

THE EMERGENCE OF “MMONWU UKA EKE”: TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS EVANGELISM AND CHRISTIAN PASTORAL CHALLENGES IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the “Mmonwu Uka Eke” phenomenon in parts of Igboland as a contemporary form of traditional religious evangelism and evaluates its pastoral implications for Christianity. Traditionally, masquerades have historically served religious, judicial, and communal functions within Igbo society. Recently, however, masquerade Sunday outings appear to represent a significant departure from established cultural practice. Employing a qualitative ethnographic case-study design informed by historical and phenomenological analysis, the study draws upon field observations and documentary sources from selected communities in the former Aguata cultural zone of Anambra State. The findings suggest that the phenomenon combines elements of religious revival, cultural performance, and economic commodification, thereby challenging both the traditional sacred character of Mmonwu and established Christian Sunday observance. The article argues that constructive dialogue among religious and traditional stakeholders is necessary to preserve cultural heritage while promoting peaceful coexistence. It also seeks to contribute to broader discussions in African Religious Studies concerning the transformation of indigenous religions in postcolonial societies, the emergence of new forms of religious evangelism, and the pastoral challenges these developments pose for Christian communities.

Key words: Evangelism, Mmonwu, Uka, Sunday observance, commodification, indigenous religions, challenges.

Introduction

Until now, evangelism has almost solely been associated with the Christian religion. This impression follows from centuries of colonialism through which the Christian religion was implanted in Nigeria, and most especially in the South-East. That mission involved the preaching and teaching of the Christian faith anchored on the founder Jesus Christ, who is believed to be God and Man. However, in most recent times, evangelism is no longer the reserve of the Christian religion. Traditional religionists of Igbo extraction and other parts of Nigeria, have woken up from what Immanuel Kant would describe as “dogmatic slumber,” to take a new direction in their bid to revive the dwindling fortunes of Igbo Traditional Religion. This evangelism has taken different forms but the one that is most pronounced today is the Mmonwu or what some others call the Masquerade institution. Their status is so sacred that they are made to appear among the living only on special

occasions and events dictated by the custom and the traditions of the various communities. Where the occurrence of the Mmonwu is no longer tied to special events or occasions, we have reasons to suspect the bastardization of the culture and traditions of Igboland.

Of all the functions of the sacred institution of Mmonwu in Igboland, profit making in the form of finance, has never been one of them. In so many towns of the old Aguata area, there seems to be an organized syndicate using our sacred institution of Mmonwu as a business making venture and tool of evangelism. It is the goal of this research to expose and create awareness on the ongoing destruction of the sacred institution of Mmonwu. We carried out a field work in some communities of the old Aguata area in order to understand this ongoing practice of Mmonwu outings on Sunday market days with no historical antecedents. We shall expose that behind it all is the unquenchable thirst for money making through the commercialization of our sacred institution.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative ethnographic case-study design to investigate the emergence of the “Mmonwu Uka Eke” phenomenon in selected communities of the former Aguata cultural zone in Anambra State, Nigeria. It combines documentary analysis to the examination of both the contemporary practice and its historical and theological context. The case-study approach was selected because the phenomenon is geographically localized yet culturally significant. Field observations were conducted in communities where the practice has become established, including Ezinifite, Aguluezechukwu, Umuchu, Umuomaku, Achina, and neighbouring towns. Documentary sources including historical studies, anthropological literature, missionary records, theological writings, and Church documents were analyzed to reconstruct the traditional functions of Mmonwu and compare them with their present utilization. The interpretation of the data was done using three complimentary analytical approaches: historical analysis, phenomenological interpretation and critical theological analysis. The effort was not to judge the legitimacy of traditional religion but to evaluate whether the present phenomenon represents continuity with inherited Igbo tradition or a significant transformation influenced by contemporary cultural, economic and religious forces.

1. The Cult of Mmonwu in Igbo Tradition

Mmonwu or *Mmanwu* in some dialects in Igbo tradition is a sacred and a secret institution. Coming from two Igbo words- *mmuo* and *onwu*- referring to spirit and death, *Mmonwu* symbolically refers to the spirits of the dead, especially those we call ancestors. There are three forms of description we can offer for Mmonwu: material, formal and symbolic descriptions of Mmonwu. (Anuka, 2018, p.128). The material description of Mmonwu firmly establishes it as a society meant only for male adults among the Igbo. These adults are usually selected as post-puberty adolescents who are meant to pass through some form of initiation rites before they can become custodians of the secrets of the sacred institution. (Onuh, 1992). Materially, Arinze (1970) describes the Mmonwu as “men robed in unusual clothing from head to foot, with raffia strapping and sometimes artistically carved heads. The person speaks in a weird guttural voice... The idea is to have a spiritual appearance”

(p.18). Most of the times, hand gloves and stockings cover the hands, the fingers, the feet, and the toes. These physical details ensure that no part of the human body is seen as to reveal the proper identity of the human person in the Mmonwu. According to Ojiaku (2021), there are two groups of Mmonwu: visible and invisible. (p.23) Depending on the circumstances or the occasions, some Mmonwu are exclusively made for night appearances where they are almost invisible and can be detected only through their characteristic sounds and the weird tones of their messages.

The formal description of this institution refers to the form or essence of the Mmonwu, the meanings and the symbolic significance of the institution. There are three sides to this formal description: "Mmonwu as the appearance of the ancestors; Mmonwu as the embodiment of the values and will of the community; and Mmonwu as a social unifier and entertainer" (Anuka, 2018, p. 130).

i. Mmonwu as the Appearance of the Ancestors.

The Igbo cosmology is basically dualistic: the existence of the visible and the invisible members in a homogeneous interaction. The interaction involves "the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the good and the bad, the living and the dead. The latter are a part of the Igbo social world" (Uchendu, 1965, p.12). The invisible members are equally the owners of the community and accompany the living in their daily quests. Though once alive and now dead, they are still considered as better positioned to assist the living members of their respective families and communities. In the Igbo belief system, those dead members who qualify according to certain criteria especially, by their mode of living while alive, join the special company of ancestors and thus become objects of ancestral worship. Anuka (2018) notes that "they are the closest beings to humans in the plethora of spirits and gods, who inhabit the land of the spirits" (p.130). The dead members, according to Isichei (1969), "depend on their descendants for their burial rites, and later for sacrifices. In return, they watch over the community and participate in its affairs" (p. 126). These ancestors come back in the form of Mmonwu during special occasions.

ii. Mmonwu as Embodiment of Community Values/Will

The Igbo society like every other society, is built upon values and norms which keep and hold it together. The Mmonwu institution, as a secret society, has the preservation of the laws, values and customs of the land, as one of its major functions. Professor Onyeneke (1987) affirms that:

The first function of the masquerade is therefore to be a visible embodiment of the community will for the implementation of its social order. Their authority affects the community as a whole with no respect for male or female, the initiated or non-initiated. It is the law of custom and it is applied equally to every one under it (p.76).

The role of the secret societies like the Mmonwu group cannot be overemphasized. In the ancient days when there were not social institutions like the police and the army, the Mmonwu played the role for the preservation of the society. The group executed every

form of judgment given by the leaders of the community and in some cases, judged by itself, most difficult cases in the community. What gave it legitimacy and authority over and every other person in the community, is its sacred and spiritual aspect, its place as the visible presence of the living-dead, the ancestors. In the ancient societies, the Mmonwu served as “counter-balancing devices by which law and order were maintained in a society which lacked formal coercive mechanisms. In recent years, their function has become primarily recreational” (Isichei, 1969, p. 127). It is thus that Mmonwu society stands out as the embodiment of the community's will, norms and values.

iii. Mmonwu as Entertainer

The traditional Igbo Society is known for its celebrations of the various rhythms and cycles of life. From birth to death, from planting to harvesting season, the Igbo mark these events with some form of celebration. Theatrical performances and dance form part of the essence of the Mmonwu society. Historically, Mmonwu had connections to agricultural cycles, traditional festivals, new yam celebrations, funerals, and title-taking ceremonies. Whereas the other formal aspects of the Mmonwu society may have been diluted or completely replaced with more modern systems, the entertainment function has become even better and more developed. In fact, it may not be out of place to say that it is the reason why the Mmonwu institution has not died or is still very much relevant.

A lot of factors make the Mmonwu entertainment function a box office. The physical costume and the various roles of the Mmonwu, attract massive following of both old and young alike. Add the music coming from the local instruments and the songs that accompany them into the frame, and you get a complete package of entertainment worthy of keeping a whole community buzzing with cultural pride and happiness. The local flute *Oja*, is known to be the voice of the spirits communicating specifically to living persons, and especially to the Mmonwu. In public performances the *Oja* communicates the dance steps likely to be beaten and executed by the drummers. The metallic gong called *Ogene*, and the *Igba* translated as 'drum' together with the *Oja* all form a trio of local instruments whose sounds alone, communicate to the community of the presence of Mmonwu and the commencement of festivities. The commercial advantage that goes with the presence of Mmonwu on festive days is another serious feature that keeps its value growing.

Christianity as a religion was originally reticent to the Mmonwu institution because of the seeming involvement with some form of idolatry or paganistic practices. However, with the passage of time and the evolution of the institution, Christianity has come to accept this entertainment aspect of the Mmonwu cultural institution such that on important Christian feasts like the Christmas and Easter, the Mmonwu is usually part of the enjoyment. The advent of Christian missionaries brought in the western calendar which recognizes seven days in a week unlike the four days' week of the ancient traditional Igbo society. As a result, Uka - Sunday was exclusively reserved for the Christians. Religious festivals of non-Christian nature and their duration, were specially prepared and announced in advance by the chief priest of the concerned god. There was nothing like “Mmonwu Uka Eke” as the

case may be in various towns.

2. Mmonwu Uka Eke Phenomenon: Its Connotation

Most recently, a phenomenon that we have chosen to identify as “Mmonwu Uka Eke” is spreading like a wild fire throughout the old Aguata cultural zone of Anambra State. The towns of interest are Ezinifite, Aguluezechukwu, Nkpologwu, Achina, Akpo, Amesi, Uga, Umuchu, Umuomaku, Enugwu-Umuonyia, Agbudu, Onneh. Most of these towns belonged to the defunct Amayi local government area and are bound by a strong cultural affinity in their history.

These towns specifically have their particular market days - Eke, Orie (Oye), Afor or Nkwo according to individual towns. It happens that on the particular market days of certain towns, if the market day falls on a Sunday, the protagonists of the traditional evangelism we are discussing, would turn the Sunday into a day for the outing of Mmonwu in the concerned town. For instance, Umuomaku town has 'Eke' as her official market day. Every Sunday that falls on Eke day, automatically becomes “Uka Eke” and a valid day for “Mmonwu Uka Eke” from where our theme had been taken. It can as well be “Mmonwu Uka Oye or Afor or Nkwo” as is obtainable in the various communities having those market days. Hence, “Mmonwu Uka Eke” is the regular outing of Mmonwu on the Sunday of Eke in a community having Eke as its market day. Those who are behind this phenomenon, would normally attribute the outing to the veneration of the god/spirit of the town's market “Eke” or any other as the case may be. In Ezinifite, this practice goes on twice a month-- Uka Eke where Eke is the market day for the village of Ifite and Uka Afor for the village of Aku/Amaekwulu. On these separate days, hundreds of Mmonwu parade the length and breadth of the village roads drawing large crowds of people, old and young, congregated in squares and beer parlours to admire Mmonwu. The same double outing a month is obtainable at Aguluezechukwu where Nkwo is the major market day and Orie is the intermediate market before the day of Nkwo. Our observations revealed that the Mmonwu and their outings are linked to a deity of Ifite village called Alusi Udokofia shortened to Udo. (Umennadi, 2024, p.xix). The leaders of the traditional religion would give the salvo for the outing of masquerades by their visit and ritual practices at the shrine of Udokofia deity. It is doubtful to say that all the parading masquerades join in this visit to the deity. In Umuchu, there is a big deity called 'Uku.' Those behind the Mmonwu Uka Nkwo at Umuchu cannot certainly be called the leaders of the Uku deity. There may be certain elements among them. However, hundreds of Mmonwu occupy the streets of the major roads leading to Nkwo market with hundreds of spectators gathered in beer parlours and super markets. At Enugwu-Umuonyia, it is the same display of Mmonwu on their market day of Orie or Oye on every other Uka Orie day.

3. Evangelism and the Purpose of Mmonwu Uka Eke

A critical look at the coinage 'Uka Eke' reveals an inherent contradiction. 'Uka' is the Igbo translation of the western calendar day Sunday. Igbo cultural calendar has no 'Sunday' as one of its four days and thus culturally and traditionally, celebrated nothing on any day that is 'Uka' day. Thus, the connotation 'Uka' expressly refers to a particular day chosen by

Christians for the practice of their faith by attending Church practice and faith observations. That this traditional practice of Mmonwu must be on a Sunday - 'Uka' that falls on the Igbo day of Eke is very significant. Thus far, we can confirm that it was a conscientious choice made by the initiators of this activity. One of the major reasons that drive this may be what we have termed traditional evangelism whose goal among others may be to derobe Christians of their sacred day of obligation, or desacralize the day as an ordinary day of entertainment in the guise of Western concept of "Weekend" or perhaps, even to supplant it as the day of practicing Igbo traditional religious beliefs.

Evangelism is usually associated with Christianity and the mission of converting non-believers to the Good News of Salvation brought by Jesus Christ. The change in Igbo society is such that some have become ex-Christians or are in the process of deconverting from Christianity into other forms of belief systems like the Igbo Traditional Religion. These ex or de-converted Christians continue to carry the language of Christianity into their new found homes. In the villages you hear them talking about 'revival' of 'our religion.' Sometimes, they say they are engaging in 'evangelism' to bring awareness to the traditional religion of our heritage. How their usage of the word fits the meaning that was once attributed to evangelism "as the proclamation of the gospel among those who have left the Church or those living in a post-Christian milieu..." (Margull, 1962, p.277f). Being ex-Christians themselves, they use the word to refer to their efforts in reconverting Igbo Christians into the religion of their ancestors.

Given the situation of Igboland in the recent times, we have seen and heard youths and sometimes, adults, championing the call for a movement towards our ancestral systems of belief and worship. With the visible signs of that system of belief in short evidence, the propagators chose a cultural and religious symbol of our connectedness with the spiritual world, the Mmonwu institution, and made it a major tool of attraction to Igbo traditional religion. The display of these Mmonwu on a Sunday of Christian worship, makes it an express target to the Christian community to abandon their 'foreign' religion and come to the religion of their Igbo ancestors. We are yet to see them explain the ultimate essence of Igbo Traditional Religion. Christian evangelism has a goal: "salvation as a present gift and with it assurance of eternal bliss" (Bosch, 2011, p. 424). That transcendental element based on a solid theological foundation brings a clarity of intent and purpose that is in short supply in Igbo Traditional Religion, a lack the proponents of this 'evangelism' would do well to address sooner than later.

In most of the communities where this practice is ongoing, the effects are becoming visible on the catholic worshiping community. The age old tradition of Sunday evening instruction is the first culprit. The Sunday evening instruction is a catechetical exercise where the worshipping community gathers to deepen their understanding of their faith and practice. Young children and adults get prepared for their reception of the sacraments of initiation and the faith of the worshiping community is strengthened. That is the tradition that has helped the church produce solid Christians in practice and in faith. To hit at the root of this tradition and thus, attack the line of production of well-formed catholic Christians, the propagators of the traditional religious evangelism carefully chose the Mmonwu sacred institution for its force of appeal. Bosch (2011) argues that authentic evangelism has a personal dimension in that individuals are targeted with the message of transformation. (p.

426).

At Aguluezechukwu, one of the parishes has officially closed shop in the evenings of "Uka Nkwo." The parishioners less regularly gather for that all important exercise in the production and the transmission of catholic faith and doctrine, because of the menacing presence of Mmonwu used as a tool of evangelism by the practitioners of traditional religion. Multiply this effect in all the churches in the old Aguata local government, and you would agree that the traditional evangelism is already a mini-success. The young catholics that should be benefiting from the Church's old Sunday evening instructions are being systematically excluded by the evangelism. It is a strategy aimed at distracting Christians and their Sunday practices by providing them a cultural alternative that looks ordinary and harmless on the surface.

Couched behind the evangelism is another reason for the choice of Sunday and the outing of the Mmonwu on that sacred day for Christians. It is financial, the exploitation of the Mmonwu magnetic appeal to the sensibilities of the Igbo, for the making of material gains. Entertainment and commodification lead to financial exploitation of a sacred institution. Is this not how sacred institution can enter the market place? (kopytoff, 1986, p.64ff). A syndicate of business men, under the pretense of religious evangelism, has succeeded in reducing the sacred institution of Mmonwu to a commodity, which can be bought and paid for by the highest bidder. These merchants control the major beer parlours and supermarkets in the town. In some towns, certain individuals keep the material aspect of Mmonwu for hire by 'men' who themselves need to make some quick cash from the people. To show how the chain is growing, groups of masquerades get brought in from different towns not observing the same market day. By so doing, the promoters of the evangelism would inadvertently contribute to the destruction of the peoples' cultural heritage and tradition.

4. The Theological and Pastoral Implications

For Christians, Sunday is not merely an ordinary day but the Day of the Lord. The Acts of the Apostles specify that Christians gathered "on the first day of the week" to break bread. (Acts 20:7). Pope John Paul II. (1998), in his Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* - "The Day of the Lord," describes it thus:

The Lord's Day - as Sunday was called from Apostolic times - has always been accorded special attention in the history of the Church because of its close connection with the very core of the Christian mystery. In fact, in the weekly reckoning of time Sunday recalls the day of Christ's Resurrection. It is Easter which returns week by week, celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death, the fulfilment in him of the first creation and the dawn of "the new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). It is the day which recalls in grateful adoration the world's first day and looks forward in active hope to "the last day," when Christ will come in glory (cf. Acts 1:11; 1 Th 4:13-17) and all things will be made new (cf. Rev 21:5) (para. 1).

The evidence of the Bible and the Apostles as recorded, testify that the Lord rose from the dead on the first day after the sabbath. The sabbath is ordinarily Saturday and the first day after it is Sunday. It is so important that Christians describe it as our "weekly Easter" when

the mysteries of Christ's victory over sin and death are celebrated. The importance of this day marks it out as a special day when Christians have the obligation to leave out every other thing for the Lord of the day. Keeping it holy (Exodus 20:4) means among other things, avoiding celebrations that would distract from appreciating its significance.

Given the hectic nature of the week days, Sundays have provided Christians ample time to pray, reflect and deepen the understanding of their faith. It is the prime day for the organization of catechesis which the Catholic Church (1997) defines as “*an education in the faith* of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine...with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” (para. 5). This is the foundational principle for the catholic tradition of 'Nkuzi nke Okwukwe n'Uka Mgbede' - Sunday Evening Instruction. Youth formation in character and morals profit very much from the availability of Sunday as the Day of the Lord. The growth in Christian and catholic faith and the multiplication of their numbers are partly due to this long tradition.

Over time, the Church has seen and warned her faithful of the attacks that may be surreptitiously targeting her practice by targeting her day of obligation the Sunday. Some of these attacks are becoming manifest in our days. Pope John Paul II (1998) talked of the Western “custom of the Weekend” which has become more 'widespread as a time of simple rest and relaxation.'

Today, however, even in those countries which give legal sanction to the festive character of Sunday, changes in socioeconomic conditions have often led to profound modifications of social behaviour and hence of the character of Sunday. The custom of the “weekend” has become more widespread, a weekly period of respite, spent perhaps far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political or sporting activities which are usually held on free days...Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a “weekend,” it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see “the heavens” (para. 4).

In our own local situation, the fragmentation of social conditions of life and living, and cultural pluralism have constituted extra challenges to our Christians who would wish to remain faithful 'to the practical demands of their Christian faith.' The production of Mmonwu on some Sundays is one of those cultural realities that are becoming part of our way of living unless something is quickly done to nip it at the bud given that there is no historical antecedent to that.

5. Proffering Solutions

Cultural revival should never be a source of tension in a community. However, when such revival targets a different group for proselytism, it can breed suspicion and tension in the society. From our investigation in some communities of our designated area of interest, the proponents of this religious form of evangelism did not consult with the leaders of the town nor seek for authorization before beginning their project. One of the reasons is very

obvious, the project has no historical nor cultural antecedent and it has no place in the traditional calendar of events in Igbo cultural heritage. One major motivation is economic gain hidden under the cloak of evangelism. Efforts must be made by all concerned parties to come together and stop a practice that has every potential of slipping out of control and taking the community into captivity.

There is need to establish various means of dialogue at town level where church leaders, traditional rulers, town union leaders, youth and custodians of culture, would come to seek a common way of avoiding problem in the communities and obtain answers for the practice that has neither historical nor cultural antecedents. The life of the Church and the peaceful practice of her faith, should never in any way be subjected to any form of attack on her body or her members. Where there is clarity and respect, faith and tradition thrive harmoniously.

Conclusion

The Igbo culture has held the long traditional belief that Mmonwu are the physical representations of the ancestors, whose invisible presence strengthen the dualistic worldview of the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead. Apart from their multiple roles as custodians of morality, agents of law and order, spiritual mediums for the living, (Onebunne, 2019), they also act as instruments of traditional evangelism. This role they fulfil by their physical validation of the Igbo belief in the reality of the invisible realm and the benevolent powers of the ancestors. By their exclusive reservation of membership to only the initiated males, they also preserve the sanctity of the sacred spaces and rites which inspire reverence and awe among the uninitiates. However, when in their role as agents of traditional evangelism, they begin hampering the activities of Christians and desacralizing their sacred day of obligation the Sunday, it becomes a deliberate attack and persecution of innocent members of the society and Mmonwu loses its character of peace maker. Moreover, we think that the appearance of Mmonwu on particular Sundays that fall on certain towns' market days has no cultural antecedent; it does not fit into any known traditional calendar of the Igbo and bespeaks of an orchestrated project with the dubious goal of making financial gains. The continuation of this practice has the potential of causing a triple tragedy: the destruction of our cultural heritage, the desacralization of Sunday and the weakening of Christian practice. Hence, it will profit the Igbo society, especially the areas that are fully under the influence of this phenomenon, to employ all the available means possible to quench this raging fire before it gets out of hand.

This study is making an original submission very useful in the African religious scholarship that the masquerade institution is becoming an instrument of organized traditional evangelism whose implications extend beyond cultural performance into the spheres of theology, pastoral ministry, and religious coexistence. Whether “Mmonwu Uka Eke” phenomenon is understood as cultural revival, religious evangelism, or economic commodification, it represents a significant transformation in the historical role of Mmonwu and therefore demands continued scholarly attention.

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