

ONUNU FESTIVAL IN OBUKPA AND ITS PROSPECTS OF INCULTURATION

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Abstract

Onunu in Obukpa is an ancestral festival. It is deeply rooted in their cosmology and depicts essentially the symbiotic relationship between them and their progenitors. This ancient feast as a phenomenon which dates back to the people's primordial civilizations has maintained its liveliness and relevance up till today due to its intrinsic religious significance, inherent positive socio-cultural values and indispensable ethical imports. This paper, therefore, strives to discuss Onunu and its prospects of inculturation. In other words, it seeks to know those positive elements in Onunu which by their natural properties and socio-cultural constructs are divinely related to Christ as remote preparations for his gospel message of salvation. The Holy Mother Church as missionary encounters religions and cultures of peoples such as the Onunu example. The Church in the face of such circumstances, respects and preserves whatever is noble, true and good in every religion and culture. She equally transforms such authentic cultural values into Christianity and plants the gospel values into those cultures. This process is called inculturation. The gains of inculturation are enormous as Christianity "takes flesh" among the people and by that token changes persons, structures, systems and values from within in a positive sense. In this way, Christianity becomes a culture and a civilization with stereological and integral human development dimensions. In view of this, this work recommends that Onunu becomes an index and beneficiary of inculturation process so that both the people and their ancestral festival would belong to Christ exclusively and develop both integrally and extensively guided by Christian options. The methodology employed in this study is historico-descriptive. This means that Onunu festival in Obukpa Religion is described and interpreted in the light of the people's world view.

Keywords: Onunu, Festival, Obukpa, Prospects and Inculturation

Introduction

Onunu is an ancient yet existent filial piety for ancestors among Obukpa people of Nsukka cultural zone, Southeast Nigeria. Obukpa people are Igbo by tribe. They have a strong love for their parents and this continues even at the latter's death. Onunu cult is special and fascinating in the way it is celebrated; (and) it is located in the context of the people's traditional religion and socio-cultural structure. It is a great festival.

The people of Obukpa have the belief system that the dead ancestors are "dead" but "living". The principles and activities of Onunu become clear and easily comprehended from this perception of ancestors as the "living dead". This means that the dead still keep up the social relationship and communion with their offsprings and survivors in the

physical world. The dead ancestors go on to protect their children; the role they played in the physical terrain continues even as they are in the spirit world. Their descendants, in turn, venerate them through cult and festival. It is a veneration that maintains solidarity within the bio-social family and sacred dignity between descendants and progenitors.

Onunu is primarily a family cult based on the Obukpa patrilineal system of marriage. As ancestor worship, it depicts the respect, honour and remembrance of the dead fathers. One of the essential features of this festival is that all married women go back to their paternal kit and kin for this annual celebration. Onunu festival is not a day affair. It spreads over thirty-four (34) days of distinct stages with peculiar characteristics. It is a remarkable feast in Obukpa traditional religion.

This paper, therefore, strives to discuss Onunu festival in Obukpa and its prospects of inculturation. In other words, this study seeks to understand the extent this socio-cultural festival with deep religious significance can become a Christian feast through the hallowed Christainisation process. This work discovers a pastoral problematic in the missionary context which is whether Obukpa indigenes should forget their bio-social roots and Onunu veneration practices once they accept Christianity or are there possibilities of becoming true Obukpa citizens with their ancestral filiations and true Christians with full heritage of the New Faith in Christ. This pastoral question is applicable and replicated in the situations of all cultures among all peoples who keep ancestral festivals in honour of their dead in traditional religions. Onunu is a festival linked with the world view of Obukpa people in their understanding of inanimate, animate and spiritual beings as unitive and impactful, each on the other. Onunu serves for them some multi-variant functions – social, cultural, spiritual, moral, among others. It is a fertile background to understanding their humanity and Christianity as this belief system influences their activities along vertical (spiritual) and horizontal (social) lines.

The findings of this paper show that there exist some remote, occult elements which are unknown to all and which, are essentially unchristian. However, Onunu is not bereft of multiple religious values of tremendous importance which are akin to the core values of Christianity. The socio- cultural and religious values of Onunu remain cherished treasures of the people and cardinal steps to Christian culture. Obukpa people as religious (*religiosi ex omni natione*), cultural (*culturae hominibus*) and social (*Sociali hominum*) are concretely celebrated through this festival of ancient heritage.

This work recommends with strong persuasions that the *Logos spermatikoi* (seeds of the Word) found in Onunu qualifies it as *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel) and so, the Church *Ad Gentes* (on mission to the nations) and *Nostra Aetate* (in our time, the Church's relationship with non-Christians) in Nsukka Diocese in the realization of her missionary goal in Obukpa cannot but study Onunu, expunge the elements that endanger the Christian faith and perfect her neutral and positive values in Christ.

THE CULT OF ONUNU

Among *Ndi Igbo* (Igbo people) ancestral cult is a reality but has varied names according to communities. The way it is celebrated, the symbols used and gestures employed plus the dates vary too. In Obukpa, Onunu is their ancestral cult.

Onunu as an Ancestral Cult

In Obukpa, the ancestors are the *Ndi Nna-nna* (great grandfathers), *Ndi nna anyi ha* (our fathers), *Ndi gboo* (those of antiquity; those of long ago) who have reached the spirit world after their honest lives on earth. These are different from *Ndi Maa (muo)* ghost, malevolent or wandering spirits and *ekwensu* (evil spirit) – the enemy of both the Supreme Being, good spirits and man.

The ancestors in Obukpa are the benevolent forefathers. They are physically dead but still alive in the spirit world in the minds of all who knew (of) them and are in the state of personal ontological immortality. They are believed to be in the state of social immortality too because of their begotten offspring who still carry their traits. They remain part and parcel of their families as parents and progenitors of their descendants. They watch over their families and show fatherly concern for the living; protecting them from malevolent spirits and evil people; giving them fortune and fertility.

However, they can punish their offspring who misbehave as a father would when his children go the wrong way. In short, with the rest of Igbo race, Obukpa people

attribute disasters and illness as effects of their ancestors' anger and success in their undertakings as signs of their good-will, loving-kindness, approval, and blessings. The ancestors intercede for them before God; and intervene with all other good spirits on behalf of their families; prevent evil spirits from carrying out devilish designs against their descendants on earth. (Agbo, D.J.U, n.d, 16).

Among Obukpa people, apart from their daily life style: morning prayers (*Igo ofo ututu*), invitation of the dead family members to come and share in the family meals by throwing some food outside for them and the kola nut ritual where the litany of ancestors are called to commune with the living as instances of family life which hinge on this family communion with *Ndi Nna-nna ha*, there is a special annual feast (*Egba*) in their honour. This is the *Egba Onunu* (onunu feast). *Egba Onunu* according to Agbo D.J.U. (1991:22): is “The feast specially celebrated in honour of ancestors from their first generation to the present”. The duration of this feast lasts from its announcement till the day the old year ends.

Announcement and Preparation for Onunu

Ugwu, D.C. (1987:33) in his *This is Obukpa* very clearly enshrined in better definitive and descriptive sentences what the writer got in the course of his oral interview cast in pure Obukpa dialect and childhood non-participant's experience. According to this erudite scholar, “The *Onunu* feast is the grandest feast in Obukpa, the feast when women put on their best dresses. It lasts for thirty-four days starting from the *Onunu* preparation day. *Onunu* feast is announced by the *Attama Ojo* on an *Afor* day on seeing the new moon. If the new moon appears exactly on that *Afor* day, then he is lucky and announces the *Onunu* feast that night but if the new moon does not appear on an *Afor* day, the *Attama* waits until the first *Afor* day that follows the new moon. He must avoid seeing the new moon until he announced the *Onunu* feast. If he does see the moon before the proclamation ceremony, he dies instantly; so it is believed. The *Attama Ojo* is always from Uwele-Eha in Ejuona. The proclamation ceremony is an exciting affair. On seeing

the new moon, the *Attama ojo* strikes the big *ojo* wooden gong and cries out aloud that *Onunu* feast is now here with us and the whole town joins in crying *Okotobo Aturu Ukpe* and this re-echoed within a few minutes throughout the length and breadth of Obukpa, from Ejuona to Owere to Obige to Ogbegu and even to Nkalagu. It is an exciting moment for the town and the surrounding towns.

The Celebration of Onunu

According to Ugwu, D.C. (1987:33), “Following the proclamation day is the first real feast day of *Onunu* which takes place twelve days, that is three local weeks, after the proclamation. This is called *Obu Egba’ Onunu*. The feast is usually light. Everyone stays in his own house to celebrate this feast. From the *Obu Egba’ Onunu* day to *Umu-Iche* is fourteen days. This is usually on *Eke* day. *Umu-Iche* is the biggest feast day in the *Onunu* season”. In the words of Ele, G.N. (1993), “Today, villages which wish to get new masquerades like the *Ekwe*, *adada*, *oshimili*, *ekpe* and all such masquerades called *maa odudo* do so or even up grade old ones. These masquerades are shown to the general public”. On on this day also, Ugwu, D.C, narrated, every male person who has a wife or an intending wife carries a big calabash of palm wine to his mother-in-law since the father-in-law would also go to his. He also fires dane-gun on reaching his mother-in-law’s house to announce his arrival. The rich ones continue to fire their guns at intervals as long as their stay endures in the house of their mothers-in-law. They are in reciprocity entertained very well by the mother’s – in- law. This ceremony is done throughout the whole of Obukpa. One can easily imagine this occasion, the graceful condition of the town on this occasion. When every male person with a wife or a lover goes to her mother’s house while other men come to his own mother’s house in respect of his own sister and guns are fired from all corners. It is a beautiful and happy feast. Four days after the tumultuous *Umu-iche* comes the *Onunu ndikom*, the following day being *Oye* is *Oto Umu-Okpara* and the next day, *Afor* is another big day- the *Oto Umu Ndiom*. This day is also called the *Ogo Nna day*. This day, sacrifices are made to the ancestors. Women are seen nobly dressed trooping to and from all directions of the town, each heading to her paternal village for the worship of her paternal ancestor, each carrying at least a fowl and tubers of yam while the rich ones carry goats. The *Okpara* of the family is the priest of the ancestors of the family. It is a great day for the *Okpara* throughout Obukpa.

Two days after the *Ogo Nna day*, that is *Eke* day, the *Ojo* society “lead” the poor old year to its shrine in the *Eke* forest in *Umueko*. There the *Ojo* society performs their miracle of planting a palm tree, which grows up that day, produces fruits which are boiled, oil extracted and used in worshipping the Old *Ahua*. All the same night. In performing this ceremony of *Idu Ahua*, no ordinary person who sees the *Ojo* people survives! One *Ojo* man who took me into confidence and “revealed” to me that the story of the palm tree was not true thus breaking the secret of the *Ojo* cult has surprisingly not yet died. Nor have I so far. (Ugwu, D.C. 1987:34)

It is interesting to hear the *Okpara* speak to the ancestors in “Liturgical prayer”. *Onunu* has a prayer which articulates the sentiments of the year. The *Okpara* presents the victim-cock, goat etc. to the ancestors. He informs them of who brought it. For instance, this cock is from your daughter married in this or that village or town. She came to salute her ancestors in thanksgiving and she asks for health, wealth, fortunes and fertility, etc

Now, the *Okpara* says in form of prayer:

Our ancestors, (he calls their names one after the other as far as he can remember):

We offer you this (he mentions what), accept it from us,

We thank you for health,

We thank you for male children,

We thank you for female children,

We thank you for protection,

We ask for long life and prosperity,

He mentions his needs and the collective needs of the family. It usually begins with thanks and ends with petition, veneration and celebration.

The historian, Ozioko, M.A. (2005:47-49) corroborates the submissions of Ugwu, D.C. cited above. He wrote that:

Festivals in Obukpa were connected or associated with ancestors, gods or goddesses. Onunu was the greatest traditional festival in Obukpa. This festival was in honour of the ancestral father. It was normally between April and May. Every Obukpa man or woman was actively involved in one way or the other in Onunu festival. It is not known how Onunu festival started. The announcement of the dates of the Onunu was the responsibility of Onyishi Uwelu in Council. The period of Onunu from the announcement to the end of it was a holy period in Obukpa. No other celebration including marriages, funeral could be performed during the Onunu session. Anybody who died during the period died a bad death and could not be mourned until after Onunu ceremonies. The Onunu was celebrated in four major parts as follows: (i) Annual servicing of marriage contracts in Obukpa Traditional setting (ii) Oto Umu-Okpara (iii) Oto Umu-Ndiomu (iv) Idu Ahua. The Onunu festivals are still there in Obukpa but the participants are declining because of the influence of Christianity.

Onunu festival is cherished by all even with the advent of Christianity. Many Christians still practice it in direct or disguised forms and wish that it becomes part of the Christian feast. In connection with this view, Arua, C. E. (2014:83), wrote that, “Even if we all should turn to Christians, the following feasts should be kept alive: *Omabe, Onunu, Nkpuru-Nkashi*. Adulatory should be wiped out from them and each of the feasts be given a new meaning and purpose to meet what we have in this modern time”. This is what inculturation would achieve; namely: the expunging of adulatory and idolatry aspects of these festivals. Onunu has religious imports. We shall discuss this in the next sub-section.

The Religious Imports of Onunu

Onunu is an important aspect of Obukpa Traditional Religion. The *Onunu* is the principal and most elaborate celebrated hub of interaction between the traditional Obukpa people and their dead family members, *Ndi Nna-nna* from the first to the last in the spirit world. For the people of Obukpa, the ancestral spirits continue to intervene in the affairs of the family and so they are believed to possess powers and wield much influence in their

lives. Consequently, they are approached in worship to benefit from the abundance of their fatherly care. Worship here means veneration, respect, love, filial piety, and honour given to parents as their due. The earthly father provides for, takes care of and protects his children and so this role continues even as he now exists in the spirit world.

However, Obukpa people do not look on the ancestors as the highest being. Instead, they believe seriously in the existence of *Chukwu Abiamu* (God, the Creator) addressed in Superlative qualities. Obukpa has the cult of *Chukwu* expressed vividly in *Egba Chukwu*, a special feast in honour of the Supreme Being. The priest of *Chukwu* is the *Onyishi* (eldest) of the village. Again, there is *Egba Okike* too. This is the feast in honour of God, the creator.

The ancestors in their religious belief system stand in close relation to God. They are intermediaries between them and the *Chukwu Abiamu*. In the words of Ugwu; D.C (1987:28-29):

It is in the nature and custom of Obukpa people to approach the big man through his closest friend. There is nothing extra ordinary, so far as we in Obukpa are concerned, in praying to God through the saints or in praying to God through the ancestors or on an Altar of clay.

The masquerades, *Ekwe, adada, oshimili* and the rest, over and above depicting the political status of the different villages that possess them, have deep religious meaning. These masquerades are believed, among Obukpa people, to be spirits who from the world of the spirits appeared in the physical form in the land of the living. The land opens and they emerge into the world of men. Or at best explained that they come out from the ant-holes, even the biggest of masquerades. Children, the uninitiated and women wonder at this awe. However, what happens is that

It essentially involves some act of covering or masking and through it the presentation of a strange identity taken to be a spirit, and particularly spirits of the dead members of a community who are understood as making a fresh and temporary appearance among the living. (Onyeneke, A. O (1987:1)

In Obukpa, the religious aspect of these masquerades are seen in these lights: First, before these masquerades appear, renowned diviners are consulted to ascertain the mind of the ancestors. Second, they revolve around funerals of men to be implanted ancestors and sometimes the funerals of women whose paternal homes are proud of and can afford to grace their funerals with the appearance of these masquerades. And third, it is not uncommon to see families and individuals offering goats to *Ekwe* or *adada* in thanksgiving for favours received or for problems wrapped in petition to be solved. Fourth, these masquerades come to exist in the context of ancestral cult, one of the *Umu-Iche* aspects of the celebration. Obukpa worship the *Chukwu Abiamu* and *Ndi Nna-nna ha* through masquerades.

Magic and suspicion are elements found too in worship through masquerades. These masquerades carry charms and amulets to ward off the incidents of falling in the public, immobility or inability to move due to forces blocking their way or other ugly

experiences which leave nothing less than shame on the entire village to which the masquerades belong. So it is always a thing of joy for them that these masquerades appear, travel as planned and go back hitch-free. Finally, “one could not conceive any idea of atheism in our traditional and primitive society. I know of no feast in Obukpa which was not part of the people’s religion. The *Onunu* was the feast that marked the end of the year and mainly set out for the worship of the ancestors”. (Ugwu, D. C. 1987:29)

Socio-Cultural Dimension

Man is *ens socialis* (social being) (Aristotle; August Comte) and also *ens culturalis* (cultural being) (Gohlen). *Onunu* testifies to the rich socio-cultural value of Obukpa people. *Onunu* is fundamentally rooted in individual families. It is a family affair and thus, a feast of family communion. Hence, *Onunu* in Obukpa helps to keep the memory of lineage connection and descent fresh and alive. Those who share belief in one founding ancestor or are intimately connected by ancestral tie are drawn together by an effective binding force as a family in the African sense.

The extended family system and the traditional value of African communalism (familyhood or togetherness) comes out very clearly here. The necessity of mutual help in matters of food, work, sickness, death and bereavement are taken care of in togetherness. Solidarity exists. Communal ownership and relationship characterize this man-in-the community value.

In the *Oto Umu ndiom* day, families plan for development within their family circle. Problems are solved as a family. Those who misbehave are fraternally corrected within this family forum. This *Onunu* promotes harmony in marital life. Husbands go to their wives’ families on *Umu-Iche* day. This promotes understanding and love not only between the husband and wife but also between the sons-in-law and the parents-in-law.

Obukpa has patrilineal system of marriage. Elders have prominent places in the relationship between the dead and the living as regards the cult of ancestors. This social framework helps maintain the sense of authority and respect for elders (*Ndi Okpara*). Old age is generally admired and respected; the elders have right to courteous and polite treatment. Authority and leadership rest on these elders. There is deep ancestral piety and affiliation among Obukpa people. The young look forward to becoming elders. Ancestor worship confers power, authority and respect on elders. In the words of Obi, C.A. (1988:45)

Elders will therefore, always support the kind of social structure which gives them prestige and recognition. This in itself helps to keep alive the practice among these ancestor-worshipping societies. Elders hold tenaciously to genealogy-tracing their common ancestors as far back as the human memory can go, because they want to perpetuate the existing social structure and entrench the power of male dominance.

The masquerades associated with *Onunu ekwe*, *adada*, *oshimili*, *ogede edoga* and the rest trigger off social interaction and celebration. There is tumultuous air of music, dance and theatrics as people expect and wait for these masquerades. When they emerge eventually, men jubilate in virile songs and music. Women dance and sing solemn songs as they admire

these masquerades. In the village, the writer's maternal home, the royal kindred, the women sing among others before the *ekwe* Ihe, thus:

“The spirit (God, who made me marry in Ihe, thanks (*Maa / Chi siri m buru Ihe, e mee*). While the unmarried young women from Ihe would sing: The spirit (God, who made me hail from Ihe, thanks (*Maa / Chi*) *siri m shiri Ihe, e mee*)”.

These are rendered in melodious tone. It is a grand festivity. The social atmosphere becomes charged with joy and sense of identification with one's village and ancestral heritage. People travel from far and nearby villages in order to admire these masquerades – that is a web of socio-cultural interaction.

Onunu Obukpa is an expression of the people's deep sense of religion thus culturally transmitted. It is proper to say that *Onunu* Obukpa, among other traditional festivals, unveils the religious consciousness, rich cultural heritage and dynamism of Obukpa people which puts them in the real context of their socio-cultural life.

The Positive Elements Found in Onunu

Onunu has positive elements which are found in other religions especially Christianity. These are the meetings points it has with the Christian faith.

We shall in this subsection, highlight these religious essentials found in *Onunu*. They are:

1. The existence of God

Among Obukpa people, God exists. They call him *Chukwu*, (Supreme Being- *Chi Ukwu*, *Chukwu Abiamu Ura* (*Deus Otiosus, Duns absconditus*). The king-creator (*Ezechiteoke*). In Obukpa traditional society, there are no atheists. This God, for them is transcendent, the *Mysterium Tremendum* (*Omama amasi amasi, Omimi di egwu, Omimi bu Omimi*) yet he is *immanent* (*Chinonso*). *Onunu* festival showcases this strong belief in the God who created the ancestors, who are his creatures, messengers and intermediaries.

2. The Recognition of Spirits

In Obukpa, Spirits are recognized in their groups as *ndi maa* who are either benevolent or malevolent. This belief system is a preparatory datum to accepting the theology of demons, evil spirits or devils (*demonology*), the angels and the good spirits (*angelology*), the Holy Spirit (*Pneumatology*) and the human spirits (*Muo Mmadu*). The ancestors are good spirits who ward off the afflictions of the evil ones and attract the blessings and fortunes to their families.

3. The Priesthood

Priesthood exists in Obukpa religion. The *Onyishi* (the eldest male in the village or kindred) and the *Okpara* (the eldest in the family) are the priests. The *Onyishi* in conjunction with *Ndi Okpara* offer sacrifice to God during the *Egba Onunu* (*Onunu festival*) and at some other occasions that demand sacrifices to *Chukwu* such as *Egba Okike* (feast in honour of God the creator, *Egba Chukwu* (feast dedicated to God the supreme being) and *nkpuru-nkashi*, the new yam festival when the god of crops and the personal gods or guardian angels called *Chi* are worshipped. The priesthood is derived from the Greek *presbyteros* and the Latin *Presbyter* which means the elder. In Obukpa, the priests are the elders of the families or kindreds. In Roman Catholicism, the priest is a *presbyter*, his house is *presbytery* while a body of priests is called the *presbyterium*, the council of elders. So, the elders in Obukpa have relevance in religion as priests who

perform the sacred rituals and play mediatory roles between the people and God, gods and ancestors. Again, in political governance since Obukpa traditional society practices gerontocracy (rulership by the eldest, the *onyishi* and the elders, *Ndi Okpara*), have the authority of rulership. The Priests in Roman Catholicism have canonical rights of rulership and ordinary/extraordinary legislative, Judicial and executive powers.

4. **Sighting of astronomical bodies**

Onunu feast is announced on an *Afor* day on seeing the new moon by *Attama Ojo*. In this connection, *Onunu* has links with other religions. In comparative religion studies, the noble Qur'an of Islam requires the sighting of the New moon in order to confirm the beginning and ending of the Islamic months like the Ramadan and Zil-Hajjah. In Christian religion, the Holy Bible teaches that the nativity of Jesus was revealed by the star. Hence, Matthew 2: 1-2 says "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star in the East and have come to worship Him". The star led them on until they found Jesus, the infant king (Matthew 2:9-11).

5. **The Observance of Holy Season/Days**

Christianity has holy seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc. Within the Lenten season, there is a Holy week whose last three days are called the *Triduum*. Within the period of *Triduum* there are no Christian marriages and funerals. In like manner, *Onunu* has days of preparation and holy days when there are no marriages, funerals nor any ceremony. In Obukpa, when the parish priests in her five parishes announce that there would be no nuptial masses and funerals within the *Triduum*, the indigenes understood that in light of such observances in *Onunu* festival.

6. **The Presence of Shrines**

Ancestors are localized with specific shrines and altars. They are fed, venerated and celebrated in their shrines. They are holy sites for the adherents of indigenous religion. Ozioko M.A. (2005:49) wrote about this thus;

On this day every man and woman, boy or girl, married and unmarried would assemble at the shrine of the Ancestral fathers and other dead fathers to offer sacrifices to them. The offerings were in accordance to what they deemed fit to give their dead fathers. The offerings ranged from cocks to goats that were slaughtered for the ancestors. It was a real festival and nobody wished to miss it.

The *Onu Nna*, that is, the shrine in honour of the ancestors are recognized as holy sites. They are kept holy as such and visited in due season during veneration and feasts. They are destinations of religious tourism during *Onunu* ceremonies and other occasions of religious significance.

7. **Prayer, Thanksgiving, Sacrifice and Communion**

These theological elements exist as proper contents of ancestor worship. Prayers are made to God, *Chukwu* through the ancestors. Petitions and supplications for favours are essential parts of this prayer. People, usually the descendants who received favours from the ancestors offer thanksgiving sacrifice to them. The sacrifice is a necessity because through it, the ancestors are fed. There is communion following the sacrifice among the living and the dead. These theological ideas did not come with Christianity, they were there before the advent of both Islam and Christianity.

So, when Christian evangelizers and missionaries came to Obukpa and entire Igbo land, their teachings were not totally strange because they had their resemblances, in Igbo religion. In line with this thought, Bediako (1992: 226) cited by Afeke, B. and Verster P. (2004: 51) explains the significance of the ancestral theology this way:

... the real essence of a theology of ancestors is not about the fate of the departed who were not Christians, or who were not sacramentally linked with the Church. A theology of ancestors is not necessitated because many African Christians have ancestors who were not Christian. Rather, a theology of ancestors is about the interpretation of the past in a way that shows that the present experience and knowledge of the grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been truly anticipated and pre-figured in the quest for and the response to the transcendent in former times as these have been reflected in the lives of African people.

The liturgy in Roman Catholicism, for instance, is a structured practice, that is an advancement from improvisation, and could be followed with effortless ease by neophytes, Catechumens and old members. The prayer through and sacrifice to the ancestors follow some definite structures like the invocation of the first ancestor till the latest. This enables the successive *Okpara* in every generation to perform this priestly function for his family or kindred. The ancestral mediatory role is not in the sense of Jesus Christ's but in the far lesser gradation of the intercessory roles of the saints and the angelic hosts.

8. Eschatology

This dimension of ancestor worship in Obukpa stresses the ontological immortality of the dead as found in Igbo world view. The human person in Igbo understanding is made up body (*aru*), soul (*nkpulobi*) and spirit (*mụọ*). The body decays at death while the *Nkpuluobi* goes back to *Chukwu*, the Creator. In the physical realm, the human person is *Mmadu*, in the spiritual sphere, he/she is *ndị mụọ/ ndị maa* (ghost or spiritual being). Eschatology constitutes a big *magisterium* of the Catholic Church and found too in every Christian denomination: Protestant and Pentecostal. Ancestor worship emphasizes that there is life after death; there is judgment and there are rewards and punishments for those who lived well and wickedly respectively. If ancestors could eat the food given them, it is not strange in Christian biblical frame of reference. One of the post-resurrection experiences with Jesus Christ was that he ate with his apostles at Emmaus (Luke 24: 13 - 35) and at the river bank (John 21: 1ff). In ancestor veneration, all the past family members are indeed alive, and are in communion with the living and the yet unborn.

However, the idea of heaven as presented by the Christian theology is found in Igbo religion but has some imperfect variances. In Obukpa cosmology as it is true in Igbo religion, there are re-incarnation, *ilọ uwa*, *ogbanje* and horizontal places of rest where someone dies in one town and is believed to be alive in another town, within the range of terrestrial existence. These are questions for the Christian Faith and theology. But most essentially, both religions believe in life after death. In one it is ancestor worship while in the other it is *Omnium Sanctorum*, Communion of the Saints. Again, both religions believe in prayer for the dead, funeral rites and ceremonies. Without adequate funeral rites, one cannot attain ancestorhood. We know too that prayers for the dead, suffrages and other pious devotions help the dead in purgatory reach heaven in Catholic theology and practice.

9. Moral Life And Social Ethics

Ancestors lived upright life and continue to foster same among their descendants from the spirit world. Due to ancestral veneration, children of the same great grandfather or progenitor come to know themselves as related by consanguinity. This stamps out incest and other sexual immorality like adultery in the family life. In Nsukka cultural zone of Enugu state, for example, wives who may commit adultery did not only offend their husbands but the ancestors of their matrimonial homes as well. Ancestors are appeased by sacrifices after confession of this sin according to the local custom. Adultery is not common in the cultural area due to the moral force which the ancestors foster. However, there is gender discrimination here as men who engage in adultery are not caught just like in Hebraic cosmology, the story of John 8: 1 – 11 where only the woman was caught in the very act. The Christian religion has a lot to do in this respect which is still *missio ad gentes* in the culture of male domination and absolute patriarchy.

10. Family Solidarity

Ancestral veneration in Obukpa unites the family and helps in social development. Among *Ndi Igbo*, brothers and sisters go beyond the nuclear family system to reach the large members of the extended family who are children of the same ancestor. The *caveat* here is that this may breed clannishness which means exclusive support and love for only the members of one's own clan.

The 1983 Code of the Canon law stipulates consanguinity as a diriment impediment to Christian marriage in its direct line or in the second degree of the collateral line. (Canon 1078 par. 3). This family togetherness identifies those close relations and consequently, impediments are not incurred. Ancestor worship prompts education, charity and other positive socio-cultural values in the family. It engenders justice and peace as erring members are corrected or sanctioned accordingly. All these values are related to Christian values and world view.

The Aspects of Onunu that are Problems to Christian Faith

In the light of the Christ's salvific message *vis-à-vis* the *Onunu* Obukpa we can readily identify some problems which need to be expunged or rectified. They are:

a) The *Ekwe* and *Adada* Cases

We have aforementioned in our study of Onunu cult that on the *Umu-Iche* day, new masquerades are brought into existence and the old ones upgraded. This constitutes an essential ingredient in the ancestral piety and veneration. Every member of the village is taxed towards this goal. Levies are imposed on everybody; Catholics, other Christians and traditional religionists alike. Even the daughters of a village being married elsewhere are involved. Should one not pay, he or she is ostracized. Some do pay secretly. Those who betray their faith in this regard always received the Church's sanctions. It is good to remark that masked human beings are not spirits and neither do they emerge from ant holes.

Again, these masquerades are, "irrestible", objects of socio-cultural entertainment and interaction. Catholics are taught to steer clear of these masquerades. But due to the social atmosphere that get charged with them, some Christians are even seen more deeply involved than the traditional religionists; all in the name of being in love with one's village political identity which these masquerades are meant to symbolize. They forget the religious underpinnings. Hence, "The tendency to identify African Culture and religions with political ethos seems to be arising. A rejection of non-Christian beliefs is sometimes taken to mean a rejection of one's own heritage". (Kato, B.H (1975:177)

The masquerades have social values of village political identity and entertainment but until it is expunged of idolatry, Christians are totally forbidden from participating in their activities.

b) **Easter Monday Christo-Paganism:**

The date for the *Onunu* is fixed by the *Attama ojo* with the ceremony of proclamation. Some Christians decided to distance themselves from the *Onunu* day but celebrate the *Onunu* on Easter Monday. With this, they are integrated into their family communion and life. This is a cosmetic solution. The Holy Mother Church did not approve of this Christo-paganism. Catholics are banned from this because on Easter Monday, during their celebration, the whole weight of *Onunu* with all its socio-cultural, traditional religious meaning and implications are at the service of African Traditional Religion.

Those who refuse this dual allegiance to old traditional religion and the new faith in Christ but with singular hearts of devotion listen to the teaching of the Church suffer rejection, family-imposed crisis and social opprobrium. In the face of this witnessing with thorns, many relapse into the old way. It is proper that authentic African values are articulated and deepened in Christ, otherwise some African Christians would remain superficial. As aptly put by Kato, B.H (1975:15): “Christianity must be expressed in such a way that Africans really understand and see themselves at home in Christianity. Superficiality of the Christianity of some members is the reason why many turn to their former way of life in an hour of crisis”. This view gives credence to the position of this paper; namely: until Christianity becomes our way of life in Igbo land in general and Obukpa in particular, the Christian culture would remain shallow. Inculturation has the potency to deepen Christian roots in our culture.

c) **Other Unchristian Elements**

On the *Ogo Nna* day, sacrifices are made to the ancestors through the *Okpara* of the family. Victims – goats, fowls- are sacrificed before fetish idols believed to be ancestral images. This form of sacrifice is one of such sacrifices in the old dispensation and which Christ’s sacrifice is superior to. Talking of this Christ’s perfect sacrifice, the Holy Scripture says: “by virtue of that one single offering, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying (Heb. 10:14), but as for the sacrifice of *Onunu* and such old sacrifices, the Holy writ unequivocally teaches. “Bulls’ blood and goats’ blood are useless for taking away sins”, (Heb. 10:4). So the *Onunu* sacrifice had been overtaken by the sacrifice of Christ for mankind of all ages.

Furthermore, diviner consultation, the element of magic and suspicion, carrying of charms and amulets that go with the masquerades make it unorthodox for Christians to participate. The empty belief of death should *Attama Ojo* see the new moon before the proclamation of *Onunu* or even, as we discovered from our study, the *Ojo* miracle is deeply superstitious and untrue. These problems identified with *Onunu* cult and festival could be taken care of through proper dialogue between the Obukpa culture as regards *Onunu* and the Christian Gospel. The fruit of this dialogue of faith-meets-faith would be to chisel out those particular unchristian elements in each case and elevate others, and indeed the whole Christianized *Onunu* in Christ.

We have *Onunu* – values which are core-values too in Catholicism and indeed, Christian faith. Hence, *Onunu* is *praeparatio evangelica*. Therefore such a rich theologically valid festival should be engaged in a dialogue with Christianity in order to facilitate inculturation. This exercise would deepen the Christian faith in Obukpa. This paper believes that these Christian themes as seeds of the word already found in *Onunu*

prepared some fertile ground for the seed of evangelization to germinate and grow the much it has among Obukpa people. The Christian message for Obukpa would then include all the authentic Obukpa cultural values which do not contradict the Gospel message.

A theologian of relevance does not theologize outside the Church. The fruits of his theological enterprise in subject to the *Magisterium*. The theologian is at the service of the Church. Therefore, the possibility of inculturating *Onunu* is not an individual theologian's affair or the feelings of a pious catholic out there.

As Pope John Paul II (1990) wrote:

In effect, inculturation must involve the whole people of God and not just a few experts, since the people reflect the authentic "Sensus fidei" which must never be lost sight of. Inculturation needs to be guided and encouraged, but not forced, lest it gives rise to negative reactions among Christians. It must be an expression of the community's life, one which must mature within the community itself, and not be exclusively the result of erudite research. The safe-guarding of traditional values is the work of a mature faith (Redemptoris Missio, No. 54)

Inculturation in this light can be facilitated by a synod to be convoked in this direction: inculturating *Onunu* Obukpa and multiple parallel cases in Nsukka area. His Holiness, John Paul II articulating the propositions of the synod Bishops of the Special Assembly for Africa wrote: "The synod considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa". (*Ecclesia in Africa, No. 59*). Inculturating *Onunu* is one of such areas of urgent priority. This is because the *Onunu* ancestral cult has Christian values and it is deeply rooted in the marrows of their cosmology and experience. It shapes their life, beliefs and goal.

The Prospects of Inculturation

Our discussion, in this section focuses on the prospects of inculturation which *Onunu* has as a theologically valid festival with many positive elements. This critical study would help us understand *Onunu*'s rich values or otherwise using the categories of Catholic Theology.

In the words of Aylward shorter, "A short definition of Inculturation is: the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures". cited by (Onwubiko, A.O, 1992:2). Christ's incarnation is indicative of the fact that God uses what man possesses, not something alien to him in saving him. Christ himself was born into Jewish culture. He used the cultural heritage of the Jews to proclaim his salvific message to them. Christ taught, by doing this, that the living culture of a people helps a great deal when used as a vehicle for the transmission of the Good News within their environment. People understand and imbibe things more when they come to them through their own categories and way of life. Christ himself understands that the imposition of an absolutely new culture on a people in the effort to preach the Good News would defeat the purpose.

No wonder he told the Jews: “I have come not to abolish the laws and the prophets but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). The elders of the early Christians realized this when in the Council of Jerusalem they saw it grossly unwise to impose the Jewish culture on the Greeks (Acts 15:1-30).

Inculturation in the African context would then mean that just as Christ took flesh in our Blessed Mother Mary, so should the Gospel message of Christ take flesh in the African cultural context. In other words, the Gospel of Jesus Christ should speak to African people in the context of their world views (Ele, C. O. 1994:13). The encounter is not therefore, between African world view and the world view of Western Christianity but between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and African world view.

In line with this view, Emefie, Ikenga Metuh echoes the warning of the Episcopal Conference of All Africa to the 1974 Synod of Bishops, Rome that “The African is keen to know what is really essential to Christianity and what are the wrappings of Western culture on Christianity”. Shorter A. throws more light thus:

What really happens is that Christianity in one cultural dress encounters a non – Christian culture and then tries to incarnate itself in the new culture. Two processes are involved: the “undressing” of Christianity from the foreign culture and the “dressing” of Christianity in the indigenous culture. These processes, however, are simultaneous since Christianity cannot exist without some dress or other. You cannot have a culturally naked Christianity. (cited by Aniagwu, A. K, 1988:108)

Earlier Okere T., wrote that “African Christians have been brought up to despise and renounce the old traditional religion but what is being offered in its place is totally foreign, developed in every detail by outsiders. There would be no understanding of the Gospel except from the context of the people’s previous understanding of themselves” (Okere, T. 1978:10). A thorough knowledge of this edifice of cultural values is of paramount importance otherwise the real could be mistaken for the shadow. Therefore, as Francis Cardinal Arinze (1990:222) would teach, a thorough knowledge of the religious and cultural context of the African is necessary for the herald of the Gospel, for a deeper planting of the Good News of Christ. Inculturation involves the whole human experience seen in the light of Christ. The challenge of inculturation in Africa is very clear in the words of Pope John Paul II: (1995): “The Challenge of inculturation in Africa consists in ensuring that the followers of Christ will ever more fully assimilate the Gospel message, while remaining faithful to the authentic African values” (N0. 78). The content of the Gospel message as proclaimed by Christ’s very lips, that is, the *ipsissima verba Christi* is a bone of contention among exegetes and theologians. However, the Gospel content should be what Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* refers to as “the essential contents of Evangelization” which cannot be modified, changed or ignored without great violence to evangelization *per se*. The apostle Paul gives us these essential contents or the living substance of the Gospel message thus:

Brothers, I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, the Gospel that you received and in which you are firmly established; because the Gospel will save you only if you keep

believing exactly what I preached to you – believing anything else will not lead to anything. Well then, in the first place, I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor. 15. 1- 4).

The Kerygma of Peter on the Pentecost day (Acts 2) is a solid background to the above Pauline teaching as an orthodox apostolic tradition of what the Gospel is. To these, Paul VI adds, love for God, and love for neighbor, the sacraments and prayer as yet other constitutive elements of the living substance of the Gospel message. The inculturation prospects of Onunu are based on its positive elements discussed above which are akin to the gospel values of Christianity. Some other aspects are neutral; these can be enhanced and given the values of Christian culture as well. However, all those aspects which are intrinsically and inherently unchristian are discarded completely.

Recommendations

This work discussed Onunu festival in Obukpa with an eye on its prospects of inculturation. In order to enable this paper bear the expected pragmatic results in the missionary life of the Church in the cultural area studied, the following recommendations are made:

- i) Onunu and other such traditional festivals which are at the heart of the people should be theologically studied in order to discover their evangelical values.
- ii) The Church on mission whose mandate includes the whole world (Matt. 28:19-20) and all creatures (Mark 16:15) should engage all peoples and their cultures in dialogue so as to understand them and evangelize them without anxiety, tension and crisis.
- iii) Issues such as Onunu festival and similar cases should be Christian themes for Diocesan Synods. This will bring its value to the consciousness of the people.
- iv) There is need to initiate inculturation process for Onunu in order to facilitate the expunging of the negative aspects and the perfecting of the positive elements in Christ.
- v) The whole Church should be involved in the inculturation activities. It is not for a few experts but rather for the whole community of believers and even non-believers as some cases might suggest.
- vi) Proper catechesis is necessary for the pastoral, moral, spiritual, liturgical and doctrinal formation of individual Christians in order to have the good grasp of what it means to be a disciple of Christ within cultural contexts.
- vii) The use of force and sanctions to deliver the Christian message distorts the goal of mission. Instead persuasions and pastoral commitments with full knowledge of the subject matter like Onunu festival remain better options.
- viii) Noble Women and ideal mothers should also be celebrated under ancestress veneration since God created them male and female (Gen. 1:27, 5:2, Matt.19:4) and family hood is not only about maleness. This means that patriarchy should be kept at moderate balances in every culture that practices its absolute forms.

Conclusion

His Holiness, Pope Paul VI in 1969 challenged African Bishops when he addressed them thus: “Your Church must be above all Catholic.... You can and must have an African Christianity. The Church can be truly African and truly Catholic”. And the Vicar of Christ, Pope John Paul II in his words to the Zairean bishops in 1980 re-echoed: “One of the aspects of this evangelization is the inculturation of the gospel, the Africanization of the church... This is part of the indispensable effort to incarnate the message of Christ” This inculturation in every aspect of Christian faith and human life is not an easy task. The spirit of Christ which leads the Church to the complete truth (John 16:13) must be the guide of this faith-exercise. The exercise must have the Christological and Pneumatological bases.

An African bishop at a conference in which probably ancestral cult was discouraged, was reported to have ‘bemoaned’: Are the people of my past to be forgotten? Must they mean nothing to me now?” This is a cry of an anguished soul in African worldview, who sees the very roots of his life and well being threatened by an interpretation of the Christian faith. (Emefie, Ikenga – Metuh, 1987:53). Inculturating the traditional world view of the African in general and ancestor worship in particular would help make the Church very much at home in Africa and Africans very much at home in the Church. It is worthy of note with Mbefo (1989:67) that, “Africans hold these ancestors in memory in the same way as the Jews hold the Patriarchs and Christians hold “the Fathers of the Church”.

The Holy Mother Church *Ad Gentes* in Nsukka Diocese has to, in line with *Nostra Aetate*, dialogue with the traditional religion there. The Council Fathers on this dialogue teach that:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religion. Let Christians, while witnessing to their faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture. (Nostra Aetate, No. 2)

The resultant effect of this dialogue would be the safeguarding of good African cultural values and the emergence of a theology based on African experience but not in antagonism with Divine Revelation (Scripture) and the deposit of faith inherited from the apostles. The Church in Africa had an ample opportunity now in her history to realize this goal even as the *Ecclesia in Africa* (Pope John Paul II) wants this holy dream come true and urgently too.

We are Africans and Christians. We are Obukpa indigenes with ancestral roots and heritage and we are Catholics, Christians and believers in Christ. We realize our meaning and become fulfilled in these dimensions. This should ignite very promptly and shape very sharply this focus of interest in the evangelization process and pastoral initiatives within the African Church. The African is *homo culturalis* to the core. So, the noble objective of theologico-cultural synthesis on the ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ involved

in the jealous protection of African-cultural identity while remaining open and faithful to the Good News of Christ is welcome. It is holy too.

Africa has an invaluable wealth of cultural heritage. *Onunu* is such a cultural treasure which is rich and cherished as such. In fact, it is the feast of “*men saints*” in Obukpa. “Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all nations” (Mark 16:15, Matthew. 28:19-20) is Christ’s missionary mandate and the Church thus sent into Obukpa, a part of “all nations”, as a universal sacrament of salvation shall have become truer to her missionary character and the missionary goal realized in some good measure if she sees the *Logos Spermatikoi* of *Onunu* as *praeparatio evangelica* and consequently, perfect *Onunu* in Christ.

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