

African Igbo and Indian Madiga: A Study of Parallels in Culture and Tradition

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Culture defines one's life vice-versa. Several Nations were under European colonial rule for centuries. The native cultures of the colonial counties were subordinated, marginalized and even marred beyond trace. Blatant denial of freedom to the native people took place. They were deprived of their own country's wealth. Their tongue was oppressed and their voice was suppressed. It was a strange but painful experience that left them disappointed and helpless. This kind of experience of the colonized all over the world was more or less the same. Incidentally, African countries and India were under Western colonial governance were utterly helpless in their claim over their native cultural identity. It is an undeniable historical fact. Every community within a nation has its own culture and tradition that characterizes its way of life, and its people are proud of their cultural regimes and traditional systems.

The western cultural onslaught totally disturbed the peaceful coexistence of the African Igbo people. The entire colonial system was responsible for disintegration among the Africans. In ancient India, different tribes existed in units or groups with cultural autonomy living their horizontal life. "They were the indigenous people of the region descended from Neolithic settlers who have been incorporated into the caste system as general manual labourers for agriculture and leather working" (Web 1) who enriched the Harappa civilization. Since there was no caste system, equality among the tribes became possible. The social fabric of the tribal groups was marred with the advent of the Aryans into India. The Varna system which originated from the Aryan life became a curse for the Indian Dalits because they (Black Untouchables) were/have been socially and culturally victimized more by the Hindu caste system than by the British Colonial Rule. The marginalized groups in general and Dalits in particular had a horrendous experience which continued down to the present with less intensity, and in different forms.

In Andhra Pradesh, as is the case in point, one would come to know that the Dalit community has several sub-castes with the social hierarchy with a replica of Varna system. One such significant sub-caste is Madiga that constitutes the highest population among other fifty-eight sub-castes in the State alone. The Madiga community is spread across the northern and southern states of India in different nomenclatures. In this backdrop, my paper focuses on the cultural past of

Madigasandits present as well. It is because the past is obviously reflected in the present. In their self-assertion for a dignified social life, Madigas draw their caste myth called *Jambapurana* that delineates the genesis of the Madiga caste and cultural past of the Madigas. Their contribution to the society through their art and other essential services is significant. Madigas are not the tribal people like Igbos in Nigeria. Though they were the sons of the Indian soil, they were pushed to the fringes of the village settlements and thus they were excluded from the mainstream social life. In fact, they were enslaved by the Aryans who invaded India and disturbed their peaceful existence.

History speaks of India and Africa as one land mass until it was separated by the ocean. "The Dalits were the original inhabitants of India and resemble the African in physical features" (Rajasekhar 43). In the light of this fact, some scholars like V.T. Rajasekhar termed the natives of the country as India's black untouchables. The historical fact is that the conquered natives of India, who were compelled to serve the Aryan order, were thrown on the village peripheries, while others who refused to serve the Aryans fled to the forests and hills only to become tribals with no fixed settlements. A study of their historical evolution shows that the Scheduled Castes and Tribes had a common ancestral lineage before the advent of the Aryans. The life of the rural Madigas who are an integral part of Dalit community in Andhra Pradesh is characterized by their caste-based traditional life.

Apart from the historical life in India, *Jambapurana* comes up with a different version about the Madigas. It gives a good speculation on the origin of Madiga that "when a cow of plenty dies on the top of the mountain called Sanjeevani, there is none to bring down its carcass. Then the gods call *JambavamuniMahadigira*. With the passage of time Maha-Adiga became Madiga, which would mean the man descending from above". Madigas are said have been born to Jambavamuni, the Madiga ancestral god, from his first wife. On the origin of Madigas, *Jamba Puranam* narrates as to how all the gods desired to eat the dead cow of plenty and decided not to waste any part of it. On their request Jambavamuni with his nails chopped the flesh into pieces. He directs his son, Chennaiah, to cook it. While cooking, the boy put back into pot the solid piece of flesh from the floor. His act enrages the gods and they cursed the boy that all his heirs would live on dead carrion and become untouchables who were confined only to the fringes of the actual villages.

Igbo and Madiga are the two different terms in social and cultural context. The Igbos are the tribal people lived in eastern Nigerian while the Madiga are untouchables who are widely spread across India with nomenclatures. 'Igbo' is a clan that characterizes pluralistic tribal life of the African "natives". Chamers in the North, Mangs in Maharashtra, Madigas in Karnataka and Chakkiliyas in Tamil Nadu are one and the same in their cultural and social life in India. They are traditionally associated with skinning and leather work to eke out their livelihood. "Like all caste in India, today they generally believe in prestigious origins. One such theory speculates that Madiga

is derived from Sanskrit word Maha-Adiga which can be loosely translated as “great and olders” (Web 2).

My paper juxtaposes and contrasts the cultural and traditional ways of both the Igbos and the Madigas in their respective societies within a comparative framework cutting across time and space. In fact, Igbo people are not untouchables in their land as Madigas are in Indian Society. They ruled their land themselves unlike in India where Dalits have been the subjects not the rulers. Even in India, tribals who have nomadic experience are not untouchables like Dalits. Their life has roots in the primeval co-existence of the aboriginals. Though Dalits and tribals had their common lineage in ancient times, their social life became different due to India caste system. Both India and Africa underwent colonial experience. Christian missionaries actively operated in both countries. Conversion activities went on in full swing in the established colonies and many educational institutions came up for the colonized. The British rule much impacted the Coastal Andhra area of the Madras Presidency while the Hyderabad State, which was under the Nizam’s rule, was not blessed with colonial education. Colonial experiences were similar in both the countries.

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a fine delineation of the ancestral customs and traditions of the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria of the 1890s. The novel seeks to discover the cultural ethos of the Igbo society. The way the Igbos worship Ala or Ali, the Earth goddess is akin to that of Madigas who worship Bhoolaxmi, the local goddess. This provides a perfect similarity in terms of traditional belief among the lower classes. Worship of the local goddess who blesses the farming community with flourishing crops forges a kind of harmonious relationship among the lower castes. Similarly, the social customs among the Igbos would reflect a kind of social harmony. “The social harmony of the village, Umuofia, is evoked vividly through Achebe’s presentation of the customs and traditions extending from the birth, through marriage to death, and of the educational, religious, and hierarchical systems” (Varalaxmi 58-59). Achebe’s Okonkwo, the protagonist in the novel, represents the pre-colonial Nigerian of inflexible customs and traditional dignity. Apart from Bhoolaxmi, Madigas worship their caste deities like Balamma, Mashamma, Pochamma, Yellamma and Poleramma who are different from Hindu gods like Laxmi, Saraswathi, Parvati, Durgamatha and Kalika Devi. These deities are worshipped during festivals and harvests. They firmly believe that the caste goddesses protect them from diseases like Cholera and Smallpox.

“Rituals and ceremonies of the Madigas mirror the space that women occupied in the spiritual world. Dalits had recognized the feminine dimension of the deity and it is evident in the fact that in most of the cases deity manifested Her (Him) self in the form of feminine” (Web 4).

Madigas are hard-working people who have been cleansing the dirt of Hindu society for centuries. The Igbos are also hard-working people and Okonkwo stands as one of the best examples for hardwork. Owning barns with yams is an indication of

prosperity and the merit of the head of the family. The hard work they put in on their own farms yields them prosperity for a joyful life. The Madiga majorities do not own lands and so most of them either work as agricultural labourers or are confined to their traditional professions. Apart from animal sacrifice to the goddesses, other ritualistic performances take place in both the societies. Achebe does not hesitate to point out the flaws that are also part for the African Igbo legacy. For instance, abandoning of the twins and the sick in the Evil Forest as such people were considered an abomination to the Earth, and ritual human sacrifices to appease the deities show the cruelty of traditional customs. Ikemefuna's brutal killing to appease the Oracle is an example of this kind. Such rituals can be placed among the unpleasant features of the community. In the Madiga cultural world, one would expect such a practice neither in the past nor in the present.

As far as their marriage system is concerned, Madigas practise endogamy. The endogamous consciousness is linked to the Madiga identity. In modern world, inter caste marriages too take place as exceptional cases. For them bigamy or polygamy would attract punishment as they are governed by the Hindu law. For Igbos no punishment is awarded for such practices by they chose endogamy as they feel that "Exogamy creates a system of affiliations and communications larger than that of the autonomous village" (Carroll 15). In societal aspects of marriage, both the Igbos and the Madigas seem to have a similar traditional concept of protecting their community.

As far as their religion is concerned, central to the Igbos' three modes of belief is veneration of Chukwu, the supreme deity in traditional Igbo mythology. The belief of the Igbos is that Chukwu created the world. The Igbos worshipped their ancestors and they had the cult of personal god or *chi*. Chukwu is the supreme god without shrine or priest. The sky is his abode and he is the god of creation and fertility like Brahma, the creator. "Igbo mythology seems to emphasize the principle of dualism as against monism or absolutism" (Reddy 25). *Chi* is a generic word for god; it is a sort of personal god. It is part of Chukwu. The Igbo personal spirit reminds me of the Indian concept of Karma. *Chikwu* and *chi* can also be taken in the Indian religious context as *Athma* (soul) and *Paramathma* (universal soul). It is the firm belief of Hindus that the individual *Athma* would ultimately merge into *Paramathma*, the supreme of God. Every Hindu including the Dalit has been indoctrinated in the karma theory for centuries. Madigas who have not converted to the other faith, the majority, are still considered part of Hindu religion. They share the religious belief of the Hindus. So they have become firm believers of the Karma theory.

In the world of Madiga, Dappu plays a significant role. It is also called *Tappeta* (drum) in some regions of Andhra Pradesh. Covering the wooden or metal round frame with the half-tanned hide of a buffalo calf in the making of Dappu requires trained techniques. "The drumbeat is so powerful that even people at a distance of two miles can be sensitized into rhythmic steps. It will produce exactly the same beat the latest musical instrument Jaaz drums give" (Web2). Commenting on the Dalit-Bahujan contribution to society, KanchaIlaiah' says:

Dalit-Bahujan masses have enormous technological and engineering skill that are not divorced from their labour. One who lifts dead cattle also knows the science of skinning it. They themselves know how to process the skin and make chappals, shoes, or ropes. All these tasks involve physical labour.

This is true in asense but skinning dead cattle and tanning are done only by the Madigas, not by all Dalit-Bahujans. Re-moving dead cattle and skinning are considered defiling and contaminating tasks. Traditional occupations such as skinning, tapping toddy, making pots and so on are demarcated caste lines. The tapping of toddy and making of pots are given a different social tag from skinning dead cattle; there is also a hierarchy even in traditional caste based professions as seen with different castes. Every Madiga does not necessarily participate in traditional occupation like drumming. Only interested youth participate in that art. Several Madigas are farm labourers. With the changing social circumstances, the affluent Madigas are associated with politics and other spheres of human life.

Migration of the Madiga youth on a large scale due to unavailability of labour work has created a big vacuum of the drumming in the world of art. Drum beating is a profession for Madigas but for the Igbos, it is a tradition. Madigas skilled in drum beating eek out their livelihood during marriages and festivals. So it is an invariably linked to it their livelihood while the Igbos do the drumming as par their custom. In the Igbo community Kola is broken and wine is offered to the vising guests. Guests customarily bring with them a goatskin to sit on. Madigas too offer either toddy or locally made arrack to the guests who visit them.

The customary settlement of bride-price takes place in both the societies -- Igbos and Madigas. 'Bride-price', system is still in practice in villages of the Telangana region. Unlike dowry, "bride-price" is given to brides before marriage. The rural marginalized societies still adopt the custom of paying Kanyasulkam (bride-price) to the bride's family. The majority illiterate rural Madigas and other sections of society, who are below the poverty line are still practising this system. Only a few affluent lower castes tend to imitate the upper castes in practising the dowry system. Here, the economic conditions of the individuals of a community matters but not caste. 'Oli' is the other term used in some districts of the Telangana state forKanyasulkam. This tradition id followed during martial engagements between the parties. This practice is analogous to Uri that existed in the Igbo society. I conclude that Uri and Oli are two different names for the same social purpose and practice.

In the context of language, Telugu is the principal language spoken by all sections of people in both the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. But there exists a glaring dialectal variation in the Telugu states. The dialect of the Madigas is not different from that of other Dalit sub-castes and upper-caste

Hindus as well within the village, but profession-related terms spoken by them are certainly different. Though all the Madigas speak different dialects in different regions, their social and cultural practices are similar, which is true of the Igbo community too. "Cultural uniformity is an important dimension that exists in the Igbo community. They are a single people speaking a number of related dialects with many social features in common" (Carroll, 13).

Despite the cultural divergences between two different societies – Igbo and Madiga – some similarities are manifest in their traditional life. Of course, social and cultural circumstances are certainly different, but comparison can be drawn between some aspects of marriage customs of the two societies. In fact, Igbo society is not a segregated society like the Dalits. Fundamentally, majority people of both the societies depend upon agricultural labour.

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