The Place of Ada-*Agbara* in *Ushi* Priesthood of Akpoku Etche of Niger Delta

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Abstract

The paper examines the place of Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity), in *ushi* priesthood of Akpoku Etche. The paper argues that in *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity, is not only chosen like the priest by the deity, but also one of the cultic functionaries in *ushi* priesthood; though the selection of Ada-*agbara* is complimented with unusual occurrences to clear traces of doubt for the right candidate of the deity. The paper posits that in *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) is saddled with innumerable roles such as: to rub *uhie* (red camwood) on the priest of *ushi* deity on the sacred day of worship, to sing for the priest during *ushi* annual festival thereby making the presence of *ushi* felt not only at the place of worship, but also help to create an atmosphere of order and calmness during such occasions. The methodology adopted was oral interviews (report of devotees of *ushi* deity and Handed down tradition from the custodians of custom and traditions of Akpoku) and secondary sources (published materials). The study adopts phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the roles of Ada-*agbara* in *ushi* priesthood. Findings reveal that the roles of Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) in *ushi* priesthood is crucial and that has helped to make *ushi* priesthood relevant and dynamic.

Keywords: Akpoku, Ada-*agbara*, Priesthood.

Introduction

In *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* (daughter of the deity) is one of the cultic functionaries in *ushi* priesthood of Akpoku. Thus, she is not only revered, but also knowledgeable in the rituals and ceremonies relating to *ushi* priesthood. In *ushi* priesthood of Akpoku Etche, there are many taboos surrounding the Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity). But the most important is that she must not marry outside Akpolu town. Apart from this, Ada-*agbara* is known for certain qualities and by a particular dress that mark her out between other cultic functionaries.

The Akpoku Background

We may now briefly turn to the Akpoku, one of the five towns in Mba clan that make up Etche ethnic nationality; a people living on the north-eastern fringes of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The economic life of Akpoku is strongly influenced by its natural environment well-endowed with a fertile and cultivable area of land. Hence, the people are mainly agrarian, and their occupation is farming. Yam the chief of crops, is primarily the concern of men; whereas cassava, maize and vegetables are cultivated by women. Though farming is the major occupation of the people but some combine it with fishing, hunting, tapping of palm wine, carving or other activities (Amadi, 2022, pp.33-34).

As regards their spiritual life, Akpoku people strongly believe in the existential reality of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Akpoku, like other traditional African societies, do not approach Him directly, rather He is approached and worshiped through the pantheon of divinities.

Statement of the Problem

The place of Ada-*agbara* in the development and sustenance of *ushi* priesthood of Akpoku Etche over the years cannot be overemphasized. Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) has helped to make *ushi* priesthood resilient and relevant especially in the contemporary society. however, as important as Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) seems to be in *ushi* priesthood of Akpoku Etche, her role appears to have continued to escape the attention of scholars leading to a dearth of scholarship. In consequence of this, genuine votaries of the deity appears to be phasing out in

undocumented formats. Therefore, this study will document for posterity the role of Ada-*agbara* for education and sustainability.

Two factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. The first, as earlier stated, was to document for posterity, the role of Ada-*agbara* especially in this era of rapid change and cultural globalization, and the second was to examine the role of Ada-*agbara* and to see how this has helped in the sustenance of *ushi* priesthood.

Methodology

This study was carried out as an interview-based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz:

i. Reports of devotees of *ushi* deity about role of Ada-*agbara*.
ii. Handed down tradition about meaning of the role of Ada-*agbara*.

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewees and some of the considerations are: the position of the informant in the society; the cultural organization he/she belongs to and the position or title he/she holds; the level of the interviewee's cultural affinity, education, social exposure, travel history, and so on. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the local community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people.

Conceptual Clarification

Ada-*agbara*

In *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* is regarded as the daughter of *ushi* deity; one of the most influential and most powerful divinity in Akpoku Etche. In *ushi* priesthood; Ada-*agbara*, like the priest is also chosen by the deity and this is complimented with the occurrences of unusual signs refer to *eshi-eshi* which in turn may warrant the consultation of the oracle to unravel. Customarily, the daughter of *ushi* deity, must not marry outside Akpoku town and by extension must also be knowledgeable in the rituals and ceremonies relating to *ushi* priesthood.

In Akpoku traditional priesthood, the daughter of *ushi* deity, like the priest enjoys some degrees of privilege and prestige. For instance, before a person is chosen as an Ada-*agbara,* the fellow as tradition demands is expected to formally pay

courtesy visit to the daughter of *ushi* deity for formal declaration of interest. In honesty, it is only the priesthood of *ushi* deity that such honor is accorded. Thus, in Akpoku traditional priesthood, the daughter of *ushi* deity is regarded as the head and leader of the daughters of Akpoku deities.

Priesthood

Priesthood is an institution which brings to mind a body of persons who perform religious functions and mediate between men and the supersensible world (Tasie and Okinedo, 2005:124). Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:142) have pointed out that in some towns certain cults have a town-wide recognition. According to them, in such cults, priesthood is highly hierarchical, and there is a graded order of priesthood. A telling example here is that of Orunmila among the Yoruba where there are about sixteen different grades. The grades are named in ascending or descending order. In affirmation to this, E.B. Idowu (1962:133), posits that there is always a chief priest who is assisted by other sub-priests according to their ranks. Following this is the call to priesthood. Ajayi, A. (1981:82), observes that the call to priesthood varies from place to place and according to the categories of priests. Similarly, Tasie and Okinedo (2005:124), have noted that in most African societies the call to priesthood is hereditary, sometimes passing from father to son in immediate succession and in other cases, to the oldest surviving member of the priestly family. In other cases, the call to priesthood may not be through hereditary but by spirit possession. Hence an abnormal behavior may be an indication that the individual is the favourite of the gods. Apart from spirit possession, some people are set aside from birth to be priests. Affirming this, Awolalu and Dopamu (1919:141) observed that "a particular mark found on a child at birth may be an indication that he may have been set apart for the office of a priest". According to Awolalu and Dopamu, “this is so in the case of Ndazo, the priest of Gunnu among the Nupe. He must be bom with a tuff of hair on top of his head". On the other hand, Awolalu and Dopamu also contend that a priest may, be called to the service of divinity either by spirit possession, through dreams, visions, and trance or by the oracle. For them, once a person has been called he must retire from the business of daily living and submit to the service of the divinity and refusal might be greeted with calamitous consequences.

In a similar way, Anyacho, E. (1994:270), notes that the call to priesthood is always for life and is made when there is vacancy in the post which is only possible after the incumbent has died, hence there is no retirement. Onwubiko, O. (1991:74) writing on priesthood in Igbo religion opined that priesthood is by heredity and never by election. According to him, a person is a priest of a certain deity because his father was the priest of that deity. To confirm the above; he cited a case where two old men Irom Ezinibitte in Ezinihitte Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State, were Struggling for the vacant seat of Ajala deity of Umuerim in Obeama Ezinihitte. Despite the struggle, the deity did not choose the two men on the premise that the priestly office was not a contestable one. Along the line, this deity by felling a tree in its shrine knocked down a part of the shrine and revealed through an oracle that both men should cease struggling for the vacant seat. According to Onwubiko, the deity further revealed that the true priest was yet to be born and his office was to be held in proxy for him.

Besides, George, E. (1980:64), interestingly notes that Yoruba priests are not "called to priesthood", usually the person who succeeds the lineage priest or the town priest is the person next to him in rank. He further observed that a person could assume priestly office purely by heredity. Rotimi and Chris (2005:22), also posit that another way by which a devotee may be called as a priest is through the declaration of the oracle. According to Rotimi and Chris, this often happens when the customary rite is performed immediately after a child's birth. In much the same vein, in Ihiagwa traditional religion of Imo State, a person may be called a priest by selection. For instance, the Otamiri deity chooses his priests by reincarnation and it is rotated between the people of Ibuzo and the people of Iriamogu villages respectively. The chief priest of the deity is called Ezeario, the Ezeario is vested on an individual by reincarnation. That is to say that any Ezeario is a reincarnate of the previous Ezeario. In addition to this, the training of priests is also considered significant. To this end, Ajayi (1981), noted that where priesthood passes from head of the clan to another, the training is usually by observation on the part of the person who is to succeed the priest. According to him, the priesthood of Orunmla among the Yoruba is a professional one and as such his training takes a long time. An aspirant may be trained for about three years and without the training the aspirant can never become a specialist except he had been affiliated from youth to the priesthood of Orunmla Ajayi, however further noted that among

the Ewe, the training for a priest takes pa in the temple where there are seminaries attached to the temple. In the temp priests are trained for a period of three to five years or eight to ten years. During training, the priest to be learns the rituals of the deity, its nature, the chantings and invocations, dances and the general ceremonies of divinity.

There are also cases where the priest to be has been identified or marked out. The training in such a case is mostly by observation and apprenticeship. Here, the priest to be, understudies the other priest for several years through participation in relevant religious activities. He takes note of what the priest does at each stage of a ritual. The training of priests takes different forms depending on the nature of priesthood. Of significance is that in all forms of training, the priest is regarded as being trained to be set apart, for example, the Ashanti priest during training, must not gossip, must not quarrel or fight, must not salute his elders by bending the right knee and touching the ground with the right hand, must not go out at night. According to them, such restrictions are an indication that the priest is leading ascetic life and they emphasize his Separateness. He or she is married to the divinity during training, although he or she could marry again or join his or her partner after training. The above are some of the taboos a priest must observe during training (see Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:143-143).

In addition to the taboos which a priest must observe in the course of training, some scholars have also noted that the priest of each divinity has a distinguishing mark, the type of which depends on which divinity he serves. For example, the priest or priestess of Orisa-nla is expected to dress in white and white beads (see Rotimi and Chris, 2005). In line with this, Awolalu and Dopamu, (1979) also noted that priests usually have special dresses which distinguish them from other cultic functionaries. Usually, white is the colour of the dress but other colours can also be used depending on the deity being served.

Following this, is the functions of priests in African religion. The chief role of a priest is to act as a link between men and the deities. Priests also act as a channel of divine communication, making the wishes of their deity known to men. It is also the duty of priests to offer the sacrifices of men to their deities. Furthermore, a priest performs the daily and weekly rites of feeding his deity, pouring libations

and offering prayers in times of crises for the overall well-being of the people. As the custodians of the shrine, he sees to it that it is kept clean and all the icons therein suitably housed (see Tasie and Okindo, 2005). Priests in general look after holy and sacred places including shrines and temples where they officiate in worship and sacrifice.

They are custodians of religious objects, myths and traditions as well as links or intermediaries between divinities and worshippers (see Anyacho, 1994:270). It is also the responsibility of a priest to take care of the shrine, consecrate the religious emblems of the divinity, oversee the offering made at the shrine, and take a lead part in the annual ceremony. A priest also ascertains the will of his divinity through divination, dreams or a medium (see George, E. 1990:61). In the remaining section of this essay, we shall be examining the roles of Ada-agbara in *ushi* priesthood.

An Analysis of the Role of Ada-*agbara*

In *ushi* priesthood, my informant, Amadi Roseline, revealed that the office of Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity), is divine selection. In this case, *ushi* deity chooses directly a candidate of its choice. It begins after three years of the demise of the incumbent. Worthy of note here is that the question of holding the office in temporal care by a temporal custodian after the demise of the former does not occur, rather immediately after the three years period, the deity can give signs to the candidate of its choice and also the entire community (Amadi, R. 24/03/2025, oral interview).

However, signs in this respect may occur into two ways namely, personal and public signs. Signs can be personal in the sense that it is only the would-be-daughter of the deity in particular that would experience them. hence no one else experiences them other than she. She alone knows and sees the signs. Notable among the signs include gathering of bees in the homestead of the Ada-*agbara*-to-be, frequent appearances and disappearances of *esu-agbara* (a particular type of millipede). In most cases, the deity may choose to appear to Ada-*agbara* while sleeping, while cooking, in the farm, etc.

The incumbent daughter of the deity, before she became the daughter of the deity, experiences these signs. The Ada-*agbara*, before she became the daughter of the deity, was a staff of the Nigeria Tide, Port Harcourt, but due to this endless appearances and disappearances of this particular type of millipede, which only she was experiencing, she was voluntarily retired from service. Public signs, in this case, are made open to everybody in the community. Examples of public signs may be the occurrence of the following; a rabbit running out in a broad day light, a sheep growing a horn or having sexual intercourse with a he goat (Njoku, Helen, 03/04/2025).

Following this is the consultation of the oracle by the community. To accomplish this task, all the elders of the six villages of Akpoku will be summoned at (*ozukoro*) Akpoku central place of gathering. In the gathering, six respected elders each from the six villages of Akpoku after due consultation will be selected to undertake this assignment. As my informant, Nwosu Kingdom, disclosed, they are to consult six different oracles and diviners outside the shores of Akpoku for six days. The reason why they have to consult the oracle outside Akpoku town is to avoid being biased and sentimental with the findings. On the seventh day, they are expected to reassemble the entire community as to notify them of the outcome of their findings from the oracles.

Before they set off for this journey each of the six selected elders will take an oath. This they do by placing their hands on the *ofo* (staff of truth and justice). Significantly, it forbids them from influencing the findings, or divulging them to anybody before the community. The reason to consult the oracle by the community is not only to unravel the underlying causes of the signs experienced as earlier discussed, but also to be for certain, the right candidate for the deity, to become Ada-*agbara* (Nwosu, K. 03/04/2025, oral interview).

At this point, it is worthwhile to not that the findings at the community level cannot be enough to make public declaration of the Ada-*agbara* as the chosen candidate of the deity.

Therefore, to be double sure of the findings of the community, a diviner who must be very knowledgeable in the act of divination will be invited by the community

to sit at the community square. According to my informant, Amadi Innocent, through him, the oracle speaks. His pronouncement after his divination makes for public declaration of the Ada-*agbara* as the real candidate.

In *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) is surrounded with numerous taboos. They are meant to guide and regulate the day-to-day behaviour of Ada-*agbara* (daughter of *ushi* deity) on one hand, Ada-*agbara* and the deity on the other hand. Therefore, it is forbidden for Ada-*agbara* to marry outside the Akpoku town. Though like, every other woman, she can marry, but it must be within the Akpoku town. The essence of this is to enable Ada-*agbara* to be available and participate fully in religious ceremonies and rituals relating to *ushi* deity.

It is also forbidden for Ada-*agbara* to sleep with her husband on the day set aside for communion with *ushi*. For instance, as *nkwo* (the first day in Akpoku traditional week) is considered sacred and set aside for the worship of *ushi* deity, Ada-*agbara* must abstain herself from any mundane activities on the eve of *nkwo*. Thus, it is forbidden for Ada-*agbara* to eat any food cooked by her children on the eve of the sacred of worship till the dusk of the next day; to go to her farm on the sacred day of *ushi* deity; to put on foot wears; and to trek distances, and to eat in the public (Amadi, Innocent, 25/03/2025, oral interview).

In addition to the taboos associated with Ada-*agbara* and *ushi* deity, is the dress of Ada-*agbara*.

In *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* is known by a particular dress. On the day of worship, Ada-*agbara* of *ushi* deity is expected to dress on white with morning rose powder on her hand. At times, she may dress on red with beads and white headpiece. Significantly, the dress of Ada-*agbara* is a distinguishing mark between Ada-*agbara* and other cultic functionaries in *ushi* priesthood (Nweke, Charles, 02/04/2025, oral interview).

In addition to this, are the qualities of Ada-*agbara*. As the daughter of the deity, Ada-*agbara* must also be identified with certain qualities. As expected, she must be accommodating approachable at all times, well reserved, honest, kindhearted and

knowledgeable in the rituals and ceremonies relating to *ushi* priesthood (Anele Mary, 26/03/2025, oral interview).

In *ushi* priesthood, the Ada-*agbara* performs innumerable roles. Therefore, it is the duty of the Ada-*agbara* to rub the *uhie* (red camwood) on the priest of *ushi* deity on the sacred day of worship, during the *oso-agbara*; a term used to describe when the priest to –be ran to the place of the origin of his deity prior to his consecration into priest), during *ushi* annual festival, during the consecration of the priest into priesthood. It is her duty to adorn the religious emblems with *uhie* (red camwood) during the *ushi* annual festival. It is also her duty to sing for the priest of *ushi* deity, during the *oso-agbara* and leads umuada (daughters of the land) during the *oso-agbara*.

In addition, it is the duty of Ada-*agbara* to sing for the deity during occasions such as the sacred day of worship and *ushi* annual festival thereby making the presence of *ushi* felt at the place of worship, and to create an atmosphere of order and calmness during such occasions (Nnaji Celestine, 04/04/2025).

Conclusion

In *ushi* priesthood, Ada-*agbara* (the daughter of the deity) is believed to be chosen by the deity like the priest of *ushi* deity. And this is complimented with unusual signs to which the people referred to as *eshi-shi* without which the selection of the Ada-*agbara* (daughter of the *ushi* deity) cannot take place. As one of the cultic functionaries in *ushi* priesthood, it is expected she must be knowledgeable in rituals and ceremonies relating to *ushi* priesthood. As the daughter of *ushi* deity, she cannot marry outside Akpoku town; so excruciating of this taboo contributes to make *ushi* priesthood relevance and dynmic.

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