
CHAPTER TEN

NON-PERFORMANCE OF ADOLESCENT RITES OF PASSAGE LEAD TO CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Adolescent phase of rites of passage is when the youths were taught various things about life, history of the people, traditions, beliefs of the people and the way to take care of themselves and their family. In the past, every community had a very strong belief in these rites; but nowadays, civilization and Christianity have changed people's belief and performance of these rites have faded away. Rites of passage are a period when a person reached a new and significant change in their lives. It is something that nearly all societies recognized and often performed. These performances were held when a person was about entering a new stage of life. Most rites of passage helped the person to understand their new roles in society. Non-performance of these rites is one of the causes of insecurity and social vices in the society. In the process of the civilization of culture, the guiding principle should be identified and should not be lost at the end. These rites were in the past a vehicle to convey moral values in youths in order to foster their development in line with traditions and norms acceptable to society. If the society would encourage the youths to start these rites of passage again, it will help to restructure the character of the youths and avoid vices like kidnapping, highway robbery, advance fee fraud (419), money rituals etc. It would also inculcate sound moral conduct in the youths, especially young girls who are preparing for marriage. The adoption of the adolescent rites of passage as part of national values would improve the societal norms and values.

Keywords: Adolescence, Rites of passage, Moral values, Character reformation and National development

Introduction

Adolescent rites of passage are one of the seven phases of rites of passage in Igbo Culture. Rites of passage are a time when a person reached a new and significant change in his life, it is something that nearly all societies recognized and performed. Most rites of passage helped people to understand their new roles in society. They also helped others to learn how to relate with people undergoing those rites because they have undergone those rites and have known all the implications of any particular rite and how it could affect the initiate. There were three categories of rites of passage in Igbo people's life. They were: Rites of Initiation/Incorporation, Rites of Transition and Rites of Separation.

Rites of Initiation or Incorporation was rites which were performed to welcome a person into a new phase of life. Naming ceremony in childhood phase is a good example of this rite. Rites of Transition were those rites that helped the individual to move well into the next phase of life. This phase included the time when a person became engaged to be married. They were learning about the new stage of life they would soon enter i.e. marriage. The transition also

included the time children entered adolescent and left the childhood behind and also when a person was dead.

On the other hand, rites of separation were performed to separate the individual from any contact or relationship he had enjoyed before. A rite that would be in this category would be birth and death rites.

There are many rites of passage in Igbo people's life. However, there are seven times in one's life that is often considered to be the most significant time of change. To recognize these significant rites in one's life, different societies typically held elaborate ceremonies. Different cultures or societies choose to mark these rites in different ways. Each rite was unique and meaningful in one's own culture.

Adolescent Phase of Rites of Passage

According to William (1994) "rite of passage is a ceremony held by nearly all societies to observe a person's entry into a new stage of Life" (P. 350). Rites of passage note such occasions as conception, birth, childhood, adolescent, adulthood, and death and beyond. Most rites help people to understand and accept their roles in society and help them to learn how to treat others in a new way. Generally, the most complicated rites are those for a new role that demands a great change in behaviour.

Here the definition is trying to mention the importance of rites of passage and how it would affect a person's behaviour. The adolescent phase is full of initiations. According to Metuh (1987):

The term Initiation rites are often erroneously taken to refer exclusively to rites which mark the passage from childhood to adulthood life or what has been called 'puberty rites'. Initiation rites could accompany admission into age groups, secret societies, the ordination of a priest or medicine man or even the enthronement of a king (p. 205).

One of the most important aspects of initiation was the seclusion period during which the youths were taught various things about the life, people, history, traditions, beliefs of their people, and the way to take care of their family. Initiation could also be seen as a public recognition that a person was moving from childhood to adulthood. As Mbiti (1975) says, "It is a central bridge in life. It brings together one's youth and adulthood, the period of ignorance and that of knowledge" (p. 93-94).

Another major significance of the rites was to introduce the children to adult life, as they would be allowed to share the full privileges and duties of the community. They had entered into a state of responsibility. They had inherited new rights and were expected to fulfill new obligations in society.

This incorporation into adult life also introduced them to the life of the ancestors as well as to the life of those yet to be born. The initiation rites also prepared young people in matters of family responsibilities. According to Obiajulu (2003):

Initiations are also done in the churches by Igbo Christians. Such initiations include baptismal initiations, confirmation, ordination ceremonies, knighthood initiations and burial rites meant to usher the dead to paradise. Conceptually, all these initiations work under the same principle, that is, the ritual transition from one status to another (p. 51).

An adolescent phase is a very important phase in the development of an individual. The youths leave behind the phases of protective childhood and become independent. People often think that adolescent is just a biological category or a sexually matured stage. A set of norms defined the expectations people hold for the behaviour of an adolescent and adolescent's conformity to these norms define their roles. The adolescent is a period which marked changes that occur in duties, responsibilities, privileges, social and economic roles and relationships with others. At adolescence, new aspirations were generated, new standards of behaviour were incorporated, and new ways of learning were adopted.

Etymologically, the word adolescent is from the Latin word "adolescere" which means "to ripen", "to grow up", and "to become mature". It was a period of life during which the individual passed from childhood to maturity; i.e. the year in which they came into full possession of their physical and mental powers. Adolescent roughly corresponds with "teens", covering approximately between the ages of 12 to 19 years. Swartz (1963) describes adolescent years as "... the last stage on the road to the full human estate." (p. 190). He also explains that once this was successfully negotiated, the person came forth with self-respect adequate to any situation.

The adolescent is ushered in by puberty. Puberty is that period of life at which a person of either sex becomes functionally capable of parenthood. The word puberty means "ability to procreate." Swartz (1963) defines puberty as:

... an early transition period in the total development process, during which maturation takes place in certain parts of the reproductive system and leads to the phase of development that we recognized as maturity; i.e. the period when the organism actually becomes capable of efficient reproduction (p. 190).

Just about two years before puberty, there was a definite and rapid development of sexual characteristics. There was also a rapid increase in height and weight. The boy's voice became coarse and erratic; the girls develop breast and hip broaden. In both boys and girls, there would be an occurrence of pigmented pubic hairs. The earliest critical expression of pubertal development is the menses (the first menstruation) which occurs in girls approximately at the age of thirteen years, and the first ejaculation and the presence of live-spermatozoa in the male. Puberty is characterized by signs of sexual maturity.

Therefore, *Ebe* rite being a rite of passage for girls could also be claimed to serve as fertility rite; hence, the non-conformists were believed to be infertile wives. Planting season begins immediately after the initiation into *Ebe*. This time, of course, the land (*Ala*) was believed to be ritually pure and happy to accommodate and facilitate the plantings. Land (*Ala*) deity

plays an important role in *Is? Ebe* because the initiation took place on no other place but on a portion of land (*Ala*) specially set apart for the purpose and it is called *Ebe*.

According to Enechukwu (1985), "*Iso Ebe* is an indispensable rite of passage for young maidens in Agulu, Anaocha Local Government Area, Anambra State. It prepares young girls for marriage cum adult life and religious functions" (p. 34). Eneh (1988) opines that *Irumgbede* is a peculiar and popular rite of passage for young maidens in Igbo land. It is a preparation way for marriage. When girls were about fifteen years old, they got involved in *Irumgbede*. *Irumgbede* would help their physical and biological growth because it was a clear fact that after *Irumgbede*, that maiden would be bodily and biologically built, that any man, who came across the girl, would be attracted. Therefore, many of them got married immediately after the rite and any of them that failed to marry within that period would be looked down upon.

According to Arthen (2006), "Puberty is defined as the age or period at which a person is first capable of sexual reproduction, in other eras of history, a rite or celebration of this landmark event was a part of the culture"[<http://www.earthspirit.com/fireheart/fhpub.html>]. In the early twentieth century, G. Stanley Hall noted American psychologist, first defined adolescence as a "distinct stage in human development". Akpudo (1989) further explains that adolescence is a period of transition between childhood and adult life. The youth leaves behind the phase of a protective childhood and becomes independent, capable of going out for himself. People often think adolescence is just a biological category. They view an adolescent as a sexually mature but still young person. A set of norms defines the expectations people hold for the behaviour of adolescence and the adolescent's conformity to these norms define his roles. Adolescence is a period during which changes occur in duties, responsibilities, privileges, social and economic roles and relationship with others.

In the adolescent phase, there were some rites of passage performed by the adolescent to enable them to move into another stage of life. They are:

1. *Is? Ebe / Irumgbede* rite
2. Age Grade rite
3. *Mmanw?* Society rite

1. *Is! Ebe*:

Is? Ebe is an indispensable rite of passage for young maidens in some parts of Igboland. It had dual functions i.e. preparing the girls for marriage and adult life. As Mbiti (1975) puts it, "The mysteries and secrets of married life are normally revealed to the young people at this point, to prepare them for what is soon to come" (p. 94). The *Ebe* which adds to the fertility of the land (*Ala*) was seen from the fact that *Ala* was a woman deity and ritually fed with manure by the Igbo people yearly for abundant crop production. Therefore, *Is? Ebe* is a rite of passage for girls and serves as fertility rite; hence, the "non-conformists" were believed to be infertile wives when they got married. The planting season began immediately after the initiation into *Ebe*. This time, of course, *Ala* was believed to be ritually pure and happy to

accommodate and facilitate planting. *Ala* deity played an important role in *Is? Ebe* because the initiation took place in no other place but on a portion of land, and it was called *Ebe*. *Ebe* is a ritual which gives the young maidens the opportunity to worship the gods and seek their aids in marriage especially with reference to procreation. Ilogu (1974) seems to agree with this fact when he says that "... the Igbo people believed that the gods aid human life" (p. 54). *Ebe* came every two years during the dry season when there was less or no work at all both on the farm and at home. This period, normal people did not like this time very much because it made them feel sick, but lazy people like Unoka in Achebe (1962:3-5) enjoys the period. Unoka abhors anything work but very much enjoys going about playing his flute whenever there was a dance in the town.

Ebe rite is an exclusive right of the freeborn and indigenous maiden of Akpulu, Ideato North Local Government Area, Imo State. Another quality for initiating into *Ebe* was that the candidate would be a virgin because *Ebe* is a sacred ritual and would be kept sacred. It is the first ritual title taken by the young girls in their life. There was a need for them not to be defiled. This question on virginity preservation before marriage is widely emphasized among the Igbo people. Even the Hebrew people sanctioned it in the Holy Bible. In Deuteronomy (21:13-19), it was said that if any man takes a wife and goes in with her and found out that her virginity has been lost, he should send her back to her parent.

Is? Ebe rite took the following procedures: Preparations were made by both parents; husband to be and the young girl who would be initiated into *Ebe*. The parents had spiritual and material preparation in the performance of this great rite. Spiritually, they made sacrifices and rituals to the various gods and goddesses informing them about the oncoming ceremony and asking their favour throughout the period of the rites. Materially, the initiation required many items like *Ab?* (long local basket), *? k?ebe* (local plate made of mud) and food items like cocoyam, yam, goat, dog, fowls and fish. The girls' participation here was different. They were mostly after beautifying themselves and that was why they engaged in decorating their bodies with *Uli*, *Nkisi* and shaving their hair. The entire town came in here to perform *Ime-Aja Ebe* (the ritual sacrifice that would be done in next *Eke* day to the *Ebe* day). The *Ebe* cannot take place without this ritual in the town. According to Ibewuiké (2006) "Initiation rites have much symbolic meaning, in addition to the physical drama and impact, as the youths are ritually introduced to that art of communal living" (p. 104).

There were certain rules and regulations which would be observed. For instance, the initiates must be virgins before taking part in the initiation. They would not have sexual intercourse during the course of the initiation. They would not eat any food prepared with oil on the first day of the initiation, and they would be truthful. Any violation of these rules such as sexual intercourse must be openly confessed.

The major work of the initiates was playing and eating what was prepared for them by their mothers. As the aim of this rite is to fatten the girls, their parents would try their best to provide them with anything that would give them maximum happiness. With this joyful and

merry-making period, the ladies got fattened and looked nourished. At the end of one month when *Ebe* rite came to an end, the girls looked more matured and appealing to the extent that any man who came across them would be attracted. This was why after the initiation; most girls who had not gotten married would marry. Anybody who failed to be married after the rite would be looked down upon and villagers would make fun of her.

Irumgbede:

This is a peculiar and popular rite of passage for a young maiden. Every town had its own method of *Irumgbede*. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on *Irumgbede* in Urualla. When a young maiden is biologically mature and prepared to get married, she would be initiated into *Irumgbede* rite. This rite was performed by the girls because of the following reasons:

- a. To show that, the girl is now grown up to leave in a man's house.
- b. To give her respect and honour as one who was brought up in a responsible family.
- c. To train her domestically for a family life especially on what she is expected to do as a wife.

When girls are about fifteen years old they get involved in *Irumgbede* rite. *Irumgbede* helps to promote their physical and biological growth because it was a clear fact that, after *Irumgbede*, a maiden would be so bodily and biologically built that any man who came across her would be attracted. Therefore, many of them got married immediately after the rite and any of them that failed to marry within that period would be looked down upon. *Irumgbede* took place three times in a girl's lifetime, but in some cases, two times would go for a girl who grew fast and who was engaged in marriage early in life.

In Urualla, the young maiden who was for *Irumgbede* would stay in a separate house for the rite. In that place, their suitors might be going there secretly to see them in a special way. The girls for *Irumgbede* were sent to the house of the oldest woman in the town, who is also trustworthy to take care of them. In such a home, it was the sole responsibility of that woman to teach and train them in home management. She would make sure that the maiden would not put up any bad behaviour in the course of performing the rite.

However, these maidens were free to perform the *Irumgbede* in their parent home or it would be the husband's home as agreed between two parties – the parents and the suitors.

During the *Irumgbede* proper, the girl's work was to eat anything prepared by their parents and their suitors. Furthermore, they involved themselves in beautifying and decorating their bodies with *Uli*, *Uhie* and *edo*. These things made them look healthy, attractive and plump because it was the main purpose of the rite. As noted by Ibewuike (2006) "During an earlier period in the fattening-house, the girls had been taught how to become sexually attractive" (p. 105).

At the end of the rites, the maidens went to the market to be admired by people. During the outing ceremony, friends, fiancés and relatives would be invited. This is called *?p? Ah?a Mgbede* and it always took place on Nkwo market day. Food and drinks were largely

provided by the parents and/or suitors. It usually began around September or November ending in December. If a girl was already engaged before then, her suitor would buy things for her and hire men to carry her on their shoulders to the market on the outing day. The presents given to the initiates by their relatives were tokens of welcome into the full community. As Ibewuiké (2006) puts, "It symbolized the right to own property" (p. 106). After the final ceremony, the girl would go and live with her husband. After the third *Iru Mgbede*, if the girl did not get married, she would stay in her parent's house independently until she found a husband.

2. Age Grade:

The culture of age-grading was traced to the forefathers of the land. It has been the custom in the land for people of the same age bracket to congregate and be identified with a common name. The name which was adopted would be symbolic and signalled a new era and goals which must be pursued. It was a type of social organization whose sole aim was to help in the development of the community. In Urualla in Ideato-North Local Government Area, Imo State, for instance, different age grades have distinguished themselves in the development of certain areas of their social life. In the past and even now, it is the primary assignment of age grades especially the youngest ones to develop and maintain roads. It was on record that Nwabugo Age Grade cleared the *h?a Uhualandiichie* for the building of the hospital. Mmad?kaejiake Age Grade built a hall to serve for any social gathering. Udokamma Age Grade built Af? daily market in the town.

Apart from the above-mentioned age-grades, different age grades helped in developing the town in so many ways. Some of them learnt traditional dances which they used in keeping the town lively during festivals like the new yam festival. Obinwanne Age Grade had Obinwanne dance and Egedege dance. Nwabugo Age Grade, the youngest age grade has the Ekere? k? dance. Udokamma age-grade had other dances used for special celebrations, burial ceremonies and other celebrations.

There were no ceremonies in the age-grade rite. As soon as one became adolescent in the town, one would identify with one's age mates.

3. Mmanw? Society:

During the adolescent stage, one had to be initiated into mmanw? society. According to Unigwe (2000:23), "Mmanw? or masquerades are the spirit being." They were believed to be the spirit of the dead ancestors according to Igbo tradition. In the olden days, masquerades served as the policemen of the community. They enforce order and discipline in the society. At town and village meetings, they performed roles of provost – marshals. They might cane in the course of enforcing law and order. For offences of different categories, they usually enforced penalties on offenders like the killing of the victim's fowls or goats in order to bend the offender to be law-abiding. Masquerades were feared and revered as the highest authority of the land especially then when traditional heads were not easily seen.

Membership of the masquerade cult was meant for only the initiates. During the actual

initiations, there were some rigorous exercises that would be undergone before one is fully admitted. It is the duty of the *Nnemm?* (head of masquerades) to initiate the new members at the *?l?-m??*. There were four types of *Nne-mmanw?* in Urualla. They include *Anyarekwe*, *? nugo*, *Ojoghori* and *Al?gwoekwe*. They rarely come out, but whenever they did, it was believed that something strange has happened.

There were categories of masquerades namely: *? n?ugocha*, *Oji?n?*, *Okpu?cha*, *? wa?hia*, *Nwaiwi*, *Mgbadike* etc. They perform special functions during festivals. Women and non-initiates have no right to stand and look at them or communicate with them in any way or manner. Those who came outstood the risk of being penalized. The rigorous exercise one must undergo before being a member was to drive out fear from oneself, so that in time of danger, he would not flee, but take courage to defend himself and his family. The riddles carved on the special sticks, or drawn in the sand, were symbols of knowledge to which the initiates now had full access. The initiates were now entitled to know every secret of tribal life, things known by exclusive groups. The rite is performed under the community sacred tree. The rite was a reminder of the religious life and a symbolic visit to the ancestors, and the spirits who were thought to live there. The occasion was a renewal of the link with the spiritual realities and a reminder that the ancestors were "present" with them. According to Mbiti (1975), "The initiates undergo physical training to overcome difficulties and pain and to cultivate courage, endurance, perseverance and obedience. These educational experiences equip them mentally, bodily, emotionally and morally" (p. 96). But with the introduction of Christianity, there had been a dramatic change in the initiation rites. The Christian "initiation ceremony" has replaced the important roles played by Igbo traditional initiation ceremony.

Adolescent rites of passage are very important stages in the life of every person. In the past, every community had a very strong belief in these rites of passage but nowadays, modernization and Christianity have changed people's belief in these rites. The performance of the rites has faded away with time.

Conclusion

Adolescent rite of passage was in the past a vehicle to convey moral values in youths in order to foster their development in line with traditions and norms acceptable to people. Modern society has inadvertently abandoned these rites because of western education and the new religion.

The ceremonies of Adolescent rites of passage were wholesome in themselves since by them the youths were taught how to respect God, parents, elders, wives and husbands. These ceremonies and rites were disappearing; Christianity had changed a lot of traditions and disrupted the systems that stabilized society. This eroded the moral values that these rites inculcate in adolescents; thus, the children of nowadays, who did not pass through these rites lose moral and social values. Some do not even respect elders and many were involved in a lot of social vices.

This does not mean that western education or Christianity is bad, they have brought in some useful changes in society. The evil culture and killing of twins, human sacrifices and inter-tribal wars which were rampant during pre-Christianity have reduced drastically. Today, there are many educated elites in society such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, architects, accountants, linguists etc. Christianity and western civilization had some good effect on iru mgbede and ʔma-mm?? rites that were not good such as appearing naked during the rites and even before the deities of the land. Christianity had transformed this through modernization. If the society would encourage the youths to start these Adolescent rites of passage again, it will help to restructure the character of the youths and avoid vices like kidnapping, highway robbery, prostitution, advance fee fraud (419), money rituals etc. It would also inculcate sound moral conduct in the youths, especially young girls who are preparing for marriage.

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