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Inculturation of the Church: Example of the Igboland, South-East, Nigeria

Umezina, Cletus C.

Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu

E-mail: chukwuman@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348037116295

Abstract

God is a universal Being. In his salvific mission, He, in Jesus Christ, chose to make himself known through the vehicle of the Jewish culture. But the ultimate destination and the spiritual jurisdiction of His mission is the entire world. He could not complete this mission, however, before the expiration of His life on earth. But before He returned back to heaven, He commissioned His disciples to continue to expand on this mission which He had started. After many centuries of evangelism, His message reached Igbo land. But it was passed on to them under the cloak of Western culture. For this reason the message was disdainfully looked upon as one without lustre; one that lacks content and so irrelevant to the daily lives of the people. Some efforts, however, have been made after the Vatican II council to express God's message through culture. It is believed in this paper

that many more of such efforts need to be put in place in order for the church to take firm root in Igbo land.

Key word: Inculturation

Introduction

The church in Igbo land is beset with myriads of culture crises. This is evident in the ubiquitous presence of syncretism and the church/culture conflicts that prevail in many parts of Igbo land. The present state of the church is such that if there is a major challenge that confronts it, it will lose its members in droves or even peter out of existence as was the case in some North African countries. The task of this paper is to stress the importance of culture in the spreading of God's message. It argues that if the church is adequately inculturated it will stand the test of time even when it is buffeted by the trappings of modernity.

In dealing with this aim, this paper will examine the importance of culture. It will also highlight how the Western Church had maximally used cultural features to transmit the Christian faith. While the paper will show the level of inculturation that has taken place in Igbo church, it will point out some areas that need urgent attention.

The Importance of Culture

In the world, there are as many cultures as there are different peoples. This is to say that each ethnic group has its own culture. There is, therefore, a diversity of cultures. The reason for the multiplicity of culture is because the challenges and inconveniences found in nature and their impact on human beings are not exactly the same for all peoples. For some cultural groups they are benign, while for others they are terribly hostile. And because of this fact, each cultural group confronts the hostilities in nature in a unique way; it strives assiduously to offset these difficulties and make nature respond to its needs. The result of this enterprise is what is known as culture. Culture is therefore a child of necessity. Its various aspects include politics, language, morality, clothing, food, religion, etc. These are the

different initiatives which man has put in place to ensure a happy and comfortable life for himself, a life which ordinarily would be impossible if he were to live simply like other objects in nature.

On the basis of the above observation on culture as a child of necessity, culture can be said to be inseparable from an ethnic group. Indeed culture defines a people. An ethnic group loses its identity if it loses its culture. In fact an ethnic group dies if its culture goes into extinction. To separate a group from its culture is like separating a body from the soul. Putrefaction sets in as soon as the body is severed from the soul. Culture is the soul of every human society. The human society turns into topsy-turvy when its culture is destroyed. This claim is based on the fact that without culture, the human society is at the mercy of the limitless vagaries in nature.

We can further appreciate the symbiosis of culture and an ethnic group if we illustrate it with Aristotle's teaching on matter and form. For him neither matter nor form is a thing (Aristotle, 1997). Something comes into existence when both are conjoined (Aristotle, 1997). When either the form or the matter separates from something that is in existence, the form is not and the matter is not. Metaphorically an ethnic group is not and culture is not when both are severed one from the other. An ethnic group subsists because of culture and culture exists because of an ethnic group. There is no culture without an ethnic group and there is no ethnic group without a culture. To separate them may be theoretically possible but practically impossible.

However, that a particular culture and a particular ethnic group are symbiotically connected does not imply that a cultural group cannot borrow from other cultures to enrich its own culture. In fact it is imperative for it to do so since the ultimate aim and indeed the *raison d'être* of every culture is to improve the quality of life and the welfare of a cultural group. That is why culture ought to be dynamic. Any cultural group that closes itself up completely to the external influences suffocates itself and is destined to remain stunted in

growth. So culture-contact is very necessary; it is important because it makes provision for the optimal response to the challenges of nature, a response which ultimately brings about the maximum comfort to man.

Religion is an aspect of culture as noted already. It is man's response to the spiritual challenges of nature. There are many things around man which he does not understand and which he cannot resolve unaided. On account of his inability to do so he hankers for a superior Power outside him for the answers to these enigmas. He bends down in supplication before this superior Being in order to get what he wants. Every cultural group has a religion, that is, a way in which it relates to this Supreme Being. As a part of culture, religion has to be dynamic as well or else it suffocates itself. It must be dynamic in order to respond effectively to the current and urgent needs of man. If the dynamism is not allowed to happen naturally, the particular religion in question stands the great risk of losing its members en masse and probably goes into extinction subsequently. This fact, especially the losing of members in droves is buttressed by a great novelist, Chinua Achebe.

In his *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe narrated the story of Ezeulu, the chief priest of *Ulu* in Umuaro. Ezeulu was invited by Winterbottom, the district officer to come to Ogberi. He refused to honour the invitation. He claimed that in line with their tradition, he was not supposed, as a priest, to leave Umuaro for such a call. He was, however, persuaded by his community to heed the call. Meanwhile, Winterbottom had ordered for his arrest and imprisonment for ignoring his orders. And so even when he bowed to the pressure of his people and went on his own to Ogberi to answer the call, he was nevertheless arrested on arrival and incarcerated thereafter. He was there for about a month and could not for that reason fulfil his priestly function of announcing the arrival of the new moon. Besides, he was irked and piqued by the fact, that apart from some members of his family and a few friends, Umuaro people did not care much about his absence.

When he returned to Umuaro after his incarceration, he refused to announce the date for the new yam festival, a feast of thanksgiving, a feast which marked the beginning of the harvesting of farm products. He claimed he had two yams to eat before he could make any announcement {this meant he had a month left before he could do so since he ate two yams every month}. He could not eat the yams because of his absence from Umuaro for one month. The elders came and pleaded with him to eat up the yams at once and announce the date of the feast of thanksgiving the following day. He refused on the basis that he could not go against the instruction of *Ulu*. Meanwhile hunger was taking its toll on the people.

The crisis between Ezeulu and his community yielded unprecedented dividends for the Christians. At the height of the crisis and its untold hardship on the people, the Christians began to teach that anyone who brought tubers of yam to the church for blessing was free to start harvesting on his farm. According to Achebe, "In his extremity many a man sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of the son."(Chinua Achebe, 1986).Ezeulu refused to allow his religion to be dynamic because of his passion for revenge. He lost many of his followers to the new religion.

So religion needs dynamism or growth in order to address the ever changing needs of man. It needs culture contact as well to do the same. The church needs to be dynamic; it needs to grow; it needs to enter into dialogue with Igbo culture in order to be relevant to the people. It needs to do so in order to reduce the syncretic practices among its adherents and build up a strong faith that can serve a bulwark in moments of crisis. The synthesis of faith and cultural elements enriches the church and makes it strong.

This paper assumes the recognition of the existence of a religion among the Igbo before the arrival of the missionaries; that the

adherents of this religion had the idea of the Supreme Being (Umezinwa, 2008). They did not derive this religious idea from the early evangelizers. This is a necessary assumption or else the Christian religion could wrongly be seen as having torpedoed and supplanted the traditional religion. That the Igbo people had the idea of the Supreme Being before the advent of the missionaries can be appreciated through their religious beliefs, practices and folklores. Acceptance of this reality is necessary for a meaningful dialogue or inculturation. In the encounter the already existing religious elements can be effectively used to express the gospel message.

Now, we examine Jesus who came with a mission to spread God's message and who did so through the vehicle of culture. After him the church has continued to proclaim this message to all peoples at various stages of its existence by means of culture. We give a synopsis of this endeavour.

The Mission of Jesus

Jesus, the second Person of the triune God took the human form in order to save man. He was born into Jewish cultural milieu. As he grew up, he participated in Jewish festivals and activities like going to the synagogue on the Sabbath and attending the Passover feast etc. But as he began his public ministry, he spoke as if his salvific mission was meant only for the Jews. He demonstrated this clearly when he said to the Canaanite Woman who had requested for his help: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt: 15: 24). And while sending his twelve apostles on mission, he instructed them "Do not make your way to gentile territory, and do not enter any Samaritan town; go instead to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" (Mt: 10:5-6).

However, after his resurrection, he showed that his mission was not meant for the Jews alone. He demonstrated this shortly before his ascension into heaven as he told his disciples "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mk: 16:15). His mission therefore has a

universal dimension; it is for all the peoples. Besides he could not have incarnated just for the Jews only as if the rest of the people were outside his dominion or had already been redeemed. He told the Jews plainly that there were other sheep that needed to be led and saved as well. As he puts it “And there are other sheep that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Hence, being born as a Jew and having spoken of his mission at some point as being restricted within the confines of the Jewish nation does not present a complete picture of the messianic mission. His recognition that there were other sheep to be led as well as his charge to his disciples to evangelize all nations demonstrates unmistakably the universal nature of his mission. His being born into the Jewish community serves only as entry point in his journey into other cultures. The apostles have the mandate to continue this journey on his behalf. They are his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20).

The Vatican II emphasizes the universal dimension of the mission of Christ when it says “the church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life or to any customary practices, ancient or modern” (Flannery, 2001). This means that the gospel is addressed not only to one particular cultural group and ought not to be expressed solely through the vehicle of this culture. John Paul II stressed the need for the message of Christ to be expressed through every culture, that is, the need for Christ to be born in every culture. Speaking to the Nigerian Bishops during his pastoral visit to Nigeria in 1982 he said:

... the divine message is made incarnate and is communicated through the culture of each people. It is forever true that the part of culture is the part of man, and it is on this path that man encounters the One who embodies the values of all cultures and

fully reveals the man of each culture to himself. The Gospel of Christ the Incarnate Word finds its home along the path of culture and from this part it continues to offer its message of salvation and eternal life (John Paul, 1982).

Rahner (1981) observes there are three significant periods in the church's attempt to convey the message of Christ. These are:

1. The short period of Judaeo-Christianity;
2. The period of the Church in a particular cultural group, that of Hellenism and European culture and civilization;
3. The period in which the church's living space is from the very outset the whole world.

The first period ended with the conversion of St Paul and his missionary activities among the gentile nations. The second period lasted up to the beginning of the Vatican II. The third period is from Vatican II till date. This last period is what we wish to examine with reference to the church in Igboland. How far have the agents of evangelization gone in their attempt to pass on the message of Christ through culture? To understand and appreciate this better, it is good to point out how the church universal expressed its message in the second period through the Roman culture.

The Church and the Roman Culture

To express the gospel message through culture is to use all the cultural elements to fulfil the religious aspiration of a people. This is most evident in the second period, that is, from the conversion of St Paul up to the time of Vatican II. The church at this time appropriated many of the religious practices of the pagan Roman world. Many of the church's rites were of pagan origin, like the use of candles, incense, holy water, ring at marriage, priestly attire etc.

The canon law was based on Roman law. Church buildings were structured along the line of the Roman Basilica. The title of the Pope

as the Supreme Pontiff (Pontifex Maximus) was originally the title of the Roman Emperor. The emperor had absolute authority. His authority extended to religious matters. It was because of this that Constantine, who retained the title of Supreme Pontiff even though he had converted to Christianity, convened the Council of Nicaea. It was the emperor Gracian who renounced this title, Supreme Pontiff and transferred it to the pope. His argument for doing so was that he was not a priest and a fortiori it was not appropriate for him to bear the title. Cardinal Newman articulated many of the pagan practices that were adopted from Roman world as follows:

The use of temples, and these dedicated to particular saints, and ornamented on occasions with branches of trees; incense, lamps, and candles; votive offerings on recovery from illness; holy water; asylums; holy days and seasons, use of calendars, processions, blessings on the fields, sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure, the ring in marriage, turning to the East, images at a later date, perhaps the ecclesiastical chant, and the Kyrie Eleison, are all of pagan origin, and sanctified by their adoption into the Church. (Newman, 1878)

So the church at this period under consideration did a lot to express the gospel message through the Roman culture. That contributed to the growth of the church at the time. However, the presence of the church was not evenly felt everywhere since it was still wearing largely the cloak of Roman culture. The lack of the spreading of the gospel message through indigenous culture was essentially the reason for the near disappearance of Christianity in North Africa, an area that can boast of producing many saints and great Fathers of the church.

Inculturating the Church in Igboland

The early missionaries in Igboland did not do much in terms of spreading the gospel message through the indigenous culture. Indeed they forbade many of the traditional practices and described them as

pagan. At Nteje, for example, the missionaries forbade the parishioners from taking part in traditional dancing, masquerading and festivities. The parishioners detested the ban for “The people {Nteje people} loved dancing and cultural dancing, title-taking and other cultural celebrations.”(M.F. Asiegbu and C. C. Umezina, 1994).They showcased their anger by turning back en mass to paganism. They took this decision while their parish priest was out on holidays. When he returned, he went to celebrate mass for the people, but found an empty church. He lost his entire congregation because of the disrespect which he and his colleagues had on indigenous culture. The parish was closed down for several years. When the parish status was later restored, Monsignor Martin Maduka, an Ozo title holder and a great champion of inculturation movement, was appointed as a parish priest. As soon as he took canonical possession of the parish, he lifted the ban placed on dancing, masquerading and other cultural values not opposed to Christianity. When he did this, those who had left the church returned back to the faith. Msgr Martin Maduka did a lot to evangelize through culture. He was a very successful pastor. The success was such that he was rewarded later with the title of Monsignor.

Be that as it may, some of the early missionaries, who were focused, approached their ministry cautiously without disrespect to indigenous way of life. And this yielded tremendous success. One of such missionaries was Bishop Shanahan. He stooped down “to learn enough Igbo to make himself one of the villagers so that he could tell them the Good News” (Obi, 1985). With regard to his attitude to Igbo way of life Jordan says:

He {Bishop Shanahan} found out gradually that the structure of Igbo village life was rigid rather than elastic, and that one had to be extremely careful in suggesting a change. A whole system of taboos and ritual ordinances controlled native life. Sometimes these changed from town to town. To interfere with

any was to court disaster. So he never spoke in condemnation of paganism or anything pagan, whether as regards custom or law or ritual. He knew the people would not understand, and would only become suspicious and antagonistic. He preached therefore a new approach to God, on the assumption that if fundamentally correct ideas could be introduced into native minds, incorrect ones would be put to flight as darkness before light. Many pagan ideas were not so much incorrect as incomplete and required only completion and sublimation (Jordan, 1971).

At Adazi, was another missionary, Father Bubendorf. His great interest in indigenous way life led him to achieve enormous success in his ministry. He was said to have condescended “to eat Kola nuts, drink palm wine or engage in test of muscle in a wrestling match with a ‘native’ to give him willing access to people’s hearts, land and purse”(Ozigbo, 1985). To immortalize him, a secondary was named after him.

With the exit of the missionaries in 1970s, concerted efforts began to be made to use culture to evangelize. Since then the mass is celebrated in vernacular. The Missal was translated into Igbo language. The same is true of the bible. The liturgical texts, such as *Exultet* and the Passion Narrative of Good Friday, which were usually sung in Latin, are now performed in Igbo language. Dancing, the accompanying of hymns with local instruments and clapping of hands which are elements of the traditional culture are now features of Igbo liturgical worship. The Eucharistic procession during the Corpus Christi/Christ the King celebration which was done with the praying of the Rosary and the singing of the Latin hymns such as *Lauda Sion* is now celebrated with many traditional elements. The procession is now accompanied with singing of traditional songs and dancing to the rhythm of local instruments. The procession is punctuated by the detonation of den

gong. All is done in recognition of Jesus as King and Lord. This was unthinkable in the past. It would have then been considered as a profanation of the sacred.

The adoption of traditional religious features into Christian celebrations is very pronounced in funeral rites. Just as in the traditional practice, the funeral mass is often now celebrated in the family compound of the diseased. The burial of the diseased is always in his or her compound and not in the cemetery. This is a hangover from the traditional religion. In the traditional religion,

the corpse is buried amidst sacrifices, other killings, and singing...series of ceremonies must be performed to enable the departed soul to reach the spirit land: Otherwise he would wander homeless and return to make life unpleasant for his relatives (Arinze, 1970).

At present the celebration of the sacrifice of the Eucharist has replaced these pagan sacrifices. The Christian burial takes place immediately after the mass in the family of the diseased as it was done in the traditional setting. (Note that the Igbo believe that the structure of the society here on earth is the same with that in the land of the spirit. If a person is buried elsewhere, he may not be able to find his relations in the other world. This is the underlying reason for burying the dead in the family compound. At present many are not aware of this reason. But the practice subsists).

After the burial, there is the practice of paying condolence or sympathy visit to the family of the bereaved. This is the social dimension of the traditional funeral ceremonies which the Christians have adopted as well. The social groups to which the diseased belonged while he was alive pay this sympathy visit. It is a way of condoling with the members of the bereaved family. It is usually done with the presentation of gift items. Sometimes the groups sing and

dance as a way of dispersing the mournful mood. For the Christians the singing and dancing have additional meaning. They portray the joy in the resurrection; they express the fact that the dead has not gone into annihilation; he lives on.

Another area where the church has adopted something from traditional practice is with regard to the birth of a child. After Baptism, the woman goes for churching. This consists of presenting the child formally to the Lord, offering mass of thanksgiving and the eating and drinking that follow soon after the mass. In the traditional religion, sacrifice of thanksgiving was offered to the ancestors generally 28 days after the birth of a child. After the sacrifice “A big feast is made and if the father of the child is generous and grateful, he will not hesitate to kill a goat in honour of the ancestors” (Arinze, 1970). It is this practice that has been reformulated and is now known as churching.

Areas of Further Inculturation

It is evident that some genuine efforts have been made to inculturate the church in Igboland. The church is certainly more dynamic now than during the time of the missionaries. Of all the many aspects of the Christian practices that have been inculturated, the funeral rites appear to be most pronounced. This accounts for the reason why there is a huge turnout and active participation at funeral celebrations. The church will ever continue to reap the fruits of this endeavour. It is not an exaggeration to maintain that a lot of people still remain in the church and practice their faith just because the funeral rites have been inculturated. They wish to receive a befitting Christian burial rites reserved for those who were faithful to the end. Many would like to be accorded the sacrifice of the Eucharist at their demise as well as sympathy celebrations {ikwaozu}. Sacrifice and sympathy celebrations are traditional practices that have been Christianized. While the traditional sacrifice before burial is replaced with the sacrifice of the Eucharist, the sympathy celebration is now conducted in Christian way.

Having said this, there are a number of church practices that still need to be inculturated. The sacrament of matrimony comes to mind. Today many people do not come to the church to assist at the nuptial mass of their relatives. But they turn out in their numbers for the traditional wedding {igbankwu}. Patrick Chibuko has made effort to address this problem by evolving a rite that brings the traditional and Christian weddings together (Chibuko, 2003). This effort is in the right direction. It will not only reduce the cost of wedding, but also minimize the inconveniences associated with marriage ceremonies. Chibuko's effort remains to be recognized officially by the church in Igboland.

Besides, inculturating the Christian marriage will help address the problem of marriage as raised by Jude Ezeanokwasa. He observes that in Nigerian constitution, the Christian marriage is not valid before the law if it is not preceded by civil marriage. Ezeanokwasa (2008) points out the consequences of not complying with the law as follows

A religious minister who officiates at a marriage without the parties having government permit is liable to five years imprisonment in addition to the marriage being invalid...After the celebration of the marriage, the religious minister is required to make entries in government marriage certificate under the pain of two years imprisonment for a default.

But the same constitution recognizes the traditional marriage and Islamic marriage as valid even without civil marriage. Ezeanokwasa wants this constitutional injustice to be corrected. However, if the Christian marriage is inculturated and celebrated within the context of the traditional wedding, it is certainly going to be considered as valid without being preceded by the civil marriage.

In addition, inculturating the Christian marriage will address some pastoral issues that are of tremendous concern to pastors of souls.

Some couples co-habit after the traditional wedding and go on to beget children. Some claim that they do not have enough money to embark on the Christian marriage. Now the practice is that if any of the parties dies in this condition, he or she is denied the full Christian burial. But inculturating Christian marriage will solve this problem.

Ozo title, which is a religious as well as social institution, can be inculturated too. Indeed in many towns, some objectionable traditional elements have been removed. However, one wonders why there should be both Christian Ozo title institution and the Christian knighthood in the church at the same time. What is really the difference between the two? Could they not be merged into one institution? The aims and objectives of the traditional Ozo title practice ought to be enthroned in the new institution. According to Maduka (1994),

Good manners demanded by Ozo title from candidates maintain a higher standard of morality among the citizens who have to undergo a serious scrutiny for moral uprightness before they attempt to take Ozo title(Cited in Asiegbu & Umezina, 1994).

Negative Attitude to Inculturation

The need to instil cultural values in Christianity is to ensure that the Christians respond positively to the gospel message. Jesus himself did spread his Good news through the Jewish culture. Now because he came down from heaven and assumed the human nature {not simply the Jewish nature} in order to redeem the entire humanity, he is supposed to address his message to other peoples through their different cultures, that is, through that by which they can understand and appreciate his message.

There are some people who are not comfortable with the idea of spreading the gospel through the vehicle of culture. They do not see how it would be possible to bring about a marriage of traditional

culture and Christianity. Prof. UdoEtuk thinks in this direction. He points out a number of traditional beliefs and practices that are at variance with Christian doctrines. Such include: belief in reincarnation, traditional method of healing, libation to the ancestors and spirits, polytheism etc. He observes that these are gradually being adopted into Christian practice in the name of inculturation. He argues vigorously against it (Etuk, 2002).

It is not totally justified to argue against the idea of inculturation because of the fears being raised above by Etuk. The examples given by Etuk which have been allowed to creep into Christianity are simply abuses. Inculturation does not mean endorsing obnoxious traditional values. Even among the Jews, Jesus had a lot to commend and a lot more to condemn. In line with the Jewish practice which he commends, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, he participated in the Passover feast, he dressed like a Jew, ate and spoke like a Jew etc. But he condemned certain practices such as inhuman Sabbath law observances such as the belief that physical disability is caused by progenitors, the denial of human association to tax collectors and sinners, divorce, polygamy, polytheism etc. In the same way some religious beliefs, values and practices of any cultural group that are opposed to the tenets of the gospel ought not to be inculturated.

In some main line churches there are a number of things that individual ministers do on their own that are outrageous and outside the teachings of the church, but which are orchestrated as inculturation. Some of them tell the Christians that the reason why there is sickness in their family or kindred, their daughters not getting married, frequent death, lack of economic progress is because of what their forefathers did in the past. Perhaps they maltreated a member of the family or kindred and sold him or her into slavery. They are now being paid for this offence. The only panacea is that they have to offer sacrifice or else they will continue to experience these difficulties. The unsuspecting and desperate Christians believe that what they say have legitimacy since they are ministers in the church. They succumb to

this trapping. It has been observed, however, that after the sacrifice some of these problems multiplied.

Be that as it may, Jesus denied that one's problems were caused by the past misdeeds of others as already noted. So then the ministers ought not to hoodwink the people under the guise of inculturation. The fear dominant feature of our traditional religion should not be transported into Christianity. The freedom of the children of God should be emphasized instead. The Scripture says "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul in hell" {Mtt. 10: 28}.

Conclusion

The baton of the message of Christ is now in the hands of indigenous Igbo evangelizers. There is the need to make concerted effort to express this message through the cultural features of the Igbo traditional life. At present we do not have what can be called an Igbo church just as we can speak of German church. This is because enough effort has not been made to root the Christian faith in Igbo culture. The church in Igbo land stands the risk of going into extinction if sufficient improvement is not made in this regard. The church authorities should welcome genuine initiatives such as that of Patrick Chibuko. Such initiatives ought to be gratefully appreciated and forwarded to Rome for confirmation. It is by appropriating genuine elements from our traditional culture that we can have an Igbo church that will be able to stand the test of time.

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