

Udok Mbosowo Bassey and Udobata R. Onunwa



AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY:
COSMOLOGICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL VALUES

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Library of Congress Control Number:	2018904448
ISBN:	Hardcover 978-1-5434-8989-7
	Softcover 978-1-5434-8990-3
	eBook 978-1-5434-8991-0

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Print information available on the last page.

Rev. date: 07/27/2018

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PREFACE

This work is a follow-up to the first Volume of *African Spirituality: An Anthology of Igbo Religious Myths* which analysed the religious and cosmological significance of African myths. The students who saw the book on Igbo Religious Myths challenged one of the authors to produce similar work on some other parts of the former Eastern Nigeria. He thought it would wise to ask a colleague of his from the area to lead the research. As soon as we embarked on the preliminary research, the present Akwa Ibom State was carved out of Cross River State by the then Military Government of Nigeria. We then gathered a few Research Assistants with whom we restructured the research methodology, outline and set out to collect data from the various parts of the two states to reflect new experiences, ethnic and political consciousness, religious loyalty and identity. We discovered that every ethnic nationality with its own world view should be given an in-depth analytical survey in order to reflect the real experiences of the original practitioners of the faith. Religion is the matrix of African peoples culture and world view.

It is usually difficult to explain why African peoples should believe in a particular way and when such a question arises, African traditional way of answering it is to tell a story which contains some facts from which one can deduce the reason for the people to believe and act in that particular way.

The work on myths referred to above extensively discussed the meaning and importance of myths in African traditional society. We

have, therefore, not considered it necessary to repeat that aspect of the work here. There is need for one to look at that work for some more details.

For purposes of publication, the original manuscript had been immensely edited, restructured and modified. For instance, the title which was *Myths of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria, An Examination of their Cosmological and Theological Relevance*, has been changed to read its present title. We have used the term **South Eastern Nigeria** purely in geographical sense not in the context of the present geo-political changes in Nigeria where they are described as South-South Political Zone. The States of Akwa Ibom and Cross River provide the bulk of materials for the present hermeneutics and analysis. The collection of the myths- some of them simple, humorous, others complicated, contradictory, poetic or often incoherent, logical, strongly worded and terrifying, illustrate the type of world-view, religious and philosophical thought- pattern of a living African people. It is the intellectual and philosophical repository of wisdom of a people who are quite educated, civilized and skilled in their own rights but could often be misunderstood by outsiders, foreigners and casual and unwary investigators who judge people from other people's own stand point. The great ancestors and elders of the people of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria are typical African great thinkers, inventors and leaders who have left us with a great mine of wisdom and civilization which we need to explore, recapture, retrieve as much as we can and utilize in our own contemporary times before the on-going radical transformations sweep them away. For instance, many young people cannot speak or write the beautiful Efik, Ibibio, Bekwarra, Ejagam, and Bette Languages of the people because of the current rapid social changes going on in the country.

The world-view (cosmology) is a people's intellectual, philosophical and abstract conceptions and explanation of the universe. Those abstract views are usually put into concrete actions as evidenced in people's mode of life, occupation, community development projects, inter-village and inter-personal relationships, governance and religious practices. African people's perception of the world has a lot of influence on their practical attitudes to life, contrary to the views of

some early anthropologists who visited Africa. Religion plays a lot of part in African thought pattern. They live and act theistically and can hardly live without their gods.

We have in this collection of myths, tried to assess how the people of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States that occupy the geographical South Eastern corner of Nigeria conceptualize their world. A *progress-oriented approach* – i.e. fierce functionalist stance is adopted in this study. We want to analyse how the concepts of the universe could be used in solving the problems of living, governance, inter-village, inter-ethnic and inter-state co-existence, harmony, peace and progress. We shall, for instance, glean from the people's past to reconstruct the present and plan or project the future. A community like Akamkpa in Cross River State, with potentials for forestry development tells of myth about trees and forests which dates far back into prehistoric times. A careful analysis of such myths could be used in feasibility surveys that can be applied in the State's Economic Development Plans for Forestry Development, Pulp Wood Industries, Tourist Attractions, and other Agro or Forestry- Based Industrial Projects. For instance, the Cross River Natural Park in Akamkpa which covers a very extensive area has been a source of attraction for tourism, and a great source of revenue generating project.

On the other hand, some dysfunctional roles of ritual practices and traditions which have got some mythical basis would be analysed and solutions sought for such objectionable practices that constitute clogs in the wheel of progress of people in contemporary times.

Myths cover all aspects of African life. We have examined in this collection, myths covering such aspects of life like creation, agriculture, origin of life and death, sleep, human sexuality, origin of days of the week, herbal medicines and charms, marriage, warfare, differentiation of human race and complexion, man and natural ecology, origin of monarchy, spread of wisdom and human intelligence, among others. It is believed that a close assessment of their cosmological and theological relevance would nonetheless help policy makers, politicians, administrators, community leaders, royal fathers and traditional rulers and all involved in the governance of the people to

formulate policies and rules that would enhance the quality of life and standard of living in contemporary Africa in general and Akwa Ibom and Cross River States in particular. More often than not, most policies and programmes being applied in some communities and states towards the solution of human problems are quite inadequate, unrealistic and irrelevant as well as non-applicable to their existential experience. Some of the policies cannot work in some areas because they stand out completely as '*foreign imposition*' to the context or rather they seem out of context in the community. Anything however good cannot work effectively if it is imposed on any particular group of people. Contextual solution to a people's problems would provide the best and lasting result. The cosmological ideas that underpin people's beliefs and actions are undeniably powerful factors that affect and determine the way people live. Christian theologians and preachers can contextualize the Gospel with local metaphysics and thought pattern that would not wrench the heart of the Gospel. It is when the Bible is applied to local world views that it becomes real to most people.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND PROBLEMS

The materials for this work were collected through primary source. The living votaries of the religion and practitioners of the culture were met in their homes and shrines. The field trips took us to different ethnic groups that make up the two states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River. We collected over one thousand tales. We sorted them out and discarded those that did not fall within the mythical traditions. We did not repeat any tale that circulated in different parts of the zone or in several communities but we added minor variations about them as we documented them. We acted like '*News Reporters*' who did not impose any of our own views and ideas on what we gathered from the learned and articulate owners of the myths. They are their own interpreters and what we recorded were later crosschecked with the informants in order to minimize errors of over-generalizations and imposition of ideas. This careful screening of the myths is responsible for the uneven number recorded in each chapter. We arranged the

chapters according to themes but referred to the sources from where we collected them. The arrangement is purely random and has no order of priority or importance at all.

The collection and analysis of the myths are not so easy a job to accomplish. The elders who narrated the tales spoke in their own local languages and dialects. Often some of the interpreters from a neighbouring community could not easily decipher what the narrators have in mind till further enquiry and questioning. We resorted at times to some other local guides and interpreters who could understand the original tales. We made sure they did not polish or adulterate the original tales in an attempt to make them more attractive or meaningful. We insisted on publishing the very things we gathered from the owners of the myths. One great advantage here is that one of the authors is an Ibibio by birth and training and understands most of the myths from his own sub-culture area.

Some of the stories sound both incoherent and illogical. There are too many language groups and dialects in the region and each stands out as an established and developed language system. Some of our field assistants and guides did not understand the local languages and dialects of their neighbouring communities.

We engaged the services of some local interpreters on short term basis, especially in places where none of our regular guides could help. In one Local Government Area, we noticed six established local languages which are not mutually understood by people. Besides, there is a community in the Northern part of Cross River State where men and women speak different languages. A man and his wife speak different languages although they understand each other. This sounds funny but real

This is one of the mysteries that will be explored in this book.

The other problem was transport. In spite of the fact that the new governments of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States have done a lot in rural development and road construction, many interior villages are

still hard to penetrate. We were able to use motorcycles and at times canoes in the creek areas of the states.

The scope of this work covers every part of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. We visited every ethnic group in the two states and all the Local Government Areas to ascertain that no part of the States was left out. This enabled us to get sufficiently broad-based data for in-depth analysis. The maps can help to show the details.

We met real people, living and authentic owners of the tales whose cosmologies and philosophical approach to life must be understood when we talk of African peoples. The urban city dwellers often do not represent the real people in the remote hinterlands. We considered reaching every part of the two States important because of the purposes which the work is intended to serve.

First, the authors aim at recapturing as accurately as possible and without bias the sacred tales of the various peoples of the two states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River. This is urgent now more than ever before because the tales get more and more distorted and adulterated in the process of transmission from one generation to another in this age of fast social change. An urgent work needs to be done along this line to save this aspect of the people's cultural heritage and moral wisdom from being completely distorted, forgotten or lost. It is both timely and expedient to harness the unwritten moral and religious wisdom by indigenous African scholars as their own contribution to the on-going efforts by the country to preserve our fast-fading and disappearing ancient civilization and culture.

Second, the authors hope that this will add to the existing number of source materials in our local and national libraries since those deposited overseas are not easily accessible to our young scholars and researchers. Students offering African History, Anthropology, Religion, Philosophy, Theatre Arts, Sociology, Political Science and African Literature would find the work helpful. A general reader who enjoys folk tales and literature would equally enjoy the humorous tales for their purely aesthetic values.

Finally, the authors who have worked in the zone for over twenty years felt that this is one of the ways to appreciate the goodwill and hospitality of the people whose love, friendship and confidence they enjoyed for over a long time. It is difficult to apply Christian theological principles in Africa without understanding the underlying local and traditional world view, cosmology and indigenous theological frame of mind. The authors thought that this work could help Christian evangelists who work in the area to understand basic underlying cosmology which they could use to communicate the Gospel.

A number of traditional rulers and village heads honoured one of the author with Chieftaincy titles when they saw him as a genuine enquirer interested in the preservation of their age-long and revered traditions. This would, somehow stimulate the interest of other indigenous scholars to carry out further research into this and other aspects of the lives of the wonderful people of Cross River and Akwa Ibom States. This culturally and oil rich as well as food producing areas of the country need to be explored so that their rich mines of philosophical and moral wisdom could be brought to the reach of many for the express purpose of building viable and economically strong and united country.

There is no doubt that the relics of the ancient civilization which the colonial administrators found in this zone would be of immense help if fully harnessed and restructured for the growth of the country and Africa in general.

To penetrate into the world of another people is simply a task that demands patience, skill, and humility. It is easy to write off people on the basis of racial or ethnic pride, ignorance, and hasty judgment. Until one carefully studies a people's way of thought, reasoning, and logic, it is not easy to understand and interact with them. Once people's cosmological views are properly understood, it would be easy to relate, associate, interact with them, and even criticize them from within and not from outside their scheme or realm of thought and action.

This work has tried to peer into the world of Akwa Ibom and Cross River states of Nigeria, people with immense, rich culture and tradition and, in contemporary times, enormous oil wealth and attractive tourist attractions. The author has argued that the best in any people can be caught only when one understands and works with them from within. The myths of the people can help explain their lifestyle and actions.

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ISBN 978-1-5434-8989-7



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