

THE OKIJA SHRINE: DEATH AND LIFE IN NIGERIAN POLITICS*

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ABSTRACT: The Nigerian police discovered dozens of corpses at a shrine in Anambra State, in southeastern Nigeria, in 2004. There were suggestions in the many newspapers covering the story that these were evidence of what Nigerians call ‘ritual murders’. In fact, the corpses almost certainly were of people who had died elsewhere and been removed to the shrine only subsequently. However, the revelation that senior political figures had attended the Okija shrine and sworn oaths there drew attention to an informal politics in which traditional shrines credited with powers of life and death may play an important role, of interest even to national politicians. Discerning why this is so entails considering the long-term effects of the colonial policy of Indirect Rule and the subsequent development of a clandestine political system in which local religious institutions sometimes play an important role.

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, ritual, ethnicity, power, politics.

ON 4 August 2004, some fifty officers of the Nigerian police, including elements of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, raided a complex consisting of a number of shrines in Umuhu Okija village, in the Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State, in the southeast of the country.¹ In the wooded groves where the principal shrines were located, the police found human skulls and the remains of dozens of corpses, some of them dismembered, some in coffins, others lying by the side of the path.² Following this discovery, the police arrested a number of people whom they suspected of being officials of the Okija shrine, most of whom appear to have been members of one extended family. Eventually, the police paraded before the press in the national capital, Abuja, 31 suspects arrested in connection with the discovery of 83 corpses – including 63 that were headless – and twenty skulls.³

The case attracted massive interest in the Nigerian press, particularly when it was confirmed that leading politicians had visited the shrine and

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¹ Most press reports give the figure of about 50 police, although the Anambra State police commissioner later gave a figure of 200 police using 15 vehicles. *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004, 20.

² It appears from press reports that the corpses were discovered in at least two separate locations. However, as all of these sites were connected, I will generally refer to them as a shrine (singular) rather than shrines.

³ ‘The “gods” versus the police’, *Newswatch*, 30 Aug. 2004. Unauthorized possession of a corpse is in principle illegal: cf. Remigius N. Nwabueze, ‘Dead bodies in Nigerian jurisprudence’, *Journal of African Law*, 51 (2007), 117–50.

sworn oaths there. Underlying much of the press commentary was the implication that the shrine may have been the site of so-called 'ritual murders', a name often applied to killings perpetrated in a search for spiritual power.⁴ One of the most notorious such cases – which had a slight connection to the Okija shrine, as we shall see – is said to have occurred⁵ in 1996, when some businessmen at Owerri in Imo State were alleged to have been using a hotel to perpetrate murders with a view to obtaining body-parts for ritual purposes. The allegations led to major disturbances and the burning of some 25 buildings, including at least one church.⁶ It was perhaps as a result of incidents such as this that some commentators assumed the Okija shrine to have been used for equally nefarious purposes.⁷ A further implication was that the shrine may have been the meeting-place of a secret society. Such associations have played a significant role in Nigerian politics since time immemorial, although they are explicitly outlawed by the country's 1999 constitution.⁸ Far from withering and dying in the face of modern nationalism, as some observers may have expected, they have in fact flourished in a changed political environment.⁹

The message transmitted by newspaper reports concerning arcane and possibly sinister religious practices and law-breaking at the Okija shrine caused acute embarrassment to politicians and intellectuals with roots in the southeast of the country, many of whom interpreted the police raid as a political manipulation designed to tarnish the reputation of Igbo people generally by slyly suggesting that their elites secretly engaged in religious practices of a disreputable nature. Joe Achuzia, the secretary-general of the leading Igbo cultural organization, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, claimed that the raid was designed to make the Igbo people appear as cannibals, and suggested that the police had more important things to do,¹⁰ although other spokesmen for the same organization took a more measured position.¹¹ The local ruler, the Igwe of Okija, also protested at the damage done to the image of the local community, convening a press conference during which he protested that

⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, 'The occult does not exist: a response to Terence Ranger', *Africa* (forthcoming).

⁵ Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton, 2007), 152, suggests that it is unclear whether or not such a murder really did occur in this particular case.

⁶ *Ibid.* 140; Daniel J. Smith, '“The arrow of God”: Pentecostalism, inequality, and the supernatural in south-eastern Nigeria', *Africa*, 71 (2001), 587–613.

⁷ J. Adele Bamgbose, 'The place of deities in African political systems: a case study of Ogwugwu shrine in Okija, Anambra State, Nigeria', *Essence: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 2 (2005), 231–42; see also the remarks attributed to Senator Adolphus Wabara in Ocherreome Nnanna, 'Okija shrines: a fanatic and a fool' (part 2), *Vanguard*, 16 Aug. 2004.

⁸ Section 38, sub-section 4 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). The full text is available at www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm#Chapter_4.

⁹ See Tekena Tamuno and Robin Horton, 'The changing position of secret societies and cults in modern Nigeria', *African Notes*, 5 (1969), 36–62.

¹⁰ 'The evil forest', *Tell*, 16 Aug. 2004.

¹¹ Interview with Ohanaeze Ndigbo, president-general Joe Irukwu, *Tell*, 23 Aug. 2004, 18.

'Okija people are no barbarians, we are no cannibals'.¹² However, one member of the national House of Representatives, a former chair of the caucus of representatives from the southeast of the country, publicly admitted that most of the members of the House from his part of the country had in fact patronized shrines like that at Okija.¹³

In spite of their wounded feelings, Igbo intellectuals and political leaders did not generally find it easy to denounce the police raid on Okija. An Igbo member of the Federal House of Representatives introduced a motion commending the Nigerian police for their action, but was persuaded to withdraw it by other members from the region who convinced him that it would serve only to portray the southeast further in an unfavourable light by drawing attention to the existence of allegedly primitive cultural practices.¹⁴ Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the former leader of Biafra and still an influential figure in the southeast, congratulated the police and condemned the practice whereby some persons use shrines for political purposes. But he also made a point of naming some other organizations in this regard, Ogboni and Ekpe,¹⁵ the former being a Yoruba organization historically associated with a particular party, the Action Group, and the latter being associated with various groups in the southeast. Ojukwu seemed to be making the point that, while he supported the police and the rule of law, such practices as occurred at the Okija shrine were not unique to Igboland.

The public authorities eventually decided that no serious offence had been committed at Okija. Intensive media inquiries suggested that the corpses were probably those of people who had died elsewhere, and whose remains had been taken to the shrine and its surrounding forest for disposal. No evidence came to light that any killings had taken place *in situ* or that any of the bodies were in fact those of murder victims. But that was not the end of the story. In early 2008, a 31-second video-clip appeared on an internet site, showing Governor Theodore Orji of Abia State, wearing only his underpants, apparently participating in a ritual activity. This was described on the internet site as having taken place at the Okija shrine. The governor denied that he was a member of any secret society and suggested that the video had been produced by doctoring computer images.¹⁶ Nevertheless, evidence later emerged connecting him to a secret society. Amid a welter of allegations of corruption and other misdeeds, a tribunal overturned Orji's April 2007 election to the governorship of Abia State.¹⁷

The purpose of the present article is to investigate why dead bodies kept at a shrine in a rural area should have attracted the attention of politicians and other members of Nigeria's regional and even national elites. Nigeria is a federal republic that has held three democratic elections since 1999, and is governed by reference to a constitution and a written law code. Yet, older

¹² Press statement, 'Okija: the truth about it all, as presented by Okija royal cabinet', quoted in *Vanguard*, 23 Aug. 2004. ¹³ *Guardian* [Lagos], 29 Aug. 2004.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* ¹⁵ Quoted in *NewsWatch*, 23 Aug. 2004, 23.

¹⁶ 'Nigeria governor denies cult link', BBC News, 4 Mar. 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/africa/7276922.stm>.

¹⁷ James Ume, 'Trial by press in Abia election tribunal dispute', *Vanguard*, 16 Apr. 2008.

institutions continue to play an important unofficial role in politics, including by the use of their supposed powers to inflict death or to enhance life.

INDIRECT RULE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria was established as a unit of government in 1914 through the amalgamation of two colonial territories that had previously been administered separately after their piecemeal acquisition by the British government in earlier years. This foundational legal act created the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, later to become a nation-state, out of what the British colonial expert Margery Perham called an 'arbitrary block of Africa'.¹⁸ Another authority, Lord Hailey, described Nigeria as 'perhaps the most artificial of the many administrative units created in the course of the European occupation of Africa'.¹⁹

Famously, it was in this vast country that the British colonial doctrine of Indirect Rule was applied with the most intense ideological commitment. In the north of Nigeria, Indirect Rule was well adapted to the aims of the British colonial masters, as the previous existence of extensive states with monarchical and aristocratic traditions made it easy for British officials to delegate authority to rulers who were well established. Indirect Rule was least well suited to the situation in the southeast of the country, where no centralized states had previously existed, where there was no tradition of literacy, and where authority was vested in what has been called 'a democratic form of gerontocracy',²⁰ articulated by complex systems of kinship, age-grades, titles and initiation societies. The institutions exercising the most extensive quasi-governmental authority in this region were the main shrines which were vested with judicial and religious powers and which could administer or witness solemn oaths. Their power to inflict capital punishment was used both in regard to transgressions of a cosmological nature, such as the birth of twins, regarded as taboo, and in regard to what British officials perceived as criminal offences. Seeking to impose on the southeast a form of government that would respond to their needs, the British colonial government appointed chiefs even to areas with no tradition of strong chieftaincy. The appointment of these so-called 'warrant chiefs', often with little legitimacy, was a major cause of widespread social and political upheaval in southeastern Nigeria. It is generally understood as one of the causes of the serious disturbances, led by women, that took place in the southeast in 1929.²¹

At the same time as the colonial government appointed chiefs to govern the radically decentralized communities of southeastern Nigeria, it attempted to control the operation of the shrines that had previously played such an important role in channelling authority over what were otherwise largely

¹⁸ Quoted in Sir Bernard Bourdillon, 'Memorandum on the future political development of Nigeria' (1939), 5, confidential, National Archives, Ibadan, MN/B4A.

¹⁹ Quoted in Henry L. Bretton, *Power and Stability in Nigeria: The Politics of Decolonization* (New York, 1962), 127.

²⁰ Elechi Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* (Ibadan, 1982), 94.

²¹ A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (London, 1972).

self-governing communities. When the British set about establishing a system of colonial rule in the region, in the first decade of the twentieth century, there were perhaps half a dozen shrines of major significance in the whole of Igboland. These were now stripped of powers that were deemed to be incompatible with the colonial vision of government, including their authority to order, sanction or execute death sentences. A British military expedition in 1902 destroyed the most important shrine in the region – Ibinukpabi, sometimes called the Long Juju, an oracle belonging to the Aro people.²² ‘The Aro Long Ju Ju’, according to one historian, ‘was recognised as the supreme god by practically all the numerous village communities from the Cross River to the Niger’.²³ However, Ibinukpabi was subsequently restored in secret, and in 1912 the colonial government destroyed it a second time, but it was again restored and by 1915 was functioning once more at a new location.²⁴ Ibinukpabi persisted even after this date.²⁵ An assistant district officer, T. M. Shankland, writing a report on the Aro area in 1933, noted that, at the time of its first destruction 31 years earlier, the fame of Ibinukpabi had extended as far as Sierra Leone and Congo.²⁶

Even after adjustments made to the administrative system in the aftermath of the 1929 rising, Indirect Rule continued to deliver poor results in the southeast of the country, in the opinion of colonial officials. Four years after the women’s war, Shankland observed that Aro had become ‘yet another area wherein an artificial judicial body came into being, a body having behind it, in native eyes, no sanction but force as represented by the District Officer, and the Police’.²⁷ The population had a generally low opinion of the value of imprisonment, the government’s preferred method of judicial punishment.²⁸ In the absence of any official local authority that enjoyed the full respect of the population, shrines continued to exercise judicial and other functions semi-legally or even clandestinely. They performed many roles that the colonial system was unequipped to encompass, such as divination, communicating with spirits, and dealing with problems of premature death and infertility.

For the British colonial authorities, indigenous religious institutions could be allowed to function inasmuch as they gave prestige and institutional support to the Native Authorities that were the key organ of Indirect Rule. Throughout southern Nigeria, shrines often worked very closely with the chiefs who were officially the linchpin of Native Authorities,²⁹ and cases heard in Native Authority law courts continued to depend on oaths sworn at shrines. At the same time as they enjoyed a measure of grudging official

²² A. E. Afigbo, ‘The eclipse of the Aro slaving oligarchy of south-eastern Nigeria, 1901–1927’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 6 (1971), 3–24.

²³ Joseph Anene, ‘The Protectorate government of southern Nigeria and the Aros, 1900–1902’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1 (1956), 22.

²⁴ Afigbo, ‘The eclipse of the Aro slaving oligarchy’, 15.

²⁵ Ogbu U. Kalu, ‘Missionaries, colonial government and secret societies in south-eastern Igboland, 1920–1950’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 9 (1977), 80.

²⁶ Intelligence report on the Aro by T. M. Shankland, National Archives, Ibadan, CSO 26/29017, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Afigbo, ‘The eclipse of the Aro slaving oligarchy’, 17.

²⁹ Tamuno and Horton, ‘The changing position of secret societies and cults in modern Nigeria’, 36–7.

recognition, however, many shrines continued to exercise unofficial functions as nodes of a parallel system of governance whose influence was felt in social and economic matters, and that even had a geographical aspect. The government built roads to encourage commerce, especially crops for export, but certain types of trade operated outside the purview of the colonial authorities and continued to pass along bush paths. 'While the produce trade "flowed" along the newly made roads', Afigbo notes, 'the slave trade and oracle business "flowed" along the old and tried bush tracks'.³⁰ It was the half-tolerance, half-suppression, of older systems of governance that made Indirect Rule so thoroughly ambiguous, the official organs of Indirect Rule being shadowed by institutions such as shrines whose actual powers often exceeded those they were officially deemed to have.

One of the main justifications for Indirect Rule was that it would avoid 'dislocation of tradition and familiar methods of administration', in the words of one British governor.³¹ By channelling political development within existing indigenous institutions, British officials intended to prevent the emergence of a class of political activists without roots in a village or other established community. But this was a vain hope, as Lagos in particular was, from the nineteenth century, home to a small but quite vociferous group of people, including lawyers and journalists, who were able to couch arguments concerning the rights and duties of rulers and ruled in a form and language familiar to British rulers. It was in this urban intelligentsia that the nationalist movement had its intellectual origins. It was only from perhaps the late 1930s³² that the incipient leaders of Nigerian nationalism, overwhelmingly of southern origin, made their first serious efforts to reach populations beyond the small world of Lagos. From an early stage of this process, one of their main techniques of political outreach was to make contact with the complex of communities based on indigenous religious institutions such as shrines, sodalities and initiation societies that played such an important role in the social and political life of Nigeria's Eastern and Western Regions. This is clearest in regard to the Western Region, whose history of city-states provided nationalist leaders with ready-made networks of influence of substantial geographical and social reach. In 1947, Obafemi Awolowo, the doyen of Yoruba politicians, in company with others, launched in Lagos the Egbe Omo Oduduwa organization, the style and title of which referred to Yoruba tradition.³³ This was assimilated into the Action Group, founded as a political party in 1951, which was able to recruit via the existing societies that were so influential among the Yoruba rulers who ran local government according to the precepts of Indirect Rule. The Ogboni society in particular exercised great influence in Native Authorities and Native Courts 'and in fact the majority of senior members of the staff and of the

³⁰ Afigbo, 'The eclipse of the Aro slaving oligarchy', 16.

³¹ Bourdillon, 'Memorandum on the future political development of Nigeria', 1.

³² Obafemi Awolowo, *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (Cambridge, 1960), 162.

³³ National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC (NARA): Record Group 84, classified general records of the US consulate and embassy, Lagos, 1940-63, box 1: Winthrop S. Greene to Dept. of State, 5 Dec. 1947.

councils of courts [were] Ogboni' in some areas.³⁴ Awolowo's political machine rapidly came to dominate the Western Region, one of the three components of the Nigerian federation, at precisely the moment that the colonial authorities were conceding political space to Nigerian political parties. In these circumstances, local notables in the eastern part of the Western Region, inhabited largely by non-Yoruba, established their own secret society, Owegbe, in order to mobilize their own supporters in competition with the Action Group.³⁵ In Nigeria's Eastern Region, meanwhile, the leading politician, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was less ideologically wedded to existing structures than Awolowo but used broadly similar techniques in forging local alliances.³⁶

It was by developing links to existing local networks of power that the emerging nationalist political parties came to dominate each of Nigeria's three Regions in the years before and after independence in 1960. The federal centre of government in Lagos, a colonial creation that passed into Nigerian hands only late in the colonial period, was notably void of moral substance but was a node of wealth accumulation. This was a toxic mixture. One far-sighted anti-corruption campaigner noted as early as 1952: 'Bribery with its allied corruption is deeply planted in this country. Its influence is so overwhelming that only serious thinking men of the community can realise the great disaster ahead of us'.³⁷

In the circumstances of decolonization and the creation of a new sovereignty, it was not always regarded as helpful or proper for academic authors to dwell on this aspect of Nigeria's government. However, sociologist Stanislaw Andreski invented a new word to describe the system: 'kleptocracy', which he described as 'a system of government [that] consists precisely of the practice of selling what the law forbids to sell'.³⁸ 'The essence of kleptocracy', Andreski noted, 'is that the functioning of the organs of authority is determined by the mechanisms of supply and demand rather than the laws and regulations'³⁹ – in other words, that authority is a market-based system. He thought Nigeria's First Republic, instituted in 1960, to be 'the most perfect example of kleptocracy', in which 'power itself rested upon the ability to bribe'.⁴⁰ Many observers, both then and later, attributed the emergence of this form of governance in large part to the shortcomings of the Native Authority system as it functioned under colonial

³⁴ Quotation from Resident, Benin Province, to Secretary, Western Province, 15 Sept. 1949: National Archives, Ibadan MLG (W) 1: 17887. See also Philip Aigbona Igbofe, *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897–1938* (London, 1979), 386–8.

³⁵ NARA, Record Group 59, Nigeria 1964, box 2526, Pol.18: Embassy Lagos to Dept. of State, 23 July 1965.

³⁶ See Audrey Chapman Smock, 'The N.C.N.C. and ethnic unions in Biafra', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 7 (1969), 21–34.

³⁷ Eyo O. Akak, *Bribery and Corruption in Nigeria* (Ibadan, n.d. [1952]). There is an abundant literature on this subject. A contemporary overview is Ronald Wraith and Edgar Simpkins, *Corruption in Developing Countries* (London, 1963), 11–53.

³⁸ Stanislaw Andreski, *The African Predicament: A Study in the Pathology of Modernisation* (London, 1968), 194. ³⁹ *Ibid.* 109. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 108.

rule.⁴¹ The institution of Indirect Rule placed new powers in the hands of local rulers while at the same time exempting them from the checks and balances constituted by dense networks of duties and obligations entrenched in religious practice.

The corpses that the Nigerian police found at the Okija shrine in 2004 were testimony to this historical evolution.

THE OKIJA SHRINE

The Okija shrine is historically part of a ritual complex that was dominated, perhaps for two centuries or more, by Ibinukpabi, the paramount oracle of the Aro. According to an early British administrator, 'active administration' in the region before colonial times 'was in the hands of those who had taken the highest title. It was these men, the ambitious and the wealthy ... who had most influence in the family and who formed the council for the village'.⁴²

The scattering of settlements that constitute Okija was incorporated into the colonial system of Indirect Rule after 1909, the year in which Okija was included in a Native Court jurisdiction.⁴³ From the inception of colonial rule, Okija was closely associated with Ihiala, a town on the important Owerri–Onitsha road. The colonial government placed Okija and Ihiala in the same administrative unit because they 'worship a common juju ... The principal priest of this juju is to be found in the senior Quarter of Okija but each Quarter has its own shrine as well'.⁴⁴ Ihiala itself, some 10–15 kilometres from where the Okija shrine is situated today, was plagued by chieftaincy disputes from 1945 to 1962,⁴⁵ to the extent that an official commission of inquiry was instituted. Detailed testimonies taken from members of the community in the course of the inquiry revealed that the regent and notables of the area had historically consulted the Ibinukpabi oracle concerning the appointment of a new leader. After the establishment of colonial rule in the area, they still endeavoured to follow precedent in most respects except for what was officially termed 'repugnant usages and practices', meaning 'such things as entail human sacrifices, ritual murder, the sale and purchase of human beings'.⁴⁶

During the years after Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Okija shrine grew in importance, actually coming to overshadow the former paramount shrine of the area, Ibinukpabi, which is reported still to be in existence,⁴⁷ but which has declined since its heyday. One source interviewed after the 4 August 2004 police raid recalled that the Okija complex grew especially after

⁴¹ Obafemi Awolowo, *The Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London, 1947), 97–8; Akak, *Bribery and Corruption in Nigeria*, 114; Amadi, *Ethics*, 87; cf. James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1958), 271–3.

⁴² Intelligence report on the Achalla group, Onitsha Division, by Assistant District Officer W. R. T. Milne, 1933, National Archives, Ibadan, CSO 26/29001.

⁴³ Bennet E. C. Ndubisi, *Ihiala and Her Neighbours: A Historical and Socio-Cultural Analysis* (n.p., 1996), 39.

⁴⁴ Intelligence report on the Achalla group, Onitsha Division, by Assistant District Officer W. R. T. Milne.

⁴⁵ Ndubisi, *Ihiala and Her Neighbours*, 5.

⁴⁶ M. G. Smith, *Report of the Inquiry into Ihiala Chieftaincy Dispute* (Enugu, 1963), 20, para.61: copy in National Archives, Ibadan, CE/S6.

⁴⁷ Interview with Alexander Ezeugo Ekwuba, *Newswatch*, 6 Sept 2004.

1970,⁴⁸ the end of the Nigerian civil war in which Okija had lain in the area initially controlled by the breakaway Republic of Biafra. In the period immediately before the police raid, the Okija shrine was being visited by substantial numbers of litigants, many of them of high social status. A series of registers maintained by a man described as the shrine secretary⁴⁹ contained over 5,000 names of people who had visited the place. Analysis of the names indicated that most patrons were from the southeast of the country and that they included doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians and company directors. Some of these litigants were reported to have paid very large sums, even hundreds of thousands of naira, the equivalent of thousands of dollars, to the chief priest of Okija. Contrary to priests' claims that the fees were paltry, the lowest recorded payment was 5,000 naira (\$38 at 2004 values). The highest payment recorded was over 100 times that amount.⁵⁰ The Anambra State police commissioner, Felix Ogbaudu, who led the 2004 raid on the Okija shrine, stated that he knew of one person who claimed to have paid 800,000 naira (\$6,070).⁵¹ Moreover, litigants who subsequently died, and whose corpses were brought by their families to the forest, had their goods confiscated by the shrine. This meant that very considerable amounts of money were involved in the shrine's affairs. A priest named Ndukwu 'admitted that his family resides in Lagos where he owns houses and other businesses', suggesting that the shrine could provide a good living.⁵² Commissioner Ogbaudu told journalists that the shrine priests were simply fraudsters who gulled people out of their money. He claimed that he had received reports that the shrines were used for extortion, sometimes of large amounts.⁵³

If each of 5,000 clients were to have paid the equivalent of \$100 dollars – a conservative estimate – it would imply total fees of half a million dollars paid over an unspecified period, excluding goods confiscated in kind and payments that went unrecorded in the registers. This sum is substantial but, by way of comparison, it is less impressive than the amounts generated by the Ibinukpabi oracle in its prime. The British official Shankland estimated that when Ibinukpabi was eliminated for a second time, in 1912, its income was about £16,000 per year, at a period when little money was in circulation. 'If these figures are correct', he noted, 'the revenue of the Juju in its palmy days, especially before energetic steps had been taken for the suppression of the slave trade, must have been stupendous'.⁵⁴

The post-civil-war years were the period of Nigeria's first oil boom, which is generally agreed to have marked a change of scale in the politics of graft and bribery in the country's politics.⁵⁵ Political corruption rose to fantastic proportions, creating a sense of vast riches awaiting those who knew how to access them. The end of the oil boom, in the early 1980s, not only threw large numbers of people into extreme financial difficulty but also spoiled the vision

⁴⁸ Interview with Emmanuel Ezeokolie, *Source*, 30 Aug. 2004.

⁴⁹ Interview with Anthony Okownkwo [*sic* – Okonkwo?], *Newswatch*, 23 Aug. 2004, 20–1. ⁵⁰ *Newswatch*, 11 Oct. 2004. ⁵¹ Interview, *Newswatch*, 23 Aug. 2004, 25.

⁵² *Guardian News*, 5 Aug. 2004. ⁵³ Interviews in *Newswatch*, 23 Aug. 2004.

⁵⁴ Intelligence report on the Aro by T. M. Shankland, 13.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Andrew H. Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, 2005), ch. 1.

of instant wealth that had been so recently conjured.⁵⁶ A Structural Adjustment Programme introduced from 1985⁵⁷ entrenched the sense of both cupidity and resentment among many Nigerians. Under the avaricious General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria was subject to a style of rule whereby 'direct disbursals and administrative favours were increasingly supplanted by politically-influenced arbitrage in a variety of domestic markets', a process more simply described as 'zairianisation'.⁵⁸ It was in the 1980s, by most accounts, that Nigeria began to acquire an ugly reputation as the home of the international advance-fee frauds known as '419' (pronounced 'Four One Nine'), named after the relevant article of the country's criminal code.⁵⁹ The phrase '419' is now used by Nigerians to designate a wide variety of dishonest activity.⁶⁰ Nuhu Ribadu, chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, said in 2006: 'Let us call a spade a spade. This is the period when we started hearing about 419, it is the period we started having drug problems. It is a period when Majors (in the army) started buying property in London'.⁶¹ In Igboland, the general deterioration in the political and economic climate was compounded by particular factors, including the widespread opinion that Igbos had been marginalized as a consequence of the unsuccessful Biafran rebellion.

Given this history, it is interesting to note that the president of the Okija Town Union commented in 2004 that in the previous ten years the shrine had been patronized by criminals specializing in 419 frauds, turning it into a purely money-making venture.⁶² Indeed, one of the corpses deposited in the forest surrounding the main shrine was said to be that of the notorious 419 fraudster Victor Okafor, known as 'Ezego' (the King of Money).⁶³ A native of the Ihiala Local Government Area, Okafor was reported to have dropped out of secondary school and taken to a life of crime, becoming part of a gang of armed robbers in Onitsha in the 1980s before moving to Lagos in 1989. Within a few years, he had become fabulously rich, reportedly from fraud and drug-trading. He acquired many properties, a fleet of luxury cars, and two shopping-malls in Lagos. He gave lavish parties attended by politicians and senior military officers. As is customary in Igboland, he invested some of his money in prestigious titles, thus acquiring the name 'Ezego',⁶⁴ an honorific available to those who have been successful in business. He had a sign decorated with dollar, sterling, yen and naira currency symbols erected

⁵⁶ Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 14, 30. An authoritative political analysis of the late oil-boom years is Richard A. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁵⁷ Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (London, 1998), 204–6, 314.

⁵⁸ Peter Lewis, 'From prebendalism to predation: the political economy of decline in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34 (1996), 97. The reference to 'zairianisation' is at p. 80.

⁵⁹ Harvey Glickman, 'The Nigerian "419" advance fee scams: prank or peril?' *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 39 (2005), 472; Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, esp. ch. 1.

⁶⁰ Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, ch. 2.

⁶¹ Speech delivered on 19 Jan. 2006. *Punch*, 20 Jan. 2006.

⁶² Quoted in *Source*, 30 Aug. 2004, 17.

⁶³ *This Day*, 6 Aug. 2003.

⁶⁴ <http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal/news1999.htm>. This is a website maintained by anti-419 campaigners in the USA. I received information about Okafor during a research trip to Nigeria in Mar.–Apr. 2002.

over the road at the entrance to Okija announcing it as his hometown.⁶⁵ Described as 'one of the kingpins of 419 in Nigeria', Okafor became deeply involved in political intrigues, and served a short spell in prison after being connected to a theft of ammunition from a Military Intelligence building in Lagos in 1997.⁶⁶

Having become fabulously wealthy, Victor Okafor also turned his attention to state politics. When Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999 after 16 years of military government, the first gubernatorial election in Anambra State was won by Chinwoke Mbadinuju, a member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The leader of this party, the former army general Olusegun Obasanjo, was elected as head of state. In order to fund his election campaign, Mbadinuju had relied on largesse from a vastly wealthy oil magnate. Soon after his election, Governor Mbadinuju had serious disagreements with this financial backer, chiefly over the allocation of government contracts, the key source of enrichment for members of the country's plutocratic class. As Mbadinuju grappled to escape from the clutches of his patron, the state's government became notorious for its venality and its enlistment of the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group originally enjoying considerable popularity in another part of the southeast that had been co-opted by Governor Mbadinuju. During his tenure the Bakassi Boys emerged as a gang of political thugs.⁶⁷ One of the methods used by Mbadinuju to enforce his authority in the state government was to oblige his political appointees to swear an oath of allegiance to him at shrines in Anambra State.⁶⁸

Victor Okafor's growing interest in the politics of his home state brought him into contact with Chuma Nzeribe, the Anambra State government security adviser, one of the organizers of the Bakassi Boys and an *éminence grise* of Anambra State politics. Nzeribe himself is reported to have a dubious background.⁶⁹ Journalists investigating the Okija shrine after the 2004 police raid were told that the two men had had a business relationship that had turned sour, causing them to approach the Okija shrine with their dispute.⁷⁰ When Okafor was killed in a car accident at Christmas 1999, it was widely assumed that his death was a punishment meted out by the Okija shrine by means of its mystical power.

The story of Victor Okafor throws light on the suggestion made by some Okija people interviewed in the aftermath of the August 2004 police raid that the Okija shrine had acquired a particular reputation due to its purported

⁶⁵ Ocherreome Nnanna, 'Okija shrines: a fanatic and a fool' (part 1), *Vanguard*, 12 Aug. 2004.

⁶⁶ Isaac Olawale Albert, 'Terror as a political weapon: reflections on bomb explosions in Abacha's Nigeria', *IFRA Special Research Issue* (Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique, Ibadan), 1 (2005), 49.

⁶⁷ Daniel J. Smith, 'The Bakassi Boys: vigilantism, violence and political imagination in Nigeria', *Cultural Anthropology*, 19 (2004), 429–55; author's interviews in Anambra State, Mar. 2002.

⁶⁸ Author's interviews in Awka, capital of Anambra State, Mar. 2002.

⁶⁹ Author's interview with member of the Security Committee of the House of Assembly, Awka, 21 Mar. 2002; see also Obie Chukwumba, 'Alagbongate: how the police give criminals cover', *African Concord*, 29 July 1996. Nzeribe's curriculum vitae is available at <http://www.nassnig.org/House/Personaldata/Anambra/nzeribe.htm>.

⁷⁰ *This Day Online*, 19 Aug. 2004.

ability to kill. The person who admitted having tipped off the police about the existence of corpses at the shrine, thereby instigating the police raid, was one Chukwumezie Obed Igwe who had himself been party to a dispute that had involved his swearing an oath at the shrine. As a result, he had developed a grudge against some of the powerful people associated with it. Igwe maintained that the officials of the Okija shrine:

have now started spreading their evil practice to other parts of the state ... to all those towns that have shrines, and whose shrines have not been known to kill. They say that their shrine does not kill and they are now initiating them to that very thing they do with the Okija shrine.⁷¹

Commissioner Ogbaudu himself referred to the shrine's fearsome powers. 'When I was going', he said in regard to the August 2004 police raid:

people were phoning me saying 'Oga be careful o. That juju is very dangerous o. Don't joke with it'. As far as I am concerned, these are common criminals looking for what to eat and the gullible ones amongst us always fall prey to them.

Ogbaudu was dismissive of the shrine priests, whom he called 'just ordinary 419ers'.⁷²

Officials of the Okija complex insisted that the bodies found at the site were not the remains of people who had died in the groves where the main shrine was located, but that the corpses had been brought from elsewhere. In some contexts, the shrine functioned in a fiduciary capacity, guaranteeing a solemn agreement between two parties. This appeared to be its main role in dealings between politicians. In other cases, people who were party to a dispute, often businesspeople or people involved in land conflicts, came to the shrine in search of justice, and were made to swear oaths in support of their complaints.⁷³ If a plaintiff came to the shrine alone, the priests might summons other parties to the case to appear in much the same way as a regular court of law might do, working largely through networks of traditional rulers.⁷⁴ If one of the litigants subsequently died, he would be regarded as having been punished by the shrine deity and his family would be obliged to bring the corpse to the shrine. Shrine priests said that relatives of a person killed in this way brought the corpse to the shrine to placate the anger of the deities, fearing that, if they did not do this, the angry deity would start to kill the next of kin of the deceased in revenge.⁷⁵ However, many people suggested that the deaths attributed to the shrine may also have been caused by human agency, in the form of rituals designed to kill a victim by mystical means or through the use of poisons. The suggestion that the shrine had the power to kill disobedient or unsuccessful litigants fits the case of Victor 'Ezego' Okafor, whose fatal crash was regarded as proof that the shrine had found him guilty of an offence and had punished him accordingly.

Almost every relevant source, including police officers and a local Anglican or Catholic cleric⁷⁶ who was acquainted with the shrine's activities, confirmed claims by the shrine officials themselves that the Okija shrine had

⁷¹ Quoted in the *Daily Sun*, 7 Aug. 2004. ⁷² Interview in *Tell*, 23 Aug. 2004.

⁷³ 'The evil forest', *Tell*, 16 Aug. 2004.

⁷⁴ Statement by Osita Ndukwu, a priest of the Ogwugwu Isiula shrine, in the *Daily Sun*, 7 Aug. 2004. ⁷⁵ See interviews in *NewsWatch*, 23 Aug. 2004.

⁷⁶ Raymond Arazu, interviewed in *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004.

a quasi-judicial function, even if it also served other purposes as well. The traditional⁷⁷ ruler of Okija made a formal statement on the matter:

People go to the shrines for the settlement of their cases because of the immediate and constant justice they receive from the shrines. It is because these people from far and wide go there for justice on their personal decision. ... If after the settlement of a case and the culprit finally dies, it is reported to the chief priest who allows to the corpse to be brought and thrown into the forest shrine, buried or left just like that by the relations of the dead person. Some of the skulls discovered from the shrine could be older than all those who are now the priests of the shrines.⁷⁸

The reputation of the Okija shrine as a dispenser of justice was widespread. The Anambra State police chief, Commissioner Ogbaudu, reportedly stated that Okija was 'notorious for this kind of evil shrines in Igboland'.⁷⁹ Several newspapers reported claims that there were similar shrines in many other parts of the country, actually printing the names of some of them.⁸⁰

The Okija shrine seems to have risen to prominence only in the late twentieth century and, while it had no official role in the machinery of government or in the political system, it nevertheless acquired substantial influence. Tracing this process over several decades reveals much about the real nature of Nigeria's politics.

LOCAL CULTS AND NATIONAL POLITICS

The politician whose name was most often associated with the shrine in press reports from August 2004 was Chris Ngige, a former governor of Anambra State. He admitted having had dealings with the shrine in the previous year, although his name did not figure in the register held by the shrine secretary, and he claimed that he had not actually entered the shrine.⁸¹ Ngige was already well known to the Nigerian public, even outside Anambra State, due to the extraordinary events of 10 July 2003, when he was kidnapped and forced to resign as state governor.

The Ngige kidnap saga has its roots in the tension between the extensive powers bestowed on elected state governors under the Nigerian constitution and the reality of a political system that is based on competing patronage systems oiled by huge sums of money. The military governments headed by General Ibrahim Babangida from 1985 to 1993 and General Sani Abacha from 1993 to 1998 saw the emergence of what Nigerians call 'political godfathers'.⁸² This is the name applied to immensely rich individuals, often without any formal status in the political system or in the government, who fund the election campaigns of candidates to key positions in public office, especially as state governors, as was the case in Anambra State in 1999. 'Godfathers' hoped to manipulate politics from behind the scenes and benefit

⁷⁷ Many 'traditional' rulers in this area are colonial creations, following the creation of the so-called 'warrant chiefs'. See Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*.

⁷⁸ Press statement: 'Okija: The truth about it all, as presented by Okija royal cabinet'.

⁷⁹ 'The evil forest', *Tell*, 16 Aug. 2004. ⁸⁰ E.g. *Newswatch*, 6 Sept 2004, 49.

⁸¹ Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 161. The Okija shrine is discussed on 158–62.

⁸² Isaac Olawale Albert, 'Explaining "godfatherism" in Nigerian politics', *African Sociological Review*, 9 (2005), 79–105.

financially by using their positions to cause official contracts to be awarded to favoured companies. Political godfathers became the means by which still more influential figures, very often ex-generals like Babangida himself, have been able to orchestrate relations of power and wealth in spite of the existence of a democratic, federal system of government composed of 36 individual states.

The Okija shrine affair revealed the extent to which political godfathers in Anambra State relayed their power via wealthy individuals, and through traditional rulers and shrines, although Christian clerics sometimes figured in these patronage networks also. As an insightful newspaper columnist explained, godfathers were able to maintain their positions thanks to the wealth and power that stemmed ultimately from their connections to the most senior officials in the country, which in the early twenty-first century meant the president or the vice-president:

With this connection they could download any number of policemen and soldiers and cruise around in intimidating sired convoys to Anambra State to illustrate the extent of their powers. Connection to Abuja also meant that they could front for these Abuja rulers in business and collect commissions for the agents they are. And with this connection, they could instal anybody in the Government House of Anambra State and received multi-million naira monthly rents, which they then flaunted before the hungry and job-seeking traditional rulers, clerics, witch-doctors, shrine proprietors, political wannabe's and, of course, their respective thugs and task men.⁸³

Partly as a result of the godfather system, the politics of some states, including Anambra, became not only more venal but also more violent over time, as national presidents and vice-presidents strived to maintain their patronage systems in individual states via a godfather. Political competition in Anambra became ferocious, in spite of the fact that many Igbo appeared to be deeply disillusioned with state politics, believing that their home area had never been fully reintegrated into Nigeria since the civil war that ended in 1970 and that, subsequently, Igbos were excluded from key political positions.

During preparations for the 2003 gubernatorial and presidential elections, Anambra State's incumbent governor, Chinwoke Mbadinuju, was dropped by the PDP, largely because of the conflicts he had experienced with the godfather who had sponsored his original election. He was replaced as PDP candidate for the 2003 elections by a little-known medical doctor, Chris Ngige.⁸⁴ Ngige in his turn was supported by his own political godfather, one Chris Uba. The latter had good access to the presidency since his brother, Andy Uba, worked as an aide to President Obasanjo; Andy Uba was also married to the sister of President Obasanjo's wife. Learning from the bruising experience of the last godfather-governor relationship in Anambra State, Chris Uba extracted from his front-man, candidate-governor Chris Ngige, a signed letter of resignation that Uba kept as an insurance policy. Uba also kept a video of Ngige in the act of signing this letter. In April 2003, Ngige was duly elected as governor of Anambra State. However, as Uba had

⁸³ Nnanna, 'Okija shrines: a fanatic and a fool' (part 1).

⁸⁴ A succinct account of the following is Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 125–30.

anticipated, within weeks of the election the godfather began to encounter serious differences with his protégé, Governor Ngige, over the awarding of state contracts. Uba decided to make use of the resignation letter. On 10 July 2003, he resorted to kidnapping Governor Ngige. The latter's resignation was announced to the press and confirmed by exhibiting a signed letter. It was on this occasion that Ngige is reported to have sworn an oath administered by officials of the Okija shrine,⁸⁵ allegedly⁸⁶ in the company of his 'godfather', Chris Uba, and of Chuma Nzeribe, member of the Anambra State House of Representatives for the Ihiala district, former security adviser to the state governor and sometime associate of the late Victor Okafor. The Okija shrine in effect served as a key part of the machinery of the patronage network in which all three figured. It also emerged that Uba had obliged members of the State House of Assembly to swear an oath, actually bringing cult objects from the Okija shrine to them at a guest house used by the Assemblymen.⁸⁷

Rumours that other state governors had also visited the Okija shrine were strengthened when a former aide to Governor Orji Uzor Kalu of Abia State claimed to the press that Governor Kalu had required his entire cabinet to swear an oath there.⁸⁸ This he had done at the behest of his mother, Eunice Uzor Kalu, who was running a political machine known as Reality Organization and who was regarded as the real power behind the governor⁸⁹ – in effect, a 'political godmother' in addition to being the biological mother of the state governor. The former aide, one Amah Abraham Nnanna, described Governor Kalu's government as 'satanic' on account of its association with indigenous shrines. He alleged that the governor employed a coordinator of shrine activities, a local government chairman known as the Grand Commander of the Faithfuls.⁹⁰ The role of the shrine in acting as a fiduciary for political deals between godfathers and gubernatorial candidates, or between governors and their aides and clients, would account for the intensity of activities recorded in the registers at the Okija shrine in 2002–3, in the run-up to the gubernatorial elections of the latter year. There were rumours that still more illustrious political figures had visited the Okija shrine, including two former military heads of state.⁹¹

The revelation of the role played by the Okija shrine in the careers of at least two state governors, Chris Ngige of Anambra and Orji Uzor Kalu of Abia, throws considerable light on the political context of the 4 August 2004 police raid. It appears that the raid had a largely political motivation in terms of the fraught relations between successive governors and their political godfathers. Rival clientelist networks, connected to the very top of the Nigerian state, were vying for control of Anambra State by using the Okija shrine, and perhaps other shrines too, as nodal points of their relationships. Exposing the shrine through the press was a clever ploy to uncover and embarrass a competing group.

⁸⁵ *Newswatch*, 11 Oct. 2004. I was informed during interviews in Awka in Mar. 2002 that Governor Mbadinuju had also required members of his state government to swear an oath at an unnamed shrine, probably Okija. ⁸⁶ *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004.

⁸⁷ 'We didn't visit Okija shrine – lawmakers Anambra', *This Day*, 24 Aug. 2004.

⁸⁸ "'Kalu's government is a failure'", *Tell*, 17 Jan. 2005. ⁸⁹ *Ibid.* ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004.

In addition to laying bare these political relationships, a further effect of the 4 August police raid was a run on local banks, as some of the shrine's adepts and beneficiaries withdrew from their accounts money that was connected with the shrine.⁹² Many of those concerned were reported to be traders from Anambra State who had become wealthy after visiting the shrine. Some of those who believed they had prospered from the shrine's 'money potion', the objects it provided for the prosperity of clients, were afraid that its power might now wither. More prosaically, they were also afraid that the scandal might cause the authorities to begin looking into their financial affairs, their tax records and so on. This was consistent with the view expressed by some people that the raid was politically motivated in a larger sense, as a way of exerting pressure on the Igbo business community.⁹³ Some Igbo businesspeople recalled how, after the civil war of 1967–70, bank accounts held by Igbos had been closed by the government, and account-holders compensated with a paltry sum. They now feared a similarly drastic measure. One businessman complained that, after the civil war, Igbos had been 'boxed into a corner', as he put it, excluded from control of the state and access to government contracts, and thereby forced into unconventional businesses, including advance-fee fraud and drugs.⁹⁴ Some analysts believe the latter activities to be the second- and third-biggest sectors of the Nigerian economy, after oil.⁹⁵

In many respects, the role played by shrines, chiefs and other quasi-traditional elements of government is a logical outgrowth of Indirect Rule. Colonization created entirely new centres and techniques of power; decolonization gave Nigerians access to these same sites, together with the massive resources falling under their control. Yet key sites for the formation of moral bonds linking politicians to their constituents remained highly localized. Moral relationships between the powerful and the less powerful have historically been articulated through institutions that have roots in specific communities that were shaped or reshaped by Indirect Rule. Ambitious national politicians of the early twenty-first century, like those a half-century earlier, found that one of the most effective ways of mobilizing political support in local communities was by accessing the whole panoply of quasi-traditional governance.

The moral vacuum in Nigeria's formal political arena was long ago analysed by Peter Ekeh in terms of two distinct entities, one being the modern public realm, the other being a traditional one.⁹⁶ According to a perceptive observer, Ogbu Kalu,⁹⁷ the historical tendency of Nigerian politicians to develop links with local centres of political influence by association with shrines and other indigenous religious institutions became more acute than ever under the rule of generals Babangida and Abacha. Cynics joked that the name 'Abacha' was actually an acronym: 'After Babangida Another

⁹² 'Laundering their filthy lucre', *Tell*, 6 Sept 2004.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Apter, *The Pan-African Nation*, 228.

⁹⁶ Peter P. Ekeh, 'Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1975), 91–112.

⁹⁷ Ogbu U. Kalu, 'The religious dimension of the legitimacy crisis, 1993–1998', in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC, 2002), 667–85.

Criminal Has Arrived'.⁹⁸ 'A legitimacy crisis activates infra-politics', Kalu observed, 'a realm where the people create a political world of their own and where they ridicule the wisdom of the rulers'.⁹⁹ He went on to show how political ethics in Nigeria are based on a 'traditional worldview'; the more the formal ideologies and ethics of the Nigerian state are seen to be threadbare, the greater the tendency towards a 'villagization of the modern public sphere'.¹⁰⁰ As politicians sought new resources of legitimacy, the people who controlled indigenous religious institutions were able to mobilize economic and political power in the modern sector. This was a function of 'the intensity of the material and psychological scourges caused by the legitimacy crisis'.¹⁰¹ However, when historically established religious institutions like the Okija shrine enter the space of national politics, they do not observe due moderation or traditional boundaries, 'because the modern space is supposed to be an unlimited and unbounded space'.¹⁰² The channels of communication with a perceived spirit world that are controlled by shrines are placed at the disposal of those clients who have the means to pay for them. At the same time, these forms of communication elude wider institutional control.

MORAL ETHNICITY

Underlying the embarrassment caused to Igbo politicians and intellectuals by public revelations concerning the Okija shrine lies the historical question of how perceptions of ethnicity and culture have been formed in Nigeria, notably through the political mechanisms of Indirect Rule and the ethno-nationalisms closely associated with Nigeria's federal politics.

The fact that some people interpreted the police raid as an attack on Igbo culture and on the moral value of traditional practices indicates the degree to which ethnic resources are also moral resources. Others, though, expressed an entirely negative view of the Okija shrine, applauding an attempt by the police to destroy what they saw as a primitive institution. Commissioner Ogbaudu claimed that after the operation he was congratulated by prominent citizens of the town, who commended him for his courage in breaking the wall of fear surrounding the shrine.¹⁰³ 'I have received a lot of commendation from well-meaning Igbo people', he said:

One of them said to me 'Sir, you don't know what you have done for the Igbos ... You don't know what you have done for generations yet unborn'. He said that the Okija people and the entire Igbo race have been in bondage over the years.¹⁰⁴

A former state commissioner for women's affairs described the raid as 'liberation day for the people of Okija', specifying that '[i]t is liberation from the terror and evil bondage that our people have been held in since all these years'.¹⁰⁵ The ambiguity expressed in people's opinions about the Okija shrine reflects an underlying ambivalence concerning the moral qualities associated with ethnicity. 'Moral ethnicity' is defined by John Lonsdale as

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 667.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 668.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 670.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 673.

¹⁰³ 'The evil forest'.

¹⁰⁴ *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Bridget Obi, quoted in *Tell*, 6 Sept. 2004, 25.

‘that contested internal standard of civic virtue against which we measure our personal esteem’. It is, he notes, ‘very different from the unprincipled “political tribalism” with which groups compete for public resources’.¹⁰⁶

Debates on the merits or demerits of ‘traditional’ culture, and its use or abuse by politicians, are often couched in religious terms. Thus, among those who celebrated the raid on Okija were Christian leaders, to whom the shrine represented the epitome of depravity and even of Satanism. Alexander Ezeugo Ekewuba, bishop of the Overcomer Christian Mission headquarters in Owerri, a self-proclaimed ‘apostle raised by God to deal with unrepentant occult men and women in this generation’,¹⁰⁷ said that he had had dealings with the Okija shrine priests. He claimed that the August 2004 police raid was the fulfilment of a curse that he had placed on the shrine a year earlier after one of his parishioners had allegedly been killed by the Okija deity, following which a shrine priest had demanded the man’s body. Ekewuba said that, on the day of his parishioner’s burial, twenty shrine priests had come to take away the corpse and to carry off the property of the deceased. Bishop Ekewuba said he had called on God to destroy the shrine if the priests did not repent, whereupon the priests counter-attacked by telling him he had only seven days to live. This was the culmination of a longer conflict, dating back to 2000, when shrine officials had summoned two men and their lawyer to appear at the shrine in response to a lawsuit, after which Bishop Ekewuba had written to the priests, calling them children of Satan. Interestingly, Bishop Ekewuba had suffered the burning-down of his church and his house during the disturbances in Owerri in 1996, referred to previously.¹⁰⁸ He attributed these attacks to the work of Ala Ogbaga, a deity in Imo State.¹⁰⁹

For officials of a sovereign state like Nigeria, which formally claims a monopoly of legitimate violence, purports to uphold the rule of law and aspires to maintain its place in the international family of nations, revelations about the Okija shrine come not so much as a surprise (since it is pretty clear that the existence of such places is widely known) but as a blow nonetheless, since they embarrass politicians and officials whose positions require them to articulate internationally accepted norms of statecraft. Hence the reaction of the inspector-general of police, Tafa Balogun, who maintained that ‘Nigeria is a distinguished member of the international community and as such we must, at all times, conform and be seen to conform with all norms, conventions and rules that are sine qua non to peaceful living and respectable human co-existence’.¹¹⁰

The mismatch between the legal and constitutional theory of how the Nigerian state works, and, on the other hand, its reality is largely synonymous with what is often labelled as ‘corruption’. One commentator

¹⁰⁶ John Lonsdale, ‘Moral ethnicity and political tribalism’, in Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin (eds.), *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde, 1994), 131. This is a useful summary of an argument made at length in ch. 12 of Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992).

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Alexander Ezeugo Ekewuba in *Newswatch*, 6 Sept. 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, ‘“The arrow of God”’.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Alexander Ezeugo Ekewuba in *Newswatch*, 6 Sept 2004.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Tafa Balogun in *Tell*, 6 Sept 2004.

attributes Nigeria's notoriety in this regard to 'a complex interplay between indigenous and foreign understandings of appropriate government conduct'.¹¹¹ Nigeria's corruption, the same author adds, is actually the product of three factors: first, patron–client relations; second, the use of technocratic and academic paradigms that are ill adapted to reality; and, third, the actual history of governance in Nigeria.¹¹² In short, 'corruption' is not only the practice of combining formal office with the pursuit of illicit private enrichment, but also a shorthand term designating a complex situation in which the reality of governance differs from the legal framework that formally constrains the operations of government. In this gap political power is generated and vast fortunes may be made, creating social and economic inequality.

The disparity between the official and unofficial practices of power is also a moral gap, and perhaps the most important medium for Nigerians to imagine and address the resulting moral dilemmas in is religion.¹¹³ That this should be so stems from the fact that power has historically been conceived of in Nigeria as an integrated force rather than in terms of a rigid division into separate realms of politics and religion. Since the mid nineteenth century, there have been at least three general historical trends that it is relevant to mention in this context. First, there has been a tendency over time to impose a dualism on the spirit world, with spirits becoming classified as either good or evil, largely under missionary influence; second, there has been a tendency for Christians in particular to demonize older concepts of the spirit world; third, people nowadays experience greater difficulties than previously in engaging with the spirit world and domesticating the spirits they perceive there.¹¹⁴

Hence, for Nigeria's many born-again Christians, like Bishop Ekwuba,¹¹⁵ the ritual activities at the Okija shrine are nothing less than Satanism. They interpret the fact that leading politicians have been associated with the shrine, as well as fraudsters like Victor Okafor, as a sign that Satan is active in politics and business. Bishop Ekwuba refers to shrines in the southeast of Nigeria as 'places raised by Satan to deceive people so that they can serve him ... These are satanic places in our land that bring curses on our people and hinder the presence of God in our midst'. In his view, the continued existence of such shrines is the cause of the political misfortunes of the Igbo people and the reason why they live scattered among other Nigerians rather than in their own ancestral territory.¹¹⁶

For shrine devotees, on the other hand, the logic is the exact opposite: the country's misfortunes derive from the fact that people have broken faith with the customs of their ancestors. One of the Okija priests, Edinmuo Ndukwu, interviewed in prison by the press,¹¹⁷ described himself as 'an ardent pagan',

¹¹¹ Steven Pierce, 'Looking like a state: colonialism and the discourse of corruption in northern Nigeria', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48 (2006), 888.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 888–9.

¹¹³ See Ruth Marshall, 'Political spiritualities: the explosion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 2006), esp. chs. 2 and 3.

¹¹⁴ See Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London, 2004).

¹¹⁵ Interview with Alexander Ezeugo Ekwuba in *Newswatch*, 6 Sept 2004.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Interview in *Newswatch*, 23 Aug. 2004.

who was simply following the practice of his father. He regarded Christianity as a foreign religion. Ndukwu maintained that those whose corpses lay at the shrine had died because they had told lies and sworn false oaths. He pointed out that the shrine did not deal only in death, but that it could also bring prosperity to people, in business affairs for example, and that it could cause childless women to conceive. Another shrine priest who said that he was an Anglican as well as an adept of the Okija deity stated that the traditional religion caused people to speak the truth, whereas the church thrives on falsehood.¹¹⁸ Several shrine priests claimed that it was possible to be both Christian and a shrine adept on the grounds that we should give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which belongs to God. 'Caesar is the idol and God is the Almighty', said one.¹¹⁹

CONCLUSION

No evidence was ever produced that any murder was committed at the Okija shrine. All 31 suspects arrested in August 2004 were eventually released without charge. It seems reasonable to believe what various people living in the Okija area said at the time to account for the dozens of dead bodies at the shrine, namely that they were the remains of people who were thought to have suffered a bad death or of people who were thought to have been killed by the shrine's mystical powers as punishment for wrongdoing.

The presence of death in various guises is one of the continuities in the historical role of Igbo shrines such as Okija. Before the institution of colonial rule, such shrines were closely associated with social death,¹²⁰ including enslavement, a common punishment for various offences at that time. Today, the Okija shrine continues to function as a repository for the corpses of those whose spirits cannot be accommodated in an ordinary funeral ceremony, and which have to be consigned to the sacred grove where the shrine is situated, where unquiet souls can be kept from troubling their living relatives. The Okija shrine is believed to be able to inflict physical death, as witnessed by the belief that people who have offended it by swearing false oaths, like Victor Okafor, are liable to be killed by the deity. There are stories of shrine officials carrying out such punishments via the use of amulets or poison, although whether the latter actually occurs cannot be stated with certainty.

At the same time, the shrine's life-enhancing and dispute-resolution powers have not disappeared. The power of shrines like Okija is likely to continue for as long as the Nigerian state is unable to deliver certain forms of justice to its people, as even opponents of traditional religion recognize.¹²¹ The idea of 'truth-telling jujus' remains very widespread in Nigeria, as Jonathan Haynes has shown in his analysis of popular videos, which routinely deal with stories of crime and misconduct in which the wrong-doers are brought to book by religious powers, but in which the very same religious powers may also be used for nefarious purposes, usually glossed in English as

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ The phrase is taken from Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA, 1982).

¹²¹ *Insider Weekly*, 23 Aug. 2004.

'witchcraft' or 'Satanism'.¹²² Politicians make use of these institutions both to seal agreements with their peers and as a source of legitimacy. In doing so, however, they may cause local institutions to become tainted by the corruption of politics.

POSTSCRIPT

It is four years since the August 2004 raid on Okija and in many ways it is as though nothing ever happened. There is every indication that at least two states of southeastern Nigeria are dominated by political blocs that continue to make extensive use of the Okija shrine and of its purported powers of death and life.

Chinwoke Mbadinuju, governor of Anambra from 1999 to 2003, when the Bakassi Boys terrorized the state, was acquitted of murder in March 2008.¹²³ His successor, Chris Ngige, who was sensationally kidnapped in July 2003, and made to swear an oath administered by officials of the Okija shrine, resurfaced as a supporter of Vice-President Atiku Abubakar in the latter's campaign for the presidency prior to the national elections of April 2007. At a public rally, Ngige expressed his gratitude to Vice-President Abubakar for securing his release from the hands of his kidnappers and, in his words, for restoring democracy in Anambra State. Ngige revealed that it was in fact Vice-President Atiku Abubakar who had directed the then inspector-general of police, Tafa Balogun, to restore him to office after his kidnapping.¹²⁴ Tafa Balogun himself was charged with corruption by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission shortly after the August 2004 raid on the Okija shrine and found guilty of embezzling vast quantities of money. He was sentenced to a mere 6 months in detention, of which he spent 67 days in the Abuja National Hospital on medical grounds. He regained his freedom on 9 February 2006.¹²⁵ Officials of the Okija shrine say that the former inspector-general of police's fall from grace was caused by the power of their deity.¹²⁶

Chris Ngige's revelation concerning the role of the former vice-president in securing his release from his kidnappers is telling as it suggests that the 2004 raid on the Okija shrine was part of a high-level political tussle that had little to do with maintaining or suppressing the practices at the shrine. The struggle concerned in the first instance the governorship of Anambra State and, beyond that, competition between rival clientelist systems answerable respectively to the head of state, President Obasanjo, and his vice-president, Atiku Abubakar. In April 2007, the gubernatorial election in Anambra State was won by Andy Uba, former aide to President Obasanjo and brother to Chris Uba, although Andy Uba's election was soon overturned by a tribunal. Meanwhile, in Abia State, the gubernatorial election of 2007 was won by the former chief of staff of ex-Governor Kalu. This was Theodore Orji, the same

¹²² Jonathan Haynes, 'Political critique in Nigerian video films', *African Affairs*, 105 (2006), 511–33.

¹²³ 'Court acquits Mbadinuju over murder of Igwe couple', *Nigerian Tribune*, 11 Mar. 2008.

¹²⁴ *This Day*, 6 Mar. 2007.

¹²⁵ www.onlinenigeria.com/articles/ad.asp?blurb=201.

¹²⁶ Personal communication by Johannes Harnischfeger.

person whose filmed presence allegedly at the Okija shrine appeared on the internet in early 2008. Orji's election was a demonstration of the continuing grip of Eunice Uzor Kalu and her Reality Organization. His election too was subsequently overturned by order of a court.