The Worship of *Akpokofari* Deity of Yenizue-Gene Community, Yenagoa Local Government Area Bayelsa State.

By

Independence Gabriel, PhD
Department of Religious Studies,
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State
independenceg5@gmail.com

Abstract

In this study, we have discussed the *Akpokafari* deity of the Yenizue-Gene people. The research used the phenomenological approach to guide the work. From what we have discovered from our findings, the *Akpokafari* deity had been of great benefit to the people. The deity had assisted the Yenizue-Gene people in the area of protection, blessing, adjudication of matters, and had also checked immoralities and social vices in the community. Yet, no records have be created on the deity. This is the problem; this study is out to solve. Modernism has caught up with the worship of the deity, people see its worship as acaice, demonic and what have you and this has affected its patronage. It is the desire of the author that we encourage and revive the activities of the deity in Yenizue-gene. This is because, its present in their day to day life have helped to check so many unhealthy occurrences that would have ordinarily been of great setback to the community. Its continues existence would be very beneficial to the Yenizue-gene people and by implication the entire Epie-Atissa.

Introduction:

This study is meant to examine, explore and document the paraphrenia of *Akpokofari* deity of Yenizue-Gene Community, in Epie clan, Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. This deity is very paramount in the traditional scheme of things of the Yenizue-Gene people. However, with the incursion of Christianity into the Epie and Atissa clan, the patronage and even the efficacy of the deity among the Yenizue-Gene people's traditional setting has been greatly affected. The believers of the Christian religious tradition see the traditionalists that worship this deity has been fetish, and diabolic as pagans, heathens and like in the area, that is the Christian believers don't see anything good about traditional

worship. This ugly development has greatly affected the future of the deity and nature too had affected the strength of the worshippers, yet no record has been created. The votaries of the deity are dying out gradually, and if no literature is generated, and it all the people that knew something about the deity dies out, then this part of the Yenizue-Gene people's culture will atrophy, that is what this study is out avert.

The Yenizue-Gene People

Since we are working on the deity *Akpokofari*, worshipped by the Yenizue-gene people, it is expedient for us to know about a little history of the people, that is the people that inhabits the confines of our area of study. Yenizue-Gene is a community located in Epie-Atissa clan, in Yenagoa Local Government area of Bayelsa State. The Epie-Atissa people occupy the area between longitude $6^{0}16$ and 6^{0} 24 east of the Greenwich Meridian and Latitudes 4^{0} 50 and $5^{0}2^{1}$ north of the equates. The community was founded by Zue the first son of Epie the founder and the ancestor of the Epie-Atissa people. The community has about six compounds namely: ufamu Nafi, Ufamu Okunu, Ufamu Weku, Ufamu (Ozuku, Fumuwede, Ufami pribok) kalafifue melody, 2025, oral interview)

The History of *Akpokofari* Deity

History had it that two sons of Yenizue-Gene, one Mr. Ikenga and Mr. Ozuku were responsible for the establishment and the institution of the *Akpokofari* deity and its shrine at Yenizue-Gene. These men were said to have brought the deity from a community in River State, but the name of where they brought the deity from was not remembered, it has been lost in the antiquities. It was said that they instituted the deity for the protection of their individual families. There is a common belief in Africa, Yenizue-Gene community Inclusive of the existence of witches, wizards and sorcerers that causes havoc spiritually. These entities are believed to harm people with their spiritual power and bad magic. This asserted is apt with what Idowu suggested as cited by Opoku (1978), in his book titled '*West African Tradition Religion'*. He submitted that;

> Witches and Witchcraft are sufficiently real as to the cause of untold hardship, suffering and numerable deaths… hence when I speak of

> witchcraft, I am referring to that which is very disturbingly real as to life of Africans in every work of life. And by Africans I mean not only the illiterates who carry on their traditional customs intact, almost as they were received from their forebears; I mean also 'educated men and women in the civil service, in the mercantile houses, well-known politicians, university professors, university graduates and under-graduates, medical doctors, Imams, Alhajis, Archbishops or Bishops and a host of Christian ministers and Muslims …. (Idowu, 1970, p3)

These two men's families experienced unexpected deaths, sicknesses, near success syndrome, that is, not been able to make wealth, and so many negative vicissitudes and believed that these occurrences were orchestrated from the spiritual realm either by witches, wizards or sorcerers and so they had to go to a community in the present day Rivers State to prepare a medicine for the protection of their families. However, they do not want other people to also go to acquire the same power, and so they did not disclose where they got the medicine from until they both died.

However, from the time that they brought in the medicine and instituted an alter and a shrine to house it, the various bizzare happenings that affected the two families, subsided, and so as the efficacy of the medicine became very pronounced, the Yenizue-Gene community decided to adopt the shrine as the whole community's object of worship. Initially, it was only meant by the families of the two individuals that brought and instituted the shrine of *Akpokofari* deity in Yenizue-Gene; (Ibani, 2017, P30).

This submission is similar to what is obtained at Akaba community of a deity known as Orisha deity as recorded in a Journal publication titled 'The resilience of Orisha shrine of Akaba community' in Atissa Clan, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa state.

In discussing the *Orisa* deity, Gabriel (2023) opined that in the categories of divinities, there are primordial divinities, they are the ones referred to as divinities that were worshipped by nations and is believed came into existence from when

the supreme being came into being. Their origin is not known but yet, people acknowledges and worships them. The second category are the spirit of human beings who lived extra ordinary life and when they died, their spirit where elevated and canonized to be equal to that of divinities. The third categories are spirits that are identified with natural features, they originated from the personification of natural forces and phenomena and the lasts the group are those divinities that resulted from the practice of magic and medicine. Africans have the wherewithal of combining herbs with other natural elements and backed their productivity with spiritual forces. Medicines are also prepared to win cases in the court, protection and also win wars, individuals and family units, a community also prepare medicine for the protection of their families. At the initial stages, such preparations are regarded as protective medicines but when their efficacy or potency become more and more strong, large cultic activities would generate around such medicine and after some period, they gradually and eventually graduate to the status of divinities. This is the category that most war gods like *Arukueken* of Famgbe Community and *Orisa* deity as earlier indicated belong. This is the group that the *Akpokofari* deity of our focus also belong. It was formally in form of a medicine that were brought by two persons from Yenizue-Gene community to protect their families but as its potency became very pronounced and famous, the community adopted the *Akpokofari* deity as a community deity.

There was also this ascertain that when Christianity first came to Yenizue-Gene, all the shrines of others deities that the people were worshipping were destroyed, but that of *Akpokofari* was spared. Even during the Nigeria civil war, that is the war between Nigeria and the Biafran army that consumed many structures in Bayelsa State, the shrine of *Akpokofari* deity was not touched. This might not be unconnected with the god's paramount roles that it has played among the people even till date, a few of the traditional Yenizue-Gene indigenes still venerates and serve *Akpokofari*.

The Functions of *Akpokofari* Deity

Generally, in Africa, deities and divinities are the second in command to the almighty God, they are not independent of themselves, they take order and directive from the supreme being. This submission is apt with what can be said to have guided the role that *Akpokofari* deity plays in Yenizue-Gene's traditional

setting. The deity like every other deity in African belief is believed to have derived its power from *Izibe*, the name of God in the Epie Language spoken by the Yenizue-Gene people. It is a god that functions as a god of protection to the people from both spiritual and physical attack by their adversaries. This deity has the phyton snake as its totem and so there are stories of how Yenizue-Gene people that their lives were in danger from being attacked by murderers and their adversaries, the *Akpokofari* which also means phyton snake in Yenizue-Gene people's language had rescued. As a result of these benevolent functions that the deity had played among them, the python snake is sacred to them. The pyhton snake wherever it is seen in the good old days would not be killed, the sight of phyton snake were very common in the community because they don't kill them but now, the community is a sub-bub of Yenagoa the capital of Bayelsa State and so it has been urbanized and strangers live among them and to some of these strangers, the phyton meat is a delicacy to them and so though, it has not been physically established, some of the non-indigenes must have secretly killed and eaten the snake. However, when such deviant is caught, the penalty had always been very serious, (Illuma, oral interview)

The *Akpokofari* deity also functions as destiny enforcer of the Yenizue-Gene people. When one's life is not going on smoothly among them, they consult the deity to find out the destiny of such person and when it was discovered from the spiritual realm that such person's misfortune is as a result of his destiny, *Akpokofari* is believed to have the ability to correct the devotees destiny for better. However, this is done through divination séance and the appropriate ritual prescribe by the deity carried out. After when the situation is successfully addressed, it is believed the person concerned would begin to experience success in life.

Man, according to one lluma, in an oral interview conducted at Yenizue-Gene, posited that there are cases of people of the above-mentioned situation and when *Akpokofari* deity was consulted and the necessary rituals carried out to revert the situation, the client's troubles stopped. To lluma, every man needs moral and spiritual realm with which to work for a solution to their problems. This makes relationship between the profane and the sacred possible and cordial, and this is actualized through rituals. The mutual relationship between the Yenizue-Gene

people and the spiritual realm in their environment is made possible through these rituals.

The *Akpokofari* deity is also attributed to have functioned as a tool for social control among the Yenizue-Gene people. The deity had so many taboos that is meant for the people to observe, for example, a Yenizue-Gene person is not expected to prepare bad magic to harm any other Yenizue-Gene person, he is not expected, for those of them that have acquired the power of witchcraft and sorcery, they are not permitted to use such power to harm Yenizue-Gene indigene. It is a taboo to kill and eat the python snake, the deity does not also encourage stealing among the people etc. If anyone disobeys these laws, *Akpokofari's* wrath must catch up with such person. This to a great extent had helped to controlled the social behaviour of the people. *Akpokofari* deity is also a source of social life for the indigenes of the community. During its worship, all the devotees in the community come together to celebrate, dance and socialize all to the glory of the deity. During this period, animals, are slaughtered and communion meal cooked and eaten together by the male devotees of the community and the ancestors and the deity's spirit. Such days are days that keeps the community agog hence it functions as a source of social interaction among the people.

The *Akpokofari* deity also functions as a deity of traditional judicial adjudications institution. When there are cases of land dispute among them, *Akpokofari* had mediated in such community dispute. The people had always resorted to *Akpokofari* deity's shrine for adjudication. There is this belief that the deity is an unbiased god and its judgement is always believed to be truth and nothing but the truth. Its judgment are sacrosanct because it is believed that the deity doesn't lie. Its verdicts had helped to settle many disputes among the people that would have ordinarily led to something else if such cases were taken to the modern law courts. Because of its trust by everyone in the community, its verdicts are always respected and obeyed. If a party involved in such situation tries to disobey its verdict, the *Akpokofari* deity had always struck such stubborn individual or party with sickness. The *Akpokofari* deity is also noted for the detection of witches among the Yenizue-Gene people. In Yenizue-Gene and even in the entire Epie-Atissa, if one is accused of being a witch, the accused must do well to free or exonerate his or her from the

tag. If that is not done, the accused would be ostracized from the community. The people believe that witches are sadists and so they do not tolerate people of such character to live among them. It is believed that if such people live among them, he or she will use his witch craftpower to kill people and the Epie-Atissa people abhors evil machinations and so when people are accused of being a witch, they must do what ever it takes to prove themselves innocent of the act. People go to find out whether one was a witch or not in the shrine of *Akpokofari*. This deity has the ability to detect witches.

This is close to what Ozue,(2017, P4) posited concerning the *Eni* deity in Isoko Land, Delta State. According to him, 'the fear associated with the activities of witchcraft was quite serious in the old days in African societies. Apart from the belief that they are thought to be involved in spiritual cannibalism or feed on human flesh spiritually, people's inability to get married and things like accidents, sterility, bareness, impotency and sudden deaths were blamed on witches. The above assertion is what is also obtained in Epie-Atissa, Yenizue-gene community inclusive. Whenever one is been accused of possessing witchcraft power, they go to *Akpokofari* deity's shrine to find out through divination whether such person was a witch or not. If the person is exonerated by the deity, then the tag that is usually associated with the people of such character would be relaxed and it is only then that the accused can be allowed to associate with the indigenes of the community but if the opposite was the case, then the victim or convict would face serious humiliation and in those days even ostracism. The family of the accused would also be tagged as people that are associated with witchcraft power and so they would be marginalized in all the activities of the community. Their young girls will be carrying the tag as well and such, suitors would not like to marry from such family. An accused who claim to be innocent of the charge was expected to pay Four shillings in the good old days as the fee for the consultation. If the client refused to pay the amount and he eventually got convicted by the deity of been a witch, it is either his relations that accompanied him to the shrine would pay the fee or one of them would be detained until the money is paid. However, with the coming of Christianity and the colonists, this aspect of the role of the deity had been abolished, but people were still practicing it even until the early seventies, (Ibani 2017, P32)

In some cases, the convict could be afflicted with incurable disease and the symptoms of such disease, is usually vomiting, especially for the people that are stubborn and would not agree to confess even after being convicted by the shrine, such individuals might die if he or she doesn't own up and the necessary rituals carried out to pacify the deity for been stubborn. Until the convict is cleanse of the witchcraft power he would not recover from the sickness.

The deity also exposes adulterers and when they are exposed, the man would not only pay the expected adultery fee or *isili-atenfina* as it is known in Epie-Atissa language but also be fined heavily. If the above penalties are not complied with, the man would die and the woman would die too during child birth.

The deity's functions also include the duty of checking the moral behaviour of the indigenes of the community. The deity has so many taboos as its moral code and so any Yenizue-Gene person that breaks these sacred laws would be punished either with sickness of death. These moral codes includes things like forcefully taking other people's estates especially land, coveting people's lake, fish ponds, stealing people's crops or even stealing people's animals that were caught by someone's else's animal trap, fishing gears like hook, lylon etc. If such occurs, the culprit would be punished by *Akpokofari* deity with sickness and until he or she confesses and restitution and the attendant sacrifices carried out to address the situation, the deviant will die. This has greatly checked the social and moral life of the people.

The deity is also attributed with the function of the protection of the people from spiritual and physical attack by spiritual forces and even murderers. However, as we have earlier mentioned, one must obey all the moral codes of the deity before one would be protected by the protective power of *Akpokofari*. If one was a disobedient fellow of the laws of the deity, then, such individual is on his or her own. The protective power or immunity from the deity would not cover such classes of persons.

Suffice it to say that in the good old days, moral order in Yenizue-Gene worked, because of the vigilance of *Akpokofari* deity. It is not out of place for us to submit

that the deity midwived the people's moral code to them so that they would live happily among themselves. Thus, *Akpokofari* would not renage from punishing any offender that broke the laws of the land. This had in no small measure helped the people, especially the younger generations to observe the dos and the don'ts in the community. They felt that by been morally upright and by obeying the taboos of *Akpokofari*, the deity would save them from both spiritual and physical attack, and to them, the fear of *Akpokofari* is the beginning of wisdom. *Akpokofari* deity is also believed to be responsible for the upliftment of the people financially and otherwise. It is believed that their devotion to the activities of *Akpokofari* would attract his blessings, like good health, good luck, success in whatever business that they would be involved in and also bless them with children. Barrenness and serenity would not be the portion of Yenizue-Gene people and so they tried as much, as possible to be at a good standing with the deity. However, this could not be obtained in Yenizue-Gene community presently because of the coming of Christianity to the village and urbanization.

The Worship of *Akpokofari* Deity

The worship of *Akpokofari* deity is done in two different ways. It is done on every sacred day of the Epie-Atissa people's native calendar and it is also done outside its shrine by individuals who would want to celebrate *Akpokofari* for blessing him or her. By that we mean *Akpokofari*'s worship can be hosted by someone whom *Akpokofari* had blessed and would want to honour him. For the normal worship days, that is usually done on *edewiedege*, sacred day, the chief priest of the deity and its cult members will go to the shrine and worship the deity. Such regular worship usually involves offering sacrifices, libation, singing of songs and dance. The traditional music that is usually made on such occasions includes the beating of drums particularly the talking drum to invoke and invite the spirit of *Akpokofari* and other spirits to join the worship process and singing of sacred songs. The worshippers danced to the rhythm of the music giving thanks to the deity and the ancestral spirits of the land for taking care of them from their last meeting to the present one. The songs sang on such occasions are mostly songs of praise, adoration and thanksgiving to *Akpokofari* deity for its benevolence towards them. The worshippers usually embarks on an *Ogele* procession round the shrine on such occasion. Sometimes, animals are also sacrificed to the deity, particularly when

their worship days coincided with the coming of votaries who have come to redeem vows made to *Akpokofari* for fulfilling their demands. For people use to come before *Akpokofari* to make pledges that if the deity enabled them achieve a desire of their heart at a specific period of the year or the coming year, as the case may be, they would come and offer sacrifice of goat, sheep, fowl to the deity, and such fulfilments of vows had always come to pass.

On the second occasion of the worship of *Akpokofari* deity is when a devotee decides to host the celebration and worship of the deity in the persons compound or the community's play-ground. This happens when a devotee had gotten a serious breakthrough of an important achievement that the votary in question had approached the deity to assist him achieve.

Example of such cases are issues that is in connection with victory over land case, blessings of the fruit of the womb, especially for clients that have lost hope of having children and with the instrumentality of *Akpokofari*, such family had gotten one etc. On the appointed sacred day, for such worship is always carried out on the people's sacred day, nobody goes to the farm. It is believed that on such days, the spirits too are believed to be around to celebrate with the celebrant and so there is the possibility for one that goes to the farm to encounter the spirits. The results of such an encounter is always very catastrophic on the part of the man or the perceived intruder.

On such days, the chief priest of *Akpokofari* and its cult members and other votaries of the deity would converge at the arena of the worship programme and the host with his or her family members and well-wishers would also come and gather together. The host will then officially welcome the members with a bottle of native gin, *ogogoro* and inform them why he or she had invited them to accompany his family carry out the thanksgiving worship to the deity. The chief priest will then accept the drink and the whole bottle or the first bottle of the ogogoro would be used to libate to *Akpokofari* deity, the ancestral and other spirits that is believed was around for the occasion. Part of the drink could be served to the chief priest and the rest of the cult members. This is a form of declaring the worship session open.

It is only when this is done that the worship would start. The worship session involves songs, dance, beating of drums and even sacrifices. A lot of gifts in form of fowl, drink and even food items are usually presented to the deity. The chief priest receives the gifts on behalf of *Akpokofari* and will in turn bless the host for the kind gesture and the acknowledgement of the work of the deity in his or her family. On such occasion, the guests are usually fed with local delicacies like plantain porridge, drinks, pounded cassava and soup known as *utaran* in Epie language with boiled yam or plantain. Such worship session attracts votaries of the deity even from other communities in Epie clan and even beyond. There used to be an *Ogele* procession round the community and in the process of the *Ogele* procession, the chief priest who leads always offers prayer to the effect that the people of the community and even the host be blessed abundantly by *Akpokofari*. He would also libate to the deity to kill all the evil doers in the community and neutralize whatever medicine that sorcerers must have buried in the community to cause havoc to the indigenes. Such days are usually days of great celebration and it keeps the community agog (Ibani; 2017).

The Priesthood of *Akpokofari* Deity

The priesthood of *Akpokofari* deity is a special reserve for the men folk only in Yenizue-gene community. From the inception of the deity, it has only been men that have managed that position. Apart from Mr. Ikenga and Mr. Ozuku that instituted the shrine of the deity and eventually became its pioneer priest, all other successive priest has been chosen by the deity itself. The priests of the deity that have been chosen to serve him must be very versed in the indigenous religion of the Yenizue-gene people, and such person must have the knowledge about the myths, beliefs, traditions, proverbs, legends and the ritualistic knowledge about the traditional religion of the people. This may not be unconnected with the training of the apprenticeship that the would-be priest designates had to undergo during his training period. The training of the young priest is done at the shrine of *Akpokofari*.

The selection of priest is done by the deity itself by either inflicting the chosen person with some sickness that would always defied orthodox treatment for cure. The person chosen would just fall sick and if such person is taken to the hospital

for diagnosis, nothing will show in the medical reports that are issued by the orthodox medical doctor, but the person would be dying in such situation. The people knows the type of sickness that would affect someone that is called by *Akpokofari*, and so they would carry out divinatory consultation to ascertain the cause of the sickness and if it was confirmed that the sickness was as a result of *Akpokofari* that wanted him to be his priest, then the necessary rituals would be carried out and from that day, the young priest would start to undergo training under the supervision of the substantive chief priest. If the priest elect refused to accept the call to serve *Akpokofari*, the sickness can lead to the death of such person. In some cases, it is the parents of the young lad who will decide whether their son would serve as priest to the deity or not. However, in most cases, the parents would have no option than to release their son for the service. It is the deity that have called the boy to his service, so humans have no option than to obey. The symptom of the calling to *Akpokofari* priesthood stool is not only through sickness but it can manifest in form of unusually behaviour, uncoordinated utterances, the experience of bad dreams, or in some cases the deity would appear to the person in question calling him to its priesthood. It can sometimes always be that, the python snake, the totem of *Akpokofari* would always appear to the person anywhere he goes, either in the farm, river, road etc.

Akpokofari priests are allowed to marry and raise a family like every other Yenizue-Gene person, but he must make sure that he does not exhibit any behaviour contrary to the dictates of *Akpokofari*. The family of such person too must strictly observe all the taboos of the deity but if it is the opposite, then such priest would be in trouble of *Akpokofari's* wrath (Dumeze Solomon) Oral Interview.

Conclusion

In this paper we have investigated and discussed the activities of the *Akpokofari* deity of Yenizue-Gene community. From our findings, it was revealed that the deity in question have helped the Yenizue-Gene community's people in various ramification. The deity has protected the indigene of the community from external and spiritual attacks, it is believed that the deity is also a source of blessing to them, the deity has also been a god of adjudication, people that had their cases at the shrine of the deity had obeyed the verdict of the deity because they believe that the

deity could not lie. Its judgement had not been faulted by any party. It has also blessed the Yenizue-Gene people agriculturally and otherwise. In fact, the benevolent act of the deity is enormous, as such, it is the submission of the author that its activities be revived. The coming of Christianity have greatly affected the patronage of the deity. Since its disposition among them were of benefits to the people of Yenizue-Gene, it is expedient we encourage the youths to identify with the worship of the deity so that its role in the affairs of the Yenizue-Gene people would not die a natural death as it has happened to the shrines of so many deities in Africa.

References

Dumeze S. (2017) Oral interview carried out at Yenizue-Gene community on 4th of April Age: 54 Sex: male

Gabriel I. (2023) The Resilience of *Orisa* Deity of Akaba community, in Atissa clan, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State' *International Journal of Language and Education,* vol, No 1&2 June, Department of English Education, Lagos State University of Education, Epe, Lagos.

Ibani. M. E (2017) A Critical Appraisal of *Akpokofari* Deity in Yenizue-Gene, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. An unpublish BA project Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.

Idowu, (1970) As cited by Opoku A. K. *West African Traditional Religion,* Jurong, Singapore, Feb International private.

Iluma D. (2017) Oral interview carried out at Yenizue-Gene community, on the 8th of June, Age: 67, Sex: male.

Melody I. (2025) Oral interview carried out at Yenizue-Gene community, on the 3rd of March, Sex: female Age: 45

Opoku A. K. (1978) *West African Traditional Religion,* Jurong, Singapore, Feb International private.

Ozue O. K. (2017) Pilgrimage in African Traditional Religion: a case study of *Eni* Deity in Uzere kingdom of Delta State, unpublished B.A project, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.