Tribal Ritual, Leadership, and the Mortality Rate in Irigwe, Northern Nigeria¹

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The tribal area of the agricultural Irigwe is denuded of forest cover except for several sacred groves which most people seldom choose to enter. There are 25 tribal "sections." The priest elders of the two smallest sections tend ritual in the sacred groves and in other places which are believed to be of supreme importance to the tribe's well-being. The two largest but ritually unimportant sections formerly supplied most of the tribe's secular leadership for warfare and nowadays provide leaders for the British instituted tribal administration. The Irigwe justify the high regard in which the ritually powerful sections are held, and also explain their small size by their belief that the forces controlled by these sections, while vital to the tribe, are very dangerous and often kill those families who handle them. A medical survey, however, now offers a scientific "explanation" which traditionalist Irigwe elements reject: the sacred groves are infested with tsetse flies which transmit the parasites causing sleeping sickness.

IRIGWE IS A SEGMENTARY SOCIETY which lacks a traditional centralized political chieftaincy. Highest authority within the tribe is traditionally accorded to the priestly elders of several tribal subdivisions which are in charge of the ritual held to be of supreme importance to the well-being of the tribe as a whole. It is believed that the forces controlled by this ritual bring life to the tribe, but only at the cost of frequent death to members of those subdivisions of the tribe controlling the ritual. This paper attempts briefly, first, to summarize the Irigwe system of tribal control and correlate Irigwe beliefs concerning ritual involvement, authority, and illness; and, second, to assess these in the light of western medical knowledge about a form of sleeping sickness found in the area.

Living just above the western escarpment of the Jos Plateau, the Irigwe gain their subsistence primarily from a traditional system of hoe agriculture. Hunting and the preservation of the skulls of certain categories of "big game" remain a passionately pursued dry season activity of great social and religious significance. The actual quantity of game taken is very meager, amounting to considerably less than one pound of meat per person per annum when divided on a tribal basis. Thus, the importance of hunting to the subsistence economy, if any, is limited to possible reduction of crop destruction by wild animals. Prior to their pacification by the forceful intervention of British commanded troops in 1905, the Irigwe included the heads of neighboring enemy tribesmen in the category of "big game" to be preserved in shrine houses; but, unlike some of their neighboring enemies, they did not add enemy corpses to their meat supply.

¹ This article is a revision and expansion of a paper read at the 1967 American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings. The field research on which it is based, carried out between August 1963 and July 1965, was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

There are 25 agnatically based tribal subdivisions in Irigwe,² which are termed "sections," each with its own shrine house where the skulls of big game are preserved. Every shrine house is presided over by a senior man of the section's senior lineage. Through his role as principal intermediary between section members and a pantheon of nature and ancestral spirits, the shrine-house keeper maintains a position of supreme authority within the section, not only in religious but in many secular affairs. Although a person may take refuge in his maternal uncle's compound, or today he may move to the Christian Irigwe area, to the cities of Jos and Bukuru about 20 miles away, or to more distant urban centers, the shrine-keeper's mere threat of withholding his ritual support is generally sufficient to make a section member submit to his authority in almost any matter.³ The shrine-keeper himself, however, suffers from two sorts of stringent constraints upon his behavior and exercise of authority.

First, he has a particular ritual and authority role ascribed to him by the position his section occupies in the ritual and authority structure of the tribe, and he fears dire consequences for his section and all Irigwe if he fails to fulfill, or oversteps the limits of, these traditional responsibilities. Irigwe sections belong to one or the other of the so-called "Male" and "Female" tribal divisions. The Male and Female divisions contrast as to the nature of their ritual specializations. The Male division, with 17 sections, deals principally with dry season ritual covering such activities as completing the harvest, storage of crops, bush burning, hunting, and early planting. The Female division, with 7 sections,⁴ handles most of the rainy season ritual regulating transplanting of millet, cultivation of crops, and first fruits. One section, bringing the total to 25, cannot to my knowledge be clearly classified as either in the Male or the Female division. In addition, all sections are classified according to another pair of moiety-type divisions known as "Parent" and "Child," with 10 sections in the Parent division and 15 sections in the Child division. The River Ngell, running east and west, divides Irigwe approximately in half. Only sections belonging to the Parent division are found in present day Kwol District located south of the River Ngell, and all of the Child division sections are located north of the River in Miango District (see Fig. 1). Parent division sections, with few exceptions, claim originally to have immigrated from neighboring tribes, whereas most Child division sections say they split off from one or another Parent division section (note the arrows in Fig. 1). Parent division sections, while responsible for the greater portion of the annual ritual cycle, do not have the right

2 There are either 24 or 25 sections depending on the criteria used (see fn. 4).

3 As of 1965 no more than 5 or 6 percent of a total of approximately 17,000 Irigwe had been converted to Christianity or had emigrated permanently to urban centers.

4 Within the Female division, Rae (Red Earth) section (5 compounds) and Daro section (14 compounds) have combined in recent years for purposes of hunting and conducting the hunting-hero (*šūa*) ceremonials, and they also refrain now from abducting each other's wives for secondary marriages. In some contexts the Irigwe now speak of them as a single section. They still act independently, however, as regards the annual ritual cycle. Rae alone is in charge of the major rainy season ritual; and in this context Rae is regarded as a "Parent" section and Daro as a separate "Child" section. Thus, in this paper I am classifying them as separate sections.

FIG. 1. Chart of Irigwe sections, indicating the number of compounds per section.

to perform some relatively minor but still vital portions of the annual cycle which myth and tradition have relegated to one or another of the Child division sections. Whenever any part of the annual ritual cycle is mishandled, it is believed that calamity will follow—usually in the form of weather adverse to the appropriate seasonal activity—with disastrous results for the entire tribe. Thus, the conduct of every section shrine-keeper, especially in his role as ritual chief of his section, is very much the concern of every other section shrine-keeper in the tribe.⁵

The second kind of constraint upon the behavior and authority of the section shrine-keeper is his fear of illness and untimely death for himself if his actions displease the nature spirits and ancestors of his own section. Irigwe notions about disease are complex. A major factor in every individual's health is believed to be the favorable disposition of one's relatives and the spirits of the dead, particularly the spirits of one's agnates. The Irigwe believe that anger in the hearts of living agnates, or the vengeful spirit of a deceased relative, makes it difficult or impossible for a person to recover from injury or illness, even though a partial or primary cause for injury or illness is attributable to some other agent. In addition, the nature spirits frequenting the section shrines and sacred groves not only may bring tribe-wide natural disaster if their laws are violated but also are held generally to bring ill fortune and speedy death to those individuals who abuse them.

Upon the death of a section shrine-keeper the senior male of the senior-most lineage of the section has prior right to assume the office, which includes taking up residence in the shrine house. No one, however, is obliged to accept the position of section shrine-keeper against his will; often several successive heirs refuse the office before someone is found who feels sufficiently vigorous and self-confident to accept the position.

The two sections of the tribe with the greatest number of ritual prerogatives and responsibilities are the seniormost section of the Male division, Nuhwie, and the seniormost section of the Female division, Rae. These two sections not only regulate much of the ritual of the tribe as a whole but also effectively intermediate between other sections in cases of inter-section disputes. Each of these sections is also ever on guard against the other section's usurpation of tribe-wide supremacy.

Given their superior status in pan-tribal ritual, why did not the leaders of one or both of these seniormost sections emerge as political and administrative leaders for the entire tribe in pre-European times? The consensus of opinion in Irigwe is that they neither had nor needed any tribal chief in the old days except to help conduct the three-day annual pan-tribal hunt (*Zaraci*), where the shrine-keeper of the senior Male section, or more usually his appointed representative, exercised the principal directive authority. On all other hunts, however, matters were organized on a sectional basis, with two or more sections

⁵ Every Irigwe section is comprised of a number of extended family compounds, each surrounded by a euphorbia hedge. Most compounds have about 35 members each. The largest, however, has over 150 members, and the smallest only 3 members.

coordinating their hunts if their leaders so chose. Head-hunting raids against enemy tribes were similarly arranged so far as I can ascertain, except in the case of occasional vengeance raids requiring the recruitment and coordinated activity of a relatively large number of warriors. In such cases outstanding warriors of the most populous sections assumed dominant roles both in rallying warriors for raids and in serving as Irigwe representatives when truces were made with enemy tribal groups. The Irigwe believe that a man who is sick or injured will suffer a relapse and most likely die if visited or given first aid by someone who has slept with the same woman as he. This is of prime relevance in keeping hunting groups and formerly also warrior groups organized on a section basis, because people from different sections take each others' wives in secondary marriages, whereas incest and exogamy rules prohibit men from the same section from sharing the same woman's favors (Sangree 1969).

The British in 1905, provoked by continuing Irigwe raids against the neighboring Birom tribe which had already been brought under British control, launched a punitive expedition against the Irigwe, in which they burned the shrine houses of several of the larger Irigwe sections as well as many dwelling huts and granaries. The Irigwe, forewarned, had buried most of their grain stores and fled to the bush, thus suffering only minimally. The man whom the Irigwe elders sent forth to negotiate with the British after the raid was a respected hunter and warrior of Nadzie, the most populous Irigwe section. The Nadzie section has a junior position in the Parent division, with only a minor role in the tribal annual ritual cycle. The Irigwe subsequently accepted this Nadzie warrior's appointment by the British as their tribal chief, and under his leadership which lasted for 26 years they desisted once and for all from intertribal raiding and head-hunting. When this chief died in 1931, the British administrators, ever striving on the Jos Plateau to discover and place their authority behind the "traditional" tribal leaders, appointed a scion of Nuhwie, the seniormost Male section, to the chieftaincy. The Nuhwie section, although ritually the most powerful Male section, is small in numbers. A plague of locusts came soon after, and this was viewed by the Irigwe as evidence of the ancestral and nature spirits' disapproval. The new chief from Nuhwie resigned, and his successor, who was selected from the section (Nadzie) and family of the deceased prior chief, received the lasting support of both the ritual elders and the population at large.

Precisely the same pattern occurred with the selection of sub-chiefs for the portion of the tribe north of the River Ngell, called Miango today, which is populated principally by Child division sections. A respected warrior from Tahu, which was the most populous section but of junior status in the Child division and held little ritual power, was selected to deal with the British and was shortly thereafter appointed sub-chief by the British. In subsequent years British administrators made several abortive attempts to appoint a man from a ritually more senior section as sub-chief, but the post always reverted rather quickly to a scion of Tahu, the most populous but, in ritual matters, the minimally significant section.

The dangers of dealing with the world of spirits was a theme I heard again and again from the earliest weeks of my field work in Irigwe. Lists of old men who had become the shrine-keepers of their section only to die shortly thereafter, purportedly because they had bungled one or another ritual and had been killed by the spirits, were recited as evidence. Youths of senior lineages of each section start their apprenticeships under their respective shrine-keepers early in their teens so they will be well trained and will not fear to assume office if they live long enough to fall heir to the position of shrine-keeper. Each section feels obliged to guard the esoterica of its ritual from outsiders, indeed from all except those men and youths within their own section who are serving as ritual apprentices, fearing death to the ritual leaders and/or natural disaster to the tribe if outsiders should learn the secret lore.

And finally, though people were too circumspect to discuss the topic publicly, it was widely recognized that the seniormost Male and seniormost Female sections which controlled and performed the bulk of ritual for the entire tribe had not grown in numbers as much over the generations as had many other sections. Indeed, today each of these sections has less than one-sixth the population of the largest Irigwe section, and they are considerably below the average section size. I thought the small size of these two sections might be due primarily to segmentation and the accretion of dissident lineages to other sections, but I was unable to find any evidence that this happened more frequently with these two sections than with most other sections.

About three months before I concluded my research in Irigwe, I had the opportunity to visit the government archives in Kaduna and found a mimeographed report on a Trypanosomiasis survey conducted in Irigwe in 1932 by a government medical officer (Moir 1933). A remarkably thorough job, it included a complete census of the tribe, which then numbered around 13,000, followed by a medical examination of over 99 percent of the population for sleeping sickness. The diagnosed cases were reported as being relatively benign, probably seldom lethal in themselves, with most sufferers complaining only of an occasional headache.⁶ It was found that the incidence of sleeping sickness was over 12 percent for males living south of the River Ngell in Kwol District, less than 6 percent for males living north of the River Ngell in Miango District, and under 2 percent for females throughout both Districts of the tribe. The report noted that these differences could probably be accounted for in part by women's exclusion from the sacred groves, which happened to be the principal areas of tsetse fly infestation, and by the greater involvement of men south of the River Ngell in tribal ritual held in these groves. The report concluded by asserting that sleeping sickness was directly and indirectly causing a reduction

6 "... the most likely cause of sleeping sickness in the Jos neighborhood would be *Trypanosoma Gambiense*. The most constant and distinct symptom during the early stages of this disease is enlargement of the lymph nodes which are especially prominent in the neck. The individual may also have persistent headache. Although the disease may heal spontaneously some authorities believe that it is usually fatal unless treatment is instituted" (personal communication, 1969, from Harry L. Segal, M. D., University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry).

of population in Kwol District, whereas in Miango District it was having no such effect.

The medical officer did not collect the figures for the incidence of sleeping sickness by section membership. It therefore remains unknown how closely the incidence rate of sleeping sickness for each section correlated with its relative involvement in the tribal ritual held in sacred groves.

During my last weeks of research in Irigwe I found a number of people who vaguely remembered the survey, and several who recalled that many people south of the River Ngell had been treated for sleeping sickness at Government and mission dispensaries. Also I learned that the chief of Kwol District, a member of the Nadzie section, had cut down most of the forest under his section's control, starting in the middle 1930's, in spite of the protests of elders from his own and other sections; all my informants insisted, however, that he had done this simply to sell the timber and pocket the money. It is noteworthy that none of the principal ritual groves of the tribe, all of which are under the control of ritually more senior sections, have been cut down.

I had some success in explaining the possible long term effect of sleeping sickness to younger Irigwe. One younger mission-educated man from south of the River Ngell, who had not heard of the 1932 survey until I discussed it with him, responded by saying, "Oh, that's why they are beating us!" He was referring to the fact that Miango District, the portion of the tribe north of the Ngell, which with one exception consists of ritually junior sections, has increased markedly in population with each census for the last 40 years, while the population of Kwol District south of the Ngell has remained more or less static, even though there has been little migration in or out of either District.

I doubt if I fared as well as the British had in the 1930's in my efforts to explain the sleeping sickness situation to Irigwe ritual elders. I remember all too well discoursing in my limited Irigwe on how sleeping sickness contracted by young apprentices in the ritual groves might through the years have checked the growth in numbers of the ritually most active senior sections; then, feeling beaten by my listeners' skeptical gazes I would find myself ending up by agreeing with my discussants that "There is indeed a lot more to health, illness, and large families than flies in the woods." The Irigwe elders agreed that ritually senior sections had not been increasing in numbers, whereas junior sections had; but their basic premise as to the reason for this phenomenon made my explanation seem simple-minded and amoral, if not immoral. The senior section elders on many public occasions proclaimed their pleasure with the growth in population of junior ritually minor sections such as Nadzie in Kwol District, and all of the Child division sections in Miango District. "We are glad they are increasing, for they are our children," they would say. They asserted that if their own sections were not so populous it was because foolish people break the ritual law, and that it is always the parents (that is, ritually senior sections) which suffer the most on such occasions. Also, Irigwe elders pointed out that larger sections caught more game, the heads of which were deposited in the section shrines, than did small sections; and since section spirits like to have

many heads brought to their shrines, the sections with the largest game bags obtained the most help from their section spirits in prospering and increasing in numbers.

The reason that the largest but ritually minor sections should hold most of the administrative leadership roles today as in former times was deemed a matter of common sense by the Irigwe elders. Which sections, they asked, could better represent the Irigwe tribe as a whole, both today in dealing with the central government in Jos and formerly in dealing with enemy and alien tribes, than the leaders of large sections with relatively great reserves of manpower at their immediate disposal for clearing roads or paths nowadays and for dealing with the enemy in battle in former times? Also, they asked, what kind of man makes a good administrative chief today and made a good war chief formerly? Irigwe elders assured me on a number of occasions that the attributes which an effective ritual leader must possess, such as a sober and exemplary personal life, an abhorrence of witchcraft and of alien doctrines, are in direct contrast to those an administrative chief may find useful today and those a war chief needed in former generations when dealing with an enemy. Indeed, in leadership where sacred rituals are not involved it was pointed out that being a witch (*krotu*), and even professing foreign doctrines such as Christianity, may be very helpful.

The notion that ritual power is dangerous to the ritual practitioner, especially if misused, is widespread throughout the world. Less widespread is the belief that sacred ritual power has a tendency to weaken and sometimes kill its practitioners even if correctly used. Here the Irigwe would seem to have developed a belief more or less directly in response to their empirically correct perception that sections of their tribe most heavily involved in ritual are in a moribund state as compared to those not so involved. The Irigwe view that secular leadership is appropriate for ritually subordinate sections may also have arisen from their awareness that those sections in fact produced by far the greatest number of warriors and war leaders.

Finally, I would like to reassert a view with which I know most Irigwe elders do not agree and which certainly is by no means proved. I think the probabilities are high that the tsetse fly has played a significant role in the "separation of Church and State," that is, in the separation of Irigwe sacred and secular leadership and also, indirectly, in the development of the Irigwe ideology of ritual power and disease which supports this separation.

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