

# **CHRISTIANITY AND IGBO TRADITIONAL BURIAL/ FUNERAL RITES: DIALOGUE OR CONFLICT?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A few years ago our next door (actually next house) neighbour lost her father. After paying a condolence visit to the family of the deceased, I left the village with the date of the funeral.

As soon as I arrived home for the funeral on the agreed date, I noticed my mother pacing up and down and looking gravely worried. As she walked towards my car, I knew something was wrong. Hardly acknowledging my greeting she announced “you are not going in there because they have decided to do the funeral in the traditional way instead of the Christian\* way.” We stared at each other for several minutes before I managed to ask “what in particular have they done? “They did not invite the Catholic Church as a group”, she retorted. In Imilike, at the time, what essentially determined whether a burial/funeral was classified either as traditional or Christian was whether the funeral cow was handed over to the oldest man (onyishi) in the village or to the Chairman of Catholic community. Cautious of her mood, I requested that we get into our house and talk over the matter. We talked and talked and talked but the difficulties and the complexities of the situation at hand including the fact that, naturally, some items such as cooking utensils, chairs, etc usually borrowed from neighbours had already moved from our house to the house of the bereaved and yet I am expected not to move over to say hello.

Although the rest of what followed is now history, the import of this short anecdote is to show that as Ezeanya and Ilogu had long observed, there is indeed a worrisome and growing tension between traditional culture and christian culture.

***\*Note that the words Christian and Church although sometimes used in their generic senses here are, in most cases, used here to refer to the Catholic Church.***

## **Traditional Burial and Funeral Rites**

In all parts of Igbo land, when death occurs, many steps (procedures) are taken by various categories of people - usually sons, daughters, relations, husbands, in-laws etc from the point of death up to the time of funeral.

In most parts, the following usually represent the summary of the standard steps/procedure adopted:

1. An unsettling alarm (cry) which arises naturally and spontaneously from sudden and shocking loss of a parent, child, husband, wife, uncle, aunt, relation, in-law etc rends the air attracting the attention of the community
2. Formal message of the sad news of death is delivered to the head of the family, from there to the head of the larger family (Umunna), and to the head of the village (Onyishi) and then to the community as the case may be. Although the message is a sad one not admitting of the usual ceremony following presentation of colanut , colanut is nonetheless, usually presented by the messengers before giving their message.
3. Thereafter, official signal permitting the burial and/or the funeral of the deceased is given.

In the case of a married woman, the process is usually a little bit more complex as the sad news moves from the husband's family to her own consanguinal family. If the relationship between the husband's family and that of her family is in good standing, there is usually little or no problem. But where there is any little strain in the relationship either due to her husband's fault or her own (i.e. not relating well with the Umuada of her family etc), there is usually a problem in which case the husband's family may be required to pay fine either in monetary terms or by presenting material items which may sometimes include life animals.

This situation requiring presentation of certain items whose type, quality and quantity may differ from case to case is one of the sore points between traditional rites and Christian rites. The reason is that, in the past, those items used to be and are still generally believed by many to be involved in the performance of certain rituals that are "not exactly in tune with some Christian principles" (Okwueze, 1998: 136)

Preparations starting from when the official signal for burial is given to the funeral also usually constitute a veritable sore point of conflict between traditional rites and Christianity.

In many places, there are preparatory rites preceding burial especially on the day immediately preceding the date of burial and/or funeral which may involve the presentation of items including life animals.

Generally speaking, it appears, that the most conflict oriented aspects of the traditional burial/funeral rites are connected with presentation of material items especially life animals ranging from the fowl to the cow. The usual issues giving rise to controversies or conflicts include: (a) to whom are these animals handed over? (b) in what manner are the animals killed? and (c) for what purpose(s) or to what end?

In some traditional societies especially among the northern Igbo, if a cow is presented as part of funeral rites, when it is killed, the chest region (Obu ye) goes to the Onyishi of the village, the waist region (Ukwu ye) goes to the Umuada, the legs and the hands go to the Onyishi of the various Umunna making up the village depending on their number and the head region goes to the person who does the job of killing the cow etc. In the past, and even now as some insist, these animals undergo certain traditional rituals between presentation and actual consumption.

In many places where Christianity holds sway, the practice is that the cow is usually presented to the chairman of the catholic community who takes over the rest of the procedure till final consumption.

In the case of a married woman, the items presented including animals were usually taken over to her consanguinal family. In deed, years ago, the last part of a married woman's funeral consisted in her symbolic return to her family using items like bamboos, banana stem/leaves, cloth, animals etc. I dare ask, if we remove the offensive traditional and ritualistic elements, what is un-Christian about symbolically returning a woman to her original family after death?

Although the above highlighted areas of conflict between traditional burial/funeral rites and Christianity have long been there, the more recent pattern of the cultural conflicts triggered off by the continuing Christian battle against traditional rites and culture is of an entirely different nature. In the past, the conflict was drawn between non-Christian traditionalists on the one hand and the Christians on the other hand. But the recent conflicts show the Christians waging cultural wars against themselves. One finds a situation, for instance, where the Catholics in a

particular town or community are divided among and against themselves on an issue or issues having to do with traditional rites and culture. This present pattern of the cultural crises is so widespread and commonplace in many towns and communities that the church has done well to kick-start discourses on them rather than keep quiet and pretend that all is well.

These tensions have manifested themselves in various parts of Igbo land but due to want of space, I will talk about just three examples of how the crises concerning burial and funeral rites have manifested themselves in two different communities within Nsukka Diocese and one community in one other diocese in Igbo land\*. Permit me to start with my own community, Imilike-Enu.

### **THE IMILIKE BURIAL/FUNERAL RITES CRISES**

Imilike is a town in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State of Nigeria. Just like many other Igbo communities, they were very strongly attached to their traditional region and culture. This situation remained so until it was touched by the activities of the Christian missionaries. The first contact of the town with Christianity was about the year 1929 (Okwueze, 1987: 115). Since then, things have never been the same with the culture of the people. There have been numerous cases of conflicts between the culture of the people and Christianity.

However, as earlier mentioned, a new type of crises arose as the cultural propaganda which Christianity brought with it became clearer to the Christians themselves. Like a fowl brought to a strange land, Christianity stood with one leg in several Igbo communities. Today, Christianity is standing with its two legs firmly gripping the soil and demanding more and more from Imilike people.

For some Imilike Christians, this is a welcome development, but for many, this new phase of assault is worrisome. In Imilike, the most crucial of the cultural crises arose from the issues of burial and funeral rites. The situation grew gradually; and some time in the early 1990s, it smoldered into full blown crises leaving the Catholic Christians of Imilike pitched against one another in a cultural battle.

*\*These incidences narrated here and some other parts of this paper were culled from my earlier published papers on subject matters related to the one under discussion here.*

The problem, briefly put, was that sometime in the early 1990s, the Rev. Fr. in charge of Isienu Parish, to which Imilike community then belonged, set out to enforce what was then a new regulation for burials/funerals involving Christians. One of the central elements of traditional burial rite in Imilike, which does not go down well with Christian demands, is the issue of who eats, and how he eats parts of the carcass of the traditional cow normally killed during the funeral ceremony of the dead.

Normally, when a traditional cow is killed to celebrate a traditional funeral, there are certain parts which are taken to the eldest person in the village of the deceased person as his entitlement. In most traditional ceremonies, the eldest person always occupies the position of the chairman. This part of the meat goes to him strictly because of his age and position, just as a modern wedding celebrant organizes the best part of the meat, food, drink, etc. before the chairman of the occasion. It is this presentation of certain parts of the meat for the funeral to the eldest person that has been, more than any other thing, responsible for the uncompromising condemnation of the traditional funeral by some Christians. This is because the understanding of these Christians is that this part of the meat given to the eldest person is done to enable him perform certain un-Christian rituals. So the question is “how can anyone who calls himself a Christian provide items for traditional religious rituals?” some Christians have argued that the taking of some parts of the meat to the eldest person has nothing to do with any ritual, but simply the socio-economic benefit of being the eldest person. The Christians who reasoned this way have therefore become pitched in what seems to be an unending battle with fellow Christians on the other side.

It must be pointed out that this implied two levels of demand on the Christian. First, that a Christian must be given a ‘Christian burial’. The second and perhaps, more complex demand was that a Christian who is bereaved of a relation, who by all standards was never a ‘Christian, must bury and carry out the funeral rites of the deceased relation in a ‘Christian way’, or must not be involved at all. The average Imilike Christian found himself in what seemed to be an inescapable dilemma. The magnitude of the problem may be better appreciated with a little illustration of just one of the practical situation that arose, and in which many Christians found themselves. X is a Christian but Y is an ardent traditionalist. Y is X’s father and had repeatedly before his death requested his sons including X not to do anything that will inhibit his getting his so much valued traditional burial and funeral rites whenever he dies. X is neither the only nor

the first son of Y. Y dies. His sons and daughters prepare to bury and celebrate Y's funeral traditionally as he had so much desired. In this situation, according to the demands of Christianity in Imilike and many other places, X should not involve himself in any of these arrangements for the final rites of the man he had known all his life as his father, and who had so much cared for him including financing his high-profile education which exposed him to the 'dangers' of Christianity in the first place. While the numerous arrangements for Y's burial and funeral rites were still going on, X who had all this while avoided getting involved, went to bed two nights to the burial/funeral but could not sleep. One voice kept him awake and, in an unusual refrain, incessantly asked "why should religion act as an instrument for crises instead of peace in my life?" this was the cultural crises in which many Imilike Christians found themselves.

In the case of X, he woke up the next morning with a definite answer to the question. Without any formal announcement, he quickly joined his other brothers and sisters in the arrangement for the traditional burial/funeral of his father.

The Catholic community in Imilike reacted in two different ways. Those who felt that what Christianity was demanding was the real test of being a Christian immediately condemned and reported X to the parish priest, who swiftly suspended him from participating fully in the Eucharistic meal during masses. However, those who deeply appreciated the kind of mental trauma which Christianity has subjected X to, and who did not see why one cannot be a Christian and at the same time participate in the burial/funeral of his non-Christian father, pitched their support with X.

Happily, in retrospect, it can now be said that Mr. X was right in so much as he abstained from those things that infringed upon his Christian obligation. What a relief that it is now in black and white that "Catholics are free to participate in the burial and funeral ceremonies of their non-Christian relations except in ceremonies that infringe upon the commandment of God" (see page 9 of Rev. Fr. Donatus Eze's guide on this).

The rest of the story of the Imilike crises is now history which cannot be fully recounted here, but suffice it to say that the crises which subsequently engulfed Catholic Christians in Imilike resulted in what was then (and still is) popularly referred to as 'Uka 1'(one) and 'Uka 2' (two) (literally meaning church one and two). 'Uka 1'(one) referred to the fundamentalists, who condemned the attitude of the likes of X, while 'Uka 2' (two) was derogatorily used to refer to

the attitude of the likes of X and his supporters. The crises which eventually became the subject of a court case at Obollo-Afor raged on unbridled. Of course the Catholic Bishop of Nsukka diocese would very easily recall that it took him a marathon session of at least 10 hours of continuous homiletics, counseling, blunt reproach, and even outright marching orders to get the warring Christian parties back on the part of the worship of God.

### **THE IGOGORO BURIALFUNERAL RITES CRISES**

Igogoro is a town in Enugu Ezike in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State. The crisis in Igogoro is related to the self-same issue of burial rites. But the dimension one intends to capture here is somewhat different. The parish priest, in charge of Igogoro in the same 1990s, as was claimed, had introduced what he thought was an effective way of ensuring that Christians do not engage in ‘un-Christian burial’. His method was to administer an oath to all intending couple who wished to wed in the Catholic Church, using the Bible. The content of the oath administered could be briefly paraphrased as follows: “I swear by this Bible that I will never take part in any un-Christian burial”. It is not surprising that many couple refused to take the oath particularly when it does not appear from all indications that there was at the time any blue print on what constituted a ‘Christian’ or an ‘Un-Christian’ burial/funeral. Religion has a way of pitching one culture against another. It was in a deep appreciation of this fact that two African scholars of religion, namely, Professors Ogbu Kalu and Ikanga Metuh (a Catholic priest of blessed memory), published their works with the titles **The Embattled Gods**, and **The God in Retreat** respectively.

### **THE NANKA SEEING OF CORPSE CRISiS**

The crisis in Nanka (a town in Anambra State) as records show appear to have arisen from a traditional culture which prohibits a married woman (widow) from seeing the corpse of her dead husband immediately after death.

From the information I obtained after an oral interview with Mr. Polycarp Nwankwo, an indigene of the town, it appears to me that the culture is intended to prevent a widow from gaining access to the husband’s disposable/moveable property after the husband’s death.

This is easy to appreciate if one considers that in traditional African (Igbo) setting, a man's 'Obi/Okwu', where he lives and keeps his most valuable assets, is a separate house from that of the woman. Ordinarily, the woman comes to the obi/okwu when she has something to discuss with the man or when the man sends for her, or when she brings food, etc to the man.

In most Igbo traditional setting, when a man dies, his property is inherited by his sons and immediate relations (brothers), and in rare cases, only the latter.

Generally, a man dies in his 'obi/okwu'. In fact, this is one of the features of a good death. The reasoning is that if a woman were allowed into the 'obi/okwu' where the man's corpse and his valuable possessions are, she may be tempted and/or opportuned to remove some of the man's valuable assets for her own benefit before raising alarm about his death, knowing the impending difficulties of economic survival as a widow, who traditionally hardly had any right to any of her husband's property. Some women, as was alleged, had in the past beaten this tradition by taking away their husband's valuable possessions before raising an alarm about his death, from which moment she can no longer have access to the 'obi/okwu'.

My own interpretation, which is not bound to be right, is that to ensure that no widow is availed of this opportunity; the Nanka people declared it an abomination for a widow to behold the corpse of her late husband. The calculation is that since the man's corpse will ordinarily lie in his 'obi/okwu' where his valuables are also located, the woman cannot have access to the 'obi/okwu' without committing an abomination.

This grew into an undisputable tradition until some Christians started challenging this prohibition, as is evidenced in the incidence recounted below not necessarily because of any proprietary or pecuniary interest.

The actual details of what transpired may have eluded the present writer but the crux of the matter, as the story goes, was that there was a woman who, being an 'ardent Christian', did not see why she should be subjected to this traditional culture. So, on the death of her husband, she insisted on beholding the sight of her husband's corpse. The villagers were said to have regarded her action as an abomination and refused to be involved in any way with his burial until a cleansing ritual removing the abomination had been performed. She said she was not going to do anything of such, and threatened to bring her Christian brethren to perform the burial if the villagers did not do same. The extreme positions could not be resolved. So, the Christian brethren, largely made up of the members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, rallied round her



in solidarity. On an agreed date, the Christian family came to help her bury the deceased. The ceremony started and progressed as a very great Christian carnival. The solidarity was so overwhelming that it angered the villagers, who ambushed the procession, physically attacking the processions leading the corpse to the Church premises already chosen as his final resting place (the villagers having refused to provide any land for his burial). At the end of the violent clash, at least two people were left dead.

In the cases of the traditional rites that gave rise to the crises at Imilike-Enu and Igogoro what worsened these crises was that at the time they happened there was no publicly known blue print on what constituted a 'Christian' or an 'Un-Christian' burial.

In fact, many years ago in an informal discussion with Rev. Fr. Greg Nnamani, the then Secretary to the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka, he disclosed that the diocese was still working on 'a would be blue print' standard on what constituted a traditional or Christian burial. That situation gave rise to many crises, as various parish priests condemned and banned whatever appeared, in their own not infrequently imperfect judgments, to be traditional or un-Christian rites without, in many cases, giving any opportunity for inputs or explanations of any burial or funeral rite.

I was greatly relieved when in the course of researching on this paper I came across a Diocesan guide line compiled by Nsukka Diocese on the procedure to be adopted in the case of a Christian burial/funeral as presented to a conference of catechists of the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka by Rev. Fr. Donatus O. Eze. I told myself that although we have heard the last word on this very intriguing issue among Igbo Christians even in Nsukka Diocese a new era has begun.

When I set out on this topic I reflected deeply again and again on the title. As I did so, two words, dialogue and conflict, attracted my attention most and the question that came to my mind was and remains, has the encounter between traditional ways of life (values) and Christian ways of life (values) been a story of dialogue or conflict?

Admittedly, conflicts may be positive as they do and should actually give rise to dialogue but the worry is that in the past it has been conflict, conflict, conflict and no dialogue. Perhaps we are beginning to witness a new dawn where Christians (Christianity) will engage traditional values in a dialogue rather than in a conflict.

It is interesting to note how Christianity (actually we Christians) in the manner of a worker preparing to retire from service after a fruitful long service is beginning to wind down from conflict to dialogue. How does one represent the picture where Christianity, especially in our part of the world, has fought and fought rites that follow birth, initiation into puberty/adulthood, marriage and title taking rites and has now finally focused more on burial/funeral rites which is the last on the rung of the ladder of Igbo traditional rites. One therefore hopes that the battle against Igbo traditional burial and funeral rites is the last of such conflict producing and conflict inflicting battles that Christianity will do especially in our own part of the world.

This is very important as Christianity needs to quickly get into dialogue to re-examine both its “unfinished battles” and its “over finished battles” against not just Igbo traditional funeral rites but Igbo traditional culture and values in general.

When I speak of the “unfinished battles” what easily comes to my mind is the common knowledge that although the Romans conquered and rubbished the Greeks militarily, the Greeks in a subtle unspoken manner overran the Romans in culture and values which are incidentally of more essence than the temporality of military conquest. How else can the indication that the battle to christianize Mr. X is yet unfinished as his coming into the church with the chorus: “Ekpere bụ ọgwụ m gwọrọ, Aga m agwọ ya ọzọ (meaning my prayer is my ‘charm’, it will continue to be my ‘charm’). The import of this is that the real thing is the ‘charm’ while the prayer is just a surrogate. Alternatively, we may consider the case of those who remove the traditional knotted palm front placed on their property to prevent thieves from daring to still them and replace it (the knotted palm front) with Rev. Fr. Ede’s, Rev. Fr. Mbaka’s and Rev. Fr. Obayi’s stickers and holy water bottles.

In the case of the ‘over finished’ battles of Christianity, all of us will continue to pay the unsavory price of its consequences. The battle to christianize Mr. Y is indeed “over finished” if he/she no longer participates in the usual communal effort to healthy environment by refusing to take part in sweeping public places including markets, mending and sweeping of village part ways etc because in the past, these were naturally associated with traditional rites.

We all must remember that in the past, as part of the consequences of the ‘over finished’ battles, only western names could be used as baptismal names. Western names naturally became equated with Christian names. I say naturally because since Christianity started its growth under

the tutelage of western civilization most of its values became accepted as Christian values. Christianity is now in our own environment and we have all been guilty of making Christianity feel that our churches are standing right on the streets of Rome and their occupants Romans and not Africans.

I sometimes liken our attitudes as Igbo Christians to that of a team of doctors managing a diabetic patient who (the diabetic) is on a long sojourn away from his original environment of many decades. In this new environment, there are no wheats, no crackers biscuits, no diet cokes etc which the diabetic was used to but there is *okpa* which his doctors refuse to allow him take even without their making effort to carry out any test to help them determine the suitability of *okpa* for the patient. At the end, some people insisted that the doctors did their job well by preventing their patient from dieing of diabetes today as he has already died of starvation yesterday.

It is not only unfortunate but also a grave irony that our general attitude is to “over christianize” western culture and values and to “over heathenize” our own culture and values.

To show how bad the situation is even when sincere efforts are made to remove un-Christian elements from our culture, we are never satisfied until we dramatize the fact that we are the vanquished in the battle between traditional and Christian cultures. Otherwise how can we justify the following situation: In most places in Nsukka diocese, one of the most critical factors that determine whether a burial/funeral ceremony is done the Christian way is to find out to who the traditional cow (Eshu Igbo) for the ceremony is handed over. If it is handed over to the onyishi then the ceremony is un-christian because of the suspicion of the possibility of the onyishi using it to perform traditional rituals. Surprisingly, even where the onyishi of the family (Umunna/village) is a known and acknowledged catholic whose ascension to the position was directed, supervised and organised by his parish priest, the church does not still feel comfortable allowing the funeral cow to be delivered to him suggesting that we are pursuing an agendum certainly beyond ensuring that there is nothing un-christian about burials/funeral ceremony. It is clear that the real agenda is to ensure that our culture and values are consigned to the realms of extinction.

I have even heard the worrisome rumour that some of us are fiddling with the idea of using another animal from a ‘foreign culture’ (Nama - the Hausa/Fulani cow) to replace the traditional cow (Eshu Igbo) in further dramatization of our vanquished lot. Perhaps many have

not reflected on the economic implication and/or loss that will certainly arise from this attitude of preferring to patronize ‘alien’ goods (Hausa/Fulani cow) rather than our locally produced goods (Igbo cow). This actually calls for concern if we consider the following facts:

- a) that the Nama (Hausa/Fulani cow) forms part of the daily animal protein content of our meals.
- b) that the Eshu is usually consumed during funerals/special ceremonies only and **not in meals**.
- c) that those who breed the local cows will be completely out of job if its use for funerals stops.

There is nothing wrong with the traditional to justify the proposal being made by some people that the HAUSA/Fulani cow be used to replace it during funerals.

What is more, the church is yet to say anything about more serious issues of concern such as the fact that burials/funerals have been turned into carnivals where uniforms are adorned by complete strangers during burials/funerals as opposed to the traditional significance where clothes tied around the waist indicated the consanguinal closeness between the dead and his/her surviving relatives. The church should halt this unnecessary fanfare and waste by her members.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE**

One of the fundamental ways of placing ourselves as Igbo Christians in a position where we can engage traditional values and Christian values in a dialogue is essentially by understanding the relationship between religion and culture.

The terms, ‘religion and culture’ are often used in a rather confusing manner. Some use the two terms as if they were two sides of the same coin: that is in contexts that suggest that religion is one part of a whole and culture the other half. Others use the terms in a way suggestive of the opinion that one could be interchanged with/for the other; in other words that religion and culture mean one and the same thing.

However, religion and culture are related in a special way which is hardly discernable or appreciated by many of us (Okwueze; 1999:269). There are many definitions of culture, but one of the most celebrated is Tylor’s **“that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”(1891:1)**. Without undermining the import of the elementary definition of religion as belief in the supernatural, or those given by James (1902:31-32), Durkheim (1915:48), Chinye

(1961:351) and Dapomu (1988:26), religion has also been defined as man's attempt and desire to realize the highest good through coming into harmonious relations with one reality greater than him, which commands his reverence and loyal service (Aja; 1996:36). This desire to realize the highest good is in most cases pursued by man within a collective relationship of communal attitude. The implication of this is that those who argue that religion and religious experience is given (innate) rather than learnt cannot but accept that religious practice and expression can only manifest within a human culture/society.

From the above definitions of religion which suggest that religion find expression within culture, it is clear that religion is an aspect of culture. Culture is, therefore, much wider than religion as religion is not only located within a culture but also derives its life from it. That is why the practice of most religions is informed by what obtains within the culture within which it arose, grew and originally found expression. The relationship between religion and culture may be likened to the relationship between a mass of water and the aquatic life (e.g. fish) which it supports. A fish out of water is undoubtedly ill at ease and stands the risk of losing its life when it is outside the water that gives it life. Just as a fish can hardly exist outside of the water that gives life, religion can hardly exist outside of the culture from where it derived and derives its life and power.

Religion, therefore, has the herculean burden/task of always encumbering itself with the demands of the culture which gave it life and expression. In fact, it has to be properly garbed in the accepted 'garments' of the culture within which it grew up. Although no two religions are exactly the same, they all have the uneasy task/duty of carrying with them the traits and character of the culture within which they grew. Neither Christianity nor Traditional Religion is an exception.

The recognition of the above nature of religion is very germane for the proper appreciation of what is usually the task of a given religion when it has moved from the cultural environment within which it was bred to a strange/new environment. That being the case, the survival of Christianity in an African (Igbo) environment required to recreate, even if in an artificial manner, a replica of the cultural environment within which it was nurtured. The task which Christianity had to accomplish may be likened to an egg which is taken away from the mother hen that laid it. If it is still intended by the person who took it away that the egg hatches,

then an environment which is a replica of the one usually provided by the mother hen must be created.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to re-emphasize the relationship between culture and religion as a way of showing that western culture within which Christianity grew is not necessarily the substance of the Christian message. Because culture is that environment created by man, it includes his way of life among his fellow men, his family life, his religious life, attitudes, customs, traditions etc.

As Ezeanya (1976:25), pointed out years ago, every people, no matter how backward they may be, no matter at what stage of civilization and development they may be, have a culture, a way of life peculiar to themselves, and the characteristic features of such a way of life. In that particular culture can be found elements that are naturally good, just and beautiful, elements that promote the general welfare of humanity as God's creatures. There are also to be often side by side with the good, parts that are 'evil' and opposed to the temporal and spiritual well-being of man.

The problem with religion is that being a major substance of culture, religion as component of culture is a cultural propaganda, which hardly admits of any objectivity in assessing the opposing culture in a manner that will enable it see what is good and what is not good. Every religion sees any other culture apart from the one it represents as a conquerable battle-field. This largely explains not only Achebe's lament that a new culture has put a knife through what bound us together but also the attitude of the Christian missionaries towards African cultures as exemplified by the following instruction given by Father Superior to a hesitant missionary trainee, Father Smith, who was working in the 'vine' field of Africa:

*We want on our side the vast numbers who in the Africa of the future will sustain their Church with their numerical strength. Call it vote for the masses if you like. In pursuit of this objective I am afraid we have got to be impatient with the culture of the people. There just isn't time to sort out first and label their customs as acceptable or unacceptable*  
(Munonye, 1966:146)

Although the likes of Fathers Superior and Smith are not necessarily right, they deserve to be forgiven for their impatience with our culture but posterity will never forgive us if we continue to propagate the same impatience and pretence that we do not have time to dialogue with our own culture but we have all the time to battle it.

It is my contention that until we deeply appreciate this intriguing relationship between religion and culture we may continue in great difficulty in our effort to sufficiently situate Christianity in the Igbo environment. Although we may beat our chests and shout that we are doing well by battling rather listening to the many meaningful and positive aspects of our traditional culture and rites that do not necessarily contradict our position as good Christians, we may end up, as has been observed elsewhere, with the very unfortunate and ironical situation where “*the Church is ‘conquering souls’ without necessarily ‘winning’ them for Christ.*” (Okwueze; 1998:142)

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