

Like humans, gods too die. Gods are not immortal. They do not die as frequently as humans do but they die after all—in centuries. Through the ages, thousands of gods have died or rather been forgotten. A god dies when there is no worshipper because the relevance of any god is sustained by the number of devotees.

Ijere, a powerful and benevolent god of my ancestors, has joined the list of dead gods. I met Ijere when I was a teenager in the 1990s. Back then, there was a minority of Ijere adherents. Last month when I went to Onu Ijere, the god's shrine, and I was shocked to see that there was no more Ijere. The shrine was overtaken by a lush tree and grasses. An eerie atmosphere pervaded the habitat. The artefacts and the usual fresh animal blood had gone.

I come from Nsukka in eastern Nigeria. My village, Ikeagwu, is about seven kilometres away from the prestigious University of Nigeria, the first indigenous university in the country that was established when Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960. My hilly village gives a panoramic view of Nsukka town. When I was growing up in the village, a lot of educated locals and foreigners used to come to the village. I helped in building a party house—made of dry grass—in the mountain where they used to have parties on the weekends. Students of the university also used to organise their own party. As children, we were exposed to city-like lifestyle, yet our village retained its rural dignity.

Ijere was the original god of the progenitor of my clan, Ezema Ugwu. He migrated from a faraway community and settled in Isi-Iyiliakpu in Nsukka. He had five sons whose offerings made up the five sub-clans of Umu Ezema Ugwu, the children of the progenitor. My ancestor and his five sons faced prosecution from those who did not welcome their settlement. Ijere played a pivotal role in their survival because they went to wars in the name of Ijere and they conquered.

I do not know how they created or found Ijere but my clan was the custodian of the god. Other clans worshipped Ijere but the chief priest had to come from my clan. The chief priest was usually the oldest male but he could delegate to another energetic younger person to perform the sacrifices and ministered to the god.

In my ancestor's cosmology, Ijere was a messenger of Chi Ukwu, the almighty god that created the universe. They worshipped the almighty god through Ijere because humans could not possibly approach the universal god directly. Therefore, they prayed and asked Ijere to intercede for them. They prayed to Ijere for bountiful harvest and protection against their enemies. They asked Ijere for good health and happiness. They prayed to Ijere for plenty of children as well as pray for the survival of their children. The benevolent Ijere granted their prayers and they flourished.

In appreciation of answered prayers, my forefathers often made animal sacrifice to Ijere. They also made a sacrifice in anticipation that Ijere would grant their wishes. As a teenager, I witnessed the many sacrifices made to Ijere. The chief priest would pray to Ijere to accept the sacrifice before slitting the throat of a goat or a fowl. After the blood was emptied at the shrine, we were given the carcass. Right there at Ijere's mountain, we roasted and ate the meat with the chief priest and everyone around.

Eating meats that were sacrificed to Ijere was an unforgivable sin in my Christian home. My Christian parents forbade us from mingling with idol worshippers, let alone accepting meat from them. Ijere upholders were called idol worshippers, pagans and heathens. In catechism, we were told that we would go to hellfire by associating with pagans. Despite the threat of hellfire, childhood curiosity and stubbornness led me to witness the sacrifice made to Ijere. It was a secret I kept from my parents.



Ijere's shrine

PHOTO: COURTESY

# IJERE THE DEATH OF A GOD

*When the god of my ancestors in Nigeria can no longer compete with the god of the Christian missionaries*

CHIKEZIE OMEJE



When the Christian missionaries came, they told my grandfather's generation that Ijere was a small and evil god. My grandfather did not accept Christianity, likewise the majority of his peers. Unfortunately, he died before I was born. Christian proselytisation became highly successful during my father's generation and Ijere began to lose believers in drove. My parents were forced to adopt Christian names because their indigenous names were not holy enough for Catholic baptism. By my teenage years, very few people were worshipping Ijere. Right now, nobody worships Ijere and the god does not appear to exist.

I am not under the illusion that Ijere worship can be revived. The art of worshipping Ijere is gone forever. We have moved on with Christianity. But Ijere was part of my history and should not be forgotten. Whenever I mention the god, my people become hostile and think that I should not say anything about an evil and impotent god. This perception is an outcome of the demonisation of the god. Ijere was not evil anyway. The Christian missionaries maligned Ijere as an evil god in order to market their own god.

In a mad rush to embrace Christianity, we destroyed our heritage without preserving any of it. Tears welled up in my eyes when I walked around my village, looking to take pictures of heritage sites. There was not a single one

anymore. I could not see any artefact. While there are new mansions all over the village, the things that point to our genealogy have been destroyed.

I have often argued that recognising Ijere does not diminish the gods we worship now. It rather gives us a picture of how our culture evolved over time. It means we can take our children to the village and show them how our ancestors worshipped their god. We have inadvertently denied our children this opportunity and they may not forgive us when they realise our folly.

Regrettably, there is nothing left to salvage or preserve. The artefacts have either been looted or destroyed. My task now is to keep the memory of my encounter with Ijere and tell anybody who cares to listen or read that Ijere was not an evil god. Ijere answered the prayers of my ancestors and provided justice. As a teenager, I wanted to ask my dad why his priest would have all the foods and animals they presented for Thanksgiving in the church while there were a lot of hungry congregants. The chief priest of Ijere would never do that because we all ate the meat equally.

I have offered to become the chief priest of Ijere but I know this will not happen because the position is reserved for the oldest in my clan. Besides, Ijere is no longer alive. Anyway, I am impressed by the ethos of Ijere. While the priests of our modern religions buy private aeroplanes at the expense of their malnourished congregants, the priest of Ijere would never do that because any Thanksgiving for Ijere was a thanksgiving for all.

I am really fascinated by how gods are founded or created by a people. Through the ages, humans have created thousands of gods that they worshipped, many of whom survived centuries. But many of those gods could not withstand the competition from other gods. From childhood, I have wondered whether Ijere had the powers ascribed to it by my ancestors. I am often tempted to believe that the powers of the god were imaginary, just like others. There is no proof.

My interest in Ijere was the role the god played in the lives of my forefathers, whether real or imaginary. Religion still matters, at least it gives succour to the people. It gives people the meaning of life. Humans cannot really live without believing in something. For centuries, humans pitifully searched for powerful gods to worship. I am glad that my ancestors created or found theirs.

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## REFLECTIONS

It is not for nothing that Dhaka is called a “jadur shohor”—a magical city. No, I don't say this to exoticise a city from the Global South out of any unconscious colonial hangover. I believe in the city's “special” abilities that are crucial in defining the urban pathology and behaviour it generates.

To understand what is magical about Dhaka, we need to look beyond the hard city—the physical city of built forms. The city is never an out and out physical space, corresponding to a totally laid out plan, completely understandable and negotiable by reason and logic alone. It is somatic and semiotic at the same time. While it exists out there in all its



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# What is *dhaka* (hidden) in Dhaka?

corporality, the experience of the city remains subjective, giving rise to an ever present invisible soft city—an elastic network of imagination, dreams, fantasy, nostalgia coupled with memories of experiences lived and/or imagined. In fact, it is through the dialogue between the two that the city we live in is brought into being.

Interestingly, the name “Dhaka” is very suggestive in this regard. Beyond the disputed historical origin of the name, *dhaka* the Bengali word points to something secretive. Maybe, Dhaka's magic lies in what remains “*dhaka*” (hidden) in Dhaka.

A careful probe will show that Dhaka is beset by an inordinate love for an “elsewhere”—both in time (golden Bengal) and space (the village, and by extension the provincial city) with serious repercussions on the pattern of urban behaviour noticed here.

For example, Dhaka is conditioned by the memory of the village. Nurtured by nostalgia, it is a partly imagined space, unadulterated by the forces of modernity, and almost mythical in its idyllic qualities. The vision of the village is also directly connected to the myth of the classic villager. The archetypal ideal villager conditions the way the urbanite is perceived as secondary, falling short in the scale of morality and sensitivity. There are many ways in which city dwellers themselves play up this self-demonising imaginary in their daily life. For example, dwellers are often found to have preference for hiring house help straight from rural areas over those who are already in the city, thinking that the



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

city has a corrupting influence, making its residents more commercial, cunning and self-serving.

This logic of nostalgia, memory and fantasy in operation belies what the available urban discourse has groomed us to believe: the city we live in has an orderly existence and anything out of that order, such as the like of dream, fantasy, imagination is unimportant, if not completely redundant, to be considered as part of the experience we so fondly call “urban.” But these everyday acts give away the existence of an ever present imaginary, soft city that oozes out of the increasingly urbanising space at every opportunity.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), of all the city authorities, seems to have realised the implications of these associations and instead of negating their existence, it has operationalised the mindscape as an organising principle. Take for example the following DMP directive running digitally at different parts of Dhaka: “Do not drive at your whim criss-crossing the road like a fish in the water.” Another, directed to bus drivers, reads: “Do not even think of stopping here.” The injunctions in their phrasing and tone allude to a behaviour that results from an ease and comfort with unrestricted movements such as ones noticeable in the village, where most of the rickshaw, truck, bus drivers hail from. The effort in the injunctions seem to be to remind these people on the road of their changed circumstances, and jolt them back to the current spatial arrangement from the other space where they have mental belonging.

On a different note, Dhaka is a city that is hard to categorise. Efforts to do so abound though. The many ascriptions it has been bestowed—a mega city, the densest city, unlivable city, and recently one of the most polluted cities—are efforts to order the disorderly with familiar indexes, and categories. Dhaka poses a problem in that too as this unliveable city happens to be the capital of one of the happiest nations in the world. Only with a careful consideration of the soft city can one begin to understand the contradiction and its operational logic. Against order, reason leading to certainty, Dhaka's operational logic often rests on indeterminacy. Nothing can be fixed about the city. It is fluid by nature.

Dhaka is a place of improbabilities—both good and bad. Living here is like being on the last few minutes of a cricket match, where you keep your hopes up until the very last minute, for anything can happen and you never give up! It is the anticipation of some sort of intervention, something miraculous that is part of the everyday life in the city. People go about the city with a certainty that there is always something to be done. Nothing about Dhaka is conclusive. The more adept you are in handling this unpredictability, the more you are at one with Dhaka's magical spirit.

Nowhere is this indeterminacy captured better than this common yet the vaguest of requests one hears frequently, “*Ektoo deikhen please*” (“Please consider my case”). Even when you really cannot make any difference, you hear this

request for a free size favour under different circumstances from different people. More than the deliverables, what it seeks, it seems, is the comfort in the knowledge that some influence can be exerted upon to change the course of things. There is always something extra to be had above and beyond the existing ways of things and not necessarily when things go wrong. And God forbid if they do, you surely expect intervention of some sort (mobilising strong, weak and even remote ties you have) that can change things for the better. There is always some scope for action! Until the very last minute there is hope in knowing that the city has your back. I wonder if this has anything to do with the proverbial resilience residents of this unliveable city has inculcated to get by.

It is difficult to give up in this city on a very material level too.

You do not throw away anything in Dhaka! You repair almost everything. As long as there is sign of life in an object—it will find a use and utility for itself, be it your car, TV, flip-flops or water bottles. You waste nothing! The terminal stage is not really terminal. This surely gives your imagination a flight. If there is any magic in the city, it is here. If we are to play this magical power in our favour, we have to learn to maneuver the indeterminacy and not waste more energy in trying to disregard or tame the realm of the imaginary, the fantastic, and the magical. May the magical force of the city be with us.

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