

Onyoma-Pere Priesthood in Nembe: African Memoirs

Ikaonaworio Eferebo

*Department of History &
International Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Federal
University Otuoke, Bayelsa
State, Nigeria.*

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A b s t r a c t

In Christianity as in African Traditional Religion, religious leadership is generally provided by the priests. This is because priests serve as the go-between a particular god and watches over all the activities involving the behavior and needs of its adherents at the shrines of the various religious worship, acts as common ecclesial representative of the whole community of faith as well as divine kings in their own rights in many precolonial African societies. However, this paper aims to highlight the function, significance, spiritual potency, prejudice as well as the symbolic heritage for Africans' religious wellbeing of all ages. Priesthood in sacral societies, also takes the form of a built-in-mechanism with the social fabric. It is therefore a graded and multivalent institution that corresponds to, and in fact in most cases coincides with, the overall organizational structure of the society in context. This study however argues that the demystification of the practice of priesthood is a clear and distinct reality to further stress details of strictly priestly characterization as exemplified by the Onyoma-pere priesthood in the Nembe society of Nigeria. The findings reveal there are evidences of a wide-range of cultural practices that make a tremendous impact on the general social and political living traditions and heritages as clearly illustrated in their lived experiences. The study however used the historical analysis and depended on the multidisciplinary exchange of ideas to generate data for this study.

Corresponding Author:

Ikaonaworio Eferebo

Background to the Study

Priesthood is one of the oldest institutions in Nembe, and by extension all of humankind in its historical development. Its origin and development is certainly associated with religion that is sacred to man, as Rudolf Otto informs “a mystery inexpressible and above creatures” (1958:13). The *mysterium tremendum* (a mystery) which attracts and impels, must have accelerated the growth of priesthood in many human societies. The characterization of religion being compartmentalized goes to classifying it as a fundamental pillar of society (Adelola, 1986, 53). Adding that the communication with the sacred is often through sacred rites and objectification of the sacred order within the systemic spheres of human activities became an essential aspect of any society as religion is endemically tied to man. One of such tools that fans the embers of religion among votaries is the institution of priesthood.

Relying on many sources, traditional African society and religion are synonymous with culture. Their every-day lives revolve around religion as the most expressive, integrative and encompassing as entrenched in their living traditions or lived experiences. The reality is that Africans are notoriously religious (Leonard, 1968:429). Certainly, they cherish, nourish and sustain the institution of the priesthood as an integral part of their culture. This is especially so as priesthood and sacrifice are relatively interwoven. For sacrifice is an act of public worship offered on behalf of the social community. However, sacrifice could not be undertaken without the intermediary performance of the priests, hence the importance of priesthood in ATR. As a result of this crucial function undertaken by priests, there has always been longing for the need of a special mediator between man and the object of worship. As Aristotle “pitches his tent on the importance of having a priest in every community” (cited in Arinze, 1970, 64), buttresses the unequivocal importance of Priesthood in Africa, especially among the Nembe people of Nigeria.

The ecclesiastical priestly dignity is not only significant but also important to the Africans due to the indispensable carriage of priesthood in their religious experiences that are influenced by ATR. Illustrating the theological role of priesthood in Igbo Tradition Religion, Nworie informs that “the place of priesthood in Igbo religion is not dispensable, whether in form of a ritually consecrated priest with full insignia of office or a *paterfamilias* playing priestly roles. Hence a genuine appreciation of the concept and function of the priest with regard to sacrifice in Igbo religion is quite imperative” (2011:59). However, priesthood in Igbo TR as elsewhere is “that sacred institution in traditional religious set-up, whose sacred officiants are ordained and dedicated for the service of a particular cult, especially in “sacrificial” and other allied matters” (Ekwunife, 1990 as cited in Osunwokeh, 2014:167), a worldview Africans hold dear to their hearts as simply not a social thing but a matter of grave concern to their whole being, as well as a means of enhancing the religious fulfilment of the Africans (Madu, 1999).

This African worldview of religion best illustrates the spectrum of the priesthood institution in the Nembe society. Therefore, the paper responded to multiple questions such as: what actually constitutes priesthood? What role does it play in non-literate

societies? Of what historical significance is priesthood to the Nembe society? And how has priesthood fared in the contemporary Nembe society? Going forward this paper is detailed into five broad segments to clearly unravel these and other related issues.

Priesthood: Towards a Theological Exploration

In many ways priesthood has been the institution that has mediated and maintained a state of equilibrium between the sacred and the profane aspects of human society. Among other things, it has exercised a stabilizing influence on social structures religious organizations. The term priest is derived etymologically from Latin via the Greek word *presbyter* (elder), of which it is a contraction, and it is equated with the Latin word *sacerdos* corresponding to the Roman officiant at the sacrifices and sacred rites (Wikipedia, 2022). Broadly, priesthood is the position occupied by a priest, a ritual expert learned in a special way through the esoteric traditions and have acquire the technique of worship and accepted as a religious and spiritual leader. The priests acquire such education through the institution of priesthood, receives specialized training on the traditions for transmission by drum-lore, lyrics, religious beliefs and worldview through apprenticeship (Eferebo, 2021:185). This specialized characterization of the priesthood institution is the ability of priests to square up to preserve the uncommon living traditions of priesthood in their purest and ethnological forms.

But the fact remains valid as priests are the principal functionaries in divine services, their special task being to engage in cultural ceremonies which they conducted mainly in the shrine or temple. Although there are cases of hereditary priesthood right and they constitute a distinct class separate from the rest of society while in other climes, it is Divinity that chooses from a particular family or the community of faith. This is especially that priesthood in its typical crystallization is a social class encountered in many different religions, across the globe at least variedly. Although priesthood with its procedures and customs tends to be shaped by the specific style and religious attitudes characterizing the culture. But in Africa, priesthood is not limited to a particular sex (priests and priestesses) as it was conceived of essentially as service of the deity. The concept is rooted in the primary nature of the temple, which regarded literarily as a "house of the god", a special abode of the deity-king, his dwelling place. Thus, priesthood is a web whereby there are servants who attend to the priests or priestesses, essentially to provide for the needs of the deity and found its expression in images connected with the sanctification of priests. This conceptualization of priesthood is what the biblical tradition called ministrants (Isaiah, 61:6; Jeremiah, 33:21-22; Joel, 1:9) of God and their function in the temple is called holy service (Exodus, 28:43; 29:30 as cited in Deffinbaugh, 2004).

It is however evidently clear that "priesthood" is and has always been a symbol of polished, refined and civilized of every society of cultured people in history. The ancient Assyrians and the Babylonians had priests, so also were the ancient rulers of Nembe as is exemplified by the "Peres" (priest-kings) Olodi, Obolo and Onyo (Alagoa, 1972; Alagoa, 1964). Likewise, in Christian traditions, the Abramic episode with Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem is one example. The historian Josephus Flavius account of the

victorious conqueror Alexander the Great made a reverential inclination before a certain high priest (2009:5-11) is another example. These examples, among others, are glaring cases of priesthood dignity and its universal realities, are fashionable facts of history. This is because there are records of reproach for having treated these sacred vessels (priests) with disdain (Daniel, 5:1-30 as cited in Deffinbaugh, 2004), King Balthazar for example.

Priesthood, accordingly, is a religious practice for mediation between humans and the gods for social harmony in the dual (physical and metaphysical) world. Thus, whatever have been stressed in this context revolves around those elements that bordered on the traditional religion are the practices of priesthood (Onaiyekan, 1998, 26). These details further suggest the priestly character, nature and functions that are embedded in the Onyoma-pere priesthood practices, which have a hierarchically differentiation called "Onyoma-pere Ibila" (hierarchical priesthood). Activities involving initiates at the shrines of the Ibila on the various religious festivals are acts of common ecclesial priesthood on behalf of the whole community of faith. While the various initiates (priests), the congregation of worshippers (votaries) as a body standing for the community. The community is thus entrusted to the protection of the "Onyo", through the Pere, to the Supreme Being, Ogina. Thus, the whole of the Onyoma-pere religion is a priesthood in its own right.

Elaborating further on the priesthood and the various cults of Yoruba religion, Idowu informs "when the cult becomes of town-wide significance, the head of the town assumes the position of the Pontifex Maximus. A paramount Yoruba clan head is virtually a priest-king because he is regarded as "divine" in consequence of his scepter which is derived from the divinity to whom he is vicegerent" (cited in Onaiyekan, 1998, 28). This is very true of the "Pere" of Onyoma in relation to its religious beliefs which is the official religion of the community. The greatest responsibility however lies on the Pere, the priest-king, who may be called the "High Priest" of Onyo. Of significant is that the real ruler of the social community is the titular Deity, the Onyo, to whom recourse is made on all occasions of grave emergency. The Pere is therefore only a "vicegerent" of the Onyo, whose high priest he is, as a human mediatory agent of Ogina (God).

There are clear indications that Onyoma-pere priesthood more than anything is the fact that the last priest-king has been deified. Accordingly, the Onyoma community is occupied, not necessarily only by members of the lineage claiming descent from Onyoma-pere, but also by priests, priestesses, and other votaries of Onyo religion (Alagoa, 2018:53). Thus Onyoma-pere has found a significant place in the national pantheon as the Igbelele, butcher, of Ogidiga (Chief Deity), his story is remembered as part of the history of the Nembe kingdom. But the summary truth is that "the acceptance of hybridization of the indigenous religion rather than anything else qualifies Onyoma-pere with those of Ogidiga, as it was and is the tradition of Onyoma-pere priesthood to purify the feast ceremony, without this special ceremony, there would not be a festival rite for Ogidiga, is a known tradition in Nembe" (Eferebo & Eferebo, 2021:64). This actually accorded the priesthood dignity of the national hero, Onyoma-pere not just Igbelegbe as recorded in

most literature, with no considerable depth of knowledge of these all-important traditions (Raimi & Ekpenyong, 2011).

There are several evidence other than the aforementioned that qualified Onyoma-pere priesthood such as periodic festivals and rituals observances in the circle of national religious festivals of Nembe. There are special songs in praise of the god, and therefore, of the hero, and there are also folk tales and riddles featuring Onyoma-pere and life at Onyoma. Furthering the priesthood national outlook, the shrine of Onyoma-pere has to be rebuilt by both kings of the two moieties of Nembe (Ogbolomabiri/Nembe City and Bassambiri/Opu-Nembe) in turn when it broke down (Alagoa, 1973, 11; Dambo, 2006, 132). Of a truth the "Pere" was a religious custodian of Ijo society that generally revolved around the ibe Deity, whose high priest, pere was accordingly, the only instrument of central control embracing all the communities west or east of the Niger Delta. Clearly brings the significant Ijo tradition of priesthood to the fore. However, this ancient religious office has been transformed into a political office in the contemporary history (Okorobia, 2008, 375) of most Ijo communities.

Political Dynamics and Priesthoodization

The recorded traditions suggest a periodization of leadership history into three periods. First, a period when the ancestors were both kings and priests, even gods or were deified after their death. Second, the era from Kala Ekule when the beginning of a modern monarchical system began to take shape in progressive development towards a dynastic structure. Third, the period following the Ogbodo/Mingi struggle of the political system which ended in what is called a dual monarchical structure with an emerging Mingi dynasty in Ogbolomabiri, and the Ogbodo dynasty in Bassambiri. The changes in the political landscape follows a common trend of these ancient rulers into the contemporary Nembe society. The best to suggest is that subsequent rulers were been consciously deified. The examples of Kings Ogbodo, Jacket Mein, among others, are handy historical lived experiences.

The divine ancestral leaders of the ancient settlements of Olodiana, Oboloma, and Onyoma, were all titled Olodiana-pere, Oboloma-pere, and Onyoma-pere, in the traditions. The title "Pere", does, in fact, almost certainly identifies them as leaders derived from the heartland of Ijo, and were so titled. As Ebiegberi Alagoa eloquently puts it, "Such transcendent leadership was invariably derived from such leaders being also priests of the national deities. Accordingly, the authority of the Pere ran wherever the national god was accepted and its symbol, taboos, and regulations respected. This normally covered the territory of the cultural/linguistic, and, in time, political unit, of the ibe" (Alagoa, 2018:64). Buttressing the viewpoint further he clarifies that in the case of the early Nembe settlements, the identification of the leaders of each settlement as "Pere" suggests that they were basically independent one from the other. The traditions for example, of wars between Olodiana and Oboloma that led to their dispersion, confirms this suggestion. They are thus, credited with distinct lists of rulers for at least Olodiana and Onyoma. Clearly, the traditions suggest a theocratic system with over dose of spirituality was attached to the title, "Pere".

The second era as recorded in the traditions converge on the idea of the formation of a united polity, initiated by the return of Kala Ekule, after a period of dispersal of the sovereign earlier settlements. The oral traditions refer to this united polity, variously as, Kala Ekulema Nembe, the city of Kala Ekule, Kala Ekulema sondiabiri/The city of Kala Ekule of six quarters, and Kala Ekulema Sonoma Se/The city of Kala Ekulema of seven communities (Alagoa, 2018:67-68). The Nembe polity is thus identified with the name of Kala Ekule. The constancy of his name in all published king lists, confirms the conclusion that he is, indeed, accorded the status of a founding figure and a legendary culture hero. This is eloquent but why aside his name being mentioned in the national anthem, kule (drum praise title) there is no remarkable thing attached to it.

This might suggest his engrossment with the priestly duties and state affairs to the detriment of other sectors. The neglect of state affairs might have given other officials unbridled access to leadership, might have effaced the achievements of these earlier rulers and in their places new heroes emerged. Although in all historical sense that same honor was also credited to Olodi-pere after he defeated the independent priest-kings of the neighborhood in a contest of spiritual powers and having acquired the drum praise title "Senengimo-pere" (world conqueror), is a symbolic tradition. Because the tradition asserts that "Olodi then became the ruler over all Nembe territory over which he assigned his colleagues places in which they could settle...leaving his son, Kala Ekule, to succeed him" (Alagoa, 2018, 49), alluded Olodi as the first ruler of Nembe. And that Olodi was deified as the national god of Nembe and his son, Kala Ekule was the first priest of this god "Senengimo-pere or Ogidiga". Thus, connecting the third generation of kings as continuation of the priesthood until the 19th century when the kingship was excised from the priesthood.

Deification and Priesthood of Onyoma-pere

Deification is simply a process of "making divine or deify", is the glorification of a subject to divine levels and, commonly, the elevation of a human being, any other living thing, or an abstract idea in the likeness of a deity. Seeing through the lens of theology, where it refers to the belief, and in art, where it refers to a genre (Wikipedia, 2022). This is what in Christian traditions refers to as apotheosis, this is the idea that an individual has been raised to godlike stature or exalted manner. There are myriads of examples in religious history. For instance, the deification of man, realized in Christ once and for all, is thus accomplished by a communion of divine energy with humanity in Christ's glorified humanity.

In many climes such as the ancient Rome deification of the emperor could acknowledge or refuse provincial initiatives in the establishment of emperor worship, in the construction for it, or in its liturgical details. The energy, however, that infused emperor worship was to be found almost wholly among local nobilities. Because of the loftiness of their families by deifying deceased relatives, Trajan deified his father, and other relatives; the Emperor Augustus however, broke traditions and had Julius Caesar recognized as a god and so on, for examples. Egypt, where the pharaohs had been long worshiped, and to peoples in the

Middle East, as elsewhere, for similar reasons of religious custom. Even the Greeks were quite used to the idea of deification of human beings (Duignan, 2022). The most reasonable suggestion is that deification is probably connected with ancestor worship, is practiced most often when the living king, although connected with gods, is regarded as a god in the fullest sense. Only after his death does he become god.

This wide context qualifies the deification of the priest-king of Onyoma as it is worship and reverence by his descendants and votaries. Among the Hittites, for example, the expression “the king becomes a god” meant the same in Nembe religious belief provides the basis for Onyoma priesthood. Thus Alagoa (2018) clarifies the long existing traditions of Onyoma's history in the living traditions of the people more than anything else was the deification of the last priest-king, and stresses further on how the ruler lived an extraordinarily strong in life, and disappeared mysteriously into the cosmic sphere. The identification of priests, priestesses, and other votaries, as well as the observance of periodic and rituals in the cycle of national festivals are sine qua non features of Onyo's deism. Accompanied by the series of special songs in praise of the god, and therefore, of the hero, and the folk tales and riddles featuring Onyoma-pere and life at Onyoma, predicated his national status in the pantheon of Divinities confirm this ever-living traditions in Nembe. The expression is that life at Onyoma as told in the traditions connect the old order and those of the new order, to tell the full cycle of a culture history. This brings into focus the legends, myths and realities surrounding the priesthood history and culture of the ancient community.

These modest contributions of Onyoma as illuminated by both oral traditions and archaeological studies, have somewhat deconstructed some of the legends and myths in the interpretation of the objects recovered by the excavation and add flesh and blood to these material culture dug up by the archaeologists. Other ritual objects such as pottery (tamuno-bele), agaga-iga (raffia cloth), a tooth pierced like a bead, a cake of chalk (itoru), and a human skeleton together with a single blue glass bead and a coiled bronze object. Couples with periwinkle shell, charcoal samples, potsherd among other discoveries, are clear indications that Onyoma was settled over a considerable length of time, and changes in the styles of pot suggest a succession of generations of inhabitants of Onyoma with new tastes and experiences. These elements also are indications that the people of Onyoma were notoriously religious.

Accordingly, “they traded with many communities to the east especially Kula, Bile, and even Ilitomba (Obolo, Andoni), as well as fought Bile whose vengeance led her formed an alliance with Kula, for the destruction of Onyoma in the early 15th century”, to which archaeological evidences have shown basis of these realities while esoteric traditions express it in drum lore confirming the relationship (oral interview with Piri Firstman, 2/2/2019). Thus, the drum lore is expressively telling the fall of Ilitomba (Opu-Ido) the Nembe name for Obolo (Andoni) is a critical lens of a cultural magnitude and diffusion between the two Ijo moral communities long before the European era as have been established here. This has invariably substantiated the story of Onyoma as told in the oral

traditions, the skeptical dispositions of legends and myths having no relationship with anything that really happened in history, is a buzz in historical conversation. The account of his supernatural feats in defense of his city against invasion, and of his final apotheosis to many are all calculated fads.

But according to Alagoa “these doubts disappeared when we arrive at Onyoma and dug up the fish and animal bones left from the meals of its inhabitants, see the pots they had used for various human purposes, and even come face to face with the remains of one of these human inhabitants. Archaeology then, reassures us that the language of the oral traditions is symbolic, but refers to the activities of real people. Archaeology produces concrete evidence of the life and art of these people about which some, at least, of the oral traditions tell” (1973:12), as well as confirmed that Onyoma was likely to have been occupied over at least four hundred years from about A.D 1275-1690. What has been reasonably infer is that multidisciplinary exchange of ideas provides a practical demonstration of the deepest reconstruction and insight to be achieved of history within the context of cultural activities with considerable time depth of preliterate societies. This is so as the neglect of any source of information in favor of another or a few would be disservice in the interrogation of the past. Thus, we turn to the priesthood history, culture and practice in details.

The Onyoma-pere terracotta figurine of a presumed priest-king from the archaeological excavation and other material culture found at the ancient city of Onyoma would seem to be concrete evidence of cultural continuity between ancient Onyoma and contemporary Nembe society. Thus, the priesthood could present another dimension of this continuity and change. At Onyoma, there is no doubt that the priesthood has been an important element of worship of its population for a long time, even before the combined attack of Kula and Bile alliance. There had been strict taboos against adulteration to keep alive the memory at Onyoma, that is, something of the properties of a sacred being or object. This aspect is deeply emphasized by esoteric traditions as exemplified by the cycle of religious festivals recognizable of the god (oral interview with Ebitenye Theophilus Gamdede, 27/6/2022), is suggestive of continuities and changes. This is because traditions in Nembe only remember the history of Onyoma-pere on the slenderest of opportunity, not as something valuable in itself, but merely as an appendage of Nembe historical traditions (oral interview with Elder Oruwari Edward, 2/9/2021).

Accordingly, their attention is directed to the point in time when Onyoma was subsumed after the unification of the various autochthonous communities that constituted the Nembe metropolitan city. A more surprising truth, however, is that they see the history of Onyoma from its destruction and the settlement of its inhabitants at Nembe. The impression one gathers from the traditions therefore, is that Onyoma was founded by some mystery being who descended from the sky (that is, from places unknown, or autochthonous?), and migrated to Nembe and thereafter vanished into the spirit world as a deity. The elevation of the extraordinary lived experiences of Onyoma-pere, definitely qualified his deification and priesthood as recognized in many African cultural traditions.

It is imperative to note that, there are a handful of descendants to continue to the next generation of Onyo's divinity that would spark giggles. One of such families is the King Dede and Inya (King Constantine Ockiya's mother) among other families who according to available traditions, are great grandchildren maternally to the last priest-king of Onyoma.

What is more remarkable is that the priesthood list of Onyoma corroborated the above view as members of the two families and others are clearly stated (oral interview with Piri First & Guanga Oboniebiyegha, High Priest of Onyoma-pere 2/2/2019), attests to the veracity of this collective memory. Professor Alagoa's study however corroborates the existence of Onyoma priesthood, he accordingly reported that, "The Priest when fully dressed to perform rituals was required to wear a hat lined with "something like coral beads", two leopard's teeth round the neck, and a string of "ancient beads" called uka on his left wrist. He would also be marked with chalk, (itoru) made out of shell" (1973:11).

Extending the description of the outfit further (Eferebo & Eferebo, 2021:67-68) writes, "The high priest is always properly dressed in George wrapper (injiri) and white sleek cloth (alor) inside out stylistically painted with native chalk (itoru) in addition to either white or red woven cap (okosi-ongu tun) with bowler or derby hat adorned with two eagle feathers (igo-puku) on both sides and woven reddish parrot tail feathers (okoko-puku) on the fore of the cap with fourteen eagle feathers shielding the face and double shoulder clothes (ikagi-bara) on both sides of the shoulders. The priest also wears two okuru (a native bag decorated with small bells made from lion or leopard skin) on both sides of the shoulders and carries... two swords to complement", this is a clear indication of a priesthood tradition that does not permit any other institution as a form of ritual dress in Nembe.

During the periodic ritual festivals, the priest dressed as aforementioned to participate in the peri toi (ritual dance) while praise songs to the god expresses divinity, in the worship processes. The priestesses sing songs to praise and grace the realm with stylistic dance steps in his honor. While this is on-going the talking drum intermittently called out the praise drum name of the god "omoni bo bionimigha bereton (twice) amabara ogidi erebara ogidi ogidi bara bara" (twice), (literarily meaning unpredicted human nature, no one knows the mind of a slave, always prepare for actions). Some of the historical traditions were sang to mourn his defeat at the hands of the combined forces of Bile and Kula, as well as mass burial accorded those that died in the invasion. This is rendered thus: "onyoma-e onyoma-e, ye ngeribo duedibi gha mi ama" (multiple times), telling the mass burial of the deaths at Onyoma.

Another memorable song reminiscence of Onyoma's priest-king has it as follows: "Onyoma-pere fua tari gha" (multiple times) meaning that "Onyoma priest-king does not love his son-in-law" (oral interview with Ebiene Forcebery, 3/3/2022), add historical value for a balance account of the established realities of a remembered history. The viewpoint is that the oral tradition is very vibrant as aspect of it is embedded in esoteric

thoughts of the priesthood as the historical memory or ethno-cultural traditions of Nembe. As such Chief Owolo James Yousuo, high priest of Ogidiga, provides a list of king-priest of Onyoma-pere, in the common esoteric tradition of a distinct identity and history for the community. Accordingly, Chief Owolo list of Onyoma-pere priesthood as modified:

1. Nunu (probably died in the late 15th century)
 2. Noinkiengha (died in the early decades of (16th century)
 3. Barene (died in 1687)
 4. Peri (who witnessed the dual monarchical system died 1739)
 5. Iniogha (died 1786)
 6. Opo (father of King Jakect Mein - 19th century)
 7. Ende (died 1846 who witnessed Kings Amain & Duguruyai reigns)
 8. Eteodugo (died 1889 witnessed Chief Bugo peri ritual in 1864)
 9. Invidi (died 1906)
 10. Idumange (died September 11th 1912)
 11. Abiogbo (probably died 1920)
 12. Burufigha (died February 7th 1923)
 13. Inaburugha (died 1978)
 14. Guanga Omoniebiyegha (died July 17th 2021)
- (Owolo cited in Alagoa, 2018, 66-67; Ockiya, 2008:6)

At the top of the priesthood list clearly represents early priestly ancestral leadership after the deification of Onyo. They are purely priestly figures that served at the shrine of the deified Onyoma-pere in remembered traditions of Nembe. This is a clear indication that the priesthood culture continues into the present, that is, preserve in the traditions of the cycle of festivals.

Having established the line of succession of the priesthood, it is pertinent to add what responsibilities these priests performed. As religious leaders authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between human beings and a god. As human agency they are often powerful in the cycle as kings. Among the Yoruba, for example, the Ooni of Ile-Ife in Nigeria, the cradle of their religion, is believed to be a political as well as spiritual head of all Yoruba (Apter, 1992). The high priest of Onyoma, is also the political leader of the community of faith and center where everything about their religion radiates. The Pere, in this context, is the equal of Vodon, Da Ayido Hwedo, as the political and religious leader of the Fon (Danquah, 1968) people of Ghana.

They offered sacrifices on behalf of the community of faith and mediate as well as reconciled warring parties through the administration of ovo (ritual oath) to bringing peace. Foretold the future, warned people of impending calamities and performed ritual cleansing/healing. They offered prayers to the god of worship during religious ceremonies such as birth, initiation, marriage, among others, relevant to his functions awarded to him by the traditions. The priest is, indeed, the facilitator and custodian of the living traditions, as well as the religious faith keeper of votaries in the social community.

Rites of Passage of Priests

According to Schaefer (2003, 103), rites of passage are “rituals marking the symbolic transition from one special position to another”. Rites of passage are ceremonies graduating someone from one stage to the other such as marriage, passage to adulthood, and life to death, among others. They are important stages in a person's life cycle. Life itself is filled with series of rites, from the cradle to the grave. They are essentially integral parts of socialization and therefore indicate that the socialization process continues throughout all stages of the human life cycle, in this case, the participant is separated from the living to death. For instance, while naming ceremony of a baby marks the significant event of birth, funeral marks the “separation” of the dead from the living (Chuku, 2008, 126). The Onyoma Priesthood under review socializes these unique stages of development with formal ceremonies, rites, and customs befitting the rank of the priest.

It is certainly clear that priests also have rites of passage that befits their exalted position in ATR, as in other religions. Death in the perception of Africans is a process which does not terminate the existence of the individual. This is so as the human life is seen from the perspective of a journey back to the creator. Death however takes the individual into the spirit world where he meets the ancestors or deities. It is thus strongly believed that priests are the human agents of intermediary between the living and the deified ancestor hero. Having the attributes of the god personification, priests are celebrated even in death to illuminate man's ontological conditions as well as his eschatological disposition (Arier, 2004, 4).

There is also the belief that, “if such ceremonies are not properly performed the successor priest ordination might truncate the priesthood to cause untold danger on adherents especially the lineages associated with the priesthood” (oral interview with Madam Mathias, 17/12/2021). She adds, sequel to this, “The priests are such revered ATR personalities just like the Anglican Bishops. They are given a decent rite of passage. Certainly, of many African societies, before funeral service the body of deceased priest is washed and dressed properly according to his rank as high priest. The Onyoma-pere priests are dressed in the same manner as has been described earlier in the study, but the differences are that at death the priest-king do not have to carry two sacred swords.

The purification process commences with a Ziba priestess performed (itoru gbein) cleansing, which afterwards he was laid in state. If the high priest has performed all the rituals attached to the priesthood seven canon gun shots salute, as an invite to the public to pay their last respect to the departed priest-king of Onyoma. The funeral rites would take place for three days before he will be finally buried at the early hours of the third day, for example on or before 3am. Accordingly the priest would be buried on the early hours with all the pump and praise he deserves (oral interview with Egbenimi Yousuo, Acting priest of Onyoma-pere, 19/7/2022). Just after the canons salute, the master of ceremonies, a son or close relative would sever the symbolic necklace (ila bele) on the deceased neck, separating him from the priesthood of the living to join the class of the ascended heroes.

The above special ceremony was in quick succession followed by the procession of singing dirges to and from the waterfront where the priest corpse was laid in state, led by the master of ceremonies with other priests known as the Igbelegbe ceremony was observed. He was chalk all over the body, had tied round his head a silk scarf or a woven cap (Okosi-ongu tun) on which was stuck four white eagle feathers; and, around the waist a piece of Kano cloth (Ikagi bete) together with George wrapper (injiri) and silk (alor) inside out. The master of ceremonies, his two attendants accompanied by other priests, following instructions from the drum priest invoking the ancestral heroes, shrines, as well as the various drum praise names of the important communities saluting them to partake in the Igbelegbe ceremony.

Thus, rendering some archaic speech pattern of singing and chorus: “Eri Okwaka-e Eri bou korobo saigha-e, Eri Igbelegbe Tongu gho eno ilala-a, Eri iyorobo nte ande gho eno ila-a, Eri oweitogu”, meaning (I am the shouter, I am the one who never turned to take those who through fear escaped to the mangrove swamp; I am the orphan child. Should I receive wound on my skull, I am a woman; but if on my forehead there is a marked sign, I am a man). The band repeatedly undergo this process three times consecutively morning and evening for three days (oral interview with Chief James Azaka, 17/5/2022; Teilanyo Oba, drum priests, 17/5/2022).

Having successfully completed all the required ceremonies on the night of the second rites by 12am seven-gun shots are fired. This is an indication to dress the deceased priest in full regalia described earlier; and, accompanied with assorted drinks on both sides of the casket. Others are the four stools, two on the leg side and two on the head side with assort spiritual contents inside the grave. Before lowering the casket for final interment, the grave was dressed in Kano clothes among other assorted materials. Lastly, the invocation of the god being worshipped and other gods of same category of Nembe and other native powers calling on them for a successful rite of passage, leading the deceased spirit into the great beyond. The grave was then covered signaled by another set of seven canon gun shots. All these done, the drum priest had to inform the spirits for a seven-day communion between the god and priests who graced the rites of passage after which, the entire process comes to a logical end (oral interview with Egbenimi Yousuo, Acting priest of Onyoma-pere, 28/5/2022).

Conclusion

This study was centered on the priesthood institution, a recognizable staple for ATR functionaries that connect between human beings and gods. The transcendental is one of the livewires of ATR that have spiced religions in all ages. It is however argued that without priesthood there cannot be orderliness in religions, and the worship processes of the god, as well as religion to have been desecrated by votaries leading to self-destruction. But, in spite, of the daring challenges facing ATR priesthood, as the scriptural personification that guides the many religious worshippers of Africa especially Onyoma-pere priesthood among the Nembe people of Nigeria; are custodians of traditions, and therefore, of history. This is owing to the significant fact that there is no sense of religious

activities in a vacuum as nothing exists in a void, to this extent, priesthood is the engine of ATR as elsewhere cannot be over emphasized context wise. As touch bearers they have power not only to administer religious rites, sacrifices, propitiation of a god, but also has always been a symbol of polished, refined and civilized of every society of cultured men since the beginning of history.

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