

Fostering the Use of Palm Fronds in Christian Worship: The Igbo-Nigerian Context

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Introduction

The issue of Christian worship is an urgent and sensitive one to the contemporary Christian life and spirituality. This is because at least it showcases the trend and direction for the Church tomorrow. In the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the importance of liturgy in the life of the Church was hinted. Accordingly, in “the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” the Council Fathers refer to liturgy as an exercise of the priestly office of Christ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7) as well as the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and fount from which all her powers flow (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 10). As a result, the Mother Church earnestly desires that all her children be led to a full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebration which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Pet 2: 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 14).

The Church, through the voice of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, advocates for inculturation in liturgical celebrations and admittedly, the Church encourages inculturation of the liturgy. All cultures are admonished to bring to the table those cultural elements that are valuable, those elements that enrich the liturgy in a particular way; however, not changing the essence of liturgical celebration. The Church songs, their dance patterns, gestures, postures, arts, images, symbols, local drums, vessels as well as instruments and in some cases, local vessels neatly and finely designed to suit the standard of the Church used for liturgical purposes. In the report at the end of the interventions of the special Synod for Africa, Cardinal Hyacinth Theiandoum notes that: “Inculturation emerged as an overriding concerns at this Synod. It concerns every aspect of the life of the Christian in Africa; it is the marriage of professed faith and concrete life. It has nothing to do with

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seeking a cheap and easy Christianity, rather, its final aim is to sanctify, in an African manner” (Theiandoum 9). We cannot claim to be good Christians in the Igbo-Nigerian context if we are not well-cultured. Igbo-Nigerian worldview and cultural tradition and customs are the possible means of encountering the Supreme Being. Jesus took human flesh, ‘incarnate’ born into a human culture and traditions; and for most theologians and scholars, this was the starting point of His mission of redeeming nature.

This paper seeks to present the advocacy for fostering the use of palm fronds in Christian worship in the Igbo-Nigerian spectrum. To a large extent, it appropriates a proper interpretation of inculturation and consequently puts the reflection and proposition of inculturation to concrete reality and liturgical ceremonies. At the same time as some scholars and worshippers see it as a step in the right direction to convey deeper meaning of liturgical inculturation, others still see this symbolic object as empty and of no importance. For this school of thought (who see nothing more than the facial value of the symbol) using palm fronds in worship means more like idolatry and superstitious practice. This paper, therefore, focuses on building the faith of Catholic worshippers and making them see that symbols can help in easy transcendence from the physical to the spiritual as well as represent heavenly realities. This is especially germane in view of the reality and urgency of an authentic inculturated liturgy in the Nigerian nation (Anagwo, *Accentuating the Use* 71-86). In this way, it will elicit rich, responsive and converging reflections and approaches on how to continuously provide enlightened and incisive elements for Christian worship. This will influence the local Church and the wider society to cherish and pursue this trend and direction for African intellectual heritage and the Church today and tomorrow. The paper will hopefully serve as a major effort and catalyst towards such enlightenment to pursue the course of liturgical Inculturation in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia. Assuredly, this is the thinking that runs across the paper with special focus on fostering the use of palm fronds in Christian worship.

The Palm Frond and its Basic Considerations in the Light of Christian Worship

Since the paper aims at giving some kind of operative pattern for other Churches in Nigeria and beyond that nurse the intention of making their liturgies and rites meaningful to the people by way of liturgical inculturation, it would be apt here to have the basic considerations on what we understand as ‘Palm Frond’. In some climes, palm fronds are replaced by local versions of “palms” such as willow branches, cedar branches, pussy willows, ground palms and flowers. It (palm frond) is represented in various languages such as: *Omunkwu* or *Omu* in Igbo; *Ekin* in Efik or *Rassar* (*Itacen*) *kwara* in

Hausa. In Hausa language, Palm tree is also called *Itacen kwara*. The branches are *rassa* put together, it will be *rassar (itacen) kwara*. Interestingly, Palm Sunday in Hausa Missal is translated as: *Lahadin Azabar Yesu* which rather means Sunday of the Passion of Jesus or simply Passion Sunday. Fronds emanating from palm trees are tropical to sub-tropical plants which come in a wide range of shapes and sizes. Basically, they have a few anatomical characteristics in common especially as seen with their leaves, so the foliage of a palm tree is called a frond. More often than not, palms grow their fronds from the crown (or top) of the plant. The fronds, in question, are one major identifying device, second only to the type of trunk the plant grows. Generally, palm leaves come in four types, namely; pinnate, palmate, bipinnate and entire.

Pinnate leaves are the most common form of frond. The foliage resembles a feather and is divided at the end into individual leaflets. There is a thick central rib in pinnate leaves whereas palmate leaves show up on the fan palms. The leaf parts are set in a circle and divide from a central area, radiating outward. Bipinnate fronds are unusual and resemble a fish tail. Entire leaves look like pinnate leaves but do not divide at the end into individual leaf sections. Usually, only five palms have entire leaves.

Very significantly, the theory and practice of the liturgical use of palm fronds are built in the Scriptures. They are among the earliest cultivated trees. Historically, five thousand-year-old inscriptions from Mesopotamia instructed the people to cultivate them (Brand 1242). Palms are characteristic of oases and watered places (Exod. 15:27; Num. 33:9). Desert travellers highly cherished the fruit of the palm. This is because they may be eaten as fresh or else dried or made into cake for a portable and easily storable food. In fact, Jericho was known as the city of palms (Deut. 34:3; Judg. 1:16; 3:13). The judge Deborah rendered her decisions under a palm bearing her name (Judg. 4:5). The palm was a symbol of both beauty (Song 7:7) and prosperity (Ps. 92:12). Thus, images and palms were used in the decoration of the temple (1 Kgs. 6:29,35; 7:36) and were part of Ezekiel's vision of the new temple (Ezek. 40:16, 22,26). Palms were used in the construction of the booths for the festival of booths (Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15).

Greg Dues notes that originally early Christians paraded or processed in the original footsteps of Jesus from the little village of Bethany into the city of Jerusalem. One of the practices to mark the celebration was to carry real palm fronds or olive branches; the two most common trees in Palestine (Matt. 21:18; Dues, 80). According to the Gospel of John 12:13, the disciples used palm branches to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem, so the crowd bore palm fronds at the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

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On the basis of the Book of Revelation 7:9, the palm in Christian liturgy and art has become the symbol of martyrdom. Liturgically, it is not uncommon to see the use of palm fronds on Passion Sunday. Biblical bases for extolling the use of palm fronds in liturgical worship abound. The palm fronds have symbolic meanings attached to them, for instance, they symbolize peace, victory and eternal life. The Mesopotamian religions thought the palm frond was a sacred object which represented immortality to the people of ancient Egypt. A closed palm frond from the date palm is included in the Judaic festival of Sukkot (Web).

It is a common practice that during the Palm Sunday, palm fronds are blessed and distributed to worshippers who carry them during the procession. They are carried as a symbol of victory and well-being in triumphal processions by the Romans and Jews alike. The occasion of the triumphant entry of Christ to Jerusalem to commence His Passion and Death, were characterized by branches of palm decorated on His path. It has given rise to rich decorative and liturgical heritage. According to the Psalms, they symbolize the just person (Ps. 92:12-13). In early Christian representations also, the Apostles and Christ carried palms as a symbol of paradise (Lang 476-477). Prior to the commencement of the Lenten season the following year, blessed palms are burned at the local church and the ashes are used in the Wednesday ritual.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the use of palm fronds in our liturgical celebrations are not empty but have biblical connotations, coloration and significance. All these biblical insights to them emphasize the role they play in Christian worship and since the Catholic Church is notable for the use of symbolism, instead of arbitrary permutations, the importance of palm fronds cannot be over-emphasized.

Palm Fronds Vis-à-Vis African Christianity: Illuminations from Liturgical Inculturation

In Christian worship, the use of “palm fronds” in the sacred writings has given a leeway to liturgical symbolism for instance, on Palm Sunday each year, Christians in the Igbo-Nigerian context use “*Omunkwu*” as a sign of victory of our Lord to celebrate His triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:8; John 12:13). Accordingly, the clarion call made in 1969 by Pope Paul VI for an African Christianity is still relevant today. This is because only African values have to find a place in African Christianity. The Pope remarked that Africa possesses human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to be found in Christianity and for Christianity; a true superior fullness and prove to be capable of richness of expressing all its own and genuinely African (Pope Paul VI, 31st July, 1969).

Igbo culture from Nigeria can be fully inculturated through the various elements and symbols of the Igbo festival celebration. This can be used to enrich the Church's liturgical celebrations. In worship, "*Omunkwu*" as one of the most used symbols among Ndigbo is highly multi-referential. The context of its usage determines its symbolism, for instance, during moments of crises and wars, it could be used as warning and litigation in the native court. It can be used to show a land under dispute, that is, as a symbol of injunction. It is commonly observed that whenever a piece of land is in dispute, it is placed to prevent any of the contesting parties from entering there until the rightful owner is established. Accordingly, "By tying the *Omunkwu*, the individual or group is signifying that the land in dispute is handed over to the supernatural, specifically to the gods, goddesses and ancestors for custody until the dispute is resolved. If one eventually removes the '*Omunkwu*' on his/her own, he/she is challenging the supernatural custodians to a bout as well as insulting the tradition of the community."

In the event of one's death, it is placed on the transportation means used to convey the dead, meanwhile, in the market shed of a deceased, it is placed to inform the deceased's colleagues of the death of their member and preventing anybody from using the shed. When something abominable happens, it is often placed on the road leading to various nuclear families to signify that the law of the land has been desecrated. During the masquerade festival, it is used by each village to notify the people that their festival is on by placing it at a point in the village market. Its withdrawal signifies the end of the festival" (Aguh 6). It can also represent holiness and other auxiliary functions. As a symbol used in war, it is placed across a path where traps are set in the bush. As a sacred object, it is used to demarcate the habitat of a widow from people entering the compound unnecessarily. It is also used to show sacred places, for example, shrines; so as not to be tempted to defecate or urinate there. One cannot easily forget that it is used to guide away green snakes in some Igbo towns, because green snakes are totems in those towns. Priests or *dibias* hold *omu* between their lips during ceremonies when they are carrying out a sacred function. As such, people cannot talk or distract them from performing their sacred rituals

Symbolically, it is also tied across the door of a sick person to indicate seclusion. It deters people from transgressing a farmland wherever it is tied. Placing *omu* on any object indicates that the object is looked upon by the spirits, and the living and the dead are prohibited from touching it. It is also used as a symbol of arbitration and litigation. As a symbol of war, *omu* can be sent to any group of people or town. Above all, *omu* is a symbol of honour. Any special guest is received by Ndigbo with palm fronds on both sides of the road through which the visitor passes to herald this heroic welcome. For Jon Ofoegbu Ukaegbu: "Till today in Igboland, it is still the accepted way of welcoming a hero" (Ukaegbu 48).

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One of the ways the Church grows is through mutual enrichment, insertion and integration with new cultures and environments. She has to grapple with people's way of life and their concrete life situations; that is the message of inculturation. Inculturation is thus defined as:

The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question but becomes a principle that estimates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. It furthermore signifies an intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values by their integration into Christianity and the implantation of Christianity into different human cultures (Pazhayampallil 1012).

It is certainly correct to agree with Gregory Olikenyi that inculturation is the "process by which the Gospel values are integrated into a particular culture and thereby transforming it from within" (168). In this way, inculturation is the appropriate adaptation of Catholic liturgy and institutions to the culture, language and customs of an indigenous or local people among who the Gospel is first proclaimed in order to give their assent. Inculturation thus seeks the manifestation and demonstration of the Gospel in autonomous cultures and at the same time introduces these cultures into the life of the Church.

On his own, Justin Ukpong sees inculturation as "an attempt to give African expression to the Christian faith within a theological framework" (14). The point is well captured by Teresa Okure when she sees inculturation as a type of "incarnational union between Christ and the peoples of a given culture" (59). Admittedly, this is forcefully emphasized by Peter Schineller who agrees that inculturation would mean "the correct way of living and sharing one's Christian faith in a particular context or culture" (12). Assuredly, inculturation would seem to mean a theological awareness of the consequences of a union of the Gospel message and the culture of a particular people. Through this framework, the Church grows as the living body of Christ (Col. 1:18) in the lives of those who accept Christ. What happens is that Jesus Christ, through His Church, visits these persons through their cultures. When they welcome Him and accept the Gospel message which is assimilated in their culture, their culture now feeds Him like a seed that feeds on the soil where it is planted (Nwachukwu 36).

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remarked that the Church profits from the treasure buried within the diversity of human culture. This is because:

From the beginning of her history, (the Church) has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and technology of various people, and has tried to clarify it with the wisdom of philosophers, too. Her purpose has adept the Gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, in so far as such was appropriate. Indeed, this accommodated preaching of the revealed were ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For thus each nation develops the ability to express Christ's message in its own way. At the same time, a living exchange is fostered between the Church and diverse cultures of people (*Gaudium et Spes* no. 44).

Cardinal Theiandoume rightly states that: "Inculturation concerns every aspect of the life of the Christian Africa; it is the marriage of professed faith and consecrated life. It has nothing to do with seeking a cheap and easy Christianity, rather its final aim is to sanctify, in an African manner" (68). The message of inculturation revolves around the incarnational union between Christ and the culture of the people. Inculturation for Africans has to do with bringing Christ into the very centre of African life and lifting up all African life to Christ. The universal Church's theology of palm fronds could be enriched with the genius and cultural values of the Igbo-Nigerian tradition in lieu of the use in Christian worship.

With the background of what the Christian theology says about palm fronds, there is a possibility that some would easily think that 'marriage' with the cultural adaptation should not be advocated. Whenever the Christian message comes into contact with the culture of a people, there is bound to be some resistance. This understanding is so because some previously held '*status quo*' are bound to be touched. Through the process of inculturation which is more favoured terminology unlike other cultural encounters (like acculturation, enculturation, indigenisation, contextualisation, adaptation, etc), (Schineller 22) favourable grounds for mutual enrichment and integration are provided through the cultural practices that are examined, evaluated and appraised to further the course of evangelization. Teresa Okure opines: "That, our understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation should serve as the solid foundation for understanding inculturation" (57). The backdrop is the famous statement: "*Et verbum caro factum est, et inhabitavit in nobis*", the word took flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Patrick C. Chibuko states that: "This incarnational statement represents to a very large extent the foundation of any serious inculturation" (159). The example of Christ gives us a theological basis to this quest. In the words of Joseph T. Ogunduyilemi:

Jesus Christ, by earthly identification, was a Jew and started Christianity within the Jewish culture. He used the Jewish language and didactic style in His ministry (the parables). He ate Jewish food, bread and wine. His garments were Jewish clothes. He participated in the Jewish mode of worship (142).

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In the same manner, it behoves on one to see what palm fronds have in stock to appreciate its symbolism in the light of Christian worship. Any attempt for the Europeanization of liturgy is out of place; instead, it recognises the cultural values and genius of other people (Vagiggini 24). Studies are to be carried out, following the Principles of Liturgical Inculturation, SC 37-40 to ensure their nobility which is not attached to any superstitious belief, hence, the Council Fathers affirmed that:

Anything in these people's way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy, and if possible, preserves intact. She sometimes even admits such things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 13).

Authentic inculturation of the people's cultural values into Christianity is what will sustain the missionary enterprise. Nathaniel I. Ndiokwere writes that: "Lack of inculturation will ever continue to constitute a stiff challenge to the growth and existence of the Church in "Africa" (34). As already expressed, the use of palm fronds is not superstitiously bound with fetish beliefs and practices. From the cultural perspective, the palm frond could be used as warning and litigation in the native court. It used to show a land under dispute, as a symbol of injunction. Whenever a piece of land is in dispute, it is placed to prevent any of the contesting parties from entering there until the rightful owner is established.

In the dialogue with the African values and genius of the people, there is the tendency to show that image resides in the memory. As the dreams and hopes reside in the African concept, so also any discussion on meeting of Christianity with African values, one sees the efforts to retrieve the positive elements which have long been neglected if not scorned in the new African memory in Christ (Anagwo, "Christianity and" 276-299). Borrowing from what the people already know and are familiar with, it will not be a herculean task. It is considered necessary to inculturate the wholesome elements inherent in the use of palm fronds as a stepping stone to the glorious implication of the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

Fostering the Use of Palm Fronds in Christian Liturgy in the Igbo-Nigerian Spectrum

The Igbos remain the third largest tribe in Nigeria and spread out in over seven (7) out of the thirty-six (36) State Governments (excluding the Federal Capital Territory) of Nigeria, namely; Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Delta and Rivers States. Christianity, especially Catholicism is the dominant religion since worshippers' troop out in numbers especially on Sundays to attend liturgical worship. The Church in Igbo-Nigerian context, like the universal Church, has enjoyed over the years, the *modus operandi*

(mode of operation) and *modus vivendi* (mode of living) anchored on the dictum: "*liturgia semper reformanda est*" (liturgy is always undergoing reformation). The current study on fostering the use of palm fronds in Christian worship should be seen as occasion for a continued renewal of the liturgy which is the "source and summit," of the Church's activity (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 10). Liturgy in the life of the Church is a reality that is *semper reformanda*.

Let us concretise with some examples. Due to the significance of Palm fronds in Christian mystery of salvation, during pandemic such as coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis or when people have limited access to attend Palm Sunday liturgy, creative options available for the priests to foster the use of palm fronds to the worshippers, besides those who attended the liturgical celebration, include blessing many fronds and keeping them in reserve for Ash Wednesday ceremony of next year, or asking the faithful to come later in the day or during the week to collect them, or blessing many palm fronds for them later as sacramentals, or the pastor moving round the home of the parishioners to bless their palm fronds, or drop the blessed palm fronds in front of their doorsteps after the Eucharistic liturgy, or such similar gestures.

Very significantly, to demonstrate the pre-eminence of the Paschal Candle during Easter Season, it can be decorated with tender palm leaves (*Omu*). Consequent upon this last symbolism, the paper advocates fostering the use of palm fronds on the Paschal Candle. It can be beautifully decorated as usually done on the lectern (where the Word is broken) on festive occasions like Solemnity of Christ the King, Palm Sunday, etc. It presupposes that the basic preparation as required by the liturgy of the day are followed like adequate size for the Paschal Candle to be visible for everybody, the quality which should be a durable one, to mention but a few (Anagwo, "Easter *Triduum*" 119-134).

At any rate, the use of palm fronds in Igbo-Nigerian terrain must never degenerate into or be misused as a mere demonstration with no symbolic expression. The palm fronds are to be regarded as sacred signs chosen for the most part by the Church in order to stir faith and devotion in the faithful. Dues states: "Blessed palms have always been respected as holy objects or sacramentals. Some families place one or more on the wall behind a crucifix or holy picture until the next Palm Sunday, or they might braid them into crosses for wall decorations. Others save them and burn a little when some crisis, such as a storm, threatens" (1).

For one thing, emphasis should be laid on palm fronds as signs; signs of the faith of the Church and not just the faith of the Christian who uses them. This will consequently result in crediting them with greater effectiveness as has hitherto been inclined to attribute to them. Palm fronds have been viewed too exclusively from the pragmatic standpoint of efficacy. The former is an external sign, instituted by Christ while the latter is an external sign, instituted

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by the Church. As Pius XII puts it in *Mediator Dei* however, “their effectiveness is due rather to the action of the Church (*ex opere operentis Ecclesia*), in as much as she is holy and acts always in closest union with her Head” (no. 27). Along with the Church, Christ is present at every liturgical action (Pope Pius XII no. 20), thus, palm fronds too are in their own minor but supplementary way a continuation of the priestly office of Christ. They cannot be less than the hem of Christ’s garment, from which power went forth. The encyclical *Mediator Dei* ought to be a major impetus to a theological rediscovery of the importance of the palm fronds.

By implications the paper argues in support of anyone who wants to be better informed on trends and directions of liturgical inculturation. It concurs unanimously and unequivocally that for the Church to be truly the Church of Jesus Christ, she must be both universal and particular. The Second Vatican Council is very particular on the role of inculturation in the evangelical, liturgical, moral, political and catechetical functions. The ecclesiastical documents encourage various cultures to bring up cultural elements that enrich the liturgy for the sake of the assimilation of the Word of God. Liturgical inculturation does not however mean substituting the conventional laid down regulations of the liturgy. All cultures are free to see what cultural elements there are to be added for the good of the liturgy, following the laid down liturgical procedures enunciated by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7-40. The Church in each country must reflect the characteristic culture of its people. This is because the crisis of the African liturgical concepts is not a crisis in the faith but the crisis which hinges on the fact that they cannot find satisfactory, meaningful expression of that faith in worship. Consequently, liturgical inculturation of palm fronds must be taken seriously in the evolution of the 21st Christianity in the African Church.

Conclusion

The paper can be regarded as an insight on liturgical inculturation, fostering the use of palm fronds in the liturgical acts of the Church in Nigeria. The paper explores how the palm fronds could further be used in the liturgical celebrations and the basis for their application. It reveals the essence and symbol of palm fronds in Christian worship. The liturgy is the highest good of the Church. It is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Through the liturgical celebrations the Church constantly relives this mystery. Down the ages, she makes a memorial; a commemoration, a re-enactment, an ‘*anamnesis*’ of this mystery particularly in the sacraments and her other liturgical celebrations. In the words of Dom Odo Casel, quoted by Puthiadem, the “Paschal Mystery is experienced through the liturgy in which Christ Himself is present and active through the Church and the Church acts with Him” (Puthiadem 21). As the highest prayer of the Church, the Christian faithful who celebrate it should be properly formed so that they could merit

the blessings destined therein.

In conclusion, while it is true that the liturgy of the Church has found home within some particular cultural milieu for a long time now, it is not true to say that the liturgy is foreign to the genre and cultural expressions of the Nigerian mind; Igbo-Nigerian culture in particular. The liturgy is not tied to any cultural expression. It is supra-cultural. The good cultural expressions found in the values and genius of a people that are not contrary to the Gospel values could be legitimately admitted into the liturgy after a thorough process of study and probable purification to remove any aspect that may lead to misunderstanding and equivocation. The liturgy therefore, does not negate the possibility of using these good and valid cultural expressions like palm fronds on the decoration of the Paschal Candle and liturgical environment. This however, must be done following certain criteria so that the integrity of the faith is preserved and the possibility of error and abuse in the liturgy is kept in control. This indeed is one of the trends and directions of liturgical inculturation to evolve 21st African Christianity!

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