

Problems Facing Women in an Inculturated (Igbo) Nigerian Church

Aloysius C. Obiwulu

Introduction

From chapter nine of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe presents an interesting encounter between the traditional African religionists and the White missionaries who had come to evangelize the people of Africa, precisely Nigeria and particularly the South Eastern part of the country. In the discussion (which ensued in one the sections, exactly the dialogue in chapter sixteen) between Okonkwo and the missionaries, we see the difficulties the missionaries had in explaining the “new religion” to the African. The encounter highlights how difficult it was for the missionaries to convince Africans to believe in the Christian God. It was not an easy task for the missionaries because of the culture and tradition of the people they had come to preach to. Achebe writes:

The arrival of the missionaries had caused considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and woman came out to see the white man.... When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying “myself” he always said “my buttocks.” He said he was one of them, as they could see from his color and language.... The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God.ⁱ

In this encounter it is fascinating listening to the argument of the Ibo interpreter. He said he was their brother “as they could see from his color and his language.” According to him the white man was also their brother because “they were all sons of God.”

Achebe also narrates how the missionaries told the people about God, “the Creator of all the world and all the men and women.”ⁱⁱ The missionaries used various ways to get the people of Mbanta into their folk. They told the people that, “*the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went to Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil.*”ⁱⁱⁱ They said there was only one true God and all the gods and deities were gods of deceit who could do no harm. The people of Mbanta showed interest in accepting the faith but were afraid their gods would be angry. And when the missionary told them that their gods were powerless they laughed at him and went away to tap their afternoon wine. Among the

people present was Okonkwo, who was there because he thought “it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them.”^{iv} In fact, he was the person who said to the white man, “*you told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk of his son. He must have a wife, then.*”^v

Okonkwo described the adherents of the new religion as women (cf *Things Fall Apart*). When his son Nwoye joined the group he was full of anger and hatred. For him, “to abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination.”^{vi} Such an attitude he abhorred. How could he have begotten a woman for a son?

In the views presented by Achebe we see how the missionaries tried to explain the Christian faith to the people, using what the people already knew. For example, they explained hell as “*a fire that burned like palm oil*” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 145). It was a simple attempt at “inculturation” without knowing it. We also note that there was a gender issue involved: In Okonkwo’s eyes the adherents were effeminate.

The “conversion” of Igbo to Christianity does not mean that they have accepted the Christian faith whole and entire. Some aspects of Igbo culture and tradition are still in conflict with the “new” religion and that is why Christianity has not taken root in the culture and in Nigeria. On account of this we talk of inculturation, which is, making the received faith have roots in our soil.

In this paper we want to explain some aspects of Igbo culture and the necessity of inculturating the Gospel message. Bearing this in mind, we shall point out some of the problems women might be facing in an inculturated Igbo Church. Some solutions to the problem will be proffered as a way forward before we end with a conclusion.

The Catholic Church in (Igboland) Nigeria

Catholicism in (Igboland) Nigeria encountered various problems primarily because it came to a culture where there was already a religion, not just ‘*Natur Religion*’ but a religion that was akin to what the missionaries had come to preach because Nigerians already understood the importance of obedience and respect to deities, gods and goddesses as well as the role of sacrifice. In the words of Ekechukwu, “*to be an African (or a Nigerian) in a traditional society is to be a religious person, to have a religious interpretation of life. God is genuinely present and active in the African*

religious experience.”^{vii} Another explanation for the problem is the multi language and ethnic groups that have different and differing cultures.

Besides, when the pioneer Catholic missionaries arrived Onitsha, in December 1885 the Holy Ghost Fathers met the Church Missionary Society (C. M. S) who had been there 28 years earlier. They also “*came into a territory occupied by a British trading company – the Royal Niger Company – which was deeply involved in the trade and politics of the area, and which had thereby antagonized many local communities.*”^{viii} According to Nwosu, two unpleasant options were open to the missionaries: either to “fraternize” with the R. N. C. and incur the anger of the natives who had come to hate the company or support the natives and risk the support and anger of the company.^{ix} It was for the Church and her representatives a very big dilemma. The missionaries could succeed because there was already a rift in relationship between the natives and the English Company.

The missionaries were considered right from the beginning as the bearers of peace, the restorers of the good aspects of life and the well being aspired by the people’s tradition and culture....^x

It was therefore not a surprise when the missionaries were given a hearty welcome by the people. Eventually the work they did among the people made them even more acceptable to the natives.

In the western part of Nigeria the story was not different. The missionaries also faced the problem of either supporting the English traders and colonizers or doing without them and forgoing the “benefits” which they stood to gain. It was reported that in the south east the Holy Ghost Fathers did not support the R. N. C and at times openly opposed its attitudes and modes of operation, while the C. M. S. missionaries always supported the R. N. C. “in its campaigns” to the detriment of the people.^{xi} The missionary activities of the first missionaries were not easy. But their labor bore good fruits. The problem remains that the faith is not yet deeply incarnated into the life, culture and way of life of the people, as is evident in certain traditional practices which till date are still dominant among many Christians in Nigeria.

The religious intolerance which exists in some parts of the country today contributes to one of the many problems of the Church. The religious autonomy and discrepancies between Christians and Moslems started as early as the missionaries began their work of evangelization in Nigeria. In fact, as early as 1889 the political administrator of the Royal Niger Company in Nigeria, George Taubmann Goldie wrote a letter to the superior of the Holy Ghost Congregation in Nigeria forbidding him and all missionaries from evangelizing the Mohammedan North.^{xiii} In spite of the letter, the C. M.

S. was converting Moslems at Lokoja. For Celestine Obi, the reason was simple: the C. M. S. saw itself as the spiritual arm of the British Administration,^{xiii} although before this time, in 1884 the S. M. A. had already established a base at Lokoja. Igboland being predominately evangelized by the Holy Ghost Missionaries and bitter against the activities of the Royal Niger Company was therefore not the favourite child of British authorities. That may in part explain, according to the views of some authors, the reason behind the role the British Government played in the Nigerian-Biafran war. There were of course some other political and economic reasons.

The missionary activities of the Holy Ghost Fathers and the C. M. S. in Eastern Nigeria as well as the courageous evangelizing of the S. M. A. in Western Nigeria helped to sow the imperishable seed of the faith among the natives. The fruit is still blossoming till date. Since the missionaries did not succeed in abolishing all traditional practices of the people, there are still certain practices that are not in consonance with the received faith. Many Nigerians indulge in various neo Christian practices because the Gospel message has not really taken root among them the way it should have. For Ikenga Ozigbo, *“the Lutz era (1885-1905) founded the Catholic Church among the Igbo while the Shanahan era (1905-1967) took it to the nooks and corners of Igboland.... Indigenization, which should have been its hallmark, was very poorly conceived and executed.”*^{xiv} On account of this “non-indigenization” or what is today called non inculturation, the Christian faith is still at loggerheads with some elements of our culture and tradition.

Aspects of Our Culture and Tradition

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The mistake of the colonial masters in amalgamating the ethnies into one country has already been made. Each major tribal or language group continues to rear its head in order to be recognized and respected. Although there are ethnic and religious differences, yet there are still other features that we share in common. This has to do with our cherished cultural and traditional heritage.

For Archbishop V. M. Okeke, certain questions revolve around the issue of heritage, “without which a complete understanding and background of a person would be lacking.”^{xv} Our cultural and religious heritages identify the various groups in Nigeria, even with a common denominator. As Okeke says, heritage could be something that is praiseworthy and good, in which case it should be upheld, or it could be something that is not good and should be criticized, condemned and no longer upheld.^{xvi} While some cherished heritage may still be good, others may no longer be considered

relevant in another or present epoch. They therefore do not stand the taste of time.

Respect for elders and seniors is one of the aspects of Igbo custom and tradition. In Igboland, achievement is revered but age is respected. That is why every child is expected to greet his senior on the road whether the senior is known to the child or not. In European and American cultures it is not so. In general, one greets only those who are familiar to him or her. Greetings extended to strangers are often ignored. In Igboland an elderly person can complain to a child's parents that he has refused to greet him. Such is not taken kindly. Whoever has a title will be highly respected.

Among the people of South-Eastern Nigeria, particularly the Igbos, hospitality is one of the cultural heritages that the people are proud of. Any stranger or visitor who has visited the area will attest to this. Visitors are warmly received, and every effort is made to make sure the he feels at home and is happy. The house owner may even starve in order to fend for his visitor. Thus, we have the common phrase "bia k'any rie nri" (come let us eat) unlike the White man who will say, "enjoy your meal." This general attitude to visitors explains why a Nigerian is ever ready to welcome someone who even comes without saying he would be visiting.

The Igbo are faithful to their objects of worship as well as to their general traditions and customs. The missionaries who arrived in Eastern Nigeria were fast and clever enough to have observed this. Traditional title holders were obeyed. They and the colonial masters used the titled men to get the people. Aligwekwe remarks:

The Missionaries discovered...how much the people could be faithful to their tradition and customs.... At the same time one could say that the visit permitted the Missionaries to learn how much the people practiced the virtue of fidelity and of honesty with regard to their convictions. That could not but have encouraged them to believe that once converted to Christianity, this people would always be faithful to it. In other words, their tradition had already instilled in them the sense of fidelity.^{xvii}

In fact, this explains why some Igbo may still be regarded as neo-pagans because they find it difficult relinquishing the cherished traditions and customs of their ancestors, even when they have accepted Christianity.

The traditional Igbo society taught people to always tell the truth and be honest. The demand was even much higher among titled men, those who took the ozo title. In the absence of courts of law, proof of one's honesty was often referred to some gods and goddesses, especially in the swearing of oaths. So, when the Christian missionaries came teaching the importance of

the virtues of truth and honesty it was not something the people had not heard.

In Nigerian culture, especially in the South East women had peculiar tasks which revolved primarily around taking care of the neatness of the house, cooking, taking care of children and doing some other minor chores, while the men worked to earn the daily bread and maintain the family. Women are barred from taking titles specifically reserved for men, like the ozo. Masquerading was men's affair. Women could only dance and clap from a distance. Climbing of certain trees like Palm, Oji, Iroko, etc was an abomination for women. Most medicine "men" were men. Rarely did a woman engage in such a profession. In short, they were regarded as the bearers of children and therefore needed to be protected. A man who was morally and physically weak was regarded as a "woman." In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo regarded his son Nwoye as a woman because he was a weakling like Unoka. On the other hand he said his very agile and intelligent daughter Ezinma could have been a boy (C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-65).

Inculturation:

The Beginning

Today people talk of inculturation in the Catholic Church because the Church after series of historical mistakes is now ready to dialogue with other religions and cultures. The Council of Florence in 1442 maintained the principle of *Extra ecclesiam nulla Sallus* (No Salvation outside the Church). The Council following the views of Fulgentius said:

The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church – not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics – can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, 'which was prepared for the devil and his angels(,)' unless they are gathered into that church before the end of life.^{xviii}

This decision of the Church was later "tempered by Popes Pius V, Innocent XI and Clement XI when they condemned the...theological opinion current during their pontificates."^{xix} They did this when they wanted to correct the view circulating at that time that, "all works of non-believers are sin and the virtues of the philosophers are vices; pagans, Jews, heretics and others are doomed to perdition because they are under the dominion of vice. They are outside the church, and God's grace does not work outside the church."^{xx}

Later Popes and Councils eventually agreed that there could be salvation outside the Church when certain conditions are fulfilled. The trend continued and came to be summed up in the encyclical letter of Paul VI, “*Ecclesiam Suam*” (August 6, 1964) and *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) as well as some other documents of Vatican II. Christ’s saving grace is always active even beyond the Catholic Church, so affirms Vatican II document: *De Ecclesia* (see arts. 8 and 16).^{xxi} Theology of inculturation reflects the efforts of our fathers in faith.

Since the advent of the missionaries to Southern Nigeria a lot of progress has been made both with regard to the number of people who have been baptized and the role the Catholic Church is playing in the religious and social life of the people. For example, most of the over 400 hundred schools taken over by the government of Ukpabi Asika in the 1970 have belonged to the Catholics. Catholicism has come to Igboland and continues to influence the lives of the people. However, the faith is not yet very strong because of the failure of integration of the faith with the good aspects of the people’s lives, accepted customs and traditions. This type of integration that is needed has been described in various ways. Some regard it as “enculturation”, “adaptation” or “substitution” while others talk of “inculturation.” There is still the preponderant tendency among some Catholics to stick to their old ways of life which are not in consonance with the doctrines of Christianity, and the faith needs to be so deepened that the faithful will turn totally away from old traditional practices that could still be regarded as unchristian. Greater number of scholars talks of inculturation instead of enculturation, substitution or adaptation. For this reason, without going into detailed explication of them, I prefer to use the word “inculturation.”

Inculturation and its Difficulties

Inculturation as a theological term refers to the incarnation of the Gospel in a particular setting, culture or tradition. When this is done, the culture and the faith embrace one another. There is integration and the Gospel then speaks the language of the culture and the culture permeates the faith. One can say that it is deepening of the faith using the cultural values and traditions of a people; values that are not opposed to what the Gospel preaches. The first inculturation is the incarnation mystery, while the second attempt at inculturating Christianity may be said to have taken place when St. Paul (though opposed by his fellow Jewish Christians), received the

uncircumcised gentiles into the Church. The process of resolving the issue eventually led to the Jerusalem accord or the first council of Jerusalem.

The various possible interpretations that could be given to inculturation have made some theologians not to be too quick in defining it. They rather choose to describe or explain it. Among them is Fr. Uzukwu, who at the beginning of his work refused to define it. His interest “*is in designing a pattern of living of Christian community in Africa that pays close attention to African sociopolitical and religious resources as well as to the Christian tradition.*”^{xxii} The theology of African Christians is not a theology that is totally different from that of the Europeans and the Americans. The African has no interest in reshaping Christian theology. He shouts that his cultural background and mentality be considered when issues concerning Christians are to be interpreted as dogmas and decrees.

Inculturation of the Gospel message in Africa (particularly in South Eastern Nigeria) has not taken place because the missionary believed that “changing the African” was what was required in order for the Gospel message to thrive:

... the deep-seated exploitative colonial program along with the then European prejudice against Africans failed to be lucidly examined by the missionaries. Consequently, the African was treated as having neither culture nor religion nor social, economic, or political values worth preserving. The change of the identity of the African person meant, in practice, the abandonment of the indigenous culture, values, and religion in order to embrace those of the West.^{xxiii}

The consequence of the above statement was that many missionaries were totally against the religious and cultural values of the people. The people on the other hand, due to their fidelity to their customs and traditions (as already explained above) did not cut off from their heritage. In a simple language,

Inculturation is popularly described in Roman Catholic official and nonofficial documents as the incarnation of the Christian message in cultures. The idea of incarnation is derived from the Christian experience of the Incarnation of the Word. Thus one may continue the analogy for Africa by imagining the seed or sperm of the Christian message impregnating the fertile womb or land of Africa. The result is conception, pregnancy, and the birth of African Christianity. The message of Christ has become flesh. When this is said to happen within African cultures, it presupposes a type of marriage between the message of Christ and African cultures.^{xxiv}

When what is described as inculturation takes place, there is then dialogue between the Christian message and African culture. Christianity then begins to make use of the cultural values in speaking to the people, using their own culture and tradition.

The major issue or problem with inculturation is that neither the Christian culture (which may be described as European culture) nor the African culture wants to get assimilated. Each wants to remain independent. It is also difficult integrating the two. That is why Mbefo talks of “cultural symbiosis” which is difficult to achieve.^{xxv} He was not mincing words when he identifies the basic issues of the Christian faith and the tradition of the African people. For him,

...(an) option would be in the direction of a reconciliation of the two major forces battling for the African soul namely, Western influence and indigenous tradition. It is a fact of African life that these two forces have confronted themselves on the Continent and that they are presently unreconciled.^{xxvi}

This does not imply that there can never be a synthesis between Christianity or Western religion and African tradition. They may still be compatible if serious effort is made.

Christianity is basically a European religion mixed with culture. In various cultures not only in Africa, the major problem has been how to integrate Christianity into the culture of the people. In some Latin American countries, for example, people have opined that the faith should be made to use the values in the traditions of the people in solving the problems of the natives.

From what has been said thus far, we can say that inculturation is good both for the Church and for the African. However, there are certain problems that hinder its progress. One of them is that Africa as a continent still depends on the Roman Church for issues involving inculturation. It is the African that should be at the forefront of it before request for approval from Roman ecclesiastical authorities may be sought. We do not have to wait for Rome to give the minute details. For example, the rite of initiation of children and adults proposed by the late Very Rev. Msgr. Dr. O. P. Achebe in his *Rite of Initiation* should have been further developed. The combination of traditional and Christian marriage already suggested by Rev. Fr. Dr. Patrick Chibuko and others should be deeply studied and used *ad experimentum*, particularly in the Igbo-speaking dioceses of South Eastern Nigeria.

Another problem facing inculturation is that our highly educated and intelligent liturgists who should lead the Igbo Church (or the Nigerian

Church) into developing practical guidelines and theories for inculturation do not seem to have one voice. One says one thing and another says another. It is not that the liturgists must not differ in their opinions. No! As academics they can differ, but then unite to chart a course of action that the rest would be able to follow. An example in this regard is the difficulty the liturgists have in educating the rest of us on the appropriate and proper way of extending one's hand during concelebration.

Although the paucity of funds may make the work of inculturation difficult, it should not be the reason why some changes in the liturgy cannot take place. For the publication of texts, purchase of materials etc, money is needed. At times enough funds are not allotted to things that have to do with liturgical functions and exercise. In spite of this we should not be deterred from moving on.

As long as Nigeria still remains under the Congregation for Doctrine, Faith and Morals (*Propaganda Fide*) and is described as a mission country, even more than one hundred and forty years after the arrival of the first missionaries, we shall not hope to achieve optimal inculturation. The reason is psychological and political. We continue to think of the Nigerian Church or the Igbo Church as a very young one that still needs to be spoon-fed by the Mother. "*The dependency syndrome and the search for external models are as much of a problem for the African state as for the church in Africa.*"^{xxvii} Igboland is rich in various good traditions and culture that it will require commitment and enthusiasm on the part of those who favour inculturation for progress to be made. The basic and fundamental home work must be done by us and not by the Whites, who may not be keen in seeing an "independent" African (Igbo) Church. We must vehemently shun the dependency attitude which makes us psychologically weak to stand on our feet.

Inculturation is not just about using palm wine to celebrate the Holy Mass or wearing loin cloth instead of chasuble, sewing unto our traditional clothes (*ákara*) the Roman collar which at times makes some of us look like members of Olumba-Olumba Church.

True inculturation... would be making communion bread out of locally available raw materials like maize or rice, taking a native name at baptism as opposed to dropping a Christian name already taken.^{xxviii}

It involves the total penetration of the Christian faith into the fertile soil of our cultural and traditional ways of life. This includes, recognizing that the male and female sexes all belong to the people of God and have equal rights and responsibilities in the family of God.

Women and Inculturation

Nigeria and Igboland had a culture before the advent of the first Portuguese explorers to this part of the world in the 15th century, and Portugal eventually was prominent in the shameful slave trade which lasted for centuries. It was made possible when “*in his bull Romanus Pontifex (1454), Pope Nicholas V accorded to the king of Portugal a monopoly in trade and exploration along the west coast of Africa.*”^{xxix} With the arrival of the Portuguese traders there was the first cultural contact with the West.

When the missionaries later arrived the shores of Nigeria, particularly South eastern Nigeria there arose serious struggle between the White man’s “civilizing” approach and the Igbos with regard to culture. In fact,

“...where the European civilization was played up as the apex of human achievement, our religion was dubbed as superstition, our medicine as charlatanism, magic and quackery; our languages were qualified as incoherent dialects, our music was termed rudimentary, our arts primitive, our crafts, non-existent.”^{xxx}

This is not surprising because no culture is totally static. Culture grows and changes. No culture is without any outside influence. At times one culture is enriched by another.

When the explorers and the missionaries arrived the territory now regarded as Igboland, one of the efforts they made was to emphasize the equality of the sexes (even if theoretical because some slave merchants preferred male slaves to female ones). The missionaries particularly regarded all as the sons and daughters of God. But that did not make man and woman equal in Igbo culture.^{xxxi}

Many people in Nigeria and Africa including women are already clamoring for inculturation. If inculturation as explained above entails the Gospel message fertilizing and impregnating our culture, then it might include those aspects of our culture where women are discriminated against. In our local churches there are hundreds of examples, just as there are also in our culture.

In Igbo culture ozo title-taking for example is reserved only for men. Women could become *Ezenwanyi, Lolo* etc. but are forbidden from taking the ozo title. It is a title that makes a man really a man; those men who do not take it are regarded as weaklings. This traditional institution was carried out in a pagan way but in 1960 it was “Christianized” in the Archdiocese of Onitsha. Since then Catholics could take it. Among the questions posed in the form by the Archdiocese were:

Was the Catholic Mission Representative present when the initiate was being initiated into the Ozo title? Was any ecclesiastical permission received by the initiate for taking this title?^{xxxii}

The report does not say anything on the sex of the initiate-to-be because it was clear that the title was only for men. So, even after the reform, which was an attempt at Christianizing the title-taking women are still not allowed into it, although men and women are sons and daughters of God. Should there be still such discrimination in an inculturated Igbo Church?

The laity are called upon to participate actively in the saving mission of the Church. In Igboland many men and women are active in various societies and offices in their local parishes. Yet there is discrimination against women with regard to some of these offices. For example, women are generally not permitted by men to head the parish council or to become a catechist. I do not know of a parish in Igboland where a lady is the president or chairperson of the parish council. So, women must fight to make sure that inculturation does not still support such discrimination against them. Of course in Europe and North America the story is different; a woman could head any committee in the local parish.

Marriage is another area that presents problems to women in a church of the future in Igboland. Efforts are being made to inculturate some aspects of the Christian marriage. Nowadays people perform “Igba Nkwu” and Christian marriage the same day. To celebrate the two the same day is financially advantageous to the parties involved. A real theology of inculturation of Christian marriage would be one where in the same venue the traditional and Christian rites of marriage are performed. It has been done a few times *ad experimentum* in the catholic diocese of Enugu.

In the traditional society “Igba Nkwu” is normally done at the house of the bride. In the effort to inculturate some of these practices, how many men will accept to have the “Igba Nkwu” and the Christian marriage at the home of the bride? Or how many men would, if need be, live with their wives at the family house of the wife, at times with the parents of the wife living under the same roof? A man who accepts such a compromise will be regarded as a weakling by his friends and peers. Such is the strength of our cultural attachment which Christianity may not be able to remove, at least not in the next few years.

Women are active in the Church when they are on their own. They know how to get things organized. The Catholic Women Organization (C. W. O.) is the strongest statutory group in almost every diocese in South east Nigeria and even in the western part of the country. Women alone have sponsored the building of Churches, rectories, halls, etc. They know how to

get money. Although men are aware of this gift which women have, they have rarely given them opportunity to get bazaars and harvests organized in the parishes. The reason behind it is that men discriminate against them even when they are aware of their talents and the contributions they are able to make.

In a typical Igbo society no woman ever puts her hands inside the mouth of a man except the man is her husband, child, brother or very close relative. Women have the authority of the local ordinary in some parishes overseas to act as extraordinary ministers of the Holy Eucharist. In Nigeria, in the West, professed sisters have the permission to carry on the function in big cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Benin etc. Yet many men never go to receive Holy Communion from them because of cultural reasons. In Igboland when the late Archbishop S. N. Ezeanya wanted to introduce it in Onitsha, many men opposed it at the pastoral council meeting.

If we want a virile Church in Igboland, serious effort at inculturation must take into account how to surmount the traditional feelings of the people, bearing in mind that the Church is a family of God where men and women are equals (or should be equals).

The Way Forward

In the popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, the author portrays Jesus as a feminist who defended women in the cause of his earthly ministry. He argues that Jesus showed more sympathy and love to women than to men. The film version of this novel was released on May 19, 2006.

Unlike the author of the novel, this paper is aimed at pointing out why women should be more interested in inculturation. If aspects of our culture that discriminate against the womenfolk were allowed to be inculturated, women would continue to be marginalized. They should therefore see inculturation as an opportunity to get engaged in the activities of the Church, without succumbing to the cultural and traditional bias against them which some aspects of inculturation may seem to uphold or support.

One of the first ways of achieving this is that women should get more involved in all aspects of inculturation. They should make their views known. Chiding from discussions on it or being afraid of being labeled feminists will not do them any good. And in order to profit from the theological, philosophical and cultural arguments inherent in the discussions they should make effort to get acquainted with basic theological issues.

Widowhood is an aspect of our culture that still causes serious concern to many good Christians. Often women's rights are infringed upon in the name of mourning a dead husband ("ikwa di").^{xxxiii} Isolated attempts

by individual priests have been made to Christianize or rather inculturate widowhood so that widows will no longer be maltreated. A concerted effort by many high ranking and educated women is needed in order to solve the problem permanently. Unless women take the bull by the horn, men who profit (“in cash and/or in kind”) from “ime ajadu” or “ikwa di” would not give up.

In order to garner more support in their struggle toward effacing problematic issues bordering on inculturation which may make women second class citizens, educated women should write and distribute pamphlets and flyers explaining the disadvantages which they face when inculturation is unquestionably accepted. The vicissitudes of a 21st Century Church and society make this paramount.

Conclusion

The voices of women are now being heard in the social, political and religious spheres. Even before the publication of Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*,^{xxxiv} (and other authors who followed after her), women have continued to emphasize how important it is to engage women in dialogue with men when some issues that involve them are to be discussed and/or implemented. This paper is not one of those feminist voices since it is written by a man. Neither does it intend to raise theological and biblical questions on the issue of ministry of women in the Church. It is an attempt of a male researcher to examine the problems that women might face in a fully inculturated Nigerian Church, bearing in mind the attitude towards women in our culture and tradition.

Women played various roles in the early Church and the New Testament is replete with instances of the contribution of women to the ministry of our Lord and how he cherished and helped them. *Women feature as the main protagonists in a series of miracle stories, all of which come from Mark’s Gospel, originally, and have generally been retold by Matthew and Luke.*^{xxxv} (The presupposition is that the Gospel of Mark was the first to be written and Matthew and Luke used it as their source). In the New Testament many of such stories and miracles that centered on women include:

1. The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1.29-31; Matthew 8.14-15; Luke 4.38-39).
2. The healing of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5.24-34; Matthew 9.20-22; Luke 8.43-48).
3. The raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5.21-24, 35-43).
4. The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7.24-30; Matthew 15.21-26).

5. The example of the poor widow who put in all she had (Mark 12.38-44; Luke 20.47; 21.1-4).
6. Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 7.53-8.11).
7. The parable of the yeast (Matthew 13.33).
8. The parable of the two sons (Matthew 21.28-32).
9. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25.1-13).
10. The anointing of Jesus' feet in Bethany
11. The presence of women during the crucifixion and burial of Christ.
12. The discovery of the empty tomb by women
13. Looking at a woman lustfully (Matthew 5.28).^{xxxvi}

These pinpoint the attitude of Christ towards the often discriminated and downgraded gender in Judean culture and tradition.

Articles, texts and books abound that discuss the social, religious and political roles of women in ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece and the Hellenistic world. Our emphasis here is on the need for women to be duly considered in the effort towards an African Church that is really incarnated in the African soil because women and men have rights and belong to the one family of God. A twenty-first century Church in Africa should be open-minded and *“the Church in West Africa (Igboland) will be a success or failure, a strong or weak church to the extent...inculturation is successful or not in this sub-region.”*^{xxxvii} Women should not be considered only as the weaker sex, the bearers of children and keepers of the house.

There are various movements going on in the world to ensure that women are listened to and considered in the society. Inculturation is something that has come to stay. Women should struggle to make sure that discriminatory aspects in our culture are not inculturated and incorporated into the future Church in Igboland. The future of the Church may depend on how women are treated with regard to inculturation. History has shown that women in Igboland can get themselves organized to defend or mar a decision or a process they consider unwarranted. The Church in Igboland cannot do without the contributions of women who are our mothers and our sisters. A research into inculturation should not leave them out. This paper has not said it all, but is only a starting point.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, (1959) 1994, pp. 144-145.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.145

ⁱⁱⁱ *Loc. cit.*

^{iv} *Loc. cit.*

^v *Loc. cit.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 153.

^{vii} A. Ekechukwu, "Theology of Religions and the Theological Problematic of Inculturation" in *Religion and African Culture: Inculturation,- A Nigerian Perspective-*, edited by Elochukwu Uzukwu. Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd., (no year of publication given), p.141.

^{viii} V. A. Nwosu (ed.), *The Catholic Church in Onitsha, Peoples, Places and Events (1885-1985)*, Onitsha: Etukokwu Press Ltd., 1985, p. xii. See the introduction to the work written by V. A. Nwosu.

^{ix} *Loc. cit.*

^x P. E. Aligwekwe, *The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society: The Igbo of Nigeria*. Owerri: Totan Publishers, 1991, p. 263.

^{xi} Celestine Obi, "The Royal Niger Company and the Holy Ghost Mission at Onitsha 1885-1900" in V. A. Nwosu (editor), *The Catholic Church in Onitsha...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Obi reports that: "*the Holy Ghost Fathers being French and very nationalistic seemed to have been nursing some grievances against the R. N. C. for creating a commercial empire at the expense of French firms.*" *Loc. cit.* It should however not be forgotten that the R. N. C. gave some help to the Holy Fathers, particularly Fr. Joseph Lutz when they wanted to collect their belongings etc. For more details see also F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857-1914*. London, 1971. (No publishers given). That was before more misunderstanding erupted between the R. N. C. and the Missionaries.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 5.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{xiv} Ikenga R. A. Ozigboh, *Igbo Catholicism: The Onitsha Connection 1967-1984*. Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers, 1985, p. 127.

^{xv} V. M. Okeke, *Our Glorious Heritage, A Pastoral Letter at the Beginning of the First Onitsha Archdiocesan Synod*. Onitsha: Goodmark Prints, 2005, n. 1, p.2.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{xvii} P. E. Aligwekwe, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

^{xviii} This quotation from DS 1351 was cited by A. Ekechukwu in his article "Theology of Religions and the Theological Problematic of Inculturation" in *Religion and African Culture: Inculturation,- A Nigerian Perspective-*, Elochukwu Uzukwu, *op. cit.*, p.136. Even Hans Kung made reference to this quotation in his book, *On Being a Christian*. London: Collins Press, 1977, p. 97.

^{xix} *Loc. cit.*

^{xx} *Loc. cit.*

^{xxi} Cf. *De Ecclesia*, articles 8 and 16. See also Uzukwu (editor), *Religion and African Culture... op. cit.*, p. 141 ff.

^{xxii} Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*. New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p.7. (Reprinted in Nigeria by Snaap Press).

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 4.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{xxv} Luke Mbefo, *The Reshaping of African Traditions*. Enugu: Spiritan Publications, 1988. Mbefo is of the opinion that Western influence and indigenous tradition are battling for the soul of the African man/woman and the two seem irreconcilable. See p. 76ff.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 76.

^{xxvii} Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

^{xxviii} Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation and Future of the Church in West Africa" in *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*. An AWACC (Anglophone West Africa Catechetical Commission) Publication. No editor, author or publisher indicated, 1993, p. 78.

^{xxix} Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church, op. cit.*, p. 21.

^{xxx} T. Okere, *Philosophy, Culture and Society in Africa*. Nsukka: Afro-Orbis Publications Ltd., 2005, p. 87. It is interesting reading the essay “The Present State of Igbo Culture” which is contained in the book. In it Okere discusses the state of Igbo culture.

^{xxx}ⁱ For more details on sexual discrimination in Nigeria, see Elechi Amadi’s *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 19...

^{xxx}ⁱⁱ The questions are contained in *The Report on Ozo Title Taking by Catholics in the Archdiocese of Onitsha*, 1972. The *Torch Magazine* of March 23, 1961 published the decision of the Church authorities on ozo title-taking. Fr. Raymund Arazu is of the view that the Church was not well informed on the issue of ozo title-taking at that time. To support his argument he presents the memorandum that was submitted to the ecclesiastical authorities by Ihiala clan who opposed the decision of the Church. We do not intend here to discuss ozo title fully. For more details on ozo title-taking, see Raymund Arazu, *Our Religion: Past and Present*. Awka: Spiritan Centre for Self Realisation, 2005, pp. 185-197.

^{xxx}ⁱⁱⁱ In my work on *Widowhood in the Church and Society*, I pointed out the difficulties and hardships widows face in Igboland. Many of these practices constitute abuse of human rights. Cf. Aloysius C. Obiwulu (ed.), *Widowhood in the Church and Society*. Enugu: Delta Publications Limited, 2009. See pages 71-91.

^{xxx}^{iv} See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1982. In the work Gilligan argues that if women were to be fully involved, interviewed and consulted in the making of universal moral principles, the interpretation and approach to issues involving women could be different. She thus questions the universalizability and conventionalism of certain principles, particularly moral principles. It was the book of Lawrence Kohlberg (*The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*, vols 1 & 2. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981) that necessitated Gilligan’s reaction.

^{xxx}^v Francis J. Moloney, *Woman: First Among the Faithful, A New Testament Study*. Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988, p. 8.

^{xxx}^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9. Moloney’s attempt is to prove that in the ministry of Jesus women were among the first people whom he helped and listened to. Many of the miracles were performed either for women or at the request of a woman. He showed freedom from constraint and prejudices inherent in the culture of the Jews at the time.

^{xxx}^{vii} Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation and the Future of the Church in West Africa” in *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*,” *op. cit.*, p.78.