

Newspaper Articles: 'Living in Bondage' & 'Citizens of a Strange Class'

(culled from 'Tell' magazine [Lagos], August 23, 2004 & May 6, 2002)

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1. Living in Bondage

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Perched close to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, by the armpits of beautiful hills, Alor-uno looks peaceful and innocent in its pastoral environment to a visitor. But behind this facade earthly beauty operates a traditional justice system that has dislocated the lives of families and enslaved generations of its victims. They have been bonded for life to *Adoro*. Everybody in his right mind is scared of *Adoro*. So powerful is this deity that its name is not mentioned, not even in hushed whispers. Comparable only to the Ogwuwgu shrine in Okwuzu, Ihiala Anambra State, the *Adoro* shrine is even believed by some to be the more vicious of the two. When TELL visited the shrine, it found that it held an estimated 3000 forced worshippers, all "foreigners" living in Alor, the community that hosts the deity. But others say that the hostages exceed 20,000. This is because besides the 3000 are offsprings who themselves have become hostages of *Adoro* or as it is more 'fondly' put, children of the deity.

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For five years, Ngozi Ogbu, the founder of Jehovah Messiah, Alleluyah Hossana Mission fought *Adoro* and its followers to liberate her hometown from the shackles of the deity. Born December 25, 1969, Ogbu married a man from Okuzu in Anambra State and they both lived in Kano. But Ogbu had a vision in which, she claims, God told her to return to her hometown, Alor-uno, and liberate the people from the bondage of *Adoro* deity. She established her church in 1994 and began a radical crusade against *Adoro*. Her trademark was preaching stark naked, at times staying in harsh sunlight. She set for herself the fearful task of ridding Alor-uno of *Adoro* and idol worship in three years. Most Alor people declared her crazy when she condemned the sacrifice of young men and women to *Adoro* because of the sins of their parents.

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Elders of the community who spoke to TELL, but who did not want to be quoted, said *Adoro* kills with visible trademarks. The victims swell up, some speak and confess the evil they did before death. "*They swell so much that they won't enter a coffin.*" Some just slump and die. It [Adoro] just chooses the type of death suitable for which person and for which offence. When it kills, no tears will be shed and no mourning for the dead. According to the villagers, it kills "*bad people*" only, fights evil, kills witches and wizards, thieves and those who poison people. It is also supposed to serve the cause of justice. If somebody takes your property or abuses you in any way, you take him to *Adoro*. Both parties are invited for investigation after which *Adoro* will be invoked.

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When the guilty person dies, all his property are forfeited to the deity. At death of the offender, *Adoro* requests for any of the late person's children as a sacrifice. That was how a bondage system began. Some brave people tried resistance in the past, "*but it led to problems*", one villager said in despair.

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Adoro is a female deity. Its history is as perplexing as its justice system. Although Igwe Ngwu Nwaeze, the 87-year-old traditional ruler of Alor-uno has been on the throne for 39 years, he could not exactly recall the history of *Adoro*. But oral history has it, that *Adoro* was the project of one man. In those days when life was about the survival of the fittest, the man needed a deity to protect him and his family. He invited a juju priestess (*dibia* in Igbo) from neighbouring Edem-Ani Community to install a deity for him. After installing *Adoro*, the priest told the new owner, that, to make the deity very powerful, he needed to make a human sacrifice. He did even more, by sacrificing the priestess who installed the shrine for him. This "*made the deity most powerful*".

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When relatives of the priestess of Edem Ani waited and she did not return, they got news that she had been killed, but enquiries at Alor-uno yielded negative results. Then they waged war against Alor-uno. But as it turned out, Alor-uno defeated Edem-Ani. The Alor-uno people believe that *Adoro* fought on their side. After the war, the whole community adopted *Adoro* as their god and protector. A branch of it was established at Alor-Agu, a neighbouring village. This branch is called Nwa-*Adoro* (child of *Adoro*) and is reputed to be more powerful than the main deity. For individual protection, each family installed a miniature *Adoro* in the compound. It was not long before the fame of *Adoro* spread to members of nearby communities who came to *Adoro* for protection. "*People come from everywhere, even Onitsha*", confirmed the Igwe.

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But *Adoro*'s protection comes with heavy burden. "*If it kills a man, it takes everything,*" said Clement Ugwuja Ogbode, the *Ede I* of Okutu, a neighbouring community. If the relatives want some of the property, they will have to buy them back from the priests of *Adoro*.

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But there are other prices. When they are not bloated, a victim of *Adoro* must not be buried in coffin. When the deity kills, TELL learnt, the relatives of the victim must close the door and report to the head office of *Adoro* at Alor-uno. The priests will then send a devotee to come and perform the rituals. Only the priests or a devotee can open the door to the room in which the dead person is laid. If, however, a family flouts instructions and goes ahead to bury the dead, *Adoro*, it is claimed, will go on rampage, killing members of the family one after the other, until they discover the cause of their calamity and retrace their steps. This they do by calling the devotees of *Adoro* to come, exhume the body, cut the head of the deceased and take it to Alor-uno where it is buried in the shrine.

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To prove the veracity of this claim, adherents told TELL of the story of a catechist allegedly killed by *Adoro* recently. He was buried by his family. Thereafter misfortune dogged their footsteps, until they confirmed that *Adoro* was the cause of death. The body was exhumed and the head cut off and taken away by the worshippers of *Adoro*.

When there are branches of the shrine, they bury the head at the nearest one. Such shrines exist at Alor-Agu, Okutu and other communities.

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At Okutu, TELL gathered that over 500 of their people are today hostages of Alor-uno because *Adoro* allegedly killed their parents. A lady, Chinasa Eneje from Anaigbu Okutu Village, is one such hostage who lives at Alor-uno. Her father was allegedly killed by *Adoro* and her stepfather forced her to follow *Adoro* to Alor so that the family could be free. Another lady, Alice Ugwu, was married to a man who allegedly abused her. She decided to end the marriage, but her husband called *Adoro* to his rescue. Alice's family gave her only two options: "*go back to your husband or leave our family*". She chose the latter. Today, she lives with her two children in a farm settlement called Okotobu. Matthew Eze, 32, did not have such guts. *Adoro* allegedly killed his mother and her father. His mum's head was said to have been taken to the deity but it still requested for the boy. His relatives forced him to relocate to Alor-uno. The story is still told of how he wept along the road from Okutu to Alor-uno, a distance of about 20 kilometers. Initially, he ran away, but the family tracked him down and handed him over to the shrine.

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Not all members of the community are adherents. Recently, late Igwe Clement Chukwu of Okpuje Community decided to abolish *Adoro* in his town. He outlawed it and ordered his worshippers to break the pots. He did not stop there, he proceeded to Alor-uno and withdrew women from his community living under the bondage of *Adoro*. But his campaign ended in frustrations. When he died, even though at old age, families of the returnees reportedly faced problems attributed to *Adoro*. Consequently, most of the returnees went back again to bondage at Alor-uno. Those of them who did not, reportedly became mad.

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TELL tracked down three of such people at Okpuje. Uche Nwoke, even in her variegated costume of a mad woman, still looks beautiful. Only two things interest her now: money and her security. As she quickly grabbed the money offered her, she continued to mumble in her vernacular, "*before they kill me! before they kill me!*". She acts scared and walks by the side of the road. Vehicles give her the jitters. She now lives in Okpuje Market. In her case, she had many children before she was given away to the shrine. Isaac Ogbode is another victim who walks the road today. He completed his secondary education before he was handed over. He is mad, they say, because he refused to stay in the system. When TELL visited Alor-uno on Wednesday, August 11, the *Igwe* denied any bestiality by the deity. He insisted that every stranger in his town was living there willingly and that there are no human heads in *Adoro* shrine. But Samuel Ogbu, elder brother of the prophetess who now heads her church, confirmed that when he stormed the shrine in 1995 they brought out human skulls and that today the case is still in court.

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Though Nwaeze denied the magazine's request to inspect the shrine until "*next time*" when the priests would be available, he said *Adoro* is good for the protection of his town. According to him, the deity was installed to protect the villagers from incessant inter-tribal wars. "*Our fathers came from Igala and needed something to protect their children. If you wanted to fight our people, you will just forget it*". According to him, now that there are no inter-tribal wars, the deity "*fights robbers and evil doers*". He said that despite the harassments from Ogbu's ministry, *Adoro* is very much alive. At one time, members of the ministry burnt the shrine but to people rebuilt it, and still believe in its potency, because it is impossible to kill a spirit.

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“People come from everywhere, even Onitsha”, Nwaeze said. “If a reported person refused to come, it is a sign of guilt and Adoro will face the person”. Traditionally, five priests, representing five families of Alor-uno, the eldest of whom will be the head, are in charge of the shrine. But today, only four are active. The fifth community, Ugbele Elu, opted out and embraced Christianity. The priests go to the shrine on only Oye and Alor market days. The *Alama*, head priest, it was gathered, visits the shrine only once in his lifetime – when he is installed. Thereafter, he administers the shrine from his home through the worshippers. But he keeps a miniature in his living room. When he dies, his colleagues visit his family with the same measure he metes out to outsiders. One of his children will be donated to the shrine.

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And the shrine always picks the best for itself. “If you give another child it will come back for the preferred person later”, an elder revealed. This happened to a family at Okutu where the wrong lady was offered, but later *Adoro* insisted on her younger sister. The women so released are kept by the priest. Any male member of the community who is interested pays bride price to the priest and can then take his pick. It is said that because of this, a kind of caste system is in place in Alor.

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Igwe Clement Ugwuja Ogbode, the *Ede I* of Okutu, confirmed the influence of *Adoro* in his town. He gave himself as an example. As a young man, he was recalled home from a good oil job with Shell to become the chief of Okutu. Fearing the future, his father made the town swear an oath before *Adoro* that they will not remove him as king until he dies, because of the sacrifice he made. He equally swore to an oath that you would not make the stool hereditary for his family after him. Twenty-four elders swore this oath on behalf of the community. Today the Okutu people have been forced to live with another chief they call “*government chief*”. But even at that, 22 out of the 24 people who swore the oath are dead. People claim *Adoro* killed them.

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It is not only in Alor that a god of ‘justice’ reigns. There are versions of it in many other towns. After burning *Adoro* Shrine at Alor-uno, Ogbu also went after these other shrines. But the people believe the deity defeated her, when she died on December 25, 1999, while on one such mission at Enugu-Ezike. [...]

(culled from ‘Tell’ magazine [Lagos], August 23, 2004)

2. Citizens of a Strange Class

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[...] At Nsukka, Enugu State, a devastating form of *osu* exists at a small town called Ero [Alor Uno]. Located within a shouting distance from the University of Nigeria, this community is today the most avoided in Enugu State. Many are the afflictions of Ero people, but the tucked away from public conscience and scrutiny. People from other places do not marry from there for fear of being contaminated. But the whole of Ero people are not necessarily ‘branded people’, “*only that these days, one cannot distinguish who’s who*”, explained an elder who did not want his name mentioned. His fear? Death!

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“If you speak against it, *Adoro* will kill you! Please don’t put me into trouble!” *Adoro* is the capricious deity that has made Ero people too hot to relate with. As the story goes, it

is a self-inflicted slavery of sorts. *Adoro* is a deity installed by the Ero people to protect them but it went beyond its call of duty and became a terror unto its people. The priests, perhaps in protest against their segregation, turned the heat on Ero people. Initially, it regulated internal law and order as it deterred theft and other social vices, but today, unscrupulous people invoke it even against their wives.

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According to another elder, if somebody steals your property, you can go to *Adoro* for justice. But *Adoro*'s justice is a queer one. It does not only kill the culprit and claim its corpse and property but also visits mayhem on the person's family. More terrifying is that one does not know when it is invoked. It's at the petitioner's whim and caprice. It continues to kill innocent people from the offender's lineage until the family discovers a pattern and goes to *Adoro*. Only last December, the story was told about a neighbouring town where a 30-year-old skull had to be dug out and taken to the shrine when it was divined that *Adoro* killed the man. Prior to this, strange deaths had become regular in the family.

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But *Adoro* also fights unjust wars. It does not believe in human rights. At present, in case rages in Okutu, a town, about 20 kilometers from Ero. A lady left her husband, a polygamist, on the grounds of considerable cruelty. Five years on, another suitor came for her hand in marriage. But the old husband refused to accept a refund of the bride price he paid which would traditionally free the woman to re-marry. He insists that he still had need of the young woman. The man threatened the woman's family that unless they handed his wife back to him, he would run to *Adoro* for justice. The family panicked and asked the lady to go back. But she said never!

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"*She's a stubborn girl*", an elder in the family told the magazine. "*She wants Adoro to kill all of us because of her.*" But she has rights, doesn't she? Moreover, won't *Adoro* judge who's guilty between the man and the woman? TELL reasoned with the elder. "*It doesn't matter, Adoro protects only the interests of the petitioner*", he explained, visibly afraid. When all entreaties failed to prevail on the woman to go back, the family sent a delegation with kolanuts and drinks to the former husband and dissociated themselves from the action of their daughter. "*That's the only way to save our family!*" he said. That is how deep the fear of *Adoro* is.

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Recently, the hope of redeeming Ero people from this deity failed. Ngozi Ufuma [Ogbu], a prophetess, settled in Ero with the mission to liberate the people from the bondage of [Adoro]. Her method was unorthodox. She prophesied naked. And preferred the intensity of the sun, a case of a disease being cured by a remedy worse than itself. But she drew people to her in thousands. She made waves. Bad people gave up their *juju* and joined her. Things were looking good for Ero. Nobody had posed a greater challenge to *Adoro*. Then she died! It was not a sudden death; her followers said she prophesied her death. But Ero people were not redeemed. *Adoro* is still in control. The priests guard their deity jealously because it gives them power and money. *Adoro* is *osu* caste backed by sinister spiritual power. [...]

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