

THE ROLE OF OMBATSE IN MORAL REFORM AMONG
THE EGGON PEOPLE OF NASARAWA STATE

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the role of *Ombatse* in moral reform among the Eggon people of Nasarawa State. *Ombatse* is an upshot of Eggon Traditional Religion. Africa Traditional Religion is a religion that inculcates morality in the lives of the adherents. The inculcation of morality is compulsory because of the consequences that one will face if he/she go against the lay down teachings of the community he/she belong to. The Eggon people, who were adherents of Africa Traditional Religion, also maintain high level of morals among themselves. The upholding of these morals has helped in the collective wellbeing and prosperity of the Eggon land. But with the coming of civilization, Christianity and Islam, the known morality among the Eggon went into blink. The paper also focuses on factors that led to decline in the upholding of morality, and how *Ombatse* helped in moral reforms among the Eggon people of Nasarawa State. The paper also explains what *Ombatse* is all about, in other to correct the wrong notion of the public on the term *Ombatse*. It is obvious that the coming of *Ombatse* among the Eggon people really helped in the upholding of high moral standard, and it also helped in the communal unity of the Eggon people. The youths were once again reminded of the dos and don'ts. A Historical research method is adopted in the gathering of data for this paper.



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Introduction

African ethicists and philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye (1998) says that African morality has the society and the welfare of humanity as its basis. The paper contributes to the widespread debate that religion is the basis of African morality and elucidates on the true nature of traditional African morality. It fills the vacuum created that African moral beliefs have no infractions against humans but only on the gods. The morality of Africans is fashioned on their interaction with their fellow humans and with the divine. The foundation and nature of traditional African morality are theocentric and anthropocentric. Exploring the foundation and the nature of African ethics contributes to comprehending and valuing traditional African morality. Laurenti Magesa (1997) contends that those who think human traditions created morality are oblivious to the fact that, their very human life comes from God. “Tradition contains the moral code and prescription for ethical life.” He makes his point clearer when he opines that morality which helps to make people conform to the norms of society is geared toward the maintenance and enhancement of life. The spate of immorality and nonconformance to the traditions handed to Africans by their ancestors weaken the life of the community. Good life in a traditional African society is attained through close ties with religion, God, the ancestors and other humans (Magesa, 1997). Magesa does not only blame human actions for destabilizing the life of the community in African Traditional Religion but also opposes spirits that can be beseeched by humans to cause harm. In the same way, benign spirits can be called upon to protect and prompt people to do good (Magesa, 1997). Mbiti (1975) also believes that many African societies believe that God is part of the social life of the community. The moral



order in the African societies was given to them by God in order that people would live gladly and cordially with one another in the society. The moral order from God aids humans to work and have knowledge of what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. The customs and institutions like the chieftaincy institutions in African societies that have sustained the morality of Africans from the past to the present were created by people through the moral order given to them by God. He does this to ensure that the life of the individual and the community is protected. Opoku (1978) also shares the view that in African traditional societies, religion is the basis of morality. Religion in Africa, he continues, is so all-encompassing that religion and morality cannot be detached from one another. Religion to him is the binding force and the source of moral codes that regulate the life of the African society. God is believed to be the custodian and the final authority in all matters in the African Traditional Religion. He mentions the Akan of Ghana, the Fon of Benin and the Yoruba of Nigeria as examples of African societies that see God as the final judge when the life of the African on earth is ended. Opoku (1978) specifically mentions that the Akan see God as the guardian of law and order and morality flows from him. This is expressed in the Akan maxim *Onyame mpjbcne* “God does not like evil.” Opoku (1978) also highlights that among the Akan, the ancestors also have a vested interest in the moral life of the living. The gods too are not left out when it comes to shaping the moral life of Africans. They punish and reward their devotees based on their character. Idowu (1962) affirms the stance of Magesa, Mbiti and Opoku that “morality in the traditional African society is basically the fruit of religion and that it is dependent on it.” Yoruba also draw their morality from God, Oludumare who has “the Pure” and “the Perfect King” as his attributes. Oludumare is the judge and the standard of morality. He judges the character of humanity. He is



omnipresent and has his eagle's eyes on the morality of his subjects; no one can escape the judgment of God. The assumptions of the African philosophers who ascribe to the widespread view that African morality depends on religion are of the view that African morality comes from God, the divinities and the ancestors. They enlighten people to do what is right, reward the good and punish the evil. This makes religion indispensable in determining morality in Africa.

History of Eggon People

The Eggon are situated in the North-central geopolitical zone of present-day Nigeria. They are specifically found in Nasarawa State with Nasarawa Eggon as their domain Local Government Area and seat of their traditional ruler, the Aren Eggon. The people first occupied the mountainous region of the state, and were referred to as Madan Dutse (Mada Hill people). The Eggon are found mostly in Akwanga, Lafia, Kokona, Wamba, Keffi, Awe, Doma, Keana, Karu and some other parts of Nasarawa and Toto. Eggon refers to the people and their language, and connotes a good sense of hearing or perception ability. The origin of the Eggon has mythological and migration accounts. (Attah, 2021). These accounts indicate that the Eggon are founders of and earliest settlers in their abode since the 1700s. The Eggon founded early settlements which accommodated their three primary clans – the Eggon-Azo, Eggon-Eholo and Eggon-Enro. Other numerous sub-clans of the Eggon include Ogba, Wakama, Alogani, Arikpa, Gale, Ezzen, Ogbagi, Agunji, Gbakukarami, Gbaku Babba, Wana, Wallon, Wata, Ginda, Iga, Gbashuru, Wangibi, Burum Burum, Ika, Ubbe, Endehu, Alushi, Gbanze, Gashi, Wuluko, Womie, Arugbadu, Bacheno and Alizaga, descended from the three primary clans (Attah, 2021). At present, the Eggon can be found in other states of Nigeria as they eke a living for themselves and contribute to the



development of the society, although they might not be in large population in these states. Throughout their history, the Eggon are known for their unique cultural heritage. Through their culture and tradition, the Eggon were able to evolve peculiar traditional political, social and religious institutions. Their ability to harness the resources in their environment using traditional techniques gave rise to indigenous economic activities and occupations such as farming, fishing, handcraft, hunting, wood carving and food processing, among others, guided by communalism. Thus, they produced goods and rendered services which enabled trade and commerce. Better trade and 'legitimate commerce' flourished in traditional Eggon society before contact with the Europeans in the twentieth century. A precious stone found on the Eggon Mountains, called Agbor, was used as local currency; labour too, was used for bride price; and goats in particular served as money (Attah, 2021). The political organisation of pre-colonial Eggon land was decentralised with political authority organised around gerontocracy and patriarchy, following the social organisation of the family and clan. Thus, political administration began from *Kpazhi* (the family), where the family's head is responsible for administrative functions and takes care of the *Kpazhi Ashum* (Ashum shrine of the family). Next was the clan which makes up the village, comprising families with a common ancestor. The political affairs of the clan were controlled by the village assembly, which comprised heads of each family in the village. This eventually led to the transfer of authorities held by the family heads to the Village Council, to exercise certain authorities on behalf of the families or clan. The *Andakopo Ashum* (head of the clan) was the custodian of the *Ashum* deity. He is the *primus inter pares*, and his influence greatly relies on his personality. The *Andakopo Ashum* was responsible for both the temporal and spiritual needs of his clan and represents his clan within the



council of elders and custodians of *Ashum* deity, the *Mo'andakopo Ashum*. Adult males exercised some level of authority as they had the right to attend meetings and speak. In this regard, the voice of the elders reflected general public opinion (Attah, 2021).

Religious Belief of Eggon People

The Eggon believed in a supreme being called Ahogbre, who is beyond the sky. Ahogbre is invisible, omnipotent, and omniscient. People communicate with him and feel his presence through the Ashum or other deities such as Angbashum, Kahan, Akuk, Arikyia, Gango and Yamba. Items like stones, cowries, pots and sticks are used to represent these deities. Such items are kept mostly at homes in a sacred room for worship where sacrifices are offered to them. It is believed that the deities ward off evil spirits from the land or family and guarantee prosperity. The Eggon also believed in ancestral spirits who asserted authority through elders. Formal religious activities were done through the Ashum ancestral worship under the direction of the Anda Ashum (Chief Priest) (Arigu, Interview 2024).

In traditional Eggon land, 'the *Ashum* played a hegemonic role which cuts across the economic, political, socio-cultural and religious realms of the society'. This gave rise to the formation of the *Ashum* society. All traditional affairs in Eggon land were controlled by the *Ashum* society. The *Ashum* society is patriarchal, revered as an institution that glues the people together and an embodiment of all political and religious authority. The *Ashum* society maintains social cohesion and communal solidarity. It is hierarchical and its members are repositories of the lore and knowledge of the gods' gifts and powers of rain-making as well as diagnosing, prognostics, and curing medical problems. The *Ashum* society has priests who take propitiatory rituals for



the people. The priests, found at the family, sub-clan, and the clan levels, make up the *Mo'andakopo Ashum*. Initiation into the *Ashum* society was open to all males. However only those recommended by the elders as disciplined boys were invited for initiation. The age for initiation varies among clans. *Eggon-Eholo* clan initiated boys of about six years into the *Ashum* society, while the *Eggon-Anzo* clan initiated boys of about 15 and 16 years. Upon initiation, the boys become full members of the society and can participate in all activities ranging from meetings to rituals. Through its political outlook, the *Ashum* society forms the nucleus of Eggon philosophical, political, and cultural life (Attah, 2021). These roles are expatiated by Alu (Interview 2021), to include: “General education... and indoctrination of social attitudes; Regulation of sexual conduct; Supervision of political and economic affairs; and Operation of various social services, ranging from medical treatment to forms of entertainment and recreation. Changes and Developments in Eggon land since the Nineteenth Century by the nineteenth century, some fundamental economic, religious and socio-political changes occurred in Eggon land. These changes began with the nineteenth century *Jihad* in Hausa land. The spread of the jihad beyond Hausa land led to the establishment of emirates and sub-emirates headed by Emirs across northern and central Nigeria area. Consequently, the sub-emirates of Keffi and Lafia were established. The result was hostility between the Eggon and the jihadists who raided Eggon land. This necessitated the political reorganization among the Eggon, leading to the change from decentralized political system to a centralized one. The office of *Aren* (chief) was established to guarantee their defence and security against the jihadists. Thus, political authority was concentrated on a single person as opposed to the hither-to group of elders – the *Mo'andakopo Ashum* (Attah 2021).



The Eggon have rich socio-cultural activities characterized by ceremonies, festivals and rituals. These socio-cultural practices acted as a form of social centre in their society. They regulated social interaction; provided mentorship, shelter and security; and ensure social therapy and reverence to the ancestors, religious deities and oracles. The socio-cultural practices of the Eggon included *Ta Erkor* (wage war), *Gbedur* (masquerade), *Asherjege* (wayward woman), *Likya* or *Kyen-Eku* (burial rite), *Adaga-Aha* (two legs) and others too numerous to mention. These cultural practices are attached to the *Ashum* deity, as it played a central role in ritual activities. The socio-cultural practices of the Eggon constitute the control mechanism for instilling virtues of discipline, hard work, obedience to authority, bravery and strength. The practices needed the permission of the *Mo'andakopo Ashum* before they operate and their successes depended largely on the concealment of the major spirit characters. Thus, socio-cultural activities in Eggon land had an outlook of 'secret societies' (Attah, 2021).

The Concept Morality

It is a matter of fact that morality is universal to humanity. This means that morality is essential to all human being no matter where they live or no matter what kind of life they lead. Morality is what makes man a man. In this case, Wiredu (1998) said that “any society without medium of morality must collapse.” This being the case, however, many foreigners have erroneous understanding of African morality. Some even tend to regard Africans as devoid of morality and moral consciousness. The central theme in moral philosophy are the nature of principles, how people can learn, internalize, and use moral principles to guide their conduct, action, or the entire life style. Thus, morality has to do with some sort of standard that can guide human action. In Africa, we can



understand morality simply as synthesis of social values, norms, mores, and their authenticity in community from which they arise. African ethics is the conceptualization, appropriation, contextualization and analysis of African values within the African cultural experience. Wiredu (1998) also defined African ethics as the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interest the individual to those of others in society. It covers the entire range of human behavior that is evolved in our relationship with oneself, other person and with other world as well. According to Kwame Gyekye (1997), African traditional ethics has dual connotation: first, it refers to set of social rules, values, and norms that that guide the conduct of the people in a society; second it refers to the attitude and responses to such norms and rules... embedded in the whole society and aiming at directing the way of life as bad or good in order to live the communal and harmonious life. The rationale for moral rules then is to ensure the harmonious co-existence of members of the society through the systematic adjustment of their discordant interest (Wiredu, 1998).

Custodian of Morality in Eggon Land

Ahogbre is believed to be the custodian of morality among the Eggon people. Eggon believed in *Ahogbre* and uphold him as the custodian of morality. Nothing is done without the influence of *Ahogbre*, and he is responsible in punishing wrong doers. The moral order from *Ahogbre* aids Eggon to work and have knowledge of what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. The customs and institutions like the chieftaincy institutions in Eggon societies that have sustained the morality of Eggon in the past, it was created by the Eggon people through the moral order given to them by *Ahogbre*. (Alu 2024, Interview). The reference for *Ahogbre* by the Eggon people is actually the driving force for morality.



Ahogbre ensure morality is upheld through the *Ashum* cult group. Security and orderliness in Eggon land were guaranteed through the efficacy of the *Ashum* society. Opoku (1978) also shares the view that in African traditional societies, religion is the basis of morality. Religion in Africa, he continues, is so all-encompassing that religion and morality cannot be detached from one another. Religion to him is the binding force and the source of moral codes that regulate the life of the African society. God is believed to be the custodian and the final authority in all matters in the African Traditional Religion. He mentions the Akan of Ghana, the Fon of Benin and the Yoruba of Nigeria as examples of African societies that see God as the final judge when the life of the African on earth is ended. Opoku (1978) specifically mentions that the Akan see God as the guardian of law and order and morality flows from him. Yoruba also draw their morality from God, *Oludumare* who has “the Pure” and “the Perfect King” as his attributes. *Oludumare* is the judge and the standard of morality. He judges the character of humanity. He is omnipresent and has his eagle's eyes on the morality of his subjects; no one can escape the judgment of God. The assumptions of the African philosophers who ascribe to the widespread view that African morality depends on religion are of the view that African morality comes from God, the divinities and the ancestors. They enlighten people to do what is right, reward the good and punish the evil. This makes religion indispensable in determining morality in Africa. Humans and Society as the Foundation of African Morality In the 17th century, the generally held notion that religion was the foundation of morality and that without religion, morality cannot exist was challenged.



Factors the Affects Morals in Eggon Land

Colonialism

The establishment of colonialism in Nigeria in 1900 brought the Eggon in contact with Europeans, first in 1907. Violent encounters ensued between the duo from 1912 to 1917 leading to the murder of Captain Irons Campbell and a retaliatory massacre of Eggon by the British between 1912 and 1917. The Europeans brought Christianity and Western education to Eggon land, accompanied by the establishment of churches and schools. The adoption of the British colonial policy of indirect rule perpetuated political centralization in Eggon land, with the creation of the office of District Head and Warrant Chief of the entire Eggon community in 1922. Through the changes which occurred in Eggon land since the 19th century, the Eggon keenly accepted westernization and embraced Western Education. The adoption of western culture and the western education affected the norms and morals among those who were given the opportunity to go to school (Attah, 2021).

Westernization

Westernization of Eggon land is obviously one of the reasons for the current moral decay among the youths. With Nigeria's independence since 1 October 1960, the *Ashum* that was saddled with moral inculcation among Eggon people was abandoned in place of the Western State system ushered in by independence, and only recognized constitutionally established institutions, officials and procedures, while neglecting a vast majority of traditional institutions and practices that were responsible in the upholding of morals in Eggon land. The adoption of Western culture is one of the problems of morals in Eggon



land (Attah 2021). Western Culture such as Child's Rights, where parents or guardians cannot discipline a child that does wrong on the account that such child has his right to sue the parents or guardians of a harsh discipline. The adoption of Western culture greatly brought a society that lack reference for Africa morality among the Eggon people. Instead of valuing and upholding the morals they were known with, they let it go in place of Western morals that does not suit our ways of doing things (Eggah, interview 2024). These were some of the challenges that propelled the setback among the Eggon people.

Urbanization

Other factors that hampered morals in Eggon land is rural-urban migration. The migration of Eggon people from the rural areas to the urban areas led to what we called cultural assimilation. The meetings of other people who are not from the same ethnic group with them make them to learn a different culture and tradition that was different from their own. It changed their ideology and way of thinking courtesy of socialization. They, now find it hard to maintain the norms and morals they were thought and brought up. They even find it hard to speak their local dialect in place of Hausa and English language. Up to now in the villages one of the means of communication is Hausa or English. One thing to note here is that these languages (i.e. Hausa and English) came with different norms and culture that is different from that of Eggon people. Insecurity in the villages is also one of the factors for urbanization. Since the villages are not safe because of recent attacks by the Fulani militias, there is a mass exodus youths from the village to the urban areas where they learn different morals that is obviously different from what he/she was thought in the village (Alaku, interview 2024).



Effects of the Mass Media

Mass media is a new social community of people with different culture and way of reasoning. People from different background meet to create another family with different ethics and norms. The mass media community is a strong community that unites the whole world together. The youths are the most populated people that are found of using social media to the elderly people. The social media also aid in the moral decay in Eggon land especially among the youths. The use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snap-Chat, Tik-Talk, WhatsApp etc, aided in youth involvement in pornography, masturbation, rituals, frauds, gambling, etc. These are some of the current issues among Eggon youths. There is no reference for morals, because social media created another world with different norms and morals that is not in accordance with the one that is practiced by Eggon people, this have led to a conflicting society. In the past, it is very rear for a young girl to have sex before marriage, but today it is encourage through the social media such as television, radio, with a slogan “If you can't hold your body, use condom”. (Arigu, interview 2024).

The Term *Ombatse*

Ombatse: is an Eggon word derived from two root words, '*omba*', meaning time, and '*otse*', meaning 'enough,' literally meaning 'time has come'. *Ombatse* is a pan ethnic organisation of the Eggon, emanating from the *Ashum* and *Azhili* traditional worship practice and religious society of the people's ancestors. Thus, '*Ombatse* implies time has come for the Eggon to resort to their ancestral traditional practices'. *Ashum*: is an Eggon word which literarily means 'oath'. It is also the name of a traditional oracle of the Eggon people represented by the buffalo horn – decorated with some leaves and feathers of a bird. This oracle is of



antiquity and serves as an intermediary between human beings and God. Thus *Ashum* is a traditional religion of the Eggon people signified by the oath taken at the *Azhili* (shrine) as a form of ancestral worship and prayers to the oracle in Eggon Land and People before the Nineteenth Century (Attah, 2024).

Ombatse and Moral Reform

The aim and objectives of *Ombatse* inter alia include unifying all Eggon people, providing social panacea, guaranteeing security, and helping the people pursue and achieve their common interest. Hence, *Ombatse* operates with commandments and guidelines given to its members to kick against social vices and instill morality among its adherents and Eggon land. Its commandments and guidelines are similar to the mosaic laws of the pre-Christian Jewish society. Those who keep the commandments are protected and rewarded by the ancestors with good fortunes. *Ombatse* has an organizational structure where it derives its administrative mechanism from. At the helm of affairs is the *Anda Ashum* (Chief Priest). Membership and Activities of *Ombatse* Traditional Institution *Ombatse* draws followership from Eggon people of all faith. The multi-faith character of the institution affirms its vitality as a sort of pan-cultural organisation.

Membership is voluntary but exclusive to Eggon males of any age, barren women, and those who have reached menopause. Initiation into the institution takes place at the shrine and it is based on persuasion. At initiation ceremony, the Chief Priest chants incantations and summons the ancestral gods of the people to confirm the initiation. The would-be members confess their atrocities and ask for forgiveness from the ancestors. The confession of their atrocities helps in the restoration of morals in the land.



Eggon people were known for bad witchcraft practice in Nasarawa State. Because of the high rate bad witchcraft among Eggon people, the people believed that natural death is rare. Once someone dies, it is believed that he/she is killed by the relatives. This makes most of the Eggon people staying in the urban areas not to go home for visit of any festival celebration for fear of being killed at home. Sometimes those in the urban areas who become successful in life and buy a car, when going home to visit he/she will not go with that car for fear of being killed. But with the revival of *Ombatse*, the activities of witchcraft drastically reduced and Eggon people in the urban areas can now visit home freely (Anga, interview 2024).

Ombatse also helped in the reduction of social vices in Eggon land. Social vices such as: stealing, adultery, fornication, rape, incest, fighting etc. The taking of oath at the *Ashum* shrine makes the people to be afraid of going against it. Breaking the oath taken can result to death and because of that, Eggon people are careful of what they do in their lives. This is why people are careful of their behaviours in the society. *Ombatse* obviously reduced stealing, among the Eggon youths; it curtailed adultery among the married couple. This also helps in the inculcation of what is called communal morality among the Eggon people. Inherently, *Ombatse* serves as a veritable instrument of social control. Members who go contrary to their oaths and commandments of *Ombatse* are afflicted by *Ashum* until propitiatory rites are performed. Affliction by *Ashum* manifests in swollen stomach, and ultimately death, if propitiation is not done. There are also situations of instantaneous death. This prompts the need for morals among the Eggon people (Esson, interview 2024).

Ombatse also aids communal morality among the Eggon people. Eggon people collectively observe morals that will bring community



progress and wellbeing. Each person behaves in a way that it will aid the community wellbeing and progress. Going against the established community norms can lead to calamities which will lead to appeasing the gods of the land saddled with the responsibility of protection, provision, etc, The individual does not exist in isolation but in a cooperate society, unlike what is obtainable in the contemporary society today (Umbugadu, interview 2024).

Conclusion

Ombatse indeed helped in the restoration of morality in Eggon land. This is one of the reasons why Eggon people have sense of morality than other tribes in Nasarawa State. The rate of witchcraft activities also drastically reduced, kidnapping, stealing and other social verses that brings set back to the growth of Eggon people are not that obvious now unlike then. Traditional Religion should be upheld because it is a religion that teaches morals through it rigid dogmas which propelled the adherents to adhere to the norms and ethics. *Ombatse* is an upshot of Eggon Traditional Religion before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Eggon land. The flexibility of Christianity and Islam towards sin is one of the reasons for immorality in Eggon land. In Christianity and Islam, if you sin, you have the grace to seek for forgiveness unlike in Traditional Religion. There are a lot of misconceptions about *Ombatse* by people who are not Eggon. *Ombatse* is not Eggon militia group, but a concept of moral inculcation in Eggon land and among Eggon people.

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