

Chapter Five

Igbo Culture in Dialogue with the Message of Christ

5.1 Igbo Culture and Inculturation

In the early part of this work we saw the traditional world and religion of the Igbos and that it has remained an ongoing challenge to Christianity. One reason is that the Igbos, like the other African groups, go in search of a concrete happiness both in the shadow of the ancestors and today in the light of the gospel. We need to recall that, more than any other group the Igbos, accepted Christianity principally for utilitarian purposes.

Furthermore, the challenge of the Igbo culture stems from the fact that the Igbos (like other African groups) live a relationship with the invisible God through a special series of meditations: family customs, marriage customs, techniques of healing, rites of initiation, special relationship to ancestors etc. These cultural constructs of the Igbos were not duly considered either by the early missionaries or by their indigenous successors.

Christianity came to Igboland during a period of great disruption in the region. The presence and practice of the Europeans (both colonialists and missionaries) left many traditional systems broken. No real effort was made towards dialogue between Christianity in its European version and the Igbo culture. Hence “the Church in Igboland grew up as it were, divided away from the cultural roots of Iboland to

wear a additional toga of foreignness other than the foreignness that belongs intrinsically to the Gospel itself”¹

Traditional Igbo society and culture stresses a considerable individualism as well as communal solidarity. This trend is found in many other African traditional societies and cultures. Through membership in the community individuals are assisted by built-in values to aspire towards different goals in life. With the advent and spread of Christianity, coupled with the subsequent Westernisation and secularisation, Igbo traditional cultural values and the moral codes supporting them began to break up. This engendered religious confusion among many of the Igbo people.

In the first place the missionaries brought an antagonistic picture of Christianity divided among themselves. Today many Igbo converts live their version of Western Christianity in this way. Again, these converts try to maintain a dual relationship. Though converted Christians, they remain consciously and unconsciously deeply-rooted in Igbo traditional religion. The fact that irrespective of the conversion into Christianity, the Igbos still flock to their traditional religion should be indicative of the ambiguity existing in their religious life. This shows clearly that there is need for dialogue between Igbo traditional culture and the Message of Christ.

Efforts have been made in this direction, but the persistence of the situation indicates that more is called for. Such a problem cannot be solved merely through translation of Western Christian doctrines into Igbo vernacular. “The work of the interpretation of the Gospel through Igbo cultural life experiences so as to provide, from the biblical revelation (i.e. the Message of Christ), new value systems for the people... becomes the inevitable challenge to theologians of our day.”² This is because this Message of Christ contains within itself the new universal possibilities for human beings through the reconciliation Christ has instituted between God and human beings.

Igbo culture and tradition cannot be left aside. Like any other culture it is to a substantial degree the repository of the Igbo peoples experience of the divine in their history. It also contains the Igbo

¹ E. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Igbo Culture*. (New York: NOK Publishers Ltd., 1974), 230.

² *Ibid.*