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Ibini Ukpabi: *The Arochukwu Long Juju*

By Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

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Ibini Ukpabi: The Arochukwu Long Juju

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The Arochukwu Long Juju The Aro people, a branch of the Igbo ethnic group, founded the Arochukwu Long Juju shrine in the 17th century. A renowned Aro priest from Agbagwu, is credited with establishing the shrine. He is believed to have discovered the Long Juju (Ibini Ukpabi), a supernatural being, in a cave. The shrine...

01

The Arochukwu Long Juju

The Aro people, a branch of the Igbo ethnic group, founded the Arochukwu Long Juju shrine in the 17th century. A renowned Aro priest from Agbagwu, is credited with establishing the shrine. He is believed to have discovered the Long Juju (Ibini Ukpabi), a supernatural being, in a cave. The shrine developed into a hub for judicial and spiritual authority, acting as a court of law for the Aro people and the neighbouring tribes and villages.

The Long Juju, according to oral history and long-held beliefs had the supernatural ability to heal, defend, and punish erring individuals and villages. According to legend, villages or individuals who offended the Long Juju were usually punished severely.

02

Structure

The Arochukwu Long Juju shrine is encircled by thick vegetation and is located inside a cave. The shrine complex is made up of:

The Cave: This is the location of the major shrine and the purported home of the Long Juju.

The Tunnel: The cave is accessible through a little tunnel representing the passage from the material to the spiritual world.

The Inner Shrine: This part of the shrine is a sacred place that can only be entered by approved priests and initiates.

The Outer Shrine: The outside shrine is a public area used for ceremonies, rites, and meetings.

03

The Significance of The Long Juju

The Arochukwu Long Juju had enormous cultural, spiritual, and historical significance. It is generally held that the Long Juju was a powerful spiritual creature endowed with supernatural abilities. Decisions were taken and disputes resolved in the temple's role as a court of justice. It also functioned as a shrine to preserve Aro customs, beliefs, and ways of life. In its prime, it attracted tourists and worshipers to the shrine and encouraged intercultural communication and trade.

From the eastern coast of Nigeria inland into the Cross River area,

many tribes and villages would usually journey inland to Arochukwu through track roads and rivers to resolve personal, communal, and tribal conflicts, believing that Justice would be served when they reached Arochukwu and visit Ibini Ukpabi (the Long Juju).

The Aro Long Juju was highly revered amongst the Igbos, Ijaws, Efik, Ibibios, etc. The Aros usually introduced the Aro Long Juju to villages or tribes they constantly traded with as they expanded and migrated southward during the peak of the Trans Atlantic Slave trade and the palm oil trade.

In many southern Igbo areas like Ikwerre, Ngwa, Isuama, etc., the Aros established Ibini Ukpabi (Long Juju) satellite shrines to settle civil and communal disputes. Aside from the core Igbo areas, the Aros also established shrines where they have a large presence and places where the Long Juju is revered.

In Kalabari (New Calabar), Crosbie Oates' Family Journal written between 1853 and 1859, mentioned an incident between the King's brother and an Aro Chief Priest who oversaw a shrine in Kalabari. The record gave an insight into the role the Aro Long Juju priests played. It recorded that they served as arbitrators for civil matters beyond the Royal House(s).

The power of the various Delta States depended on their large fast war canoes. In fact the canoe was an important indicator of status and power hence King Amakiri's anxiety to retrieve from Oates a canoe which had been found drifting. This is the canoe mentioned earlier which Oates bartered for two doubloons and some parrots.

As well as the royal houses, Oates mentions the juju King (or Jew Jew King). The juju oracle was an important arbiter of disputes and was outside the civil jurisdiction of the royal houses. The juju priests (or Kings), mainly from the Aro tribe, would be regarded as sacred.

However, Oates describes the murder of the juju King in New Calabar. It seemed that the King's brother had "been mad for a day or two", had rushed into the juju hut while the King was making juju with the natives and had inflicted a fearful stomach wound on the King with a knife. Oates and his friend, Dr Saunders, had rushed to help and Dr Saunders had stitched up the wound. Three hundred natives with guns, daggers, spears and knives gathered to hunt the killer. One hundred of them escorted Oates and Saunders back to their ship. However, in spite of their efforts, the juju King died the next day. A party of armed men in pursuit of the murderer found him hiding in a tree and shot him. Fifty persons belonging to the murderer's family were also killed in revenge.

Aro Juju Priest in New Calabar: Crosbie Oates' Family Journal (1853 – 1859)

Rituals and ceremonies were held in locations where Ibini Ukpabi was

venerated. Offerings were made to the Long Juju in order to promote peace, prosperity, and justice. Purification rites were done by Long Juju Chief Priests occasionally to purify individuals villages, clans, and tribes from wrongdoing. Annual festivals were organized in reverence to the Long Juju.

Arthur Glyn Leonard, in his book *Lower Niger and its Tribes*, recorded an incident where a village in the Brass River held “...great play and feast in honour of Aro the Long Juju...”

Early in the year 1900 I happened to be paying a visit to the Brass river, and among other topics was discussing trade prospects with some of the chiefs. These, according to James Spiff, a well-informed and intelligent man, did not promise to be favourable, because, he informed me, the producers—in this case **Ijo**—instead of cutting down the nuts from the oil palms, as they ought long since to have done, were busy all over the country making great plays and feasts in honour of the Long Ju-Ju (the Aro Chuku, or god of the Aro) for having prevailed over the smallpox.

Feast held in honour of Aro Long Juju in Brass River area- Lower Niger and it's Tribes – Arthur Glyn Leonard (1906)

The Arochukwu Long Juju was an essential part of the Igbo cultural and spiritual landscape, attracting visitors and scholars seeking to understand its rich history and significance. The Long Juju shrine was destroyed by the British Expedition Force during the Aro-Anglo War (1901–1902). After the destruction of the Long Juju Shrine, many of its worshipers seized to revere it and replaced it with other deities. The arrival of Christianity and modernization also played a huge role in dissipating its influence and power.

- Crosbie Oates. (1853 – 1859). Introduction to the Crosbie Oates collection. Abolition & Emancipation – Part 2 & 3.
https://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/abolition_emancipation_part_2_3/introduction%20to%20the%20crosbie%20oates%20collection.

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- Arthur Glyn Leonard. (1906). The Lower Niger and Its Tribes. Macmillan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

Chikwere is a passionate history blogger dedicated towards sharing fascinating stories and untold tales of Igbo history and culture. I am also a Graphic Designer and a Tech enthusiasts. I developed a deep love for Igbo culture and tradition since my teenage age. So far I've learnt alot about Igbo History and Culture and I'll share the knowledge acquired so far in this space of Igbo History and Culture. Daalu.



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