

## **Spirituality in Female-Oriented Cults in Ìjẹ̀bùland, Ogun State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*Behind and beyond the physical environment are supernatural forces controlling and animating the whole universe. The concept of spirituality which is sacred, divine and incorporeal is a universal phenomenon in all religions of the world. The Ìjẹ̀bù people which are a subgroup in Yorùbáland believe in the ‘sacredness and profane’, “the non-material and the material”, “the holy and the unholy”. In the traditional Ìjẹ̀bù worldview, the people appreciate God, who is Real and Practical in their religious experiences and expressions. They also believe in lesser divinities through whom they contact God. To understand the people and their worldview, it is essential to study the elements of spirituality in their attitude to the sacredness in the universe around them; this is because religion which is among the facts of culture, plays a dominant role in the life of the people. The major trend in this study therefore is to examine that which the people hold dearest and which gives their life its basic rule of behaviour. The traditional Ìjẹ̀bù man and woman are known to be intensively religious, and they get involved in it from the cradle to the grave. There are many religious cults devoted to gods and goddesses called “Imalẹ̀” in Ìjẹ̀bùland; through these cult groups, they worship the Almighty God and the lesser “orisas”. They offer prayers and sacrifices for their*



*families and the people for general goodwill through the cultic functionaries who are both male and female. Worships take place in sacred places where women provide music, songs and dances required during religious activities, and men are the drummers. Among these cultic groups there are various rules and taboos which the people see as “èèwò” and in all these we see elements of spiritual in Ìjẹ̀bù.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Ìjẹ̀bù Worldview, Divinities and Female-Oriented Cults.

### **Introduction**

Over the years, religion has travelled very far in permeating the whole activities of human existence; hardly is there anything in this jet age that religion does not have its way into. Religion is thus not a strange phenomenon in man’s existence. The role played by supernatural forces cannot be overemphasised, and the notion of spirituality or sacredness is universal in all religions, and Ìjẹ̀bù traditional religion is not an exemption.

The Ìjẹ̀bù community which is part of the African Society in the traditional setting interprets the whole physical world around them in spiritual terms, and it is considered full of mysteries. Just like other Yorùbá subgroups, they believe in the existence of divinities which are also known as lesser gods or goddesses. These divinities, according to Parrinder (1949:26), are believed by the people to have emerged from the personification of natural forces; some are deified ancestors, while others combined both human and divine characteristics. These divinities are believed to be interested in man’s affairs. In return, men worship and offer sacrifices to them, so that all may



be well with them in their daily activities. Speaking about these divinities, generally, Idowu (1979:68) asserted that:

. . .the divinities are essentially ‘of the heavens’, but certain ancestors have found their way into the pantheon usually by becoming identified with some earlier divinities. In this category, we have *Odùduwà* and *Şàngó* for example, some have got there through excessive veneration by the people.

Furthermore, on the question of the number of divinities, Idowu (1979:68) believed that some have recognition all over Yorùbáland as a result of their places of worship in the pantheon. He therefore stated that, “...there is no doubt that each of them has particular localities in which he or she is the Chief divinity, while in others he or she may be, for all practical purposes of rather secondary status” (Idowu, 1979:68).

The Ìjẹ̀bù, like other Yorùbá people, recognise the fact that some divinities are primordial – those that God used in the creation of the universe. Some are deified ancestors, that is, “human beings who had lived extraordinary and mysterious lives on earth so much so that when they were dead, they were “canonised” or deified as gods” (Awolalu & Dopamu, 2005:74). Immediately they are deified, they became divinities, having the attributes and characteristics of the primordial divinities. Some of them are personification of natural forces and phenomenon, and they are associated with such elements as rivers, rocks, caves, trees, mountains, forests, animals and insects in aquatic environment; hence “aquatic spirits” (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2001:25). Among the Yorùbá, particularly, among the Ìjẹ̀bù

sub-group, divinities and spirits are used interchangeably. This shows that both divinities and spirits are classified together by virtue of their being in the spirit world. Essentially, the whole essence of the Ìjẹ̀bú being in communion with the` divinities and spirits is to obtain their favour. Therefore, in order to make life meaningful and worth living, the Ìjẹ̀bú people accord great respect to these divine beings who are regarded as the protectors and guardians of the community.

The divinities, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (2005:48) are the objective phenomena of the African religion. They are semi-autonomous agents, each being the executive heads of his departments in the Deity monarchial government, the convenient and appropriate channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty. By virtue of the Ìjẹ̀bú Cosmological Worldview which sees God as incomprehensibly unapproachable, the people could only gain access to him through His intermediaries. It is in this perspective that the divinities and spirits occupy a strategic place among the people.

In Ìjẹ̀búland, apart from a number of primordial divinities that have recognition all-over Yorùbáland, there are still some divinities which are peculiar to them or which are the chief divinities in certain localities. Among these localised divinities are *Iyemulẹ̀* and *Iyemojì* which are deified ancestors. They were once human beings, but because of the extraordinary powers which they exhibited while alive, they were deified and worshipped. In addition to this, both divinities could also be regarded as aquatic spirits by virtue of the fact



that they are water goddesses; they occupy and inhabit the aquatic environment, and their shrines are located near streams and rivers that pass across the towns in Ìjẹ̀bùlánd. It is in this perspective that we examine the female-oriented cults in Ìjẹ̀bùlánd and the spiritual beings worshipped or associated with the cults.

### ***Iyemulẹ̀ – Female Divinity in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde***

According to history, *Iyemulẹ̀* divinity is recognised as a special protector/deity who intervened and saved her town, Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde, and its environs, from historical calamities and military invasions of the Ègbá warriors. This deified personality was the powerful woman whom *Káfúẹ̀rú*, the son of *Olówà Mòro* of Òkè-Pòrògún in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde, used to consult before the Ègbá people sent a declaration of war to Oba Aníkíláyà in 1830 for his own protection.

*Iyemulẹ̀*, after being introduced to the king and his advisers by *Káfúẹ̀rú*, assured them that she would assist to bring the Ègbá to their knees. She boasted that she would single-handedly subjugate them. When the Ègbá warriors got to *Iyemulẹ̀*'s forests, they sent to Oba Aníkíláyà to inform him of their arrival. This crafty woman prepared poisoned red-oil bean cakes (*àkàrà kengbe*) with solid pap (*ẹ̀kọ́ títù*) and sold it to the Ègbá warriors. She used an *Igbosun* cloth to carry her baby, *Kupọta*, upside down on her back. The Ègbá warriors were hungry after a long journey, and they fell to the trap through the magic medicine called *èèdì* by buying the poisoned food. After eating, they died. This is how *Iyemulẹ̀* assisted in winning the war for Oba Aníkíláyà and the Ìjẹ̀bù. Oba Aníkíláyà and his



people thereafter showered gifts on *Káfúerú* and *Iyemulè*. After *Iyemulè*'s death, she was deified and worshipped throughout Ìjẹ̀bùland. She has her main shrine at Pòrògún, Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde, and her devotees could be found throughout Ìjẹ̀bùland.

*Iyemulè* river could still be found at the back of the present-day Adéqlá Òdùtólá College, and another shrine is at the river side. Her annual festival comes up in January and could last for fourteen (14) days. *Iyemulè* is a female cult, and women are its principal worshippers. The head of the women is referred to as *Alágbo* (the high priestess). Apart from this female chief, there are two male priests: *Alase* who is the high priest and *Òjùwà* his assistant. These men are either the husbands of the chief priestess or an aide who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the shrine particularly in performing activities which are considered to be beyond the capacity of the women. Such activities include killing of the sacrificial animals, drumming or other tasks that could be given to them by the priestess.

*Iyemulè* is an aquatic and fertility divinity in Ìjẹ̀bùland. She is kind and generous to Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde women in particular and the whole of Ìjẹ̀bùland in general. She is seen as a mother of all as barren women go to her shrine and altar to pray for children. They offer her sacrifices of hens, pigeons and kolanuts. She gives success in trade and victory in war to the people of Ìjẹ̀bùland.

### ***Iyemojì – Female Divinity in Ìjẹ̀bù-Ìlónè***

Another female-oriented divinity equally honoured and worshipped for the effective roles she played in Ìjẹ̀bùland is *Iyemojì*. She is one of the deified ancestors in Ìjẹ̀bùland.



*Iyemojì*, according to oral tradition, was believed to have lived sometimes ago in Àgọ-Ìwòyè under the name of *Òrùnkén*.

She did not stay long in the town because of some misunderstanding she had with the people of the town. In annoyance, she left Àgọ-Ìwòyè for another destination. On travelling out of Àgọ-Ìwòyè, she was infected with a disease called *ògòdò* (yaws). All the communities or towns or villages she got to did not allow her to stay until she reached Ìlónè, near Ilese-Ìjẹ̀bù. Despite all her problems and sicknesses, she was warmly received by the *Baálẹ̀* (head) of the town and his people. She was said to have got to the town half-naked having walked for many days and nights, with only *iró* (wrapper), without *bùbá* (blouse). This accounts for why her worshippers and the priestesses do not put on blouse during worship or inside the shrine. We need to note that women worshippers in Ìjẹ̀bù do not wear blouse in the shrine of the divinities as a sign of honour to the divinities.

*Iyemojì* became thirsty on her long journey, and she begged for water which was given to her in a calabash. She refused this, and they later used a broken pot to give her the water. During this period, oral tradition has it that the people of Ìlónè were faced with the problem of scarcity of water. As a result of their hospitality to her, she promised to help them solve their problem of shortage of water. She asked them to clear a bush beside a rock from which water sprang up later. This river is still at Ìlónè, and it can vividly be seen at *Ìmàgbọ̀n*. Nobody ever saw the abode of this divinity, except hunters at night during their hunting expeditions. The rock is the source of the

river. According to Madam Rónké Ònásànyà, the *Alágbo*, the high priestess, *Iyemojì* is still living though they cannot locate her place of abode. There is an alter at *Iyemojì* river side where they offer sacrifice to her. *Iyemojì* does not only give people the gift of children, she also gives material blessings and offers protection against disasters. Whenever people come to her with some heart's desires, it is believed that they would be granted by this divinity.

### **Divinities in *Agbo Òrisà* in Ìjẹ̀bú-Igbó**

Each cult in Ìjẹ̀bú-Igbo comprises all the primordial and deified ancestors as we have in other parts of Yorùbáland. Unlike in *Ìlónẹ̀* and Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde, Ìjẹ̀bú-Igbó does not have a particular divinity that is peculiar to the town. Each divinity is worshipped every day or annually during their festivals. The priests and priestesses offer prayers, cast the *ẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀dógún* every morning before eating, in worshipping all the divinities.

*Omitútù* is a tutelary divinity in Ìjẹ̀bú-Igbó, and it is also an aquatic spirit found in the cult. Our informant, Iya Olòrìṣà Àmòpé Odúnsì cannot give the details as to how this water divinity came to be worshipped. This is due to the fact that they did initiation for her when she was very young, and those that are knowledgeable about the divinity have died. Apart from this, nobody goes to worship the deity at the popular river along *Òkè-Ifẹ̀* Road in Ìjẹ̀bú-Igbó any longer because the shrine at the centre of the ward (*Àtikòrí* Ward) was destroyed by heavy rain some years ago. Since the devotees could not come together to do the repair work, each devotee has set up her own small shrine for the divinity in her house. *Omitútù* is seen as the



divinity of fertility, and women pray to her for the fruit of the womb.

Other divinities in the shrine (*Agbo Òrìsa*) include *Òrìsa-Ìlá* (male/female), *Şàngó* (god of thunder) and *Ọya* (divinity of the River Niger). There is also *Ọşun* (the divinity of River *Ọşun*). It should be noted that the same River *Ọşun* in *Ọşogbo* flows through *Ìjẹ̀bù-Igbó*. There is a popular *Ọşun* road in *Atìkòrí*, *Ìjẹ̀bù-Igbo*, which leads to *Ọşun* State with the river separating *Ọşun* State from *Ogun* State. Also in the *Agbo Òrìsa* are *Erinlẹ* (god of vegetation), *Egbé* (divinity of “born-easy-babies”), and *Ànà* (god and divinity of children who wear their umbilical cords round their necks). The umbilical cord is not buried but placed in a pot in the shrine, and sacrifices are offered to it from time to time. According to these people, others are *Ìgè* (breech birth children considered not merciful to mothers). We also have *Omọláńgidi* (baby dolls) representing the *Ìbejì* (twins) who the people believe are sacred children. They are regarded as *ará ọrun* (heaven dwellers). Traditionally, people who give birth to twins are expected to perform some rituals for them, and this must be done by the eighth day of their birth. Twin babies are rolled on the ground in front of *Òrìsa* *Ìbejì*, and the items for this ritual include palm oil, beans, *àidùn* (*àádùn*), sugar cane and fowls. The baby dolls at the altar would be given new cloths, and food would be placed before them from time to time. Their individual names are *Táyéwò* and *Kéhìndé*. The child born after them is named *Ìdòwú* and he/she followed by is *Àlàbá*. In *Ìjẹ̀bùland*, it is still a practice to see a mother of twins going around begging. The money so

collected would later be used to offer sacrifice to *Òrìsà Ìbejì*. This is a spiritual instruction that the mother must beg for alms, and it must be done even if she is a rich woman.

Cases of refusal are rare among the people because of the untoward circumstances that may befall the woman or the babies. In a situation where one refuses to perform this ritual dance, it could lead to a very serious sickness or in some cases death if the situation is not urgently reversed by this ritual. The parents may be afflicted with one form of sickness or the other. This is one major reason why people comply with this ritual dance. In addition, Wotogbe-Weneka (2001:28) affirmed that in the belief system of the African people of which the *Ìjẹ̀bù* forms a part:

Twins... are abnormal children believed to have come from the spirit-world. And as such, they have much in common with the spiritual realm. That is why such children ...are dreaded and usually their birth precipitates much divining as to ascertain what the spirit wants from the parents or close relatives of the “ill-fated children”.

It is on account of this that this ritual dance is considered very important among the *Ìjẹ̀bù* people.

There is also *Èsù* (the Inspector General of rituals) in the shrine; *Èsù* is an hermaphrodite, its emblem (statue) has both male and female organs. It has a female breast and the male organs; the emblems of *Ògún* (the god of iron) and *Obalúwayé* (god of small-pox) are outside the shrine. *Obalúwayé* or *Olóde* (the lord of the outer space) has its emblem in front of the



shrine, while the shrine of *Ògún* is usually at the back of the house.

### **The Sacred Places of Worship Among the Female-oriented Cults**

Looking round the physical environment are the spiritualities which are supernatural forces which are controlling and animating the whole strata. Human life, like the human society, is sacred, and the major concepts of the religion of the people are the divinities and the various cults attached to them. The Ìjẹ̀bù people, like other Yorùbá, believe in the existence of places which are traditionally connected with the presence of the divinities or those places which are consecrated to them. There are sacred places where worship takes place; shrine dedicated to the divinity for sacrificial and ceremonial purpose, either for individual or for the community in general. Their various locations, the physical structures, the contents of the shrines and the various acts of worship that are associated with the female cults, the various rituals and the concept of taboos all show some elements of spirituality in Ìjẹ̀bù female-oriented cult.

Among the Ìjẹ̀bù people, the sacred place where worship takes place is referred to as *Agbo* or *Ilé-Òrìṣà* (shrine) – the house for divinities or the place of worship. Every town or village in Ìjẹ̀bùland has sacred places of the worship of the divinities. Ezeanya, as cited by Wotogbe-Weneka, (2001:38-39) described a sacred place as “any place set aside by the people for the performance of acts of religion-offering of sacrifice, prayers, oath-taking, performing of certain initiation



rites”. These sacred places can be likened to temples and synagogues in the Bible. A shrine is a place of worship where sacrifices are offered to or performed in honour of the divinities and ancestors. Idowu (1979:130) observed that:

A shrine is primarily the ‘face’ of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes...it is the place where the divinity is called upon and worshipped..., the divinity gives the people his blessing while the people render him his due in worship.

Shrine may be for one particular *Imalè* as the case is in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde and Ìlóné, where a shrine is dedicated to *Iyemulè* and *Iyemojì* respectively, or more gods and goddesses as in Ìjẹ̀bù-Ìgbó where we have ‘*agbo Òrìṣà*’. The shrine is seen as a convenient meeting arena between the worshippers and the divinity. It is a place where the divinity is called or summoned to come and attend worship, and where the votaries make their supplications known to the spiritual beings. It is also the place for worshipping the divinities where religious and social rituals are performed. Among the Ìjẹ̀bù, it is believed that certain natural places and objects have peculiar religious significance. A large number of these sacred places and objects set aside for the divinities abound. These sacred places could be shrines, temples, groves, roadside, roundabout areas or altars at riverside and so on.



### **Location of Shrines in the Female-Oriented Cults**

There are two shrines for *Iyemulẹ̀* divinity. One is in the centre of the town at Pòrògún in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde, while the other is at the bank of *Iyemulẹ̀* River at the back of the present-day Adeola Odutola College in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde. The shrine at the riverside is smaller than the one at the centre of the town because this is just a miniature where rituals can take place when the need arises.

*Iyemojì* has only one big shrine at Ìlónẹ̀, and it is at the centre of the town. There is a small altar at the bank of *Iyemojì* River. The *Agbo-Òrìsà* in Ìjẹ̀bù-Ìgbó and environs is either in the centre of the town very close to the king's palace (as the case is in Àgọ-Ìwòyẹ̀) or in the house of each individual priest and priestess. This shrine may be a big building, a room or just a small space, depending on how rich the priests and priestess are. Usually, shrines form parts of the personal properties of the priestess. This is unlike the case in Ìjẹ̀bù-Òde, Ìlónẹ̀ and Àgọ-Ìwòyẹ̀ where the shrine is a community property. At the river side, there is usually a small altar at the foot of a tree.

Apart from worshipping at the communal big shrines, the cult functionaries also have a small room in their various houses set aside for the divinities. Here, they have everyday worship and consult the spiritual beings.

### **Physical Structure of the Shrines**

For the Spiritual Beings among the Ìjẹ̀bù people, there are solid buildings where the images and sacred objects of the divinities are kept. All the principal divinities have sacred places located for their worship. In these sacred places, there are sacred objects which represent individual divinities. The shrine may



have square, rectangular or domed shape. The *Iyemulẹ̀* and *Iyemojì* shrines are rectangular in shape, with an arch entrance. The main outlets and windows are decorated with fresh or dry palm fronds. These leaves are used as a sort of curtain for the shrines, while white cloths are used as the curtain for the inner sanctuary which may be called “the holy of holies”.

As a result of modernity, the roof of the shrine which used to be thatched is now made of corrugated iron sheets. Usually, no door is fixed except when the shrine is inside a house, as the case is in Ìjẹ̀bù-Igbó and its environs. *Iyemojì* and *Iyemulẹ̀* shrines have no doors, but palm fronds serve as the door into the shrine, and such entrance is usually big. There is an inner sanctuary where the emblems are kept and the final rituals take place. This place is forbidden to all, except a very few highly privileged people like the head of the cultic functionaries. It is a taboo for non-initiates to enter “the holy of holies”. Inside and outside the shrine is an open space where the devotees, votaries and visitors stay during worship. This space is used for dancing and other acrobatic displays.

On the walls of the shrines, for instance, are beautifully drawn pictures of *Iyemulẹ̀* and *Iyemojì*. One can quickly see these drawings immediately one gets to the entrance of the shrines. In the inner section of the shrines, the emblems and symbols of the divinities are displayed.

*Iyemojì* shrine in Ìlónẹ̀ has a slanting roof, supported by outer walls and four pillars at the corner of a central courtyard. Though among the Yorùbá people, *Agbo* is generally regarded as a circular place, the Ìjẹ̀bù people use it to refer to the shrine.



There is an *Akòko* tree (the *Newblodia leavis*) in front of the shrine, especially the *Iyemoji* shrine. Shrines by the riverside are usually surrounded with *pèrègún* and *wórò* leaves (dracaena fragrance). The bush surrounding the shrines is cleared during the annual festival; the sheds and tents are mended and decorated. Chairs are obtained for worshippers to sit outside the shrines. There is no seat in the inner enclosure of the shrine because this is the *ojúbọ òrìṣà* (the altar) where worshippers are expected to sit on the mat or on bare floor as the case may be.

### **Contents of the *Iyemoji*, *Iyemulẹ* and *Igba Imalẹ* Shrines and their Symbolic Meanings**

From time immemorial, man has found specific objects to symbolise the invisible and the supersensible world. In Ìjẹ̀bùlánd, each god or divinity has its sacred objects. Just like among other Yorùbá people, the Ìjẹ̀bù attach a great importance to these emblems and symbols of the divinities. The Ìjẹ̀bù people do not regard the emblems and symbols as ordinary images but as a personification of the divinities they worship. These symbols are transferred into the religious realm to secure and enact a strong bond between the unseen spiritual realities and the living. It is not strange to see some of these symbols on the walls of the shrines or on the clothes worn by the traditional functionaries and other devotees who wish to blazon and exhibit their humour through any of the symbols. These symbol figures are noticeably in the worship of divinities in Ìjẹ̀bù community. According to Nabofa (1994:7);

....symbol is something, an idea, a sign, a ritual or a behavioural pattern that stands as an outer



representation of an inner essence or experience of the unconscious. It is a concrete indication and language of an abstract value as well as a sign consciously designed to stand for something which has been inwardly experienced.

In fact, a symbol is a revelatory aspect of truth; truth in its subjective aspect which renders a great service in bringing to the surface a consciousness of the symbolic process. Symbols allow people to communicate with each other including ineffable and invisible spiritual entities. Symbols can be seen as the basis of any religion, political or economic, understanding. The concept of symbolism is indispensable in any religion and society.

The emblems are seen as a sufficient reminder of the attributes of the divinities. Some of the purposes they serve are to present visible, tangible evidence of the invisible intangible and spiritual entity. An emblem is usually kept from profane touch and out of the lay man's reach. Some symbols are not moved out of the shrine of the divinity, while some may be moved in time of ceremonies. During the annual festival, the emblems and symbols are usually washed, polished with either chalk (ẹfun) or camwood (osùn), and re-consecrated. Any damage done to these emblems is immediately replaced and consecrated.

In the shrine, there are all sorts of emblems ranging from calabash (*igbá*), *àtòrì* (cane) (*Glyphaea lateri-flora*), stones, carved images (for the twins and *Èṣù*), clay pots, axe head, metal and a host of others representing the divinities. Each



divinity has its own peculiar sacred objects. For instance, clay pots of various sizes are the emblems of the divinities; iron pieces represent *Ògún*; *Èṣù* is represented with laterite mound, and the big round black pot made with clay represents *Obalúwayé*.

Also found in *Iyemojì*, *Iyemulè* and *Igba Imalè* cults are sacrificial items such as hen, goat, salt, water, white chalk, camwood, birds feathers, kolanut, bitter kola and palm-oil. The kolanuts are usually four lobes, and they are used for divination. Palm oil stands for softening, and it is used to pour libation on the ground and on the emblems of the divinities. The *òtùn* (the clay pot) with the *wórò* leaves is also found in the shrine. This is necessary because the shrine is far from the river. The water symbolises the presence of the divinity, and it is to draw the attention of the devotees to their objects of worship. Water is also poured for libation, purification and for restoring normalcy to those possessed by evil spirits or sickness. The white materials in the shrine also include items used for worship; the bells (*agogo*), rattle (*àjà*), *irùkèrè* (horse tail), beads of various colours and shapes with cowry shells.

At the riverside, the event of purification takes place, and the devotees and the priestesses take their bath and fetch *òtùn* water into their *òtùn* pot and also perform sacrifices here. The items used include goat, hen, pigeon, and gin which they pour as libation. What they do at the inner sanctuary is more of sacrificial offering, and it tends to be done in secret. The water from the river is kept here with the *wórò* leaves. Like *irókò* (*Chlorophora excels*) and all other sacred trees, *Akòko* trees

(*Newboldia leavis*) are sacred, and they are regarded as the habitats of the spirits.

The shrines are usually marked off by palm fronds or curtains to cover the entrance to the shrine to show that they are sacred places. The palm fronds serve as a signal to ward off non-initiates.

### **The Institution of Priesthood**

Speaking about the spirituality of priesthood in Ìjẹ̀bù traditional religion, it will be apposite to give a definition of the word priest. The term priest is used to include all religious leaders, and they are religious servants associated with temples, shrines and places of worship. The institution of priesthood among the cult groups in Ìjẹ̀bùland comprises religious specialists who perform sacrificial rituals on behalf of the community or congregation. These religious specialists could be men or women, and the institution is strong and developed. They are highly honoured and favoured. They are usually called *Olòrìṣà* (one who cares for the divinities) or the *Òrìṣà* (divinity) abides in that people, and can be a vehicle or channel of the *Orisa*'s self-expression at any time or place, convenient or not convenient. These priests and priestesses perform the sacrificial ritual which is one of their essential characteristics. These rituals which could be communal or corporate ritual and individual, personal or private ritual are carried out at designated places such as in the shrines, sacred groves, altars, cross-roads or any other places when the need arises. There is no age barrier as to who becomes this cultic official among the Ìjẹ̀bù people, and the initiation would be done. The institution



of priesthood may be hereditary or vocational. Candidates are usually chosen by the divinities and the senior priestess or trained, initiated by the candidate they are ordained. They serve both God Almighty (*Olódùmarè*) and the divinities that are considered sons and daughters of *Olódùmarè*.

After the call, training and initiation into the various grades of priesthood, the priest and priestesses occupy an important position in the community. They are revered in the worship of the divinities in various cults. They are accorded respect and seen as religious experts and are a set of people full of maturity and intelligence. Their functions and relevance can be summarised into five headings. They are cultic, oracular, therapeutic, instructional and administrative or political functions.

### **The Concept of Taboos**

The word taboo among the Ìjẹ̀bù people as well as all over Yorùbáland is called *èèwọ̀*. Taboo, according to *Chambers Universal Learners Dictionary*, is something forbidden for religious reasons or because it is against social customs. While to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, taboo is what is set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose, restricted to the use of a god, a king, priests or chiefs while forbidden to general user, prohibited to a particular class (especially to women) or to a particular person.

According to Awolalu and Dopamu (2005), taboos are prohibited actions, the breaking of which is followed by supernatural penalty. To buttress these definitions, Onyeidu (2001:43) asserted that, “the strict observance of traditional

taboos is another major feature of spirituality in the indigenous and ritual ordinances controlled native life”. To Amponsah (1978:71), taboos have some religious connotation, and negligence in observing these taboos may result in death, illness and hosts of other bad things that one may term as evil. Thus, among the Ìjẹ̀bú people, taboo is *è̀wò* – things forbidden, things not done. There are a number of taboos in *Ìjẹ̀bú* society, many things forbidden in the society, religious places, that is, shrines and even during worship. Therefore, these are things which one must not do, the violation of which is termed evil or in which one is taken to have committed a sin and the effect of which carries with it a serious penalty.

### **Taboos Associated with Women and the Reason for Them**

In Yorùbáland, generally, there are some taboos associated with women. Ìjẹ̀bú-land is not an exception to this. First and foremost, it is a taboo for a menstruating woman to enter the shrine of any divinity in Ìjẹ̀búland or to enter the power house, *Ile-Aghara*, a small house where traditional medicines are put. Not only are they not to enter the shrine or the power house, they are not to touch the medicine or any of the ingredients to be used in preparing them. It is also a taboo for menstruating women to prepare or touch the meals of their husbands. The reason for this, according to Nabofa (1985:390-393), has to do with the fact that the blood from the uterus, a human organ that is often associated with impurities, is capable of rendering man ritually impure. He further opines that among the people, there is a belief that a mysterious negative power exists in the female reproductive organ or any blood that issues



out of it like most other bodily refuse, has the potentialities of sacrilege. Thus, it is a taboo for women to participate in some rituals during this period. At the end of their period, which normally lasted for four to five days, they are expected to perform some simple ceremony of ritual cleansing. This they do by using some concoction (made with various herbs) to bathe.

Another taboo associated with women has to do with the fact that they are excluded from some religious cults. They are not allowed active or direct participation in the Orò cult, especially when it is out for purification rites or in executing criminals in the town. Also, when the *Agemo* cult is out, a principal cult among the Ìjèbù people, women are not supposed to see the mask, *Èrù-Agemo* meaning luggage of charms. In fact, during these periods, they are expected to be in confinement. Moreover, it is believed that when they do have the knowledge of who is behind the “evil” or what the mask is made up of, they must not say it.

When the *Agemo* mask is out, a cry of refrain usually accompanies it thus:

*Eeke ....e! Obiren ma i wo o.....*

That is, it is forbidden for women to see this.

According to Chief Oduwole, the *Aborè*, women are excluded from seeing the mask because they are likely to leak the secrets of these cults because of their soft entrust and emotional natures; they may not allow the men to carry out some of their judgments of executions. Also, to Ogunba, (1967:35), women confinement during this period is not something extraordinary or that which has to do with sex segregation. From his own



point of view, women are confined during the celebration so that men may feel free to put on whatever they please without any consideration of modesty or shame. To him, during this period, men put on only pants, even naked at times, and some put on women's dresses. Seclusion of women during this period, according to him, should not be seen as a wicked act or another device by men to impose themselves on the credulous womenfolk. Furthermore, to him, the confinement and secrecy are done in the spirit of a convention, intrinsically interesting to both men and women. Women know that nothing is strange; it is their husband and fathers who go to perform, that they even put on their clothes and women from their confinement can even recognise the voices of their husbands. While to Chief O. Senkale, men offer prayers to the whole community nakedly, for some believe that prayers are more effective when one goes before the creator naked.

Moreover, there are taboos connected with woman and marriage in general. In Ìjẹ̀bùland, every woman that has passed adolescence is expected to have a husband. Any woman in Ìjẹ̀bùland who refuses to do so without any special reason like deformity would be called *Dalemosu*. Even it is a taboo for her to get married and stay in her father's house. If she refuses to move out, she will be seen as an outcast; she would never be respected and would be seen as a curse to herself, her family and the community at large. The reason that may be adduced has to do with the fact that marriage among the Ìjẹ̀bù is seen as a means by which a man and woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation. Sex outside marriage is



therefore not supported. In fact, it is taboo for a girl to have sexual intercourse before her marriage or to be pregnant.

Moreover, widows are not expected to have sexual intercourse with any man until the prescribed period of mourning is over which is usually five months, and she is betrothed to another man. When women are pregnant, they are seen as delicate beings, delicate in the sense that they are believed to be between two worlds, the physical and the spiritual. Thus, they are referred to as *Alabarameji*. There are some taboos associated with them during this period. Until the pregnancy is prominent enough to be seen by everybody, they must not inform people except the husband and the elder woman (*Ìyálé*) in the compound, who then advise her on what she should do within this period. The husband then makes necessary sacrifice to their household Divinity for safe delivery.

During this period, the woman is seen as a special and delicate person. She must watch what she takes in and what she says. For instance, in some households, it is a taboo for pregnant woman to eat snail and drink from a bottle directly without using a cup. The effect of this would be on the child; the child would be deaf and dumb. It is a taboo for a pregnant woman to have sexual intercourse with another man or fight during this period. If she has intercourse with another man, she would find it difficult to deliver, and if she does not confess, she might die in the process. A pregnant woman is not allowed to fight because it is believed she can easily be harmed.

During this period, women take things easy; they do not engage in vigorous work, for this may result in miscarriage,

even death, and it is a taboo for a pregnant woman to die. The death of such a woman is a disaster to the family and the community at large, and necessary sacrifice has to be offered to ward off such an evil thing from the community.

From the above, therefore, looking at the taboos associated with women in Ìjẹ̀bùland, it is not a matter of sex distinction, but something that has to do with sheer decency and purity of behaviour. All are enacted to keep the community in order, harmony, to promote better life and understanding. It is not a sort of punishment on the part of women, for men, especially the uninitiated ones, are even excluded from some religious activities.

Apart from taboos associated with women, there are also taboos associated with the female-oriented cults in Ìjẹ̀bùland. For instance, *Iyemulẹ̀* and *Iyemojì* devotees are forbidden to eat *Eja àrọ̀* and *Eja ọ̀sàn* (the mud and cat fish) from the rivers. These fishes are believed to be sacred, and they are regarded as children of the divinities. Therefore, it is a taboo for any devotee to eat the fish from the river. Also, *ìgbín* and *àlùbòsà* (snail and onion) are forbidden, and none of the devotees is allowed to drink *Emu Àìran* (raffia palm wine), but it can be used as a sacrifice to the divinity. Also, snail could be used as a sacrifice due to the fact that the water in the snail is believed to have the potency to soften things, and this is why the snail shell is broken at the tail to ooze out the water in it. This is highly appreciated by the divinity, and the *Ìjẹ̀bù* people will say, *ẹ̀rọ̀ ni ti ìgbín* (it is always easy or calm or soft with the snail). On the



other hand, palmwine is forbidden to prevent the devotees from getting intoxicated.

There are certain taboos associated with the divinity like other deities in Ìjẹ̀bùland. The main taboo is *Èsùrú* (a type of yam), *Igbá* (calabash), snake and the fact that no woman should put on a *bùbá* (blouse) or cover her head during the festival or worship. Anybody in the audience that has come to watch the festival or even move near the shrine must not wear *bùbá*. If she does, she would have to wear it half-naked, removing her two hands outside and use this to cross her neck like a necklace. It is also a taboo for a man to wear a cap when the dance is on. The dancers must neither talk while dancing nor talk when they are waiting for their turn to dance. If there is any cause to talk, the senior priestess would come with a big wrapper or use her own wrapper to cover her and the dancer, so that no one sees them. They use eyes contact to communicate. The essence of this is to keep the purity of the environment in such a way that human interruptions will not prevent the divinity from releasing its blessing. Again, they are still in possession of the emblem of the divinity, that is, the *otún* pot and in order to reverence the divinity, they are not allowed to talk.

Third, during the procession by the priestesses to and from the river side to fetch water, they must not talk to anybody. They would only tie white wrapper or any neat wrapper; and must go bare-footed. They would carry their clay pot (*Òtún*) on their heads/hands and cane (*Àtòrì*) on their hands, it is a taboo to be touched by these canes. If anybody is inadvertently touched by the cane, the person would be asked to

bite it. However, if a person is deliberately beaten with this cane, he or she would be tasked to perform an elaborate sacrifice. During the procession, the line must not be intruded upon by a non-initiate and even an initiate. A non-initiate either rushes by before they get to him/her or waits patiently until they have all passed. Anyone who breaks into this procession would be cursed. In the shrine, no one may wear slippers or shoes. This is a mark of respect for the deities.

Also, fighting is a taboo among the priests and priestesses in their various cults. They must not engage in insulting words. “Respect all” is their watchword. Whenever there is any misunderstanding, they must settle it amicably. No harm must be done to one another for they all have entered into the same covenant with the divinities. One has to obey all the regulations of the cult group and its taboo. Each divinity usually has certain things which are to him things forbidden. What is a taboo to one divinity may not be taboo to other divinities. Therefore, great pains must be taken to learn the differences on entering into covenant with the supernatural being. The terms of the covenant constitute the norm of conduct or the code of behavior for the individual persons in the worship and reverence of the spiritual elements of objects.

### **Worship and Rituals in the Female-Oriented Cults**

The various ways by which the Ìjẹ̀bú people approach God and His various agents are referred to as worship. The Ìjẹ̀bú word for worship is Ibo. It was derived from the Yorùbá expression for deity worship (*Ojọ́ bíbọ́ Òrìsà* or *Ojọ́ 'bọ́*) *Ojọ́ 'bọ́* eventually becomes the name of the day of the week in Yorùbá calendar



(Thursday). It is a fundamental truth that in most human beings, there is an “instinct” which makes him (man) to himself, which sways and surmounts the seen and unseen worlds; that is, the power which from time immemorial, man has believed to be the ultimate determiner of destiny.

Man is believed to be created by God with a divine element in him. This divine element is ever living in him, endless and always in quest of the supernatural from where it got its source. Worship is man’s response to the essence, being and deeds of God. It is the adoration or hallowing rendered to a divine being (God) or supernatural powers (divinities and spirits). It is an action, process or expression, venerated or performed, in religious exercise or ritual.

In order to renew this sacredness, man involves himself in various forms of worship. He needs to create harmony in the universe in which he shrouds himself. He needs an environment of peace, and he sees the cosmos as a religious one. He wants to use the visible to feel the presence of the invisible, and he tries as much as possible to use worship to bridge the gap between the creator and the creation.

Man believes that if worship is given to the divine beings regularly and in the right manner, all will be well with him, while failure to perform the customary rites and ceremonies or the adoption of wrong modes of worship is regarded as fraud or trickery with serious consequences to the individual or the community.

In the female-oriented cults of divinity worship is the richest religious ceremony. This we can see in the various rites



and the annual festivals of the various *Imale*. It is a religious exercise, which involves the performance of devotional acts in honour of the Supreme Being (God) and the divinities. It is a matter of course, and it testifies to the belief, creed, myths and philosophy of the people. Worship is natural to every *Ìjẹ̀bú* woman or man. They find themselves in the act all the time, from birth to death; even in attaining eternal bliss with their ancestors, they find themselves in one form of worship or the other. Therefore, in the life of the *Ìjẹ̀bú* people, worship as an imperative urge does not only stand out prominently, it is both essentially ritualistic and liturgical. At the back of it, there is an underlining theological reason. As a form of ritual, it follows set, fixed and traditional patterns (laid down rules and regulations). Idowu, (1979:109) asserted that:

These traditional patterns are carefully preserved and systematically followed. Especially is this so because they have acquired magical virtues in consequence of which it is believed that they can only be efficacious when they are correctly conducted.

The period of worship could be classified into two parts: The non-festival and the annual festival. The non-festival worship refers to the daily, weekly and occasional worship, and it is both regular and occasional.

### **Daily Worship and Rituals**

Worship is performed daily, especially in the morning and also as the need arises during the day, in the various cults. Early in the morning, before talking or eating, the priestess as well as



other devotees or votaries first invoke the Supreme Being which is the object of worship and the divinities. They adore the supernatural powers with praises in the way of cognomen or praise names. They kneel down and bow their heads with their forehead touching the ground. They use the rattle or bell to summon their entire household to worship. They also use it to invoke the divine beings. This group of worshippers may include the priestess' immediate family members or neighbours.

The worshipper pours libation on the emblems of the divinities and also on the ground. This is followed by various songs and dances. In pouring the libation, the priestess takes a sip of the alcohol (if there is any) and sprinkles it three times on the emblems of the *Imalè*. If there is no alcohol, she may use *Omi àìfò*, (early morning water; water fetched early in the morning before talking to any one). This is also followed by various calls on the divinities to wake up and attend to their "children".

After this, there is the offering of prayers and blessings. This is followed by the breaking of kolanut. With the casting of the kolanut, the worshippers want to know if their worship for that morning has been accepted and also to know how the day would be. If with the casting of the kolanut the result is positive, they bite some of the kolanuts and conclude the worship by placing part of the kolanut on the shrine and eating the rest. If the prediction is not favourable, the priestess only divides the kolanut among the worshippers and puts some aside for visitors that may come later that day.

This early morning/daily worship is not very elaborate, and it is usually short and precise. The rite is also performed later at night.

### **Weekly/Occasional Worship and Rituals**

Apart from the daily worship, we also have weekly worship. This is a little elaborate, and it involves several or all worshippers in a community. The ritual follows the same pattern as we have in the daily worship. But it is usually at night. It is run overnight and terminates early the following morning. There is a lot of singing and dancing by all the worshippers. They dance and sing into the depth of the night before they start to offer prayers, invoking the divine beings, the breaking and casting of kolanuts.

Apart from the weekly worship, we also have “Seventeenth days worship” which the people call *Ìtádógún* or *Igbó’še fún Òrìsà*, that is, seventeenth-day worship for all the divinities. Here we see a sort of inter-cult relationship, where all the women, irrespective of their various cults, come together to worship the Supreme Being and the rotation to each *Alágbo*’s shrine. They pray for each *Alágbo* present and those absent, other worshippers and the well-being of the community at large.

This type of worship can be seen as occasional. The *Ìjẹ̀bú* people express their belief about God and His agencies through concrete act of worship. This weekly/seventeenth day’s worship involves more worshippers than the daily worship. It follows the same pattern of the daily worship.

Besides the weekly and seventeenth-day worship, we also have occasional worships which could come up as the



occasion warrants. This type of worship happens when a calamity befalls a worshipper, a priestess or a client. In this case, the person may be asked to offer a sacrifice to the divinities. This type of worship involves only the client, one or two relatives and the chief priestess, *Alágbo*. The rituals may be performed at the riverside or in the *Agbo Òrìsà* (Shrine). In the above types of worship, there is no *Òtùn* dance. This is because they do not go to the river to fetch water with the *Òtùn* clay pot. *Òtùn* dance only takes place after the collection of water with *Òtùn* pot during annual festivals.

It is important to note that the seventeenth-day worship is likened to the Sunday worship of the Christians and the Friday worship of the Muslims. The implication of this is that the rituals which ought to be performed in three days are performed in one day. This now reduces the days to fourteen during annual festivals.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to present the elements of spirituality in the Ìjẹ̀bù Worldview. These spiritual entities are realities in man's existence. The universe around us is full of natural phenomena which have religious and metaphysical meanings because they are symbols and emblems of divine beings. Some of these natural phenomena are thought to be abode of the spiritual entities; they are believed to be imbued with spirits of various categories. They exercised and are still exercising great influence in the affairs of men. The Ìjẹ̀bù Worldview is a spiritual arena in which there is the interplay of various spiritual entities. The whole purpose of belief in the

existence of these spirits is to keep in favour with these invisible spirits and thus avoid misfortunes and disasters.

Among the Ìjẹ̀bú people, just like in other Yorùbà communities, the cultic functionaries perform specific rituals in and outside their places of worship. These religious specialists in their own ways and contexts serve a religious purpose as intermediaries between humanity and the spirit world. In order to be able to communicate between humanity and the spirit world, they are concerned with the renewal and the sustenance of the life of the individual and the community they serve through their rituals and various symbolic authorities.

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