

Christianity in Igboland: Opportunities, Problems and Emerging Expressions

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Abstract

Igbo cultural environment can be seen as the setting in which the Igbo have lived out their political, economic and cultural everyday lives within the framework of religion and morality. Upon this cultural environment, Christianity was established from 1857 onward leaving the Igbo with diverse experiences. On one side of the experience was a completely new sense of transformation, but on the other hand, Christianity left the Igbo society topsy-turvy, manifesting in cultural crisis that hacked seriously on the Igbo worldview. Using some historical and sociological methods of inquiry, it was mirrored that this state of affairs could either lead to persons exposed to them being cultural hybrids, not at home with the traditional settings or the new social order engendered by Christian missionary activities, and therefore divided personalities, or else, it could lead to a new synthesis of adaptation of the old and the new, to the greater enrichment of life. This was the case with Igbo Christians; hence they evolved somewhat evolutionary expressions in Igbo Christian spirituality, demanding a new interpretation of Christianity in the context of their experiences and cultural environment that would be related and relevant to Igbo worldview and institutions as well as their symbolic interpretation of reality.

Keywords: Igbo Worldview, Igbo Christianity, Christian

Spirituality, Igbo Cultural Environment, Missionaries

Introduction

The life and thoughts of any pre-literate people is best studied through their religious beliefs and practices, hence this study is concerned with the analysis of Igbo religion and culture in the arena of the struggle for existence resulting from the encounter between Igbo cultural environment with Christianity. The study is necessary because the traditional Igbo religion as practiced by its adherents today is no longer same as in the past. Christianity as a way of life among its Igbo believers is itself no longer the same as was introduced by Western missionaries. This study, therefore, is an effort not only to create a point of contact and understanding from which we can appreciate the transformational roles of Christianity in Igbo society thereby exposing the weakness of Igbo traditional religion in helping its adherents navigate through the vicissitudes of the modern Igbo setting, but also the inadequate approach of Western missionaries in evangelising Igboland by neglecting the social and ethical milieu in which their converts lived before conversion and which cultural environment they continue to live.

Though this study is a reconstruction of the interaction of religions and cultures, it has to be noted here that it does not intend to interrogate culture as such in its complex and meaning. It will rather look at culture insofar as it is closely related to religious ethics. Even though, Ilogu observes that religion is one of the basic institutions of culture, it is religion which gives ultimate orientation and direction, not only in the values and beliefs which it upholds, but also by the way religion creates the pattern of relationship between individuals and groups, through

the values by which such individuals and groups make choices and thereby develop culture.¹ In the context of this study, Igboland is a generic term, which refers not only to a geographical location or entity, but also to the ethnic people who predominantly occupy the said geographical location and the language spoken by the people. It is worthy to say that, in spite of some sub-cultural differences among different Igbo communities, the Igbo still see themselves as one people, and at the same time are seen by non-Igbo people as a homogenous entity and have never been hitherto identified as different people. The Igbo people share a lot of things in common, especially their cultural outlook and way of life.

The Planting and Expansion of Christianity in Igboland

It was in July, 1857 that the first permanent Christian mission was established in Igboland following an agreement executed between a missionary group led by Ajayi Crowther, a Sierra Leonean ex-slave of Yoruba parentage, and Obi Akazua of Onitsha. Earlier attempts had been made by the same missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (1841 and 1854) to establish a Christian mission in the Igbo town of Aboh, and in spite of the warm reception and magnanimity of Obi Ossai in providing land for their mission base and operations, the missionaries relocated to Onitsha for some economic and geographical reasons.² It was then left to Onitsha to take the pride of place of becoming the cradle of Christianity and Christian evangelisation in Igboland.

¹. E. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*. (Onitsha: University Press, 1958), 24.

². K.L. Nwadior, "An enduring covenant: The past and the present in contemporary African Christian practice". *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 50,3-4 (2021): 203-223.

The Roman Catholic thrust in the Igbo Christian enterprise began also in Onitsha in 1885 under the leadership of the French-born Rev. Fr. Joseph Lutz, who had a missionary experience in Sierra Leone. It was, however, the leadership dynamism of Rev. Fr. Joseph Shanahan that greatly influenced the expansion of Roman Catholicism in Igboland. A third missionary activity towards the evangelisation of Igboland was started by the Primitive Methodist Society in 1892 in the area between Qua Ibo River and Port-Harcourt, from where it moved into the heartland of Igboland around places like, Uzuakoli, Bende, Isukwuato, and so on. The Baptists under the leadership of William Hughes from Colwyn Bay Institution in North Wales, started work in the Port-Harcourt area, and later moved westward into Igboland around places like Oloko and Obinze. The Qua Iboe mission led by George Walts, a British trader, started a school at Ibuno by the bank of Qua Ibo River in the Ibibio country. This missionary group later moved into Igboland especially in the Ngwa area around Aba. Much earlier on, the Presbyterians through their establishment at Calabar in 1846 had penetrated into Igboland around places like Arochukwu, Uburu, Ohafia, Afikpo and Abriba.

It was through the activities of these six European based mission agencies that Igboland was evangelised to the extent that in 1914, it could be said that Christianity had been planted in Igboland.³

However, a more detailed look at this earliest history of European missionary activities in Igboland will show that there was a strong link between the desire to Christianise and the desire to

³. Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo culture, 29

“civilise” the Igbo. That possibly informed the forcefully argued case for combined action by British politicians, philanthropists, commercial and agricultural experts, medical specialists, educators and missionaries, captured in “the Bible and the Plough” policy of Thomas Fowell Buxton, resulting in the 1841 Niger Expedition known as “the civilizing mission”.⁴ Through the various levels of engagement by these foreign agents of change, especially by the use of English language in the schools established by the missionaries and the fact that this early in the history Christianity in Igboland overloaded the Gospel message with foreign elements, a preference for European way of life was being indirectly built up in the minds of the Igbo, who already have had cultural inclination towards adaption to change by the virtue of its open society system.⁵

Nigerian historians have written quite a good deal on this topic, especially the indirect missionary roles in creating a new society through schools, as well as other latent functions of the various missionary agencies. This study is not intended to repeat all that. Rather the study wishes to call attention to some other historical and sociological factors that have created opportunities and challenges for Igbo Christian believers. The essence of it is to show how the traditional life of the Igbo has, over the years, been affected positively and negatively by the impact of Christianity, and the increasing revolutionary interpretation of the Gospel now taking place at an pace among Igbo Christians; the root of the whole thing being the failure of the early missionaries to

⁴. Ikechukwu Kanu. *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues.* (Nigeria: Augustinian Publications, 2015), 33.

⁵. Ikechukwu Kanu, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy.* (Nigeria: Augustinian Publications, 2015), 26.

understand the religion and the mores of the Igbo.

Hopes and Opportunities in the Teachings of the new Religion

The historical situation at the time of the coming of Christianity to Igboland was opportune. In its value orientation, the Igbo cultural practices did not seem to give much consideration to the worth of the individual person. The activities of the Aro people who managed the *Ibinukpabi* oracle, in harassing some villages with their Abam mercenaries, and the hunting for slaves and kidnapping of persons, had wearied the Igbo people to the point of their being ready to welcome something new. The existence of *Osu*, who were the untouchables of many Igbo towns (*Osu* are people dedicated to special deities. One of them is always chosen to be the special priest of a particular deity and must live near the deity's shrine); and the old women who were forced to drink poison as proof their innocence from witchcraft, were very worrying practices in Igboland at the arrival of the Christian missionaries. Isichei,⁶ says that Igbo cultural environment created whole classes of unfortunates to whom Christianity was to come as a liberation.

It was an old Igbo custom to destroy twins because it was considered unnatural for human beings to give birth to more than a child at a time, only lower animals like hens, goats, dogs, and the rest could give birth to more than one at a time. A woman giving birth to twins would, therefore, need a special cleansing sacrifice and the twin children would be destroyed, otherwise the land thus abominated would incur the wrath of the ancestors, which would plague the community.

⁶. Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo culture, 29

Human sacrifice was another practice that the missionaries confronted and addressed in Igboland. Three types of human sacrifice Ilogu (1985a) and Kanu (2015) say existed in Igboland before the arrival of the missionaries; the sacrifice of atonement when extreme abomination to the land had led to a breach of harmony between the spirit world and the community; the second was when chiefs and some noble men holding the *ozo* title were buried with their slaves partly to ensure a smooth passage to the land of the ancestors where they would join the restful bliss of other ancestors. It was believed that such slaves would serve their masters in the life after death; then there was human sacrifice resulting from the manipulations of the priests of sacred cults, oracles and shrines to appease the deities of such oracles. Missionaries in Igboland were naturally worried about these practices and at once did whatever they could to stop them. Christianity in Igboland showed the value of the human person and helped in abolishing these practices.

Commenting on the positive impacts of the missionaries in Igboland, Nwadiolor says that in one way or the other, missionaries and their collaborators were the great innovators in rural Africa in the 19th century.⁷ They had the numbers, the expertise, and the power to make a large scale impact not just on the inhabitants of a few well-run mission villages and settlements but upon rural society as a whole. It was clear enough to many Africans that the new “western” order with its trains and taxes, its books and its curious medicines, had come to stay; if so, it was

⁷ K. Nwadiolor, “Igbo Traditional Religion and Institutions”. In C. Uchechukwu (Ed.) Learning about Idi Igbo.(Lagos: Integrated Works Solutions, 2022), 198. Nwadiolor, K.L., An enduring covenant: The past and the present in contemporary African Christian practice. Journal of Religion in Africa, 50,3-4, (2021): 203-223.

vitaly important to make sense of it all. Hurton opines that people are attracted to world religions when they come in contact with a wider world, that the traditional religions are profoundly rooted in a particular locality and when they find themselves in a cosmopolitan environment, the local divinities seem less appropriate.⁸

One of the most powerful extra-doctrinal techniques adopted in virtually every Christian mission was western education. By strategically reaching out to the children, the missionaries were making an investment in the future generations that would, with time, take over control of local affairs. Mission education emancipated the people from closed traditional control and equipped them with a sense of self-worth and esteem. It has further opened their eyes to the dimensions of their rights and freedom both as human beings and citizens of a wider global community.

Development of industries and markets, centralization of administration and travel facilities in roads and railways, led to growth of towns around missionary settlements. Many young Igbo people were attracted away from their villages to the towns in search for greener pasture, which many of them got. However, it can be said to a reasonable extent that though urbanisation enhanced the economy and the confluence of cultural diversities, it reduced the essence of Igbo cultural values. Thus, in spite of numerous transformational roles of Christianity in Igboland, Ayandele still decries that:

His European master and teacher has stripped him of
his own skin, so robbed him of his own soul and

⁸. E. Isichei, *A History of the Ibo People*. (London. The Macmillan, 1976), 33.

language, so daubed him over with spots and stripes of his own veneer, so halted and be-frocked him that he has turned him into an unrecognisable human being.⁹

This is what this study refers to as problems in the missionary presence in Igbo cultural environment. It is these problems that the next section will focus on.

Missionary Policies and the Embattled Igbo Values

Before the arrival of Christianity, Igboland was a place where the traditional religion laid the bases for behaviour, social and cultural identifications, and the principles of socialisation from the older to the younger generation were clearly understood. It was an organised society with structured social system of patterned political and cultural values. For Nwadiolor,¹⁰ the cultural pattern that emerges through looking at the traditional social structure of Igboland as well as the institutions of family, religion and economic pursuits could be termed communalistic. Emphasis, according to Kanu is placed on the commune rather than the individual, and moral obligations are regulated more by the moral codes, tradition and custom than by the exercise of

⁹. E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. (London: Longman, 1966), 249

¹⁰. K. Nwadiolor, "Igbo Traditional Religion and Institutions", 198.

individual moral judgment and conscience.¹¹ Yet, the individual's responsibility to the commune is clear and never shirked because social expectations as well as shared values are commonly observed and the social ethos of the village is jealously guarded and upheld both by religion as well as by the accepted practices and prohibitions of the community. According to Agbo, a reflective analysis of the Igbo cultural environment shows a basic cosmology of people deeply rooted in religion.¹² Arinze aptly captures the influence of religion on the Igbo cultural environment when he states that the bases of many Igbo values are their deep commitment to religion. He shows how sacrifice and priesthood are potential instruments of social control and direction among the Igbo.¹³ Ejiofor adds that the Igbo man has some view about self and society which seem to influence his relationship with others, his traditions are noble and his person is worth any fortune. He is born as a continuation of his ancestors

¹¹. I. A. Kanu, "Igwebuike Research Methodology: A New Trend for Scientific and Wholistic Investigation".IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH). 5, no.4 (2019): 95-105; Kanu, Kanu, "New Africanism: Igwebuike as a Philosophical Attribute of Africa in Portraying the Image of Life". In Mahmoud Misaeli, Sanni Yaya and Rico Sneller (Eds.). African Perspectives on Global Development (pp. 92-103). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, p. 104; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology. Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 14-22; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as an Igbo-African hermeneutics of globalisation. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vol. 2 No.1., 2016, pp. 61-66; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as an ontological precondition for African ethics. International Conference of the Society for Research and Academic Excellence. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 14th -16th September, 2015, p. 11.

¹². T.O. Agbo, Redefined Identify: A Missionary Interplay of Bible Translation and Igbo Culture, 1857-2017. (Enugu: SAN, 2020), 56.

¹³. F.A. Arinze, Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion. (Ibadan: University Press, 1970), 65.

who, after their death, are still actively involved in his affairs.¹⁴
Anene further submits that:

No study of the Igbo is intelligible without a clear appreciation of the reality of the supernatural world. Among the Igbo, religion, law, justice and politics were inextricably bound up; law and custom were believed to have been handed down from the spirit from time immemorial, from ancestor to ancestor.¹⁵

But with the arrival of Christianity and its expansionist activities the neat pattern became disturbed. For one thing, Igbo society became secularised to the detriment of ancestral homage which was a major support on which the system rested. This section will, to an extent, place emphasis on the change in Igbo cultural environment as engendered by the contact with Christianity. As Nwadiolor and Ogbuji note, there is probably no doubt that, looked at in terms of the total scale of Igbo history, missionary enterprise could be discussed in terms of the degree of changes which it induced in the life and culture of the people and hence their identity. This section will therefore explore in details the ramifications of the impact of Christianity on Igbo cultural pattern so as to indicate how new types of spirituality and values are emerging in Igboland.¹⁶

The planting of Christianity in Igboland involved a good many factors of human nature, historical facilities or hindrances and the

¹⁴. L.U. Ejofor, *Igbo Kingdoms: Power and Control*. (Singapore: FEP, 1982), 44.

¹⁵. J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1960: The Theory and Practice in Colonial Protectorate*. (Cambridge: The University, 1966), 10.

¹⁶. K. Nwadiolor and I.B. Ogbuji, "Reclaiming African Personality through Religious Powers: Indigenous Churches and Cultural Re-Awakening in Post-colonial Era". *International Scholars Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 3, no. 3 (2020): 9-20.

problems of racial and cultural misunderstandings. There was no attempt to interpret ethical principles of Christianity in Igbo cultural orientation. Rather, what seemed to be the general belief of the 19th century missionaries was to produce a new society in Igboland. The cultural and racial differences that tended to divide the missionaries away from the local congregation made it difficult for clear community-oriented Christian ethics to appear clearly in such local congregation. Christian ethics in Igbo cultural environment of the 19th century therefore became simply a system of some moralistic rigid code centred on excommunication and castigation.

Part of the problem was that the circumstances of missionary work and the organisational necessities of the Church turned some of the early missionaries into setters of standard which must be obeyed rather than being missionaries on a cross-cultural assignment. Furthermore, there was a movement in England within Evangelical circles, and elsewhere in English Christian life, which emphasised “holiness”. “Holiness” was defined on moralistic terms about the thing a Christian might do or might not do. Kamuyu opines that the evangelical movement was started by a group of Christians at Oxford University in 1735. It involved mainly the Anglicans. Evangelical theology was selective, individualistic, pietistic, and often unreflective.¹⁷ The Evangelical theology contributed to the missionaries' attitudes towards what they considered to be African secular life. The evangelicals had developed the doctrine of two kingdoms, namely, the kingdom of salvation and sanctification, and the kingdom of the world. The

¹⁷. W. Kamuyu, “The Suppression of African Patriotism and Nationalism by the Mission Churches in Kenya from 1900-1950”. In O.U. Kalu (Ed.). *African Church Historiography: An Ecumenical Perspective*. (Leiter: Lukas Vischer, 1988), 168.

first kingdom is headed by Christ while the head of the second is Satan. This doctrine of the two kingdoms had a substantial influence on the missionaries who perceived the African world as a world headed by Satan while their world was headed by God. Many young missionaries coming into Igboland, like the Oxford and Cambridge graduates were persons sharing this evangelical theology. These missionaries, therefore, made no allowance for any of the values of African society assuming in fact that there were no such values.

Again, the problem of institutionalisation of the Church and providing it with structures of administrative machinery had turned the Church in Igboland into a law-making body with chains of command along the line which most often required to be obeyed, thereby constituting themselves unknowingly into law givers. Strong demands were then made from Igbo converts; new rules were introduced, for instance, Christians were forbidden from marrying according to native customs; they must stop paying the customary bride wealth and naming ceremony of their children must no longer be performed in Igbo traditional way. During the course of the years, Christians were taught to refrain from paying the extended family and village collections levied for various activities because the missionaries believed that part of the levies went to sacrifices to idols, part also went to certain other activities associated with burials, like the masquerades. According to Okolugbo, Christians were therefore taught to look down with disgust and contempt on certain aspects of the traditional religion, culture and social institutions. Christians

were discouraged from participating in traditional festivals or to fulfil filial duties towards their ancestors. They were also discouraged from taking local chieftaincy titles, since the reception of these titles seemed to the missionaries, the involvement in the service of the traditional divinities or paying homage to them.¹⁸

Greater complications arose when many children of many family heads became Christians, and were forbidden by the teachings of the missionaries to perform the second burial of their fathers. The Igbo practice was to bury an elderly person soon after death, with preliminary ceremonies, sometimes later, the second burial would take place with lot more elaborate ceremonies than the first. It was believed that this second burial was the one that helped the spirit of such departed elderly persons to conveniently join the league of the ancestors from where they plead effectively with deities for the well-being of their children on earth. For quite some time, this presented a big problem to many converts who were ready to obey the teachings of the missionaries, and the same time felt the compunction of filial duty to dead parents as well as respect to community opinion because these converts were also members of the local non-Christian community.

Oath taking at the shrine of a chosen deity was one of the methods employed in the traditional Igbo society in obtaining sanctions against destroyers of traditional norms and provisions. According to Ilogu, the Igbo used shrines (where oaths were sworn), oracles and taboos as means of social and political control. Christians were taught not to accept this anymore as they

¹⁸. E. Okolugbo, *A History of Christianity in Nigeria: The Ndoshimili and the Ukwuani*. (Ibadan: Daystar, 1984), 70.

were regarded as unchristian practices. But in the absence of other alternative forms, it did, no doubt, constitute the Christians into lawless groups. Ekechi laments that:

The converts in turn became quite fanatical and threw caution to the wind; indeed, no doubt, by their teachings, the Christians began to cut down the trees in various groves and religious shrines as a test of their earnestness in religious commitment.¹⁹

The Christian missions also despised *omenani*, the traditional religious sanctions which were established for the preservation of the society. Nwadiolor and Kanu educate that *omenani* is derived from the earth goddess and sanctioned by the ancestors; it is religious in nature, although it fulfills social, moral and cultural functions. In the absence of writing and formal school education *omenani* becomes the means of summarising the social philosophy and religious doctrine of the Igbo. *Omenani* is the means by which traditional Igbo societies enforce conformity. Culturally speaking, *omenani* is the means by which the social ethos is measured, the values of the society are continued from one generation to the other, and the process of socialisation through the education of the young ones are facilitated.²⁰

For instance, *omemani* prohibits women under their menstrual periods from visiting the streams or the house of a titled man. All the missionary bodies encouraged their converts to defy these religious sanctions which they regarded as taboos emanating from primitive superstitious beliefs. Nwadiolor adds that the

^{19.} F.K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914*. (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 53.

^{20.} Nwadiolor, "Igbo traditional religion and institutions", 198.

missionaries encouraged Christian women under menstruation and women who had just given birth to defy religious sanctions which forbade them from entering certain traditional holy spots, passing by the groves of certain divinities, entering the houses of traditional priests and other people holding public religious offices. Besides, Christians indiscriminately ate totem animals, birds, fish, and crops which the citizens forbade for spiritual well-being of the individual as well as the entire community. On the whole, Christian missions encouraged their members to have negative attitudes toward these social control provisions.²¹

Masquerade is a social control institution in Igboland, employed during special communal sacrifices which involved warding off any evil spirit tormenting the society. According to Nwadiolor, in pre-colonial Igbo setting, the masquerade institution is the police of the community of a sort. The Igbo believe that masquerades represent images and spirits of the dead ancestors coming from the world of the spirits for the maintenance of peace and order in the communities. They also appear in the communities during festivals for the purposes of entertainment as well as to dine and wine with their living relatives. The masquerade institution is highly respected and regarded in Igboland.²² *Otu Muo*, as the masquerade society is sometimes referred to, also performs some political duties: they guard the village against thieves, collect fines from people pronounced guilty of offences, and help in seeing that abominations are not hidden. Membership of the masquerade society is not open to everybody. In most cases, it is

²¹. K. L. Nwadiolor, "An Enduring Covenant: The Past and the Present in Contemporary African Christian Practice. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 50,3-4, (2021): 203-223.

²². Nwadiolor, "Igbo Traditional Religion and Institutions", 198.

restricted to the male adults in the community. However, some women who have attained their menopause are in some cases allowed to join the masquerade society. It is believed that women defile or nullify the efficacy of the masquerade, and are therefore strictly prohibited from seeing or touching the paraphernalia of masquerade. But all the Christian missions encouraged their women to despise the masquerade institution, because they were ordinary men, not the embodiment of the divinity or spirits they claimed to lead out. This attitude was regarded not only as anti-social but also a calculated attempt on the part of the Christians to invite the wrath of the divinities on the people.

What then will take the place of oath taking or any other disused traditional sanctions against deviants of moral prescriptions? What alternative sanctions can the Church provide to replace oath taking which had played useful part in enforcing morality?

Ife nshu and ancestral reverence is another Igbo cultural value that was attacked by the teachings of the missionaries. *Ife inshu* is seen when a certain kind of animal or fish is killed, certain parts of it must be given to the senior brother and uncle, where the young man who killed the animal or fish has lost his father. If the father is alive, it will be for the father and the uncle and also for the senior brother. *Ife nshu* can also be seen in the carrying of tribute gifts in the form of firewood, yam, palm wine and sometimes a few other items on the great feast day of lineage or clan by the younger to the elder. It is a means of recognising the lineage tree when the line of seniority is clarified once a year by the exchange of these tribute gifts on the appointed day. This practice was highly discouraged by the individualistic tendencies of the imported European culture as well as “the come ye out from the people” teaching of

the missionaries.

Belief in the continuity of the lineage through a link that connects the dead, the living and the children of the future, is a very a strong and healthy culture feature of Igboland. The ancestors, according to Ilogu:

Are themselves guardians of public morality; they know best what is good for their offspring because in life they had laid the foundations of society on goodness, truth and purity, and they would now want such goodness to continue. It is by doing what the ancestors would approve-that is, by being loyal to the traditional code of morality-that the tribe or extended family can survive.²³

Unfortunately, Christianity has removed the fear of the ancestral spirit as the source of evils like sickness, barrenness and some epidemics. Yet Christianity has not been able to kill the belief in the existence of unexplainable link between the Igbo and their forefathers.

From the earliest contact of Christianity with Igbo life and society, polygamy seemed one of the most difficult institutions of the people's life to be easily thrown away by converts. It has to be noted that the failure of the missionary leadership in Igboland to understand the depth of the problem presented by polygamy, has continued to be a source of ethical embarrassment to the Church, not only in Igboland but all Africa. Okolugbo notes that "as early as 1896, Isaiah Edemenya, the first Ndoshumili man who

²³. Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo culture, 74

attempted to be trained as a priest in the first Anglican Divinity school, Asaba was excommunicated and dismissed from the school by the missionaries of the Niger mission on account of "wrong marriage".²⁴ They felt that "true religion" can admit of no compromise with the world and therefore the Church could not admit polygamists. This position of the early missionaries to Igboland did not take cognizance of the problem posed by polygamy to the Igbo convert whose social structure, links of association on the father's side as well as on the mother's side, and the relationship of cousins, uncles and nephews or nieces have been built around the many wives of the family, nuclear or extended. The roots of the young Igbo personality and the consciousness of his communal existence he knew then went deep down into polygamous associations. No wonder Archdeacon Dobinson lamented that:

One never realised till one gets out here how serious and difficult a question it (polygamy) really is. How serious and difficult the dislocation Christianity brought upon Igbo institution of family life built on polygamy is, can be seen from the fact that the problem is still with the Church after a century in Igboland.²⁵

This wound of racial intolerance on the part of these European missionaries still constitutes thorny moral and ethical problems for the Church in Igboland. This made it impossible for real, effective understanding and appreciation of Igbo people and their culture to be generated and utilized in the service of the Gospel. The Igbo Christians reacted to these states of affair and openly said that the missionaries had come to break down rather than to

²⁴. Okolugbo, A History of Christianity in Nigeria, 74

²⁵. Ilogu, E., Christianity and Igbo culture: Onitsha: University Press, 1958, pp. 74-75

build up, to destroy rather than to help.

Nwadiolor notes that the missionaries would have recorded more substantial achievement in Igboland if, while maintaining its own position it had paid more attention to Igbo religious institutions and worldview; but the denial of Igbo traditional norms, values and aspirations without satisfactory substitute or explanation left much to be desired and sparked off criticism not only from the non-believing population but also from Igbo converts themselves.²⁶ To this, Okolugbo echoes that “Christianity has of course largely over thrown African moral taboos and sanctions but Christianity, while destroying them, has put nothing in their place”.²⁷ The Igbo thus view this failure to integrate with the people, their society and institution as a major weakness of the missionaries, responsible for the inability of the Church to meet the spiritual needs of the indigenous converts. Thus, instead of displacing the traditional religion in the lives of its adherents Christianity became an appendix of the indigenous beliefs and practices; the Christian God being worshiped on Sundays while recourse was freely made to traditional divinities on week days. During life crises such as birth, marriage, sickness, poverty and death, customs matter more than Christianity and it is during these crises that the Church significantly becomes an alien institution in Igboland.

These historical facts explain a great deal of the need to re-interpret Christianity to the Igbo

^{26.} Nwadiolor, “Igbo Traditional Religion and Institutions”, 198.

^{27.} Okolugbo, *A History of Christianity in Nigeria*, 74

Cultural Recoveries and Emerging Expressions in Igbo Christian Spirituality

The period of planting and expansion of Christianity in Igboland witnessed warm enthusiasm and reception by the Igbo. However, the later part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century saw the beginning of the growth of indigenous Churches. Ngugi states that a religion that took no account of people's way of life, a religion that did not recognise spots of beauty and truth would not satisfy, it would not be a living experience, a source of life and vitality.²⁸ There is no doubt that all religious organisations make some provisions for the solutions of members everyday life challenges. Nwadiolor and Ogbuji are of the opinion that if a new religion has assumed major significance in the lives of a people, then it is very necessary to assess the nature of its activities and progress in order to establish the genuineness of its predominance and to see how far it has allowed itself or otherwise, to fulfil the requirements which the people demand of their religion.²⁹ Among the Igbo, it appears however, that these emerging dimensions in Igbo Christian expressions are believed by a good number of people to help more effectively with people's perspectives about work, health, wellbeing and deliverance from unseen life forces challenging people's well-being. Ejiofor rightly notes that although the Christian religion is firmly established among the Igbo, it seems to yield to the traditional religious beliefs as an affective force in everyday life. Whereas the manifest power of Christianity appears to be directed to defending its central ethical and doctrinal beliefs, they do not emphasise mystical and

^{28.} W. T. Ngugi, *The River Between*. (London: Heinemann, 1965), 40

^{29.} Nwadiolor and Ogbuji, "Reclaiming African Personality through Religious Powers", 9-20.

symbolic means to achieve their end.³⁰

An insight into the evolutionary annals in Igbo Christian spirituality and the emergence of many prophetic and sometimes unorthodox Churches which have sprang up possibly as a means of solving the problems created by the interaction of Christianity and Igbo traditional pattern forms the fulcrum of this section.

As earlier noted, developments of industries have led to the settlement of young Igbo people in towns around Christian missions. In the villages, they were socialised into the neat pattern of communal living and sharing in the large extended family unity, with its organised pattern of social control through customs, provisions and the use of religious systems of oath and authority, associated with ancestors through the heads of the lineages or the extended families. Such controls and traditional religious sanctions do not operate in towns. However, some people started organising their various town unions in the towns and cities embracing people from the same group of villages, and try through these town unions to bind themselves together by norms of their village life, especially in matters of social welfare and cultural interest. It is some of these clan unions from the towns who go back to the villages to demand that the Churches incorporate features of Igbo traditional culture into the Christian way of life, as a means of recovering what they regard as their lost identity as Igbo. They now rejoice in their freedom to give their children, at christening, Igbo names which they regard as more meaningful than what the early missionaries called “Christian names” even though most of those happen to be Italian or Anglo-

³⁰. Ejofor, *Igbo Kingdoms*, 21.

Saxon names; Igbo musical instruments are now incorporated into gospel band, Igbo language is now acceptable as liturgical and pulpit language. Achebe continues that this class of Igbo Christians insists that “Igbo sayings and proverbs are far more meaningful and impactful than the doctrinaire, self-righteous strain of the Christian faith they were taught”.³¹ Nwadiolor adds that in recent years, the very considerable and beautiful body of proverbs and spiritual sayings in Igbo language which refer to God have been brought into some use in preaching and catechesis.³²

The Igbo custom of paying bride-wealth to the parents of a girl by the family of the young man wanting to marry her has been retained by the Christians. Igbo Christians have also generally adopted the traditional practice of newly delivered mothers staying fairly in quiet rest and comparative seclusion for some weeks after child birth without attending to public places like Church, women's meetings or the market till after the christening and the service of churching of women after childbirth. The customary giving of feast for a new born child has been taken over by Christians. Okolugbo notes that the traditional seventh day outdoor ceremony among the Ndoshumili people has been Christianised by a few Anglican women prayer groups; these prayer bands have assimilated the traditional practices of *IgoAniEzi* and transformed it to suit the Christian faith. *IgoAniEzi* is the traditional dedication of a newly-born baby to *OliseEzi*, the arch-divinity of the people.³³ As the chief agent of *Chukwu* on

^{31.} Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. (London: Penguin, 2012), 12

^{32.} Nwadiolor, “An Enduring Covenant”, 203-223.

^{33.} Okolugbo, *A History of Christianity in Nigeria*.

earth, *OliseEzi* is believed to be the custodian of life. Consequently, a newly-born baby must not see the world until homage is paid to this divinity in form of ceremonial service on the seventh day. While absorbing this ceremony into their religious practice, Ndoshumili Christians have clothed the custom with Christian norm. Christian mothers and their new born babies are advised to keep in doors for seven days. At the end of the seventh day, instead of rendering service to *OliseEzi*, they are instructed to offer prayers and praises to *Chukwu*. Usually, members of *OtuEkpele Eke*, the women's Eke prayer band, help Christian mothers in this ceremony. On the seventh day, the head of the women prayer band leads her group to the house of a person performing the outdooring ceremony. Like the traditional priest, the Christian leader orders the parent to bring the baby outside and prayers are offered to *Chukwu* directly instead of the *OliseEzi*.

Some festivals, according to Ilogu are ceremonies of re-enacting the solidarity of the people under the covenant of their unity through common ancestry and the protection of clan deities.³⁴ Nwadiolor explains further that, religious festivals and rituals such as new yam festivals, harvest seasons, hunting seasons and planting season festivals are activities that demonstrate and express belief and faith respectively in *Chukwu* and the spirit world. During these ceremonies, what God or the divinities have done for the people are commemorated; rituals are done and powers obtained from the spirit world.³⁵

^{34.} Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo culture, 29

^{35.} Nwadiolor, "Igbo Traditional Religion and Institutions", 198.

Religious festivals sustain and generate the myth underlying the believe system of the people, while it also binds people together socially. For instance, the Igbo celebration of the new yam festival is connected to the month of *Ufejioku*. It is a time when they give thanks to *Chukwu*, His deans and the ancestors for granting them a bountiful harvest. These annual ceremonies is continued even now and some Christians, who, so many years ago, would not witness it, do so today as identification exercise with the rest of their fellow clansmen. This can be seen in the *Iwaji* festival among the Igbo. This is the traditional annual offering of the new yams to *Ufejioku* (the agricultural divinity) before the citizens are permitted to eat the new yam. This is because it is believed that *Ufejioku* is responsible for the good harvest of every farm. Some Churches have now assimilated this practice by fixing a day in which every Church member is expected to bring his new yam as thank-offering to *Chukwu* (The Almighty God) before he tastes it. Christians now emphasise that *Chukwu*, rather than *Ufejioku*, should receive such offerings. Thus, while the missionaries were reluctant to promote indigenous Christianity in Igboland, some Christians of Igbo origin have taken the initiative to interpret Christianity to suit their cultural environment. This is a move in the right direction for without indigenisation it is impossible for Christianity to be rooted in and be meaningful to any people.

The use of visible symbols of well-being like holy water and incense and well-known cases of spiritual healing are among the main attractions into these indigenous Churches because these practices resemble the Igbo traditional religious use of symbolic elements in healing processes. Ilogu explains why some educated Igbo Christians consult diviners or still wear charms or submit to prophets of healing and vision seeing Churches thus: it is because

neither science nor the Christian faith has succeeded in explaining the causes of fortunes and misfortunes to the Igbo. His traditional culture had given him a more satisfying explanation namely that there are all sorts of chance situations in this world controlled by spirits.³⁶

Igbo medicine, therefore, goes beyond mere scientific findings of the healing ingredients. Rather, it targets holistic healing through the effective mobilization of all affordable resources (physical, spiritual, economic and even political) in preventing or curing a person's illness. This is so since the human person is a composite of the physical, the psyche, the social, the moral and the spiritual, any of the parts could be afflicted either in part or as a whole at any time. This is why Adibe notes that “any medicine man or woman who worth his/her name must have an unflinching alliance with mystical powers”.³⁷ He explains these mystical powers as the spiritual beings whose potency attracts reverence and homage.

According to Onuwa, “The traditional religion is indeed society itself and there is no clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane”.³⁸ Both the spiritual and the physical realms of the universe are believed to work in a consistent harmony and are subject to an ordered system and rhythm. Any breach in the system causes a disaster and the whole system is disrupted. The whole essence of man's religious rituals is to keep the system in a consistent harmony (to maintain the balance). Medicine is part of

^{36.} Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo culture, 29

^{37.} B. Chidili, “Religion, Healthcare and African Herbalism”. In E.O. Ezenweke & I.A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*. (Jos: Fan Annieh, 2012), 208

^{38.} U. Onuwa, *Studies in Igbo Traditional Religion*. (Obosi: Pacifi

that whole complex religious attempt to keep the system in consistent harmony. The value of the people's cultural environment is strongly emphasised in the religious activities of these indigenous Churches. Highly emotional forms of public worship with drumming, impromptu forms of prayers, "soulful music" that were typical of Igbo traditional worship, and fallen into trance and speaking in tongues, attract a large number who say that such worship patterns are more agreeable with their Igbo background and with the unconscious level of their personality.

These emerging Churches utilise Pentecostal features as well as African healing and prophetic deliverance practices both as worship pattern as well as problem solving mechanism. It can be said therefore that the western missionary efforts in evangelising Igboland was frustrated in part by forces set in motion by Christianity itself, for example, science, technology and secularisation. At the same time, the cosmic totality of Igbo cultural environment was punctured by the impact of Christianity and the accompanying western secularised civilisation. Hence, the development of revolutionary Christian expressions that found proper link within Igbo culture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study, so far, has indicated that in the interaction between Christianity and Igbo cultural environment, the Church was not acclimatised to the Igbo cultural surroundings, leading to the gradual decay of the Igbo moral codes. And in the absence of another effective normative guide to life and values, there was definitely the need for new Christian expressions to be developed to fill the gap. This evidently led to the emergence of religiously based new culture even as the old Igbo cultural pattern was

religiously oriented. The motif was to determine how best the Church could serve the Igbo human and spiritual needs by being more related and relevant to their own cultural environment.

What is more is that this development in Igbo Christian spirituality should take cognisance of the 21st century rapid social change which requires that the Gospel be further re-interpreted to become more relevant to this generation of Igbo Christians, not only for relating the Christian message to Igbo culture and life, but also in rearing Christians for the ever-changing tempo of the 21st century life, which includes secularisation and arrival of greater doses of modern civilisation. The task here is clearly that of repositioning Christianity to be absolutely crucial towards the understanding of what Christ means in the emerging world community and its new normal. Lastly, there is the need to address the question as to how Igbo Christian can respond to the demands of his culture which are facts that can no longer be ignored, and at the same time remain faithful to the Christian faith even in the fast-changing world of the 21st century.

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