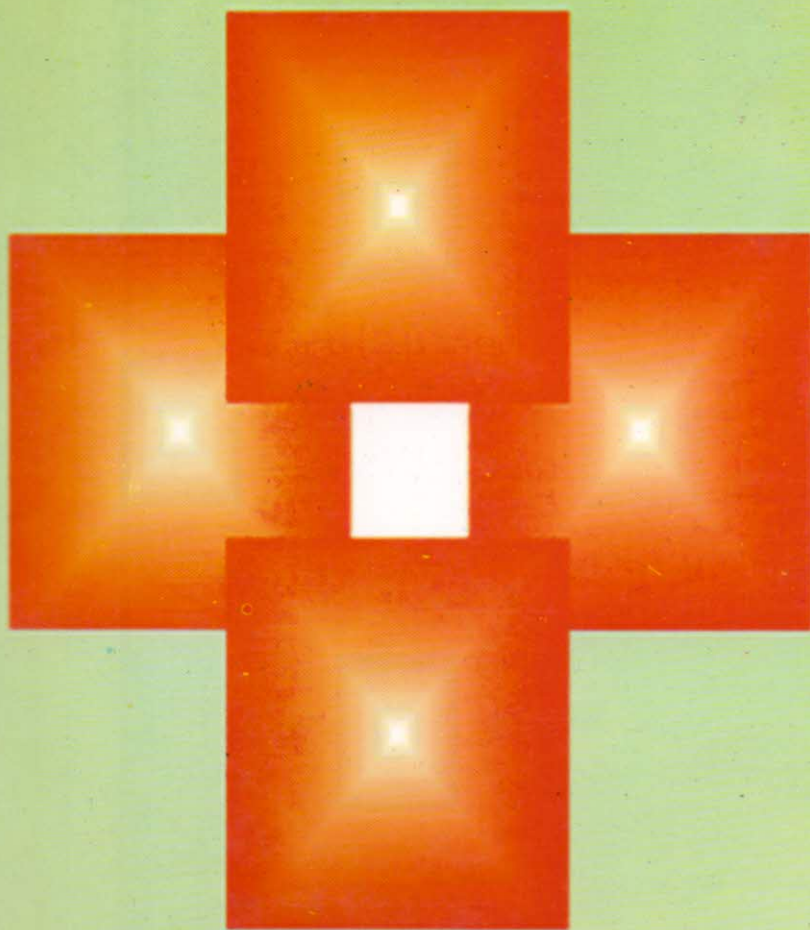


Human Views on God

Variety Not Monotony

(Essays in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu)



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HUMAN VIEWS ON GOD: Variety Not Monotony
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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Burden of Secrecy: A Comparative Study of Okonko and Ogboni Societies

Nwosu Patrick Uchenna

Introduction

The debate on secret societies and their burden of secrecy is one of the salient characteristics of contemporary culture. In many parts of the world secret societies are formed, questions about the value and burden of secrecy associated with such traditional religious heritage are raised. The controversy is often expressed in terms of mystery and secrecy, sacred and profane, of secularisation and piety. It takes place at the frontiers of the religious structures and within the ivory tower. And since secret society as a phenomenon is deeply engraved in human culture, where art, customs and social elements have always received the influence of religion; it becomes understandable how the discussion about it extends to practically all expressions of life.

Among the motives which, lies at the base of contemporary discussion on secret societies, is certainly the present drawing together of peoples, generally described as globalisation. P. Rossano noted this succinctly when he said that:

the process of mutual acquaintance which, the history of religions had started about a century ago in restricted intellectual European circles, has become general and spread to mass level as a result of the extraordinary development of communications between peoples. The knowledge of other religions...of other forms of religious humanism has contributed to the elimination...of the prejudices of ethnocentrism, has revealed undeniable connections between the Christian religion and the other religions of the world, documenting unsuspected dimensions in mankind's religious feeling.¹

This has aroused in some people the curiosity to know what goes on in ancestral societies. It has also become for many a challenge for a greater revival of their own religious vision of life. Within this circumstance, "the Roman Catholic Church, accepting the globalisation appeal of our time, urged all people to find out in a sincere and patient dialogue, what riches God in his bounty has bestowed on peoples."²

The reality of secret societies and some other societies that have secrets are unquestionable. The expressions of reservations, ignorance, misunderstanding and unnecessary condemnations of this social and religious heritage are also manifest. Olu Obafemi noted this fact when he said in clear terms with regard to attacks on organisations that have secrets, that denigrating of genuine religious bodies is part and parcel of the Nigerian life.³ It is sufficient here to think of Okonko and Ogboni societies in Igbo and Yorubaland respectively and their profound contribution to the integral human and social stability.

Therefore, despite the controversy and misinterpretation surrounding Okonko and Ogboni, this chapter addresses the concept of secret society and societies that have secrets, the burden of secrecy and the reality of Okonko and Ogboni societies. To aid in understanding the chapter, points of convergence and divergence in both societies would be identified.

Secret society and societies with secrets

The word secret comes from the Latin root "Secretum" meaning separate or set apart. Society is as well derived from the Latin root "Societas" connoting fellowship, union or alliance. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, secret means a thing or mystery that is not or must not be known by other people. It also means anything not properly understood or difficult to understand. Within this context, society becomes an organisation of people formed for a particular purpose. In line with Jacques Maquet's submission,

society co-ordinates all the activities of its members in such a way that they can live together from birth to death, ... perpetuated over several generations ... to pursue in common certain ... objectives.⁴

The coming together of people for good purposes enhanced by some level of secrecy does not make such an organisation a secret society or evil organisation. In other words, the maintenance of secrets by societies as such, is not an evidence that such society is evil.⁵ The presence of mystery and secrets as components of an order, organisation or gathering do not make such a society a secret one. It can best be described as a society that has secrets.

In the ancient world, middle age and contemporary society, organisations and institutions that have secrets existed. They still exist and are chiefly religious. Because religious and temporary powers are associated with such societies, mystery and secrecy become very necessary. Jesus Christ had spiritual and temporary powers associated with him while on earth. He shared deep mysteries with Peter, James, and John to the isolation of the rest of the members of the apostolic college. That this was the case did not and does not make Jesus and his disciples members of a secret society. In the Catholic Church, both at the universal and local levels, some facts are classified as "secreto pontificio" and it cannot be said that the Catholic Church is a secret society. There are thousand and one Orders, Congregation, and Apostolic Institutions with different goals, apostolates, charisms and missions aimed at glorifying God and advancing, human development, their ways of life therein remain secret to non-members.⁶

There were the mystery cults of Osiri and Serapis in Egypt, of Orpheus and Dionysius in Greece, of Cybele of Phrygia and of Mithra in Persia. All tended to surround the worship of gods with elements secret and awesome.⁷ The elements of secrecy and awe helped to keep the people in submission to the authority thereby sustaining social stability. Secrecy is the glory and prestige of any society that has it. It brings about social solidarity to members and the larger community.

However, there are secret societies in the real sense of the words. A.P. Anyebe described it as, "an association of men for a purpose, which is neither published nor publicly explained. Such associations allegedly have no constitutions, no rules and regulations, and no minutes are taken at their meetings. Their place of meeting is never advertised and they issue no circulars."⁸ This means that secret societies are of specific criminal intent. Such groups add no value to the society or community in which they exist and therefore, ought not to be encouraged by the State and religious leaders.

Notorious for their acts of terrorism, secret societies keep their membership secret. They appear in public dressed in full-length gowns and face masks. For example, during the 1920's, the Klan Society of America placed greater notes on the religious aspects of its philosophy, opposing Catholics, Jews, and foreign born.⁹

Another example of a secret society is the Freemason. Its members are popularly known as "Know Nothings" because they professed ignorance when confronted about the society. The society is rooted in anti-Catholic sentiments. Pope Leo XI¹¹, on April 20, 1884 condemned them as "Foul plague"¹⁰ in the encyclical titled *Humanum Genus*.

Section 35 (4) of the 1979 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria defined secret society as, a society or association not being a solely cultural or religious body, that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols: (a) whose meetings or other activities are held in secret, and (b) whose members are under oath, obligation or other threat, to promote the interest of its members or to aid one another under all circumstances, without due regard to merit, fair play or justice, to the detriment of the legitimate expectation of those who are not members.¹¹ In this context, secret societies unite their members for the purpose of conspiring against a legally constituted authority and the Church. They make use of rituals and ceremonies that constitute them into sects. They essentially plot against the tranquility of the State. According to the teaching office of the Catholic Church, secret societies, while externally profession Christianity are in reality pagans who veil their impiety under orthodox terms to which an entirely different meaning is given by the initiated.¹²

In light of the above, it is plain that public and avowed attacks on the Church and the State or constituted authorities are compatible with secret societies. In such societies, there is demand for absolute obedience to unknown leaders. This is against man's nature and against all divine or human laws. To buttress this, N.I. Omenka gave a practical aspect of a typical Secret Society in Nigeria. He wrote,

In western Igboland, where religiously induced violence assumed extraordinary dimensions, the Ekumeku secret society featured very prominently. Formed at Ibusa as a response to the activities of the Christian Missions and their colonial administration allies, the society organized spear headed a number of violent raids on Mission establishments in Igbo region between 1898 and 1904.¹³

Thus, a secret society is a society which is known to exist, but whose members and places of meetings are not publicly known, it is a society with a ritual demanding an oath of allegiance to an unknown leaders or forces. They conceal their rules, corporate activities, names of members, signs and password from outsiders. In certain cases, the members are not allowed to know even the names of their highest officers. Their objectives and goals are pursued through violent means.

Therefore, secret societies as we have highlighted here are distinguished from ancestral or traditional societies that insist on maintaining their secrets especially in Africa, societies like Okonko and Ogboni are our concern in this chapter. These societies in Igbo and Yorubaland carry a burden of secrecy.

The burden of secrecy

For obvious reasons, the Catholic Church places a singular watchfulness over various fraternities formed by people for the promotion of any good work, peace and order in the community. According to Charles G. Hebermann, the reason for this caution is to prevent human beings from being led into spiritual ruin through societies of whatsoever name or purpose.¹⁴ In whatever angle, traditional societies or brotherhood that have secrets originated in earliest communities of Africa. And their main purpose was to attain a closer link with the divinities for the ultimate well-being of the whole society. As Awolalu and Dopamu noted, "since West African peoples are religious peoples ...they are always conscious of the presence of the divinities wherever they are, and whatever they do."¹⁵ The submission of Awolalu and Dopamu was corroborated by Macculloch when he wrote that,

While the social units of the family, the clan, the tribe, have a protective value for those individuals within them and are usually consolidated with the help of religious and magical rites, additional protection and closer communion with divinity is sometimes sought by closer groupings of men...¹⁶

The purpose of most ancestral societies is to ensure closer link with the gods and have greater power in dealing with them. Thus, there are ritual acts at stipulated seasons, moral and religious teachings connected with initiatory rites.

Ancestral societies promote laws and order and guard the mysteries surrounding their existence. According to Awolalu and Dopamu,

they enforced and maintained traditions, customs and beliefs. They determined ritual behaviour and regulated social attitudes. In this way, they became the "power" of the community where they functioned.¹⁷

Admission is by rigorous and prolonged initiations and by large payments. The essential features of the societies are elements of mystery associated with their actions, and meetings. The secret mysteries which the ignorant masses see as a burden are the source of the prestige and influence of such societies.

With the aid of masks, dresses and sacred objects which no uninitiated person may see with impunity, the members of the society show that they are in intimate relationship with the gods or spirit or that these are actually among their ranks.¹⁸

It must be noted here that for a society with social, political or religious aims like Okonko and Ogboni, secrecy is well indispensable. The secrecy in which their deliberations are wrapped not only enhances their power by confining the knowledge of projects to a limited circle, but also casts a glamour round them. The secrecy makes them more formidable.

Again, supernatural allies are claimed or ascribed to ancestral societies, and this explains their common elements of secrecy. However, a society which has secrets in one part of Africa may be found in another part with precisely the same functions, rites and ceremonies, except that the element of secrecy may be lacking.

The burden of secrecy in ancestral societies refers to the non-public nature of the rites of initiation. That is, "to the veil which, is drawn over the nature of the proceedings of fully initiated members."¹⁹ It also refers to the knowledge of a password and other signs of the duly admitted associate. The limitation of membership to one or other sex is also included.

Furthermore, in purely traditional setting, the privilege to prepare a spell, charm, to call upon a deity or to officiate as a priest is a form of wealth, jealously guarded and purchasable at a price. Therefore, secrecy is unavoidable. Priests, diviners, doctors and special functionaries have an interest in keeping their secrets inviolate, and it is not surprising to find that their behaviour is that of custodians of a trade secret, to be divulged only to those who themselves become members of the guild.

Rites of initiation imply a certain level of separation from the outside world. It is a certain affiliation to a new world. It involves separation from the profane world. The separated person becomes a taboo, a danger to those who do not share his sanctity. The intending initiate is himself endangered by contact with the outside world, until he is restored to it by rites of decasualisation. This is a ground for secrecy particularly in Okonko Society of Igboland and in Ogboni. And for now, nothing can change this however the influence of Christianity and Islam.

Okonko and Ogboni societies

For an adequate survey of Okonko and Ogboni societies, we must consider them not only from the point of view of outward forms and functions, but also in their reality and meanings. Okonko and Ogboni societies can be described as private, voluntary organisations formed to champion the well being of members and the community at large. Both societies in Igbo and Yorubaland respectively, serve a social function by promoting good-fellowship and coexistence. They are trans-national bodies that serve benevolent purposes, providing members and the larger society with benefits, in cases of accident, sickness, old age, and death.

The term "Okonko" in Igbo society constitutes a major element in Igbo culture. It is a form of religion which attempts in its own ways to calm the hearts of people by out-lining a programme of life covering doctrine, moral precepts, and sacred rites.²⁰ The society represents the accumulation of a people's wisdom and identity. It is real and without it a people is without a name or identity.

The term "Ogboni" to a cultured Yoruba person connotes maturity, discipline and truth.²¹ Ogboni society has a body of divine message called Ifa. As noted by Awolalu and Dopamu, of all the Yoruba societies, the Ogboni guild is the most important.

It is principally a political organisation, established for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society...members ... from time to time ... settle civil disputes, deal with criminal charges and discuss general matters concerning the wellbeing of the community. They were king-makers and they also curbed the powers of the chief and checked kings tending to become too powerful.²²

In the light of the above, Okonko and Ogboni are organised in lodges, branches, and do have representative government with a hierarchy of elected officers and a special ritual for the election and initiation of new members. They are not societies of evil or darkness even though they carry a burden of secrecy. They are essentially ancestral organisations that emphasise good fellowship, coexistence, mutual aid and philanthropy. Many presidents, senators, governors and supreme court justices are members. By their very nature, Okonko and Ogboni tend to draw their members from the more privileged groups of citizens, in which the young are well provided with the advantages that lead them towards success.²³ However, in recent times, the influence of Okonko in community affairs is diminishing. And Awolalu and Dopamu also observed that "the Ogboni society has lost much of its earlier powers... the Ogboni functions are limited to ceremonials like title taking, funerals, and sacrifices."²⁴

Comparison of Okonko and Ogboni society

At this juncture, the point can be made that there are fundamental similarities and differences between theory and practise of Okonko Society in Igboland and Ogboni Society in Yorubaland. Although there is ample evidence for the existence of Okonko Society in all parts of Igboland with the formal greetings are "mma mma" and "ndee wo noo", the origin and development of the institution are completely obscure. The exact date and time the society was instituted were not recorded. Most heads of families and staunch members of Okonko find it convenient to say that the society was in existence even before their forefathers.

Many theories concerning the origin of Okonko Society have been proposed. It is more than likely that no single theory is right, and that the origins of the institution are complex and its development gradual, stemming from a variety of local factors and influences from different places.

This is unlike Ogboni society in Yorubaland that has a firm and convincing historical account of its origin. According to Kolawole Komolafe, it was at the earliest history of man on earth that Ogboni came into being. It originated to put an end to the period of disharmony, stealing, lying, murder, conspiracy, rape and other forms of wicked behaviour on earth. Through the appeal of the elders on earth Orunmila agreed to find a quick solution to the state of chaos. As the historical account goes, Orunmila, through Ifa divination consulted Olodumare (God). Orunmila was urged to go to heaven to call Edan to help repair the damage done on earth. Komolafe wrote that,

Without any waste of time Edan immediately embarked on her mission. She ordered all the people on earth to promise on oath a return to good behaviour and orderliness, failure of which the defaulters were to pay the highest penalty (death).²⁵

It was when the elders had committed themselves to maintain peace, fairness, justice and harmony on earth that calm returned to Ife. Edan then settle down on earth for some time to supervise her splendid work. Komolafe further submitted that, "after a long sojourn on earth Edan returned to heaven leaving the authority of supervision to a most trusted, truthful and disciplined group which she called Ogboni."²⁶ This became how Ogboni fraternity came into existence in Yorubaland. There is strong evidence to this historical account, especially with a body of divine message existing in Ogboni Society called "Ifa". The message is believed to be sent to the earth by Olodumare for the benefit of mankind. This kind of fundamental record is not available in Okonko Society. Ogboni is a fraternity of chiefs and elders which was also the executive authority in Yorubaland. It has religious and political functions. Therefore, it is a fraternity of mature people of exemplary behaviour, dedicated to making the world a comfortable abode for mankind by ensuring a high standard of morals amongst its members and promoting peace on earth based on sincerity, truth and discipline.²⁶

Okonko Society is similar to Ogboni in that essentially most of the elders and heads of households in Igboland belong to Okonko. And the society is evenly spread in Igboland, just like Ogboni in Yorubaland. Awolalu and Dopamu confirmed this when they submitted that,

The Ogboni Society is found in all parts of Yorubaland. Nearly all the chiefs and leading persons in the community belong to this society.²⁷

Furthermore, Okonko and Ogboni hold and cherish same values. They originated in Igboland and Yorubaland respectively for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society.²⁸ They stand resolutely for peace, justice and in all human activities on earth.

Besides the functional values, Okonko Society admits members through the same way Ogboni does. New members are welcomed through initiation rites. The initiates take an oath to be obedient members and to keep mysteries of the society in total secrecy. This admission is limited to all free born men and membership, in both societies confer a measure of honour and dignity.

Immature minds, criminals and people of questionable characters are not admitted into both societies. There is no room for liars, thieves and other criminally minded people. Other characteristics common in both Ogboni and Okonko are the wearing of special insignia, a hierarchy of ranked grades that determine the allocation of authority, and secret rituals from which the non-initiates are prohibited. However, we note here that Ogboni fraternity is essentially

concerned with the organisation of its rank and file for the proper execution of its functions under the spiritual guidance of a revered deity called "Edan". The concept and idea of a deity that is revered in Okonko does not exist. Emphases are on the ancestors and the "Agbara Ala" (earth goddess) that are often appeased to enhance peace and prosperity in the land.

Finally, in this section, we add that Okonko Society strictly excludes membership to women. It is an organization for men. This is not the case in Ogboni society. According to James Johnson, "Ogboni ...was the highest society and ...commanded the respect and obedience of all. Women were admitted into it by initiation."²⁹

So, neither Okonko in Igboland nor Ogboni in Yorubaland is a society of darkness or evil. Both societies were founded on truth, justice and peace. These values are strictly maintained by committed initiates in Nigeria. The societies have a way of calling stray members to order when detected. However, both societies are suffering gross Christian influence today and their powers are limited to some extent.

Conclusion

This chapter has made an expose and analysis of the nature and practice of secret societies and societies that have secrets. It revealed that in the history of community coexistence ancestral societies played a vital role. In the pursuit of universal values like peace, justice, equity, in Yoruba and Igboland, Okonko and Ogboni Societies took the lead. This is contrary to recent views and attacks on the society as being fundamentally devilish. This is attributed to misconceptions and bias emanating from ignorant masses and Christian religion's hasty pastoral strategy towards Okonko and Ogboni Phenomena. Due to this, Okonko and Ogboni, which are integral component of African Religion have over the years been treated in a shallow approach unlike the attention given to the conventional religions. The question which arises here is: do Okonko and Ogboni include in the theory and practice that can be associated with God? This question provides a basis for further investigation because both societies (Igbo and Yoruba) are uncompromisingly religious.

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