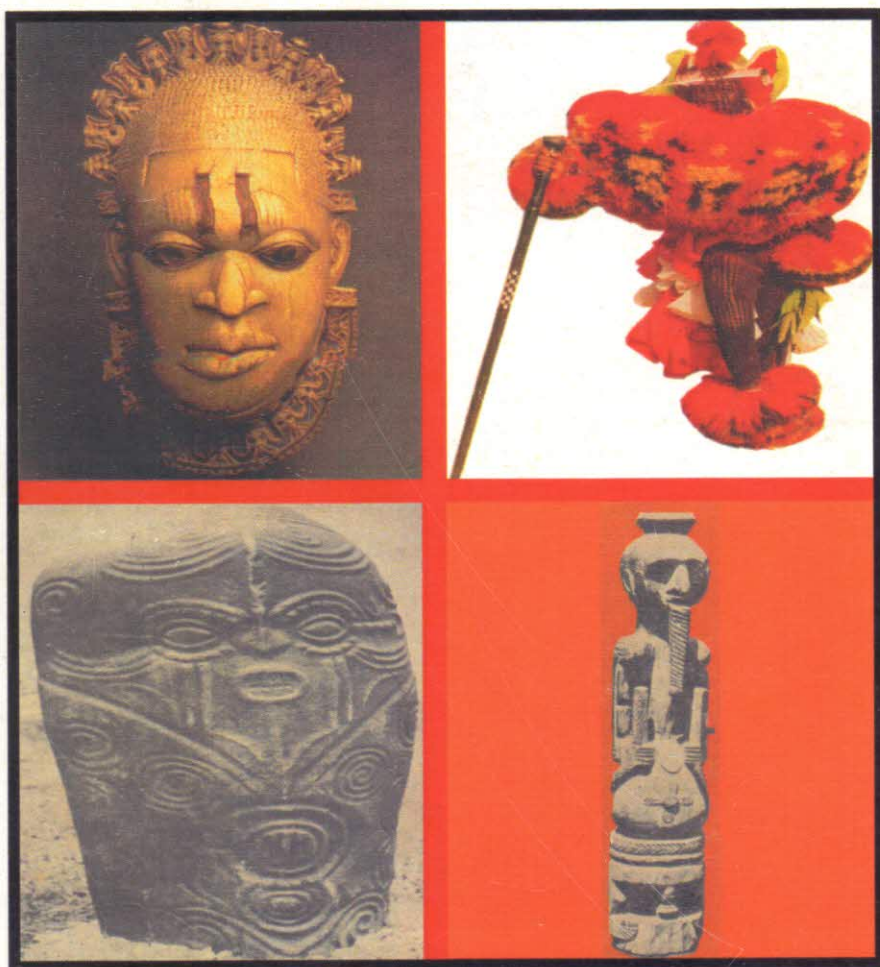


AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY



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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

OKONKO ETHOS AND VALUES IN CREATIVE TENSION: THE IGBO PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Patrick U. Nwosu

Introduction

Vatican II Council was summoned by John XXIII in 1962 and one of the key decisions taken during the meeting was to engage the society and various cultures in dialogue. This was informed by the fact that no one has a monopoly on the truth. Based on this decision, the socio-cultural lives of many nations already removed from the public domain by the early missionaries started making a comeback. This major comeback, following the Vatican II Council's decision impacted greatly on Okonko Society in Igboland creating tension between it and Christian mission. However, how to engage Okonko Society and Catholic Christianity to dialogue has remained an issue in Igboland till date. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to analyze the actions of Christian leaders within the context of Okonko ethos and evangelization. The paper, applying historical and analytical methods, argues that there is urgent need to appreciate afresh the Okonko ethos as a platform of evangelization in Igboland.

Before the Roman Catholic Vatican II Council that lasted from 1962 to 1965, the ecclesiology with which the Christian Mission in Igboland was busy and the Missiology that underpinned it were clearly the fruits of slavery and colonialism. In fact, the Igbo church was seen from the prism of Western

churches. The Church in Igboland, particularly the Roman Catholic Church depended on the Western "mother" churches for its sacred science, spirituality and funds. Almost every aspect of the Igbo sense of mission and spirituality did not escape the woes of slavery and colonialism. Hence, the ancestral society in Igboland called Okonko was adversely impacted.

Worried by the actions of the early missionaries and that of the indigenous clergy to exterminate the theory and practice of Okonko society, the question arises whether there exists any criterion by which a certain course of action can be determined as responsible or irresponsible. Obedience or disobedience to God's plan has been pointed out as the criterion of ethical goodness of an action. This is buttressed by the submission of Obi when he defended the way and manner that early missionaries desecrated Igboland. He said that, "divine providence wanted the Eastern Nigerians to see the salvation of God and so sent the missionaries to lead them to the knowledge of the truth..." (Obi 1985:2). Obedience or disobedience to God's will as a criterion however, is still of a very general and indeterminate nature. This is why today, proselytization, crusade and evangelization that were terms coterminous with the history of Christian expansionism in Igboland are being avoided. Yet, the long history of planting Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, in Igboland has come to be characterized by these terms. In the 21st century, to avoid the damages these activities did to the ethos and values of Okonko Society, some main-line Christian leaders are reformulating their theologies of mission to talk about "studying", "dialogue" or "cooperation" (Ugorji 1997:56-57).

Thus, the thrust of this study is to analyze the actions of Igbo Christian leaders against the ethics of Okonko Society. The aim of the paper is informed by the growing degradation of basic human values in Igboland. Values such as "umunnacra" or community ties, respect for the aged, well-being of the majority, honesty, peace and security are becoming rare. Anxiously, this ethical degradation is assuming global dimensions (*The Guardian* 2012:1-2). Social and religious situations in Igboland indicate or point to the urgent need to appreciate a fresh the Okonko ethos and the challenge of using the framework of ancestral institutions in the evangelizing mission of the church. In discussion the issues raised above, one observes that the missionary enterprise in Igboland has tremendous literature attached to it within the decades back while almost a few exists on the ethics of Okonko society. Using historical and expository methods, the paper proceeds in the following subheadings: Ethics and Ethical Theories; Okonko society at the Sight of Christianity; Okonko Ethos and Christian Life; and then, a Conclusion.

Ethics and Ethical Theories

The definitions of ethics and ethical theories depend on the way one sees their purposes, determines their contents, and responds to their main themes. In

other words, ethics and ethical theories point to a common destiny. In this regard, Aristide correctly observed that, "there is only one history: that of human beings, that which helps us to explain the struggle for humanity" (Aristide 1993:48). While affirming the validity of human history, Kavunkal defended the observation of Aristide. He notes that the God of the Bible does not act on a purely spiritual realm but acts in relation to history. According to him, "salvation history unfolds itself in secular history. We have to see the hand of God in secular history. The world is no longer a hindrance but a challenge" (Kavunkal 1996:131). Therefore, ethics and ethical theories are analyses of the good and its realization in human actions. They are the studies of the meaning and application of evaluative intelligence (Miranda 1997:131).

Those human actions are good which contributes to the realization of the common good; and those actions are bad which lead people away from the common good and obstruct its realization. In this regard, the Okonko ethos is the specific determinations that help a people to realize their ultimate goal and purpose in life. This ethics was of greatest importance for the Igbo before the advent of Catholic Christianity. Rightly then the ethics can be designated as science of meanings for the Igbo people. According to Akanmidu, the word: "ethics" derives its origin from the Greek word: "ethos". The concept in the word "ethos" connotes from the rules of a people or community. From this angle, ethos, in meaning, relates to character or to person's nature or disposition. (Akanmidu 1995:4).

Recent ethical discussions pay increasing attention to the question of the meaning of existence. It is pointed out that insight into the meaning of existence supplies that comprehensive framework which makes a people's way of life possible, provides the basis for their validity, and ensures unity to the ethical theory (Dopamu 1992:204-208). Definite view concerning the goal of a meaningful life enters in every ethical reflection as the condition of its contents. This was the stabilizing role Okonko Society played in Igboland through its ethics and values. It represented a conception of the meaning of human existence that reveals the understanding the Igbos have about their religion and ancestors. In other words, Okonko ethos condenses Igbo anthropology to a focal point that influences values and judgments.

In the light of the above, the Christian mission was relentlessly aimed at disrupting the established ethics and tradition of the people of Igboland. This was done without corresponding soul-centered projects that will serve as alternative to the people's identity, experience and historical challenges. The result was that the Igbos became bewildered, confused and deeply deprived of something dear to them. Reflecting on the ethical implication of missionary strategies in Igboland, Obiechina notes that the foreign missionaries and early converts caused a great crisis in many traditional African communities. He writes that:

... They no sooner come to a place than they began

activity to destroy the religious, and therefore the ideological foundation of society. In spite of the people's general tolerance, it is only a matter of time before serious conflicts develop (Obiochina 1971:222).

Like it happened to other traditional institutions the ethics and values of Okonko Society were violently attacked by the Christian missionaries and their agents as devilish, pagan and satanic. They were quick to condemn the theory and praxis of Okonko Society (Okonkonism) and this prepared the ground for the moral degradation clearly noticeable in Igboland today.

The different views held by Okonko Society and Catholic Christianity with regard to the ultimate goal of human beings and of their community activities properly fit as ethical theories. Akanmidu classified them into three basic theories. They are utilitarianism, consequentialism and the futurist moral theory (Akanmidu 1995:29-39). Akanmidu notes that the essence of utilitarianism may be looked for in temporal happiness and welfare (Akanmidu 1995:30). That is, pleasure and happiness are the only things good in itself, while evil is what causes pain and sorrow. Ethically right then is what is useful and profitable for achieving the goal of temporal well being and success. Utilitarianism may as well be typical instance of consequentialism, "... on the ground that utilitarianism is used to refer to any outlook which holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action always depends on the consequences of the action" (Akanmidu 1995:35). However, the consequentialist cannot be dissuaded by an action that is good in itself without having to wait for the consequences that such action will elicit (Akanmidu 1995:35).

The ethics of Okonko Society, in the light of community living, did not admit the principle of unrestrained, private happiness or *pros peris*. Individualism and selfishness had no place in most Igbo communities, no matter how much pleasure that could bring to the person. Okonko society condemned and punished criminal recklessness perpetrated on grounds of utilitarianism and consequentialism. The greatest happiness of the larger community was axiomatic in Okonko society (Adegoke vii). This could be described as modified utilitarianism and consequentialism.

The futurist moral theory holds that an action is moral when it justifies and motivates the recipient to show appreciation in the future (Akanmidu 1995:37). This concept belongs essentially to the religious domain. As Akanmidu puts it: "the futurist moral theory builds in people the sense of appreciation of what others have done for them. In this way, the attitude of the ingrate is jettisoned and deemed inappropriate" (Akanmidu 1995:38). The theories highlighted so far capture the imperative of ethical behaviour. They point to the reasons why people behave ethically. Neither Okonko society nor Catholic Christianity in Igboland raises objections to these theories as such. Both institutions agree on the real world of meaningful existence and the need to sustain it. However, what

constitutes meaningful existence seems to be at the root of the creative confrontation between Okonko Society and Christian religion in Igboland.

Okonko Society tends to present ultimate morality which centers on the community and union with God in the ancestors. On the other hand, Christian religion, for many years in Igboland, has proved in many respects to be unwilling to accept this morality and to present itself to suit the experience, expectation, identity and history of the people, especially with those traditional ceremonies and institutions that have been there from time immemorial, Oliver A. Onwubiko explains the uncompromising attitude of Christian religion toward ancestral settings in this sense:

Having impressed on the converts in the church, and on the children in the school, that performing traditional ceremonies was bad and sinful, neither the converts nor the missionary had the good intention to see what was good in those ceremonies and the rites and rituals that, in them and through them, expressed the traditional African religiosity. Some never dared even to ask what influences Puberty initiations had over the stability of the life of an individual and thus the African community, family and the stability of marriage and sexual morality (Onwubiko 1991:129).

It has to be stressed that the Divine, generally understood as God is the love that values otherness. Because of valuing the radical otherness cultures and traditions, this love allows creatures and people their own integrity, autonomy and freedom. The Okonko Society provided and still provides the potential that enables the Igbo culture to develop according to their own history and experience. When this is recognized within the context of missionary efforts, then a "space" necessary for inter-face and mutual enrichment opens up naturally. In discussing the issue of integrity proper to creation, Linahan buttressed the point being made in these words:

God's graciousness in relationship, enacted by the spirit, characterizes not only the lavishness with which God has gifted creation, but also the welcoming delight, the gracious hospitality the inclusiveness with which God "makes room" for a relationship partner that is radically other (Linahan 2009:144).

Interface and mutual enrichment between Okonko Society and Christian religion in Igboland would be more result oriented than confrontation. Authentic evangelization involves both giving and receiving.

Okonko Society at the Sight of Christianity

Okonko society in Igboland is an ancestral institution that exists for the purpose of community preservation. The institution enforced tradition, customs and beliefs before the advent of Christianity in Africa. The Society determines ritual behaviour and social practices in most communities in Igboland (Nwosu 2009:178-179). Okonko Society changed drastically with the advent of missionary activities in Igboland. The early Irish missionaries and the native clergy that took over from them after the Nigerian Biafra civil war did not create any climate of openness towards Okonko ethos, despite encouraging instructions from the Vatican.

In the encyclical "*Maximum illud*" (1919) by Pope Benedict XV, the Roman Catholic Church at the universal level instructed missionaries to cultivate positive approach to the culture and traditions of their host communities. Contrary to the Pope's instruction, the missionaries that came to Igboland, "who were primarily Irish, were very insistent and uncompromising about handing on, without change, whatever they practiced in their country..." (Uzokuwu 1994:97). At the departure of the white missionaries, the native clergy simply clung to what they inherited from the Europeans. They view any adaption or positive approach to Okonko ethos as either a return to "devilish worship" or infidelity to Rome. The new religion, with its strategies and activities adversely upturned the ordered rhythm of Okonko society. Seeing the society as standing on the way of getting new members into the church, the efforts to destroy it heightened. The actions of the missionaries, through schools and Christian village programmes, started drawing away actual and potential members of Okonko. Omenka gave credence to this fact when he writes that,

The children ... no longer took part in Pagan rites and practices and were often prone to debase places generally accepted to be sacred. Some mission officials were alleged to have even encouraged their young adherents to disobey their pagan rulers... (Omenka 1993:249).

This affected the membership of Okonko Society and their financial strength since they depended much on Okonko initiation fees for their upkeep. Missionaries and agents of Christian evangelism exploited and subverted the Okonko ethos. As Achebe vividly described it, the intrusion of western and missionary cultures and values into the African society had a seriously disintegrating effect (Achebe 1979:99). In other words, at the encounter of the new religion, Okonko society experienced a disruptive force that has rocked it to its foundation till date. Consequently, today there is collapse of high moral principles and orderliness in most communities in Igboland and Nigeria at large. The core values of Okonko society embedded in its ethos are distorted due to the influence of Christianity. The native Cultural integrative elements held

sacrosanct by the ancestors have been watered down. This was inevitable because,

You cannot put on a new culture readymade. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made (Eliot 1968:200).

This view of Elliot accounts for what has happened and is happening to Okonko society in Igboland.

In Okonko society, sacred knowledge, adult education and sense of responsibility are situated in its ethos. They are nourished and promoted, their perpetuation is guaranteed. Through Okonko ceremonies and rites, the younger generation is guided towards stability of life. By so doing, the stability of African community, family, marriage and sexual morality are ensured. It is in the Okonko society that attempt is made to reconcile the cultural past and future. Thus, Dulles warns, that,

Proper spirit of accommodation must restrain missionaries from crudely westernizing peoples who legitimately fear the loss of what is precious and distinctive in their own heritage (Dulles 1967:58).

Dulles warning calls for climate of dialogue between Okonko society and the new religious in Igboland. This is urgent because Okonko is not dead in Igboland. The society is still functional and people, till date, take certain cases to Okonko. The members occupy important positions in the communities where the society exists. Through the society's framework, villages are brought together under a type of loose federation to encourage bilateral cooperation and harmony. The society is effective means of social control and protection of property. Through Okonko ethos, people pay allegiance to the common good of the community, even though Christian influence has weakened the society in a very significant extent. Yet, God is concerned about every aspect of human existence, Okonko inclusive.

Okonko Ethos and Christian Life

Igboland that has Okonko society as her prominent ancestral society is the home of many religions and churches. Igboland is either giving birth to these religions or giving place to them in the southeastern soil of Nigeria. From these facts about Igboland, Greschat comes to the following conclusion regarding the tribe:

It is there that one finds "authentic Pentecostals" such as the "chosen one of God" J. Ikechiuku, an Ibo, who founded St. Joseph's chosen church of God. He teaches baptism in the spirit, considering all those who are baptized only with water to be merely nominal

Christians. He knows the working of the Holy Spirit to be speaking in tongues, shaking, crying "Hallelujah", prophesying (Greschart 1997:331)

Different religions and churches are very much alive and active in Igboland. However, Okonko society existed here before the birth of any new religion. The society is the host of catholic Christianity and other churches. Thus after many years of missionizing, the religious map of Igboland is still substantially being influenced by Okonko society. Less than 50 percent of Igbos may be said to find their spiritual growth through the Catholic Christian faith alone. Many are affiliated to Okonko society though now at nominal level. This calls one to ask what the role of Christian life is in Igboland. In other words, the effort is to juxtapose Okonko ethos and Christian faith in a relationship of legitimacy. This effort takes into cognizance the fact that "in the religious experience (the God-experience) normally speaking we do not come across any substantial difference between Christians and the followers of other religions" (Kavunkal 1996:75).

As noted earlier, the Greek conception of ethnics has more to do with normative patterns which Okonko and Catholic Christianity subscribe to. On this fact, Akanmidu goes so far to argue that,

This idea puts ethics in a clearer light sufficiently to be identified as some kind of inquiry into human conduct, or into some normative systems, or into some values (Akanmidu 1995:4).

The above submission fits into what is recommended through Okonko ethos. The natural law, as well known is engraved in the hearts of every Okonko adherent for which they seek for eternal values like coexistence, peace, justice and equity (Nwosu 2009:6). In this context, "the Okonkonite" (an adherent of Okonko society) recognizes the peoples common origin in God, the creators of all things. It is in this light that the ethos cherishes sense of responsibility. This responsibility concerns all human rights within the community where Okonko has influence. In these communities, the Okonkonite turns constantly to the initial intentions of the ancestors, which is preserved and handed on within the Okonko society. The initial inspiration could be summated in the words, "common good of the community". The ethos prevents mischevious manipulation to serve particular interests. This indicates that Okonko ethos is humankind oriented. It guarantees the inviolability of people's right. Therefore, Okonko society frowns at the spiritual individualism. For the society, individualism is inhuman. As Ejizu writes,

The communal way of life is central whereby human beings shares joys, blessings, sorrows and burdens. Harmony within one self, one's clan, society, nature and the spiritual world forms the basis of a healthy society (Ejizu 2005:10).

To achieve harmony in life, Okonko society pays high premium on

respect-respect for oneself, other people, the elderly and the spiritual world. Members of the community are expected to be people of respect and integrity (Ayandele 1991:270). In all, the ethical category of Okonko society, what is right and wrong is assessed by how it affects the larger society or the common good. The foregoing is in line with the utilitarian ethical principle which stresses the affects of actions. As Akanmidu argues, from this basic view point, utilitarianism as a moral theory sees right action as one that promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Akanmidu 1995:30). Okonko ethos hangs on modified utilitarianism. Hence, disturbing harmony and disrespect are punishable by the Okonko society in Igboland.

Relating Okonko ethos to Christian life, one notes that for Christian religion the God-experience is to flow into the experience of the neighbors. For Christianity, particular Roman Catholicism, service to neighbors is as important as worshipping God (mt.22:36ff). In fact, the criterion for the eternal life in Christianity is service to the neighbor (mt.25:31ff). In this regard, Kavunkal explains that this accounts for the reason why Christian churches are engaged in the management of "numerous mission hospitals, charitable homes, orphanages and so on" (Kavunkal 1996:75).

Hence, Catholic Christianity or any other new religion in Igboland cannot be seen as a cause of depreciation of Okonko society or meant to swallow her ethos. Rather the two institutions should be more alert to God's plan operative in all cultures since creation. This plan has to be followed without diluting the basic contents of Okonko ethos and Christian mission of witnessing to God's care for all nations. The core ethos and experience of ancestral societies in Africa should be explicitly upheld by Christian mission. Christian missions have to reconsider the scant attention being paid to the local cultures in their host communities. Okonko for example comprises the hopes, aspirations, problems and agonies of a people, the people of Igboland. In this society is expressed the social process and the concerns and struggle of the Igbo.

Conclusion

Going by the sequence of the findings of this study, Okonko ethos and Catholic Christianity are not supposed to be antagonistic of each other. None, in the mind of God, is meant to subsume the other. Rather some sort of accommodation in the light of the new heaven and the new earth should be the over-riding challenge. In this respect, the paper noted that much has not happened between Okonko society in Igboland and Catholic Christianity, despite encouraging instructions from the Vatican II Council. Okonko ethos and Christian presence in Igboland appear to be indispensable in the process of humanizing the life of all Igbo people. This tendency to relationship invites all churches in Igboland to enter into dialogue with adherent of Okonko society on equal terms. This is especially so because these institutions in Igboland will

continue to co-exist, as noted earlier. In the face of moral degradation, deep-neck corruption, individualism and loss of cultural values rocking Igboland and the nation in general, ancestral societies and new religions must become agents of regeneration through their ethical theories and services. Instead of brandishing their strength as signs of might and superiority, Okonko society and Christian religion have to be signs of the eschatological communion that has the living God as the foundation.

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