

The Age of Cultural Hybridisation: A Case Study of Okonko Society vis-à-vis Christianity in Igboland

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ABSTRACT This paper is focused on the reality of traditional societies in Africa with Okonko society as a case study. Particular attention was paid to the origin, functions and pastoral challenges which, this ancestral society pose for Christian religion in Igboland. This research demonstrated that African Religion (Afrel), symbolized in Okonko society, is involved in a marriage of ignorance and bias with Christian religion in Igboland. Seeing the Christian faith in the light of the experiences of the “Okonkonites” (members of Okonko society) seems to be a difficult task for the Christian leadership there. Therefore, suggestions were made on ways to turn the apparent “ignorance and bias” between Okonko and Christian religion into constructive dialogue. This would help to improve the complementary relationship between Okonko society and Christianity in the efforts to enthrone the values of the kingdom of God on earth. Okonko society has its place among phenomena in the field of Comparative Religious Studies and in the Christian evangelization of people in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with Cultural Revolution, Christianity in general is in the process of extracting itself from one cultural attachment and putting down roots in multiplicity of places. This can be described as cultural hybridization. This includes religious experiences, cultural identities cum expressions of various peoples. In this context Comblin (1998) observed that, “Christianity has shaped itself to fit North American culture to such an extent that being American and being Christian has become almost the same thing. Differences between denominations do not matter because the central message is the identification of the American way of life with the gospel....”

Confronted with this observation of Comblin (1998) in the light of Okonko society in Igboland, one notes that the Church or Christianity, as an institution, has done so little to translate the message of Christ and His person into Okonko. This might have resulted from the observation that Okonko is the cultural expression and identity of the Igbos that have “*mma mma*” as a form of greetings. And to bring the message of Christ into it is to create a new world in Igbo Christian spirituality.

This again does not rule out the fact of change and transformation that truly took place with the introduction of Christianity. For instance, one of the greatest influences of Christianity is the introduction of Western education. However, the

gist-child was seriously disadvantaged because of the strong belief that she would marry and then ceased to belong to her family of orientation, taking the wealth to her family of procreation. In the late 1940s when girls were allowed to go to school through the intervention of the Catholic Mission, a lot of positive changes were witnessed in the society. Another area of serious change was the orthodox medicine, which helped immensely to cure many diseases traditionally attributed to supernatural causes. Thus, the building of churches and schools also matched with the construction of health centres (Mbakwe 2005).

The focus on Okonko society is instructive because it is the pivot of this work. The missionaries were averse to bi-membership of Christianity and Okonko society. This rule, as laid down by the missionaries was vehemently refuted as the people believed that the secret or mystery of Okonko had been revealed to women and non-members by those who got converted to Christianity. In spite of the missionaries effort to discourage initiation, a good number of people still joined either because of threat and pressure from their family or society, or because they wanted to hold important positions in the town. Joining the ancestral society was a significant criterion to hold important position in the town, so many chiefs would not want to forfeit such traditional honour.

The missionaries consistently preached

against the rituals which characterized the Okonko society. Thus, members of the Church were strictly prohibited from participating in what was taught to be sacrifices to the devil. The continued preaching of the missionaries coupled with the fruitful conversion of the people led to the decline in Okonko society in contemporary time (Mbakwe 2005).

This paper therefore, highlights the place and origin of Okonko society in Igboland, its functions and values, and how the relevant values can complement Christianity in her mission to enthrone the reign of God's kingdom in our contemporary society. Recommendations would be made as to how the confrontation between Okonko society and Christianity in Igboland could be changed into dialogue.

OKONKO IN IGBO SOCIETY

Society in general is made up of individuals or group of individuals who contribute to the general well-being of the community. In traditional society, no individual exists alone except corporately. He or she owes his/her existence to other people, including those of past generations and his/her contemporaries. Within the large corporate society are also other associations, guilds, groups or simply societies (Awolalu and Dopamu 2005). They are termed "closed associations" for the fact that initiation or acceptance into the society is not open to all and sundry. Other idiosyncrasies of such associations are "the wearing of special insignia, a hierarchy of ranked grades that determine the allocation of authority... from which the non-initiates are prohibited" (Offiong 1998).

In Igboland, such associations include "Umu ada", "Nze", "Dibia", "Eze ji", "Ozo", "Isi Nwanjoku" and "Okonko". These societies were and they remain the power of the community where they function. According to Ayandele (1991), every member of these societies was expected to be a man or woman of respect and integrity "who must confide absolutely in all members and help members in distress."

Okonko society in Igboland is of semi-religious character, it has a standard code, language, ethics and world-view which are most carefully guarded. The influence and power of Okonko society over the affairs and conduct of people in Igbo communities where they function are well known. The society determines ritual

behavior and social practices in most parts of Igboland. The nature and dynamism of Okonko society have religious and ethical contents. Butt Thompson's observation supports these noble features of Okonko. He said that the initiates are "taught pride in their ancestry, the pride that is the foundation of most religions, ancient and modern, civilized or barbaric, the pride that fosters admiration and reverence, and suggests regulations for the conduct of life..." (Thompson 1970). This means that the nature and frame-work of activities of Okonko society are well known to all in the communities. The whole range of its functions makes it the cohesive, social, religious and political force in many places.

Okonko is connected with the ancestors. These connections are described as "*ida mmiri*", "*ikpu ulo*" and "*ida mboko*" respectively. They represent the accumulation of a people's wisdom and identity. Thus, Okonko society becomes the objective manifestation of the reality of rationality of the Igbos. Without Okonko a people will be without a name. Therefore, Okonko constitutes a major element in Igbo culture. It is an integral element that exists and operates presently to give meaning to real people. It contains functional values for various communities in Igboland and for the adherents. It is within this functional framework that the Fathers of Vatican II Council (1965) noted that "...other religions which are found throughout the world attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by out-lining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts, and sacred rites".

For Christian religion, particularly Roman Catholic Church in Igboland, the challenges raised by this teaching in the face of Okonko society need not be traumatic. It is rather, to my opinion, an invitation to a Christian constructive and engaging encounter with traditional societies in general and Okonko society in particular.

Origin of Okonko

Like so many societies in the world, the origin of Okonko society is shrouded in mystery and obscurity. The exact period and date that the society originated in Igboland is not known. Most heads of families and elders in Igboland today cannot give the historical origin of Okonko. They are contented with saying that the society was in existence even before their forefathers.

However, some elders argued that Okonko

society came into being in an attempt to put a stop to community conflicts, inter-tribal wars and eventually create peaceful coexistence among people and neighbors. According to James (1976), the people realised that warfare was incompatible with trade, the Aros used the Okonko society in order to win the co-operation of different communities.

From another angle, prominent elders from Ohafia, Bende and Ikwuano areas of Abia State strongly opined that Okonko was derived from Ekpe society of the Efik-Ibibio. Okonko originated in the Ekot areas, and by early part of the eighteenth century, it had spread to the Cross River territory. It is likely that Ekpe diffused into Arochukwu, a neighbouring group where it was known as Okonko during the same period. From Arochukwu Okonko spread to other parts of Igboland.

In the light of the above, Ekpe society migrated into Igboland as Okonko, spreading to almost all communities of Igboland that have “*ndee wo*” and “*mma mma*” as their forms of greetings. It is to be noted here that early members of Okonko were associated with the Long-juju of Arochukwu. According to Offenber (1975), “members visited Arochukwu so that the oracle would solve such problems as “poor crops”, continued illness, epidemics and lack of children.”

A middle opinion on the origin and history of Okonko society claims that the local agents of the Long-juju of Arochukwu were pioneers of Okonko society. They were called “*Enyi Ndi Aro*”, friends of the Aros. It is claimed in some Igbo quarters, that the Aros gave them a secret symbol of Okonko called “*Ngbara*” which empowered them to form the society in their localities (Abadist 1954).

The founder of Okonko in each Igbo community was recognized as the President or “*Eze Ngbara*”. The president presided over the weekly meetings of the society and regulated its affairs with the multi-titled holders constituting the second rank in Okonko society (Abadist 1954).

In all analysis, the consensus opinion about the origin of Okonko in Igboland is that the society sprouted from among the free-born as a platform of social, economic, political and religious metamorphoses. The society existed and still is a formal society in Igboland permeated by a sense of mystery. Just like the description s Laye (1981) gave to a coherent society with a consistent manner of life, Okonko society is a

society whose origins “are incapable of explanation”.

Religious and Social Functions

All households and lineage in Igboland have their own heads. Most, if not all of such heads, are elderly men and staunch members of Okonko society. This informed the reason why Onyejekwe (2003) described Okonko society as indispensable in the daily governance of communities in Igboland. He strongly submitted that, Okonko was a powerful institution, which dominated the government of the community. During the pre-colonial and colonial eras, Okonko promulgated laws, enforced laws and order and performed the function of social control, it employed different techniques to enforce its rules and regulations.

Okonko served and still functions as the principal means of communicating with supernatural beings and the ancestors with the purpose of maintaining religious and social stability in Igboland. Offiong (1989) puts this point thus: “The Okonko is an attempt to reduce the all pervading spiritual world to an organization in which a few selected men can contact the spiritual world and interpret it to the people.”

Therefore, among the religious and social functions of Okonko is the settlement of important disputes in various Igbo communities. When there is a religious or social matter at stake, threatening community stability, Okonko members would assemble at the village square or at the “*Obi*” to listen to the matter. Decision or judgment is decided according to custom and tradition. Against this background, Ilogu (1980) wrote that, “the sort of things that are publicly judged include “*aru*” which are against the earth goddess believed to bring disintegration to the “*Umunna*”, village or town such as murder of a fellow town’s man, incest, stealing of yam especially by... titled person. Okonko society, no doubt, had the most powerful administrative network in Igboland.

Before any major feast or initiation ceremony in Igboland, the “*eze Okonko*” makes sacrifices to the mother spirit inviting her to grace the occasion with her presence. Her presence is believed to be inevitable if the ceremony or initiation is to be successful. The Okonko society also performs immersion ritual on behalf of the community. The community passes through such a cleansing process in order for all the evil things and sins of the community to be forgiven. This

religious duty is often carried out, by the Okonko society, at the beginning of the planting season.

The religious and social functions carried out by the Okonko society give the people a sense of reassurance that all is well again in the community. It is also the Okonko society that determines the date and manner in which the new yam festival will be celebrated within the year. The new yam festival is an agricultural and social ceremony designed to rejoice together for the good harvest. It is also put in place by the Okonko society to appeal to the spirit in charge of yam, to be equally propitious the next season. Until this ritual is carried out by Okonko society, new yams, at least theoretically, are not eaten. The ceremony is quite elaborate involving sacrifices to the "*ahia njoku*", the yam spirit. In all these, the Okonko Society features prominently (Offiong 1989). Okonko society also excommunicated people in very severe cases. The person is outlawed, banished and sent on involuntary exile (Achebe 1981).

Despite Western education and the influence of Christian Religion in Igboland, the functions and activities of Okonko society are still celebrated with zeal. Though these are now done with modifications, the secret symbol and mysteries of Okonko society remain a matter of pastoral concern for the Christian Churches. Today, even though membership in Okonko is not mandatory, young men still look up to membership. A lot of parents feel uneasy until their male children indicate interest and are initiated into Okonko society.

CONCLUSION

Of all the societies in Igboland, Okonko has the central place of importance in the lives and affairs of every free born male adult in the land. Okonko covers the traditional, religious and social lives of the Igbos prior to the advent of Western Culture and Christianity. The society is primarily a social, political, religious and judicial organization, established for the purpose of maintaining justice, peace and order in Igboland. This means that Okonko Society had the effect of preventing crime in the community. It was a vital society that reassured the rest of the populace concerning the enforcement of customary laws, especially in land matters and marriage cases.

Yet discussing the signs and counter signs in Christian life in Africa, a former Duff Lecturer insisted that "however anxious a missionary may

be to appreciate and retain indigenous social and moral values, in the case of religion, he has to be ruthless..., he must admit and even emphasize that the religion he teaches is opposed to the existing one and that one has to cede to the other" (Westermann 1973).

These submissions by Westermann (1973), a German missionary scholar, today captures the relationship between Okonko Society and Christianity in Igboland. Some indigenous clergy, zealous and committed to pleasing their European masters, see Okonko society as an institution that should be completely eliminated. According to them, "giving" the new means taking away the old. It has taken the intervention of another scholar of missionary expansionism, Cragg (1968), to raise the question: "if the old is taken away, to whom is the new given?"

From all these and what is on ground in Igboland, one is firmly moved to state that Christianity cannot succeed in enthroning God's kingdom if it ignores the impact of "Okonkonism" in the lives of Igbo Christians. "Okonkonism" is a manifestation of Igbo race's search for God. This means that Okonko society was a providential preparation for the advent of Christian religion in Africa in general and Igboland in particular. In the theory and practice of Okonko society, as this paper has highlighted, God was ahead of the Christian missionaries, preparing the Igbo race to encounter Christ. Thus, Sanneh (1983), in connection to this fact said that the places (in Igboland) reflecting the most marked accession to the Christian religion are also the areas of the highest concentration of the old traditional religion.

Okonko society in Igboland is thus, a significant factor that the immense Christian presence should not ignore. The Church has a lot to learn from the Okonko society especially in the areas of human and divine values embedded in Afrel. Therefore, this paper advocates that African Bishops and Priests drop their negative views of their own culture and religious history. This will be the beginning of the enormous task ahead in the area of inter-religious dialogue with Afrel and incarnating the gospel in Okonko society of Igboland.

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