



The Importance of White Garments in the IGBE Religion

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Introduction

Colours represent different meanings, and are closely associated with various people and religions. Colour serves as means of communication. In ancient civilisations, colour was an integral part of the substance and being of everything in life (Hui-Chih, 2014). Colour, in the understanding of Finlay, (2004) is the essence of landscape and of our whole perception of the physical world. Equally, in every religion, colours have their implications. An inappropriate use of colour can be perceived as offensive. Among the Shiite Muslims, green is sacred and its use is undertaken very cautiously. White is the colour of mourning in China. An overabundance of white space around a small isolated image or lettering might hint at funerary meanings (Maroto and Bortoli, 2001). Many forms of ancient religions require their adherents to wear all-white clothes for certain reasons and for specific periods of time. These religions include but are not limited to some paths of Hinduism; Buddhism; certain strands of Wicca; Voodoo, Palo, and Santaria. Blumberg (2015) argues that clothing worn by religious leaders and people of devout faith is often much more than a fashion statement. This paper will therefore explore the importance of the white colour and white garments in Igbe, an evolving world religion, practiced largely among the Urhobo-speaking ethnic group in Delta State, Nigeria.

A Brief History of the IGBE Religion

The adherents of the Igbe religion are monotheists, who believe in an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God called Oweya and that he rewards the good and the evil people alike, according to their deeds. Dance is a core element of Igbe, and there is no worship session without dancing. The adherents believe that by dancing, they draw to themselves the very hand of God. The adherents of Igbe usually meet in an Ogwa, a sort of temple, in which they dance, welcome members, and sing native Urhobo songs in place of hymns. The Igbe religion was founded by Ubiesha Etarakpo around 1858 and has its headquarters at 11, Egbo Street, Kokori Inland, in the present Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria (Nabofa, 2005). Legend has it that Ubiesha and his wife, Erukanure (both of Urhoboland) were farmers by occupation. One day the two of them went to plough their farmland in order to plant their yam seedlings. While hoeing, Ubiesha unearthed kaolin, or the indigenous white chalk (orhe), to which he did not initially attach importance. Back home, however, an unknown man, who refused to disclose his identity, appeared to Ubiesha in a dream, appealing to him, in his own best interests and those of humanity, to return to the farm and take home the kaolin that he had found the previous day. It is believed that this “mystic man” taught Ubiesha some songs and dances and then instructed him on how to organise his new movement and what he should avoid to maintain a state of ritual purity. Besides this, he was taught how he should use the kaolin for healing diseases and for protection against all forms of evil spirits. The following morning, therefore, Ubiesha

went and took home the “sacred” kaolin from his farm. With the aid of this kaolin, he established the religion, probably because il’igbe (dancing) and il’esuo (singing) were basic in its liturgy. Soon afterwards, Ubiesha, with the power of the “sacred” kaolin, began to heal people, see visions, speak in tongues, and prophesy in a state of frenzy. He soon gathered a large following, constituted predominantly of those who were seeking healing and protection (Akama, 1985).

White Garments in the IGBE Religion

In many religious traditions across the world, white represents openness, truth, purity, and holiness. Likewise in the Igbe religion, the white colour and the donning of white garments has a symbolic meaning. The use of white garments in Igbe religion is claimed to be divinely ordained by Oweya (God) It must be acknowledged that white is the official colour of the Igbe religion, and according to Obaghwarhe Eyareya (2014), a high priestess of the religion, God revealed the colour white to Ubiesha Etarakpo, the founder of the religion, because it symbolises purity. In addition, Eyareya posits that part of the rudimentary feature of the white colour is equality. It also implies fairness and open-mindedness, objectivity, and freedom. White in the Igbe religion is claimed to be a soothing colour which helps to create order and spiritual deftness. Therefore adherents of Igbe don white garments during worship services. Equally, in worship services, the Uku (High priest) or Omote Uku (High priestess) wears white dress and white headgear which can be compared with the liturgical vestments worn at Christian Mass. Besides, the vestments inspire the high priest and all of the faithful to meditate on their rich symbolism associated with the white garments. According to Uku Festus Ikoba, a high priest of the religion and the leader of Oweya Missionary Association:

White symbolises purity of the heart and soul in the Igbe religion. White in the Igbe religion is associated with purity, innocence, and goodness. That is why in the Igbe religion we wear white clothes. When you see us in our white clothes, it simply represents the state of our heart before God who is the father of light. We are naked before him. He sees the state of our heart. When you see our members putting on white garments, it means an outward representation of the pure state of our hearts towards other human beings. When we put our white clothes we are simply communicating to mankind that they are safe when they are in our midst. The white cloth also communicates truth and honesty. That is all true members of Igbe religion stand for the truth and will always speak the truth. No true worshipper of the Igbe religion who wears the white apparel commits crimes against his fellow man (Interview 2015).

Comparatively, the submissions of Ikoba (2015) align with Maroto and Bortoli (2001) whose study reveals that the colour white in countries such as the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean countries, Argentina, Brazil, and several parts of Europe represents purity, goodness, and a state of cleanliness – although not all the religions that are domiciled in the countries mentioned don white clothes as a symbol of purity. For Olori Abel Egofovwe, a chief priest of the Igbe religion, adherents wear white garments as a symbol of their divine strength and power. He opines:

In the Igbe religion white depicts faith and it is also associated with perfection. I also want to mention that the heavenly beings wear white clothes. This is very important to us in the Igbe religion. When we wear white clothes or garments we see ourselves as representatives of God on earth. We see ourselves as men and women who have been empowered to provide solutions to the problem of mankind. That is why when people approach us for spiritual help it is because they believe that our faith can deliver from sicknesses, diseases, and other issues that may be challenging their lives. Therefore, when you see us in our white garments, it simply communicates a group of people who are representing God on Earth and also who are filled with divine power through faith in the ability of Oweya (God) to transform lives (Interview 2016).

The white garment in Igbe has both psychological and spiritual implications. Psychologically, it enhances the confidence of adherents that they are a special group of people in the eyes of Oweya (God) because of their strict puritan conduct. However, this faith exclusivity does not in any way encourage members of the religion to behave untowardly to members of other faith traditions. According to Efetobore Mukoro (2016) white in

the Igbe religion also signifies humility. Therefore, one of the hallmarks of a true Igbe worshipper is a humble disposition at all times. Spiritually, wearing the white garment implicates that as an adherent of Igbe one cannot be oppressed by “malevolent” spirits. Justine Akpoveta, a practitioner of the religion, sums it this way: As a practitioner I believe that putting on the white clothes means that I am covered with the glory of God. Once the Uku consecrates the white cloth for use; it is generally assumed that it carries the power and the glory of God. When one is covered with the glory of God, no evil spirit can come manipulate you. When we put on the white cloth, physically people may see it as white, but those with “spiritual” eyes will see that you are surrounded with fire. Apart from physical covering, wearing the white garment also guarantees spiritual protection in the cosmology of the Igbe religion (Interview, 2016).

Though Igbe is situated within the genre of Evolving World Religion, its worldview concerning white garments, as was revealed to its founder Ubiesha, can be compared with other religions of the world. However, there are slight variations that border on the occasions that adherents of other religious faith traditions are expected to wear white clothes. For example in the Islamic religious faith tradition, men are encouraged to wear white clothes, for white is regarded as the purest of colours. It also communicates simplicity. Above all, white clothes are used in Islam as covering for the dead. In relative terms, Islam and Igbe share a certain commonality in their ideologies of wearing the whitening garment. Likewise, when placed side by side with the Santeria religion, Igbe also shares a similar philosophy in terms of white clothes, albeit with a slight difference. It must be mentioned that it is obligatory for initiates in Santeria to wear white clothing for a year, and white clothing is the standard attire for attending Santeria religious services. Equally, the concept of wearing of white clothes in Christianity also shares some commonality with Igbe. It is worth mentioning that traditionally Christians wear white clothes for the ritual of baptism. Also there are many Christian Churches in Nigeria whose official clothing is white. Still, in some Christian congregations members of the clergy have adopted white clothing as official attire.

Conclusion

This paper explored the symbolism of white garments in the Igbe religion. It identified that symbolically the colour white means purity, simplicity, and holiness in Igbe. Comparatively, it was discovered that many religions and ethnic groups across the globe share the same symbolic notion of the white garment as a symbol of purity. In the light of this shared commonality of worldview, it is therefore imperative for members of the different religious faith tradition and diverse ethnic groups to relate with each other from the standpoint of dialogue and coexistence rather than being exclusivist. This to a large extent will reduce to the barest minimum incidences of violent religious conflicts that are currently plaguing the world.

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