



THE INTERPLAY OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY IN SHAPING MODERN IGBO VALUES

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Abstract

Prior to western contact, life among the Igbos was moderated by traditional values. These values were tied to the culture and religion of the people. The advent of westernization and Christianity brought in a new set of values anchored on the teaching of the Christian faith. As expected, cultural clash became inevitable. Though religion is a crucial aspect of the social and spiritual life of human society, it has brought great hope as well as grief arising from religious conflicts. In this paper, attempt is made to examine the place of religion in Igbo society. The paper traces the interplay of traditional religion and Christianity in the development and shaping of the modern Igbo society. The paper is of the view that the ability of both the Igbo culture and Christianity to adapt and synthesize elements of its values was at the centre of the social harmony, and success of the Igbo people in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Values, Igbo.

Introduction

Religion remains one of the oldest institutions on earth. It is definitely as old as man. Its effect and influences upon the lives of men and the society is unquantifiable. There are hardly a people without one form of religion or the other. And this is the reason why it can be safely argued that the desire and hunger to worship a supreme being is innate in man. There is an inner void in man which can only be assuaged by religion and this places religion as a critical need for all humanity. A realization of this may be the factor responsible for the different religious worship that adorn the earth. B. N. Okafor (2001) notes that man's attempt to throw away the idea of religion has not only robbed him of true happiness that he searches for but has contributed to decayed morality in the society of mankind.

In Igboland, religion occupies a central place in the culture and life of the people. The people and their daily activity revolve around their religious belief. There is hardly a distinction between the material and spiritual. Such a distinction is alien in Igbo culture and worldview. In this paper we will examine the place and role of religion in Igbo Society.



Religion and Society in Pre-Colonial Igboland

The religion of the Igbo people in the pre-colonial days was indigenous or traditional to the Igbo society. It has no known origin or founder. The doctrines or creed were oral and as such there were no written literature. Though it is oral, its authenticity was highly accepted by the people. Generally, the Igbo people believe there is God and deities as well, who controls the affairs of men on earth. And this Supreme Being placed them to settle in Igboland. Archaeological studies points to the fact that the Igbo people have occupies their present location for thousands of years. However, the origin of the Igbo race is still a contentious issue among scholars of Igbo studies.

Since everything including man was created by God, the Igbo's see their world as God's society. And as such every principle that is at work on earth operates at his mercy. It also follows that the human society must operate in recognition of the fact that it has an owner or a supreme ruler for which every other ruler is holding his position or office in trust.

As a result of this understanding and belief, the people and their society are heavily dependent on spiritual powers for everything. For every event and occurrence in their society, they see an invisible hand at work. This explains the predominance of rituals and supplications as a way of life of the people. Thus, there is hardly an event which was not viewed as spiritual. Events like marriage, birth, death, politics or governance, farming and harvest were all built around religious ceremonies. The pre-colonial Igbo society was so much permeated by religion and one can confidently say that in absence of a strong force, religion was the major string that held the people and their society together. This was expressed by Obierika in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* when he said: "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us. Whiteman is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe, 1958). This statement was a clear articulation of the role and place of religion in Igbo socio-political life. It clearly shows that religion is potent force that shapes the thought and behaviour of people. Its influence in the society is unquantifiable.

The Igbo's usually refer to God as 'Chukwu'. This literally means 'Chi-ukwu'. Chi means spirit while ukwu, means great. In the perception of the people, God is great and indeed is the greatest spirit. The Igbo people clearly recognize that no human is spirit and every mortal is subject to the spiritual and is created by the spiritual. Thus they refer to God as Chineke. God that creates. It is also popularly believed among the Igbo's that the creator is also the allotter of portions and gifts. This is the reason for such names as Chijioke. The



same Chukwu is the owner and giver of life. This is the reason why such name as Chijindu is popular among the Igbo's. This may explain why the Igbo people do not bow down to greet a human being. The people had a clear understanding, that only a spirit should receive worship. Though they respect elders, and greatly respect age, there is clear distinction of the mortal from the immortal in Igbo thought.

However, some communities use the term 'Obasi bi n'elu', as a reference to God. This may have had its origin from among the Ibibio's that use the word 'Abasi ibom' as the name of God. But whichever concept a community used or uses, the understanding and the implication remains the same. The interpretation is 'God who lives above the earth' (Omosede & Adelumo, 1979).

The reference to God as Chukwu or Chi-ukwu is because the traditional Igbo people believed that apart from God, there are other spirits of less influence and power. In fact, every man has his chi or spirit. This spirit is assumed to be the person's companion throughout life here on earth. As such, these spirits from time to time must receive sacrifice and appeasement so as to make one's way prosperous. It is believed that if one's chi is angry with him, the door to every fortune, success and even sound health is closed. The destiny of a person's life here on earth is only known by his chi.

The Specific Role of Traditional Religion in Igbo Society

Religion was an active force in the maintenance of law and order in traditional Igbo society. People were held in check by the fact that there exists myriad of spirits apart from God, whose prying eyes were moving all over the universe. Thus, the people believe that these spirits are the only ones who see in secret. Thus they had an understanding that their daily life and activities are monitored by God and his spiritual agents. As a result of this, the resort to priests and diviners, referred to as 'dibia afa', was common among the people. The dibia afa, usually finds out the mind of God or the ancestors for the people. He usually recommends appropriate sacrifices if the gods or the ancestors were offended.

When men bear authority in Igboland, they did so in the full consciousness that they are human instruments whose actions must be judged by the owner of the universe. They rule with fear based on the understanding that they are Gods delegates administering the people for Him. E.G. Parinder (1949), notes that in many parts of Africa, the king or chief is regarded with religious awe, and he links his people to the ancestors, to the divinities and finally to the supreme diety. In administering the community, the priests also played important roles. They stood between the people and the gods, the ancestors, and to restore relationship with them whenever it is broken through sacrifice.



In the maintenance of law and order masquerade were employed in many parts of Igboland to serve as the police force. It was used to recover debts, fines and at the same time played other security roles as the community deemed fit. Since the masquerade was supposed to be a spirit, law enforcement is made faceless and removes the risk of picking offence with a human being when one is punished. This directly agrees with the English symbol of justice depicted by a blindfolded woman with a scale in her hand. Even if you know the man behind the mask, it was an abomination to reveal or mention the identity. The masquerade institution was a cult and its operation was secret to the uninitiated, and women. Though this institution played significant role in the maintenance of law and other, it was equally used to intimidate and abuse the rights of the people, especially the uninitiated and women. When a masquerade abuses the right of the initiated, the case was usually handled in-house within the cult.

The entire Igbo worldview which includes her religion, culture philosophy and entire pattern of life is encapsulated in Omenala or Omenani. Omenala literally means that which obtains in the land or community and refers to what accords with the customs and traditions of the Igbo people (Onwu, 2009). The Omenala was jealously guarded by the people and since every aspect of it was tied to the people's religion, it gave it a divine authority which protected it from incessant abuse. E. N. Onwu citing T.U. Nwala notes that Igbo philosophy is the philosophy of omenala, which refer to the spirit, the underlying principle or idea behind a particular custom/act. Omenala was perceived as sacrosanct and its violation was met with severe sanctions. It was established by the ancestors and handed down to the living to guard and enforce. And since the people believed that the spirit of the ancestors were living and hovering around the earth, both to bless and punish, no one was quick to disobey any aspect of the omenala. Again to flout them amounted to insulting the spirit of one's parents who have died. This arrangement and understanding was the key factor in preserving Igbo culture and way of life.

On a general note the Igbo's are a deeply religious people. Atheism was unknown in Igbo culture. (J.S. Mbiti, 1969: 1) summarized the religious attitude of the Igbo's and African when he noted, that Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities of both traditional and modern life.

The critical place and role of religion in traditional Igbo society is unquantifiable. Religion is inseparable from the life and culture of the people. Therefore, it is unlike western



societies, which make a distinction between private and public life, and often classify religion as part of the private life of citizens. In Igboland, the people and their religion are one. And the religion is the religion of the community and not that of an individual member. Religion so much controls Igbo society to the extent of proscribing what members of the community must not eat and even prescribing when certain crops will be eaten. For instance, certain meats like python are proscribed till date in some communities in Anambra State. In almost all parts of Igboland yam is only eaten, when the community has observed the 'ahiajioku' ritual and festival. Again, there are still dedicated forests where people are prohibited from fetching firewood, hunting and farming on religious grounds. There are also certain rivers where fishing, bathing or washing are not allowed. These dos and don'ts are religiously observed by the community.

Christianity in Igboland

The Igbo people as noted earlier were a highly religious people before the advent of Christianity. The people already possessed a deep rooted belief in the supernatural, good and evil, life after death and reward for good and punishment for evil. These beliefs were already firmly rooted in the people's psyche and worldview. This was one of the contributory factors that made the work of the missionaries easier. E.N. Onwu (2009) quoting Major G. Leonard writes that the people are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and a deeply religious people, of whom it can be said that they dress religiously and sin religiously. That is to say that the totality of the people's life was moderated by their religious beliefs and observance.

The C.M.S. otherwise known as the Anglican Church was the first Christian denomination in Igboland. They established their mission in Onitsha on July 27, 1857. The church missionary team led by Samuel Ajai Crowther entered into an agreement or understanding with Obi Akazua, and this paved the way for the evangelization of the city. Onitsha was perceived by the Anglicans to be the gateway to Igboland. Other mission groups arrived later, with the Roman Catholic Church (R.C.M.) also starting its missionary activity at Onitsha in 1885. The Methodist Church in 1892 and subsequently, the Presbyterian mission and Qua Iboia mission among others. The missionary surge into Igboland was like an invasion. While the Church Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Church pushed into the interior – Awka, Owerri, Nnewi, from Onitsha, the Scottish missionaries moved from the riverine area of the Cross River into Itu and Bende. The Qua Ibo mission moved in through the Qua Ibo River and set up its headquarters at Etinam. The Methodist established their most prominent base at Uzuakoli. Smaller denominations like the Brethren, Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's witness, entered the mission field in Igboland much later. Competition for control and areas of influence in the field resulted in rivalry among the mission groups. To avoid the competition turning bitter, and for effectively



evangelization of Igboland, mission conferences were held in 1911, 1917, and 1926. These conferences produced a “gentleman’s Agreement” which zoned the land.

However, in some parts of Igboland, the missionaries were fiercely resisted. For instance, in 1901-02, the British troops carried out the Aro expedition which destroyed the long juju of Arochukwu. In this operation the steamers of the Presbyterian mission took an active part, while Dr. Rattay, one of its medical missionaries, was chaplain and medical officer to the troops. Immediately after the expedition, Dr. T.B. Adams an official attached to the army, began preaching, followed a few weeks later by James Johnson and at the end of the year by the intrepid ‘queen of Okoyong’ Mary Slessor (Ayandele, 1966). The defeat of the long juju was significant in opening up Igboland to missionary activity. The juju had hitherto held a strong religious and political influence in Igboland and the Aro’s on their part were vehement in their opposition to British rule and Christianity.

The Igbo’s across the Niger at Asaba also had it rough at the hand of the British as they resisted the influence of Christianity on the social and political life of their community, in 1893, when Egbosha, a minor became king of Isselu-uku, the female regent ruling on his behalf invited the missionaries to establish posts in the town in spite of opposition by all the other chiefs. When the king came of age, he refused to perform ceremonies which he felt was not in agreement with his Christian faith. The slaves, emboldened by Christian teachings equally declared themselves free. This led to the formation of a secret organization known as Ekumeku (Ayandele, 1966). The organization spread rapidly to Ibusa, Okpanan, Iselle-uku etc. and began to attack missions’ establishments. King Egbosha got in contact with the Royal Niger Company who dispatched troops led by Major Festing, a Roman Catholic. The force quickly routed the Ekumeku and got the local chiefs to offer to protect the missionaries and its establishments.

Ayandele (1966), writes that in statistical terms and in the desire to appropriate all the material and social opportunities that missionary enterprise could afford, it is the Igbo people who have responded most enthusiastically to Christianity. Though missionary activity started first in Western Nigeria, it grew more rapidly in Igbo land. For instance, by 1710, the statistics showed that there were 18,500 Christian converts in Eastern Nigeria as against 17,000 in the Western part of Nigeria. By 1920, the figure had risen to 514,395 and 260,500 respectively.

Several reasons could account for the rapidity and success of Christianity in Igbo land. Some of these include the strategy adopted by the missionaries in their work in Igbo communities and villages, and the republican nature of the Igbo nation which allowed



individuals to take decisions without first seeking consent from a monarch. Rev. Fr. Lutz, who led the first Catholic mission into Igboland was quoted to have told the Obi of Onitsha on arrival that:

We come to live near you, to open a school to teach your children and your good people, all who wish to come and learn knowledge from the whiteman of Europe (Agbodike, 2008:3).

In addition to preaching the gospel the missionaries adopted the strategy of using charity as a means of demonstrating the love of Christ. For instance, the Catholic mission adopted the Christian village strategy in Onitsha, as a means of raising faithful followers. This strategy involved bringing together boys and girls, breach babies, and their mothers, freed slaves, the outcasts, runaway slaves as well as the jettisoned, who were outlawed by violation of Igbo customs and traditional laws and rehabilitated them and gave them assurance of life, freedom and security (Agbodike, 2008). They equally educated them and taught them vocational skills.

Christianity and Values in Igboland

No nation in the world ever encountered Christianity and their society remained unaffected. The British who pioneered missionary work in Nigeria were not originally Christians. They were converted. And since Christianity is life, it has the capacity to change a people's way of life, thought pattern and culture in general. The lamentation often common among our people of the devastations which Christianity inflicted on our cultural heritage is retrogressive and counterproductive. If the British or any other nation had sat down to mourn their past, they wouldn't have risen up to chart a course for the future. I sincerely don't believe in mourning over the past because, the past can hardly come back. But we can overcome the experience of the past by rising up to make the most appropriate use of the present, failing which there will be no end to our mourning. Therefore, the approach in this paper, is not a lamentation but an honest evaluation and appraisal.

Christianity was, and is still of tremendous influence in Igboland. The early missionaries placed their emphasis on character moulding. Ayandele notes that the ideal of many of the missions was to make their converts spiritual automatons, to live literally as the unlearned and ignorant apostles of old, according to the tenets of the new faith... it is clear from records that ideally Christian missions wanted to make Nigeria a veritable Christian country (Ayandele, 1966). It is equally evident that most of the European missionaries like Wilmot Brooke, Bishop Tugwell, Walter Miller, Oliver Griffin, Thomas Harding etc, left behind an enviable life of holiness and moral excellence. So even if there were mistakes the missionaries made in the way and manner they handled indigenous culture, they were



not ill motivated. And their strictness with regards to the lifestyle of the people was all geared towards producing an excellent man in our people for the benefit of our nation.

Mission Unaccomplished

Regrettably, this ideal of making every convert a perfect representative of Christ, was far from being realized. Most converts never really jettisoned their culture and old way of life. One consul H. H. Johnston was highly taken aback when he discovered that “the zealous converts of Brass felt no twinges of conscience when in 1885, they ate their human enemies.”

There was also the incident at Onitsha in which two African agents of the mission committed murder. Currently, there are numerous incidents of immorality, fraud and other vices perpetuated by persons who are Christians and occupy enviable positions in the Christian faith. This more than any other factor may be responsible for the resurgence of traditional religious worship among Igbo youths. All these point to an indictment of the mission work as deficient in inculcating the life of Jesus on its converts. This could partly be because of inability on the part of the missionaries to effectively communicate the gospel message to the people or their zealous quest to colonize more converts and territories, thereby failing to disciple the converts. And because they needed more hands to man increasing number of churches, such untamed lives were consecrated as pastors and teachers. Johnston expressing his disappointment at the Niger mission agents noted as follows:

I regret to say that with a few – very rare exceptions, those African pastors, teachers and catechists whom I have met have been all, more or less bad men. They attempted to veil and unbridled immorality with unblushing hypocrisy and a profane display of ‘mouth’ religion which to an honest mind was even more disgusting than the immorality itself (Johnson, 1887).

In the gospel of Luke chapter six verse forty, the author notes that, a disciple is not above his master: but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master. This implies that the predominance of mouth religion among Africans, is a direct result of the deficiencies of character and life of some of the early missionary pastors.

At the national and societal level, this gave rise to corrupt practices among the educated elites, who hardly demonstrated probity in the handling of public affairs. Rather than engineer better society, the educated class became purveyors of white collar corruption in public offices at all levels. This negated the principle of restoring the dignity of man through Christ centred education in Nigeria.



The above shortcoming, notwithstanding Christianity had made serious impact in Igboland. We will examine a few of these influences on Igbo society. One remarkable fact all the mission agencies came to terms with, was the fact that the process of evangelizing Igboland would be more fruitful if the gospel is adapted to the local condition. Thus the missionaries took interest in studying the language and culture of the people. It was this study that gave the Igbo's a written language. As far back as 1929, a common Igbo, often referred to as union Igbo has been developed. The CMS encouraged the use of vernacular in all their service and taught same in their mission schools. Thus the preservation of Igbo language was a vital tool in preserving Igbo culture and identity.

The mission schools were a critical factor in accelerating development in Igboland. Because of the more open nature of the Igbo's in accepting Christianity, mission schools were littered throughout the land and this gave them an edge over others. This explained the dominance of the Igbo's in the nation's civil service, commerce and the other sectors prior to the Nigerian civil war. The Hausa's who loathed Christianity had to pay dearly for it, for they soon began to cry out against what they termed marginalization, imbalance in the public service and other sectors where education was the criteria.

Christianity had also had a cleansing effect on the culture and tradition of the Igbo's. Prior to Christianity, the people buried their prominent men with another human being, who ostensibly should be his attendant in the spirit world. Twins were instantly killed and their mother ostracized, and various communities were locked in inter-communal conflicts. But, the introduction of Christian ethics and values has abolished all these. A broad understanding has been added to the Igbo concept of the extended family via the Christian teaching of the universality of God as the creator of all the earth, and all that is in it. The Igbo's now have an enriched cultural understanding, that the family of God is broad and universal. This key understanding may have liberated the people, and is the reason why Igbo's readily settle in every part of Nigeria and the world. Thus, fully embracing the concept of brotherhood of all men, more than any tribe in Nigeria.

The Igbo people had a peculiar music style which not only has survived Christian influence but has also been incorporated as part of Christian worship. Their music style incorporates instruments like ekwe, ogene, igba, ichaka and the udu. All these instruments are today commonly used as accompaniments in church worship in many Igbo communities. This indicates a blending of Christianity and the traditional ingenuity of the people. Closely related to music in Igboland is masking or masquerades. The dual role which masquerades played in Igbo traditional culture made some segments of the Christian community view it with suspicion. Culturally, a masquerade is believed to be a spirit and the question



Christians ask is which spirit? But of recent, masquerades are a common feature at Christian festival like Christmas. In fact, the Catholic Church most times allows the use of masquerades in their official celebrations like reception for priests, sent-forth or burials, etc.

Oborji, writing on the integration of Igbo culture in Christian worship notes that among the Igbo Corpus Christi festival is celebrated as Ofala Jesus (Jesus annual outing as king) with fanfare, cannon shots, songs and dance etc. In some places, the popular *Aku na eche enyi*, which is popularly used to usher in dignitaries is played by the parishioners on this occasion. The indigenous religious culture of the people has a rich tradition of joyful rituals and celebrations. This, the church has perfectly integrated into their worship.

The age grade system popularly known as *otu ogbo*, *umuada* etc, has found new expression in our churches. The Catholic Church has adopted a grading system which grades the people into groups similar to the age grade system. These are the Catholic Women Organization (CWO), the Catholic Men Organization (CMO), Catholic Girls Organization, Mary League etc. In the Anglican Communion, similar arrangements are also in place.

The Igbo culture has equally assimilated some Christian values into its culture. The traditional breaking of kola nuts, though done in vernacular, because kola nut according to tradition, does not understand foreign language, now takes the form of a Christian prayer. The kola nut is now broken and eaten in the name of Jesus no longer in the name of the ancestors. But the content of the prayer is still intact. The only difference is that; it is concluded in Jesus name.

Religion and the Present State of Igbo Culture and Tradition

There have always been contentious arguments in some quarters to the effect that Christianity has destroyed our people's culture and tradition and replaced it with Western culture and traditions. There is no doubt that Christianity abolished, and modified some of our people's beliefs and values. But the argument is often presented as if the missionaries came specifically targeting Igbo culture. The truth remains that the missionaries came with a mission, and this mission involved the inculcation of ethical and behavioural pattern in line with the teachings of the Christian bible. There is also no doubt that our people lived and behaved in certain ways that could not have glorified our image as a people. We wouldn't have been proud celebrating the killing of twins, human sacrifice, the *osu* and slave system etc. One error, we had always fallen prey to is to interpret Christianity and its values as Western culture. This is not fair to the history of Christianity whose founder died in the hands of his people for trying to introduce teachings contrary to the way of life of his people or the law of Moses. Christianity was a strange religion and culture in the west.



But the west made adequate use of Christianity and its principles to fast tract their spiritual and mental development. The scientific revolution wouldn't have emerged under a closed tribal system governed by taboos.

C. B. Nze remarks that religious intolerance is more manifest in the dealings of Christianity with such aspects of African culture as marriage. Almost all the Christian churches have refused to recognize polygamy within the African context. Though monogamy seems to be on the increase, polygamy is still prevalent among our people even among some sections of the elite. The Church seems to have adapted to the issue, by allowing polygamous persons to be accorded church membership, but restricts the level of their participation in spiritual service. In virtually, every Igbo community, the core values and principles of the people's culture remains intact. The New Yam Festival is still widely celebrated, though many of our people are no longer active farmers. The Igbo culture of respect for age is still maintained in our interpersonal relationship and as noted earlier, masquerading has added colour to even some Christian feasts.

Conclusion

What we perceive has happened in Igboland, was a neat adaptation of the two dominant religious beliefs – traditional religion and Christianity. In this adaptation, both traditional religion and Christianity had to lose some of its values. Christianity, we all agree has lost some of its strictness over some issues. In the same way, traditional religion has lost some of its values.

Recommendations

But it must be clearly stated, that if we must make progress in the present scientific and technological age, certain traditional philosophies must not only be critically questioned but jettisoned. African traditional society (Igbo inclusive) lacks the tradition of reflections and critical thinking and has therefore developed a rich variety of 'philosophies' but failed to develop a critical philosophy (Otoni Nduka, 2006). This understanding is necessary in appraising our culture so as not to be a clog in the wheel of the mental development of our people, which will ultimately develop our culture. Since culture is dynamic, we must not be insisting on the cultural practices of the 18th century as it can never solve the problems of our people in the present century.



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