

Inculturation of some Christian beliefs in Unubi: Roles for the Anglican Community

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Abstract

With the increase of culture revival and great number of Igbo youths going back to idol/ancestral worship, one wonder the depth of Christianity they received and practiced. After about ten decades of gospel presence in Unubi, and in spite of the large Christian faithful therein, the church still seems to be far from making solid foundation when it comes to incarnating some Christian practices into Unubi culture. The increase in conflicts between the Church and the traditional Unubi people, and the great wave of culture revival that engulf Unubi in the recent times point to the fact that the gospel message has not fully come to life into Unubi culture. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the rationalization for, and the process of inculturation as a feasible and healthy strategy for consolidating the Christian faith among the Unubi cultural people and the roles of the Anglican Church in the process. The research, in part, will also serve as a panacea to the calls of Unubi students to have Unubi traditional values documented. The work combines historical and case-study methods of research. The research traced the history of Christianity in Unubi and her interaction with Unubi traditional religion. The result of an analysis of data from various field works and the study of literature on this theme shows that in general, average Unubi man is cultural and is attached to traditions of his culture. And because culture is a way of life and is gluey, it seems to have a strong grip on the people such that the mere reception of Christian baptism and profession of Christ seem unable to separate. In that case, many Christians appear to show double loyalty: loyalty to the Church and loyalty to a certain aspect of the traditional system. The implication of this culture misunderstanding is that the traditional religion is apparently fading while the Christian faith still does not seem to be firm. The effective means for consolidating the Christian faith in the land is most probably a feasible process of inculturation, which makes the person faithful to Christianity while remaining truly African.

Keywords: Inculturation, Christianity, Beliefs, Unubi, Anglican, Roles.

Introduction

Africans are religious. There is no doubt about that. Their religiosity is imbued in their diverse cultures. One of the problems of most Christian denominations is how to relate the Christian message to diverse cultures. The Unubi people, like most Africans, have rich cultural heritages. There seem therefore to be a conflict between these cultural heritages and the Church. The importance of culture in the study of religion cannot be overemphasised. Culture explains why individuals behave or react to issues the way he they do. That is why Christian messages should be related based on a given culture if it must be meaningful to the people. Nmah and Udezo (2015:264) suggest that “. . . for the gospel message to be meaningful to Africans, it must be incarnated in African culture. For the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture, but also of the faith”

The dichotomy between Christian principles and cultural realities has always been a challenge for the Unubi cultural Christians. Most Church members, suggestively, do not have the liberty of being true Unubians and true Christians. This is because the church the European missionaries brought was careful to boycott and isolate cultural identity. The Anglican Churches in Unubi (among others) frown at masquerade, *ozo* title taking, and Unubi traditional marriages (marriage involving one man and more than one wife), and some other cultural practices. This experience is seen in almost all the African societies that have interacted with Christianity. Because of that, Nche, Okwuosa, and Nwaogu, (2016) aver that

Many African Christians became guilty of double standards as they could not disconnect completely from the primal or pristine religion of their fore-bearers and the values it offered. Hence, they paid double allegiance, as they became good Christians, when the going was smooth, but when it got tough, they resorted to their traditional religion. This is because Christianity as thought by the European missionaries gave rise to pertinent questions. (p. 1)

Some of these questions which bother the typical Igbo and average Unubi man according to Mbefo (1989) in Nche et al (2016) include;

Does being a Christian mean that I cannot take *ozo* title? That I cannot bury my dead in the traditional way? Why should I change my name that arose out of my matrix and which has meaning and relevance in that matrix for a foreign name which people find difficult to pronounce; foreign names which are truly

foreign? What does a celibate priesthood tell a polygamous culture? Why does the liturgy of the church bypass the liturgy of traditional religions that have always mediated transcendence to our people? (p. 1).

Buar (2009) also asked “How could a genuine African Christianity develop in a cultural vacuum” (p.382). This means that Christianity must have a base – the culture of the host community. If this is neglected, the result will be unavoidable dichotomy in the Unubi Christian personality; which means Christianity that is grafted on to the people as an alien faith and which is exercised on the surface, while deeper convictions and reactions remained rooted in the traditional religion.

The above questions are matters of concern as it applies to the interaction between culture as upheld by the Unubi people and Christian missions. Is it wrong for an Unubian to seek to maintain his Unubi cultural identity? How can he be a true Unubian and a true Christian? What are the effects of culture on Christianity in Unubi existence? What are the issues of conflict between the church and the traditional Unubi people? What is the relevance of inculturation to cultural development? How has inculturation impacted the church in Unubi? What roles can Anglican Community play in inculturating some Christian beliefs in Unubi? These are the questions we will seek to answer in this research work.

The scope of this study is Unubi people in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The scope covers their social, cultural, educational and religious lives, the activities of the Anglican churches in Unubi and the interaction between the church and Unubi cultural views. This study is significant because it gets down to the history of Christianity in Unubi and equally seeks to examine the interaction between Christianity and Unubi cultural existence. It seeks to determine the extent to which Christian message has been integrated into the Unubi cultural heritage and the roles the Anglican Church will play in inculturating some Christian beliefs in Unubi. The methods of data collections are historical (primary and secondary sources), oral interviews, documents and records. The primary sources involve oral traditions. Oral interviews were conducted, involving the elders representing different interest groups, literate and illiterate, knowledgeable and unknowledgeable. The secondary sources comprise published and unpublished materials. Such published works include books, journals, articles and monographs.

Inculturation

The idea of inculturation has been explained using different concepts by different authors; Concept like indigenization, contextualization, acculturation, enculturation, among others. These concepts are commonly used in discussing the meeting of two cultures. In the case of this study; between Christianity, and Unubi culture. While indigenization and contextualization deal with methodological aspects of adapting Christian faith to a new culture, inculturation furthermore is activity of the on-going interaction or synthesis between faith and culture (Prom 2013). The problem of contextualization, according to Cashen (2010), “is that it focuses on the context of the interaction rather than the culture” (p. 38). Cashen (2010) argues that contextualization does not take into consideration the fact culture is dynamic. It only looks at a specific case and how theology is applied to direct instances and contexts. This means that contextualization focuses on a particular situation in which the gospel must be contextualized rather than looking at the culture as a whole and seeing how the host culture and the church interact with each other. According to Prom (2013), contextualization focuses on transmitting and or translating the gospel through the local idioms and languages of a given culture. He opines that “this is more of a ‘top bottom’ approach while indigenization as a ‘bottom top’ approach to mission.

On the other hand, indigenization is used when people native to a culture or land begin to articulate the gospel message from the perspective of their culture. Cashen argues that the problem of indigenization is that the term is too constructive in that it focuses on the culture of contact, not recognizing that the group that brought the message transported it through their culture. The insider knows the host culture very well but is unable to recognize the changes that have taken place within their culture. The term was also criticized for not recognizing the changing process of culture. It was said to have viewed the process as a past experience not expanding upon the changes that have occurred and are continuing to occur.

According to Prom (2013) Mullins notes that, in the social sciences, indigenization is understood broadly as the process of transformation that occurs to foreign-born religions as they come in contact with native religion and culture which includes cultural adaptations in social organization, liturgy, leadership and theology. Here the native religion and culture determine, influence and promote the cultural adaptation. Nche et al (2016) affirm that “This idea has spawned into several concepts such as ‘Acculturation’, ‘Enculturation’, ‘Interculturation’, ‘Incarnation’, ‘Africanisation’, ‘Adaptation’, and ‘Indigenisation’ of the Christianity in Africa. These concepts revolve around the idea of making the Christian faith culturally permissible and acceptable in Africa” (p. 1).

However, Nmah and Udezo (2015) aver that;

The term “adaptation” and the approach it designates, has been abandoned as too superficial and inadequate. Similarly, terms such as indigenization, Africanization, “accommodation”, and “Christianization” have also been abandoned for not going far enough. They are said to represent processes that do no more than reproduce an African version of Western Christianity. Many African theologians today would rather opt for the term “inculturation” and call for African inculturation theology. Some prefer the term “incarnation” (p. 264)

Cashen (2010) opines that “Inculturation is better equipped to address the complex process of the Christian tradition meeting the African culture. It acknowledges that the missionaries’ culture was imbedded in the Christian tradition . . .” (p. 33).

Pruitt (2007) opines that “. . . indigenization and contextualization address methodological aspects of adapting Christian faith to a new culture whereas inculturation, more adequately describes the ongoing interaction, or synthesis, between that faith and culture” (p. 19).

Consequently, the concept of Inculturation will be adopted for this study since it best represents the purpose of this study.

Scholars have defined Inculturation in various ways. However, one or two of these definitions will be a working definition for us. In the words of Bosch (1991) “Inculturation is one of the patterns in which the pluriform character of contemporary Christianity manifests itself” (p. 447). According to Coertze (2005), “Inculturation could be seen as a model of contextualisation. Contextualisation was a term originally used for the process of educating and incorporating people into ministry within their own unique contexts” (p. 12). Inculturation is thus viewed as the attempt to translate the Christian faith into a specific culture.

According to Prom (2013),

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the cultures, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation (p. 39)

Crollius (1986) in Prom (2013) adds a new dimension to the concept of inculturation when he defined it as,

The integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people in such a way that the experience not only express itself in elements of this culture, but becomes a force that animates, orients and innovates this culture so as to create a new unity and communion not only within the culture in question, but also as an enrichment of the church universal (p. 39)

Inculturation allows for a mutual dialogue to ensue where not only the culture of impact is affected but also the tradition itself is influenced bring about a new creation.

Ezechi (2011), in Nche et al (2016) opine that the notion of inculturation is the expression of the dynamic relation between the Christian gospel and world cultures for the consolidation of the faith. They view inculturation as a process or attempt to find or root Christianity in different cultures of the world.

Walligo (1986) opines that,

Inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his Gospel of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It is the continuous endeavour to make Christianity ‘truly feel at home’ in the cultures of each people (p. 11)

The researcher accepts Nche et al stance on inculturation which states that inculturation is a movement for the *Africanisation* or *indegenisation* of Christianity in Africa. That is to say, the process or attempt to find or root Christianity in different cultures of the world; a process whereby cultural values can be transformed through their exposure to Christian message and the insertion of Christianity into indigenous cultures.

Christianity

Christianity is a religion that is based on the life and ministry of Christ. This include the prophecy of his coming, his birth, his childhood, his teachings, his death, his burial, his resurrection, his ascension, his promise of the Holy Spirit, and his second coming (the parousia). According to Asalu (2005),

Christianity is one of the most widespread religions. Its name was formed from that of its founder, the historic Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Christianity has a very humble beginning, Jesus Christ who founded Christianity was born in very humble circumstance and he lived, worked and died in a very humble circumstance too. (p. 49).

This means Christianity is not bogus. It is accessible to as many that would want to embrace it. Christianity, according to Clarke (1986.) “is a very general term covering a great variety of religious beliefs, practices and organizations”. (p. 4). What characterised these religious beliefs are the life, ministry and death of Christ. According to Deem (2011), Christianity is a religion based upon the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in Palestine during the first century. To him, Christianity is more than religion. It is a way of life based upon one’s love for God and love for people. Christianity is also a commitment to personal integrity and truth.

Brief history of Unubi

Unubi is situated at the extreme eastwards of what is now Nnewi south local government area, having common boundaries with Ekwulumili, Osumenyi (also in Nnewi South L.G.A) in the West and Awkaiheddi (Nnewi South) in the south; Uga (Aguata L.G.A) in the East and Ezinifite (Aguata L.G.A) in the North. Unubi lies nearly at the extreme south-east of Anambra state. Akwaiheddi and Uga lie between Unubi and Imo State.

Much has not been written concerning the origin of Unubi. Most of the things known about Unubi were based on oral traditions. According to Ibe (2011), “. . . we hardly saw any written records left behind by people, who lived and died before us. I perceive this as a gap in our social and historical life” (p. 4) Of course there is a reason for everything.

Ogum in Ibe (2011) opines that,

Unubi is a severely under-documented Community. The first reason for this state of affairs is that the purveyors of Western Education did not reach our land in time. The second reason is a kind of self inflicted constraint: *Nso Okuko*. Because of the taboo of *Nso Okuko*, our people could not venture out to distant lands where Western education was already flourishing. For example, the missionaries had landed at Onitsha as far back as 1957; but reached Unubi sixty years later, a distance of less than twenty five mile. Yet when our people eventually started venturing out of their immediate vicinity, they were able to trek to Onitsha. But for *Nso Okuko* they could have trekked to Onitsha at the turn of the twentieth century, and that could have made a lot of difference in our world-view. (p. iv)

Umeogu (1998) agrees with the fact “every people on earth have their setbacks. Unubi is not an exception. But among all the setbacks that dogged the heels of Unubi existence, two spectacular ones readily spring to the mind, viz. *Nso Okuko* and *Abubo Onye akana Ibei*. . . (p. 69).

According to Umeogu, the fore bearer of Unubi came from Ezinifite town (Aguata L.G.A). A man called Akuabuba, a hallowed hunter, came from Ezinifite in search of greener pasture and settled in what is the present-day Unubi. Unubi is not just a place, it’s a people, culture that identifies the people.

Advent of Christianity in Unubi

Umeogu (1998) avers that Christianity first came to Unubi through the Roman Catholic mission in 1917 through the instrumentality of John Ogunataji Mbadugha. They met with the warrant chief of Nkwukwo village, Chief Umeokiche Umeanzie who contacted Umeohimili Ezeoke of Amichi town. Ezeoke helped to contact a missionary worker in the late 1917. At about October, Rev Fr. Greze, who was the first priest to visit Unubi on mission work signed a treaty with the warrant chief and the Catholic Church was officially founded in Unubi in 1918.

Agreeing to the above fact, Ibe (2011), confirms that “The Christian religion came to Unubi first through the Roman Catholic Church (RCM) missionaries in 1918. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries came into Unubi about 1920” (p. 14). He states that since then, the struggle to replace the traditional religion with the Christian religion has been fierce with casualties on both sides. Although the Christian religion has taken over 80 percent of the population in numerical strength only, many people now live in what can be termed corrupt Christian and corrupt traditional religious life pattern (syncretism).

The historical background of the Unubi Anglican community

Today in Unubi, the Anglican community has four churches with Ebenezer as the first and the mother church, then St. Paul, St. Andrew and lastly St. Simon. According to Umeogu (1998), the Anglican Church came to Unubi in 1920. He states that the bringing of Anglican Church into Unubi existence was not done for Unubi by others. It was one late Chief Umeohakwom (Umeorakwue) Umekesiobi of the present day Akwuchukwu (formerly Akwueke) village in Amakom, Unubi, with the help of a few other persons made the negotiation with the then church authority Nnewi/Amichi district for the advent of Anglicanism to Unubi existence.

In contrast to Umeogu’s date, Ogum in Maduakor (2011:11-12) argues that

“we had assumed that Ebenezer Church was founded in 1920. However, in the course of the research for his second edition, we came across the inside cover-page of a bible which the first convert, the late

Pa Abraham Ufele, bought at Nnewi on January 2, 1918, and wrote his address on it as Ebenezer Anglican Church, Unubi. This shows that Ebenezer Church, Unubi might have started before January 1918 (p 11-12).

Umeogu (1998) avers that Umeohakom was a warrant chief of the then colonial administration. He encountered the Anglican during his several trips to Nnewi as a warrant chief and with the help of the court clerk at Nnewi; he obtained the services of the evangelizing Sunday school students from Awka College who stayed at his house organizing the new community of Christians.

Among the first citizens of Unubi to embrace the Anglican faith were Abraham Ufele, Simeon Nnadozie, and Charles Nkamnebe. These men of great faith alongside the warrant chief evangelized Unubi with the doctrines and practices of the Anglican church; so much so, that many converts were won day after day.

In context of Christian education, from the point of view of the church missionary society, the chief and his men (and women) of the new Christian faith did not lack potential. They made great sacrifices, both in personal and financial resources, to keep the faith and education of their converts going. For instance, Emmanuel Orakwue – the son of the warrant chief, chose to become a teacher without pay, all in an effort to keep the church alive.

Their labour was not in vain. With the help of the then pastor, Rev. Ekpunobi, the Anglican church in Unubi thrived, and has since built four churches, two schools, a pure water factory ~ Mu-sure (by the Diocese of Amichi) and have produced more than twenty indigenous priests.

Unubi and cultural conflict: Its Genesis

Unubi as a people have a rich cultural heritage. Some of these cultural heritages that the church frowns at include; *Ozo* title taking (especially among the Anglicans), Masquerade (most probably because of their violent nature), *Okpensi*, *Ina nta Ogba*, *Ibu okwe*, *Iri ogugu* and *Ulasi*. In a bid to retain their cultural identity, members of Unubi masquerade cults have in one way or the other demonstrated their displeasure with the church in most probably wrong ways. For example, the matters that were brought to the attention of the UDU (Unubi Development Union) 3rd January 2014 that the masquerade cult members invaded the premises of St. Simon Anglican Church in *AkwuChukwu* village in Unubi and made away with the fowls belonging to the priest. Again; the land given to the Anglican Diocese of Amichi by the Unubi community was decorated with palm fronds - a sign that it has been confiscated by the cult. There has also been a contention on who uses the market square between the Christian denominations and the masquerade cult members on every 1st January. The churches insisted that the town should not start the year with masquerade, instead with crusades. It is worthy of note at this point that these members of the masquerade cults are also members of the church.

In 2010, the highest authorities of the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church in Unubi, Ven. Oliver Chigbo and Fr. Basil Anunobi have put forces together to fight what they considered idolatry in Unubi. They resolved that any member of the church who refuses to renounce his membership in the Unubi masquerade cult will be denied outing services/mass in the event of death.

In response to the various clashes between the church and cultural practices in Unubi, the *Igwe Ohazurume* of Unubi sought to resolve it through a letter written to the community on the 9th October, 2017 in which he halted further use of the market square by both Christian and traditional organizations. But could these problems be resolved by a mere letter? The importance of dialogue in conflict management cannot be over-emphasized whether as regards the consolidation of the Christian faith or the restoration of peace in the culture area. With regard to restoring peace, researchers have often approved dialogue between the church and the host cultures. In the past, terms of agreements are used in handling unforeseen conflicts. It stipulated boundaries of operation in terms of time and place, for the activities of both parties. However, the restiveness of the youths today, and the consequent readiness to undercut the terms of agreement in many villages render ecumenical dialogue impotent in the struggle. Therefore the continued choice of ecumenical dialogue and terms of agreement can only serve short-term purposes, for example, the installation of immediate peace. The desired long term peace and order seem possible only with an effective and sincere dialogue of cultures between Christianity and the traditional religion, which can also bring about enormous cultural development in Unubi.

Other Unubi cultural practices ranging from *Okpensi* to *Ulasi* are mostly regarded as paganism or fetish. Participants are regarded as second class citizens by brethren. Most of the promoters of these cultural practices are looked at as a mess that must be avoided. According to Buar (2009:382), “Colonialism had denied Africans their civilization, decrying their cultural traditions as barbaric”. Viriri and Mungwim (2010), in Nche et al (2016) aver that “They rejected hitherto everything African, categorised them as barbaric and completely unholy for the Christian God. This rendered Africans as epitome of barbarism, morons, and primitive among other binary oppositions” (p. 3). To him it was not possible for African Christianity to develop in a cultural vacuum. It is

worthy of note that most times it is difficult for these people promoting their cultural heritage to marry whom they love from the community because, the parents of such girls are not willing to give away their precious daughters to “pagans” or “heathens”. And again, they are not willing to lose their positions in the church. According to Ezenweke and Nwachukwu (2017),

There is no doubt that Africa and Africans are still suffering from the effects of errors done to her by the early missionaries and investigators that came to Africa. Without sufficient knowledge of the philosophies of African life and belief, these missionaries passed a judgement on them as a people who had no knowledge of God and who cannot comprehend anything good or meaningful. Thus, described them and their religion with derogatory and misleading terms such as; primitive, savage, fetishism, juju, heathenism, paganism, animism, idolatry, and polytheism. This is evident in the fact that before the foreign investigators could begin their investigation of what the religious beliefs of the Africans looked like, there were theorists who have never been to Africa but who regarded it as the “Dark Continent” where people had no idea of God and where the devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held sway. (pp. 45-46)

The quest for identity has led to these various negative interactions between the churches in Unubi and the Unubi cultural heritage. This is because Christianity is a foreign religion encoded in foreign culture (Nche et al, 2016). Base on that, the inculturation of Christian faith becomes necessary in order to provide to the Africans that kind of Church where Africans will feel at home. Most of these activities that sprout strife between the church and the Unubi cultural heritage could have been handled with inculturation; this is because inculturation gives room for dialogue.

Inculturation: Roles for the Anglican Church

The Anglican Church has achieved inculturation in area of leadership, language, musical instruments and the use of cola and garden egg as objects of prayer during house cell meetings and church harvest. However, there are other areas that call for inculturation. To achieve the objectives of inculturation there are things or persons that must be considered instrumental to the process. These include missionaries, local leaders, cultural icons, culture, the priest/laity,. Missionaries can help to introduce new religious ideas and practices to the community (via Catechism, education, lay training, synods) while the local leaders can help to adapt and interpret those ideas and practices to make them more relevant to the local context. Cultural icons, such as music or art, can also play role in the process of inculturation

Conclusion

Culture plays an important role in evangelization. This is because human life is from the beginning cultural and Unubi community is also cultural. The church should, as a matter of necessity, understand the Unubi culture to be able to familiarize with the Unubi people. In doing this, caution should not be thrown to the wind, acknowledging the fact that some of the cultural practices involve rituals, occultism, some are dehumanizing, so that the church would not be perceived as practicing syncretism.

The process of inculturation begins with an effort by all agents of evangelization to get to know the culture of the people they are ministering to. Paul in Acts of the Apostles 17: 16-34 was in Athens. The people of Athens were ready to defend their beliefs. Their approach to Paul was defensive (verse 18). But Paul, rather than attacking them verbally, took time to study them and discovered a foothold for preaching to them. At the end, many believed his message. Christian evangelists adopt Paul’s tactics in approaching alien cultures it gives room for acceptability. In the light of heightened discord between the church and the Unubi cultural heritage, it is very important to engage the instrumentality of inculturation. It is required in order to get the gospel ingrained in the people of Unubi. Everybody must be involved; the lay and the ordained, the low and high profiled personalities.

Recommendations

- i. The church should adopt inculturation in evangelizing Unubi.
- ii. Inculturation should be entered into with sincerity of purpose in order to achieve the desired results in Unubi.
- iii. The Anglican Churches in Unubi should quit riding on the back of European cultures, but try to encourage people to accept the Christian message in their own way of life.
- iv. The cultural practices that do not contradict the gospel should be accepted by the Unubi Anglican community.
- v. The Anglican Churches in Unubi should listen and learn from these cultural heritages, and not to condemn them even before getting to know them.
- vi. The Anglican Churches in Unubi should teach people starting from the known to the unknown just like Paul in Athens.

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