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Exploring Ọgbọ Obodo and the Mkpitime Cult: *A Glimpse into Anioma Spirituality*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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EXPLORING ỌGBỌ OBODO AND THE MKPITIME CULT

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At the center of Anioma (Western Igbo) culture, The cult of Mkpitime stands out as a fascinating practice deeply rooted spiritually in the traditions of Ndi Anioma. It is an ancient system of religion, as recorded by anthropologist Thomas in his Anthropological Report on the Ibo-speaking People of Nigeria, giving a hard-to-find glimpse into the sacred rituals and rites of the Ndi Anioma, particularly during the New Yam Festival (Iwáji). Mkpitime deity, closely associated with a calm lake close to Onicha Olona, is a female spirit whose cult holds cultural and religious importance in the Enuani areas of Anambra and Delta.

The Role of the Orhene and the Rituals of Mkpitime

At the heart of the Mkpitime cult is the orhene, the high priest or priestess dedicated to serving the deity. During Thomas's visit in October 1912, he observed the orhene in a period of deep spiritual seclusion called "going into nzu." A sacred ritual and seen as time of silence and withdrawal, the orhene is isolated from the world for three days. During this period, it is forbidden to engage in quarrels, make noise or even shoot guns, as the atmosphere must remain pure and calm for the priest to get divine guidance.

On the fourth day, the orhene emerges from seclusion, and the priest or priestess is ready to offer sacrifices at the sacred Lake Mkpitime. This ritual is marked by a sound celebration of loud drumming, dancing, and the performance of mmanwu (spirits in the form of masquerades). This part of the Mkpitimeas ritual is a public reaffirmation of the spiritual connection between the divine, the

people and their ancestors.

The Sacred Art of Ọgbọ Obodo: The Circle of Dance

One of the most exciting aspects of the Iwaji festival is the birthing of sacred motifs on the ground, called ọgbọ obodo or “circle of dance.” made from ashes, chalk, charcoal, and red mud, it represents different totemic animals and elements of the local cosmology. Intricate depictions of animals like leopards, pangolins, monkeys, and vipers, along with symbols of the sun, moon, and Mkpitime herself, represent the interconnectedness between the spiritual and natural worlds.

A woman primarily skilled in art is appointed to draw these sacred motifs on the earth’s surface, creating a momentary art form that incorporates the effusion of Anioma belief systems. The figures are not mere ornamentations; they are godly symbols with deep meaning. However, as the festival extends and the dancers fill the grounds with their joyous steps, the figures are soon erased by the stamp of energetic feet, implying the temporary nature of life and the sacred.

The sacrament surrounding ọgbọ obodo is more than just a dance; it is an act of worship, a re-creation and destruction that guides both the material and spiritual worlds. Domestic animals such as ducks, goats and fowls must not be allowed to step on these godly figures, as it is believed that doing so would taint the spiritual importance of the sacred drawings.

The documentation of the Mkpitime cult and its related rituals, especially during the Iwaji festival, gives a vital record of Igbo religious practices in western Igbo areas.

Northcote Thomas’s photograph of the ọgbọ body markings associated with the Mkpitime cult in Onicha Olona, 1912.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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