

INCULTURATING THE IGBO DEITIES: AN EFFORT IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY

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Abstract

African Theology refers to the results of the efforts made by the African scholars/theologians from the 1950s to make the Gospel more relevant to the Africans. The pioneering works of Tempels, All African Council of Churches, Ecumenical Assembly of Third World Theologians and the Vatican Council II were notable among others. This was also the beginning of other liberation movements by and for the Africans in the social and political spheres. For the theologians, two strategies were debatably considered in this ideological and theological warfare with varied levels of effectiveness; Adaptation and Incarnation, With the massive adoption of the word 'Inculturation' in 1977, theologians have been encouraged to make more efforts to expound the Christian message from the African traditional worldview. However, till now Igbo theologians have neglected the study of the deities which constitute the one of the major problems of evangelization among the people thereby paying a little more than a lip-service to this endeavour. This paper advocates advancing the praxis of inculturation through the study of the Igbo deities using the review and interview methods. Exploring the reasons for the study, the reality of the deities, their relationships to Christian thoughts as well as the specific areas of attention towards inculturation, we discover that the deities as God's ambassadors are like the Angels in Christian thought except for their ubiquity, levels of worship and moral irresponsibilities or license to commit evil in some cases. The paper ends with proffering some solutions to these weaknesses without which the Igbo deities can be veritable means of African Incarnation theology and evangelization.

Keywords: Inculturation, Theology, Evangelization, Christianity

Introduction: African Theology And Inculturation

African theology has been generally described as "Christian theology from the perspective of the African cultural context" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_theology#Development) distinguishable from black theology which is an aspect of liberation theology that originated from the American and South African contexts.

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Accordingly, some African scholars have defined the discipline as “a theological reflection and expression by African Christians.... An attempt to respond to a mandate to construct a biblically-based and relevant theology that speaks to the spiritual needs of the African people” (Waweru, 2018). Hence, Mbiti (1959) is considered the Father of this discipline with his *African Religions and Philosophy* simply because he is African. Otherwise the Belgians priests; G. Dufonteny and especially Placid Tempels (1945) can be considered the Father of African Theology. The former had worked among the lower Congo of Central African from 1907 to 1923 and published the *Le Bulletin des Missions* in which he accused fellow missionaries of lack of fundamental adaptation among others (Oborji, 2005).

Thus in the 1950s, African western theologians had started protesting against the negative colonial and missionary interpretations of the religion and culture in Africa, and started interpreting the Bible in their cultural contexts using African concepts and ideas. Worthy of note is that these efforts that garnered a lot of support and enthusiasm among African Christians because of other liberation efforts and movements across the continent were also criticised by western scholars as an unhealthy introspection into an African imagined past. For some African non-Christian critics too, it was simply a distortion of African traditional religion to try to Christianise or integrate the former with Christian theology. Amidst these debates, the engaged African theologians were more concerned with fashioning the best approach for African theology otherwise known today as Adaptation and Inculturation.

Oborji (2005) gave a lucid account of the historical currents that gave rise to the need for African theology and evolution of both well- intended approaches which included the European prejudice about Africa, the counter- reformation and council of Trent (1545-63) and the modernist movement which informed much of Vatican Council I, all unfortunately coinciding with the missionary influx into sub-Saharan Africa. African theology actually started with the method of Adaptation which is a “missionary theory that was employed to transplant a Christianity developed elsewhere into Africa, as if Africans have no culture of their own on which the faith could anchor” (p.68).

This approach was in vogue even after the Vatican II along with other similar terms like indigenization, localization, Africanisation, contextualization and acculturation until the 1974 Synod of Bishops declared it out of date with the

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intentions of the Church for her African missions. Inspired by the Vatican II *Ad Gentes* 10's analogous reference to the Incarnation as the basis for understanding the different cultures of peoples, these theologians adopted Incarnation interchangeably with Inculturation as a new approach for the practice of African theology. Thus, as Jesus Christ, the Word of God became incarnate in a human Jewish culture, his Gospel should be inculturated or incarnated in the African culture and context (Jn. 1:14, Matt. 5:17, Acts 10.34).

Finally, the Ecumenical Council of Third World Theologians conference in Ghana 1977 which brought together Christian theologians of all denominations in both Francophone and Anglophone Africa adopted Inculturation as the new concept of African theological enterprise with liberation in mind. From there, many African theologians proceeded to explore and expose the deeper varied meanings of the term in relation to the whole mystery of Christ- His Incarnation, Ministry, Passion and Resurrection – and its transformational role in human history and cultures. Hence, Oborji (2005) summarises that Inculturation is;

A way of evangelization which embraces the whole of Christian life.... Sarpong (further) argues that inculturation is not just a question of liturgical adaptation or innovation, much less the use of drums or materials. Rather it involves concepts, symbols, a whole new way of thinking and doing things (demanding) imagination, courage and initiative. In the same spirit, Jose Antunes da Silva points out that inculturation implies that Christianity can only take root in the new culture if it assumes those cultural forms.... There is need for a critical symbiosis. The faith criticizes the culture, and the culture enriches the Christian faith. For John Waligo, inculturation is that movement which aims at making Christianity permanent in Africa by making it a people's religion and a way of life which no enemy or hostility can ever succeed in supplanting or weakening.

These are exactly the foci of this paper with our indebted study of the Igbo deities.

Why The Deities?

Four reasons can be advanced here;

- I. The obvious reason that no one seems to be interested in their study. In his *Trends in African Theology since Vat. II*, Fr. Francis Oborji made an expansive expose of the major African Theologians of note from its inception. These include; G. Dufonteny, P. Tempels, V.

Mulago, S. Ezeanya, A. Ngindu Mushete, Benezet Bujo and Charles Nyamiti. None indeed did devote specific efforts on the deities may be because of the presumption that one cannot speak of any aspect of the African's religious life or culture without touching the whole of the African world-view and life. (Metuh, 1999, p. 77, Oborji, 1998/2005: 100).

- II. Traditionally, whenever any faith or culture is said to be anti Christian, it is either worshipping idols or indulging in anti-life practices or both (Gal.4: 8). This is based on the conviction that only God through Christ the Lord is worship due (Matt.2: 11; Phil.2: 10-11). Igbo worldview and religion seem to be among them that contradict their Christian counterpart with the worship of the deities.
- III. Metuh (1996) is therefore right to say that "belief in and cult of the deities constitute one of the intractable problems in the studies of African Traditional Religion, and the theologico-pastoral attempts to incarnate Christianity in African world views" (p. 109). This is because of their numbers, varieties and influences that immediately suggest that Africans/Igbo are basically not in control of the deities are claimed.
- IV. The conviction that these deities are still alive and active, and that a sizeable number of Igbo Christians and academics alike participate in their cults and even advocate for their inclusion in Christian theology.

All these strongly suggest that attempts at inculturating Igbo Christianity as other African cultures that neglect the deities are bound to fail.

Place And Nature Of The Deities In Igbo Cosmology

It is right to remember that cosmology/ worldview refers to "the body of beliefs about the universe which are common among members of any society and existentially demonstrated in their value system" (Ifesieh, 1989, p. 20). Igbo worldview therefore refers to the understanding of how the "Igbo evaluate their whole life (both temporal and otherwise) which provides a charter for their action and guide for their behavior" (cf. Uchendu in Metuh, 1987, p. 61). Igbo deities form a very important part of this cosmology.

This is a worldview that upholds the theory of the existence of two basic worlds- the visible and invisible worlds. The "invisible world can be subdivided into two- the world of God and the gods situated somewhere above the firmament, and the

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underworld, somewhere beneath earth surface. This is believed to be the home of the ancestors, the sprites, and the disembodied spirits. The visible world is populated by men and all material surroundings familiar to man- sky, earth, rivers, forests, mountains and so forth" (Madu, 1996, p. 5 & Metuh, 1987, p. 62). However these worlds are not mutually exclusive since the beings in these spheres can and easily cohere or interact. God and the deities for instance, who are believed to inhabit the upper part of the invisible world can and do control the actions of the other spheres; man can also reach them, while the ancestors have direct influence on their human families.

Igbo pantheon has a hierarchy of beings in its retinue. At the head of the hierarchy is 'Chi-ukwu' (the Supreme Being) who is regarded as the creator and sustainer of the universe. Hence they call him 'Onye okike" (One who creates) and 'Onye nwe/ ji uwa' (One who owns /holds or sustains the world). However since this Being is quite removed from the created world, he left the world to the watchful eyes of the Deities.

The Deities are therefore next in rank to the Supreme Being. Though they are generally believed to be created by the Supreme Being and subordinate to him, Igbo myths surrounding the nature and worship of God, and the fall of man have given rise to three theories concerning their relationship to the Supreme Being. According to Anyanwu (1999);

Those who hold that the supreme is a Deus Otiosus, God has completely left the universe in the hands of the deities. Proponents of animism on the other hand, hold that God is to the deities only a *primus inter pares*, while the more accepted position is that the deities play a mediatory role between God and men or the rest of the world (p. 83-4).

In the last instance, the deities are best considered as God's servants or messengers or angels in the world.

Igbo deities are also many and can be classified loosely into Major and Minor deities. Major divinities are those which are considered to be universal or acknowledged within such a wide social group as the tribe or nation. They include;

Anyanwu - represented by the Sun; Ala - represented by Earth; Igwe - represented by the Thunder; Ahiajoku - which is the Lord of Agriculture,

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Muo mmiri - a divinely appointed temptress; and Agwu-Nsi - the Lord of divination and healing (Madu, 1996, p. 6).

It goes without saying that most of the major deities are personifications of natural phenomena or their derivatives, hence the appellations as Nature deities.

The Minor deities are rather those with whom the destiny of particular localities are associated and which occupy central most influential positions in those societies and have their shrines in them. Metuh (1999) gives such names as “Eze Mewi, Ogwugwu, Idemili, Ulasi, Ubu, Ele, Ojiyi, Akpu, Ojukwu, Ngwu ETC all familiar with Nnewi community alone” (p. 102).

Worthy of mention is also that there is no strict agreement among scholars in the classification of these deities or in their gradations. Reasons for these can be sought in the segmented Igbo societies and their particular experiences or histories. Thus apart from the first three mentioned Major deities above, the rest are not always regarded as such. Even scholars who recognize all five do not grade them in the same order. Arazu (2005) for instance argues extensively for the supremacy of Ana even over God (p. 109-204). Hence Anyanwu (1999) further states that,

The differentiation between the major and minor divinities is as a result of modern scholars’ attempt to build among the Igbo pantheon something like the Christian concept. In the traditional setting as is evident, one cannot say strictly that one divinity is major and the other minor. Individual communities and culture areas have their own ranking based on their environment. It means that what is a major divinity in one area could be termed minor in another area (p. 99).

Similarly, some deities are believed to be manipulated by those who know their secrets, just like the spirit forces and medicine.

Below the divinities in Igbo pantheon is what are generally referred to as the Spirit forces (Arusi). Metuh (1999) describes them as metaphysical forces which God created and left in nature and can take their abode in natural material objects through which they normally act. The Spirit forces number in hundreds and share some of the attributes of the Deities. They also have often been confused with the latter by many writers on Igbo Traditional Religion. Two things are said to distinguish the Arusi from the deities though:

Whereas the Arusi are the property of and are worshipped within the clan which owns them, the belief and worship of the deities are accepted by most Igbo groups. The second fundamental difference is that whereas the deities, like Ala, are fully personal and are therefore loving, merciful, just and kind, the Arusi are not fully rational and therefore sometimes act irrationally (p. 102-3).

This is because they are believed to indiscriminately kill whoever infringes any of their laws, even if the person acted inadvertently. Furthermore, "They, like the deities, can also be manipulated by those who know their secrets for good or for evil" (Metuh, 1987, p. 66).

The place of man in the scheme of things deserves special mention also. He is believed to be at the centre and pivotal point of the universe. Therefore his life is of prime value in Igbo world-view such that every other thing is supposed to be created and arranged for his sake. This is why the Igbo world-view like most other Africans' has been described as heavily anthropocentric. According to Ejizu (1985), man's relationships with the spirits and deities also appear "on many occasions to be manipulative as the traditional worshippers shop from one deity to another for definite material gains bothering on life, such as offspring and health" (p. 144). For this also, man's life can be said to be obviously this-worldly.

Just before and after man in the hierarchy are the Ancestors and medicine or magical forces respectively which we have skipped because they do not directly concern this paper. Suffice it that the hierarchy is also fluid because of the interrelatedness of all these beings.

Relationships Of Igbo Deities To Christian Thought

As messengers of the Supreme Being, the Igbo Deities mirror Angels in the traditional Christian thought from the Greek 'Angelos' and a translation of the Hebrew 'Malak'. According to Woods (1999), Angels are also said to be,

Immaterial spirits or pure intelligences created by God prior to human creation to regulate the order of the world and specifically to serve as messengers... to human persons with respect to the divine plan of salvation (p. 19).

From these descriptions, we already see the kernel of the similarities and so, the possible point of resolution of these beings in the two cultures.

Furthermore, Catholic theology also teaches that Angels, because they are immaterial or bodiless creatures, can only be distinguished from one another by their functions for which they have also been named and classified as good or bad. Except for the Nature deities, same appears to be the case for the Igbo deities.

Again, angels generally appear in both the OT and NT as the hosts of heaven, the Holy Ones, worshippers of God, benevolent guardians and protectors of persons and places, yet they also execute divine judgement and punishment as the deities in the Igbo deities (Cf. Deut.4:19; Dan.1:13; Ps. 103: 20; Matt.18 10; 1Cor.1: 10; Tob. 12: 15; Ex.12:23; Num.2:6-8; 2Sam. 24: 16ff; Acts 12:23).

Other Similarities between Igbo Deities and Christian Angels include;

- Deities like angels are creatures of God and His messengers to the world of men and other creatures.

They predate man and are higher than him in the hierarchy of beings.

- They are not objects of divine revelation or of mere human imaginative creation but are more like forces discovered in nature for man's purposes (Woods, 1999, p. 19).
- These beings are not subject to human limitations/ weaknesses yet human moods can be ascribed to them by analogy.

Major Points Of Divergence Between The Igbo And Christian Angels

1. Characterisation or Categorization of these Beings: With the influence of Platonism and other currents, contemporary Christian theology seem to have a clearer delineation of the being of Angels (cf. McBrien, 1994/2000, p. 256; Woods, 1999, p. 19) unlike the Igbo understanding that is fraught with many disagreements. as we had pointed out.

Added to those, are that some authors also regard and categorise some of the supposed deities as mere spirit forces as in Ejizu 1985, p.140; Metuh,1999, p.105; Nwala,1985, p. 37 -On the mermaid spirits, while most practitioners are interested in and promote only their particular deities. Ndidi Obi (personal communications) for instance, is of the view the water spirits represented by the great Idemili he

feeds at Agulu lake are the Archangels of Christian theology because he sees only a thin line of demarcation between these beings in their level of operations.

2. Morality of the Angels: This simply refers to the quality of being morally right or wrong for it is “a natural outcome of a being’s Intelligence and Freedom that it be morally responsible (Peschke, 2001, p.14). Of the Christian angels therefore, McBrien (1994) says: “since they are intelligent beings with freedom, angels have the capacity to reject God, as we do. Those angels which rejected God are portrayed as demons in league with Satan (1 Cor.15:24; Eph.2:2)” (p. 256).

This is not so in Igbo Traditional Religion where the deities are believed to not always be free and responsible to God or their perceived purposes in the universe. By this we mean the possibility of these beings being manipulated by some human beings for their selfish ends.

3. Worship: While the Christian angels can only be revered, the Igbo deities are also worshipped and sacrificed to like, and for God. According to Arinze’ “the devout pagan believe that their sacrifice is their own way of worshipping God and sometimes, but rather rarely, they explicitly ask a good spirit to carry their sacrifices to God” (p.49).

Attempts At Inculturation

In support of the Inculturating efforts, Bujo (1992) had also seen;

The possibility of helping the Christian message really to enter the hearts of Africans, so that it may bear abundant fruit in a way of life which is at the same time both truly African and truly Christian (p. 76).

In this paper, our attempts at inculturating the Igbo deities will take the form of suggestions along the three lines of divergence of the Angels:

1. Proper Categorisation/ Characterisation of the Deities

The writer thinks that this should be the first task of both Igbo traditionalists and theologians lack of which has continued to involve the Igbo into lots of confusions, suspicions and mistrusts.

A study of similar cultures and civilizations (Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Hebrew) where Christianity seems to have taken firm hold of the culture, they seem to have outlived or mastered the influence of their deities/ gods whose specific names are

reminders of their perceived roles. The Greeks for instance have a plethora of gods (both major and minor) who are supposed to guard natural phenomena and events in near perfect hierarchical order. Much more remarkable is that while some of these gods are known to be benevolent, some are ambivalent while others are outright evil in their actions, all because they are known. Indeed the unknown ones are more suspect and are regarded as more prone to evil and to be avoided (cf. Farnell, 1967, p. 221-6; Gardner, 1971, p. 712-3; Russell and Turner, 1999, p. 342). Hence McBrien (1994) states that “not every signal from the world of the numinous necessarily bears a message from God. The world of the numinous is as ambiguous and as fraught with sin as is the world of the tangible (p. 256).

In Igbo land today, it rather appears that added to the disagreements, is the fact that most practitioners enjoy the secrecy of their titular deities while claiming their superiorities over every other one (which they of course do not know enough). What a self deception to say the least! The researcher is of the view that the Igbo can learn from these cultures and civilizations which many often regard as polytheistic.

Scholars have also tried to kick the word ‘gods’ from Igbo vocabulary on the grounds that Igbo religion is not polytheist and the deities never at war. This cannot be right given the prevailing circumstances just described. Besides, do we not often hear of intercommunity wars masterminded by men but in consultation with some deities; Ekwensu for one as in Arazu, 2005 p. 120-1; Opata, 2005, p. 11-85; Umeh, 1999, p. 197).

Furthermore, may be until most recently, there were masquerades and *dibias* that competed for supremacy in particular festivals. Certainly these powers are not originated by men but through the agency of the deities and spirit forces with which these exhibitors are always in contact. Here the Igbo principle *hatt ‘oburu na ahaghi a naghi esi ogologo?* (Literarily: One does not measure his height with an obviously taller person) is implied in both secrecy and contest of the deities and spirit forces.

Finally, one may not be too wrong to group both the supposed deities and spirit forces (good and bad) together in the prevailing circumstances, until this proper identification and categorization is done. This might entail proscribing the cults of some deities whose roles are not favourable to the Christian mission.

2. Morality of the Angelic Beings

The Igbo theologian ought to call to question this assumption that the Deities and even the spirit forces can be arbitrarily manipulated but never immoral. This is based on “the belief that ethical judgements “cannot be attributed to the actions of the inhabitants of the invisible world” (Magesa, 1997, p. 72) or “is determined by the principle of the hierarchy of beings” (Metuh, 1987, p. 254-5). One has to note that a particular messenger remains so as long as he is delivering the message of the sender and not acting arbitrarily; the same with the deities. Otherwise the deities would better be equated with God and in this case, the Igbo should not deny being polytheists.

The truth is however that the Supreme Being still retains his sovereignty in Igbo Religion (Idowu, 1976, p. 173; Metuh, 1999, p. 132) and can be interceded whenever the deities fail. Furthermore, the worshippers retain the right to desert any such deity (Ejizu, 1985, p. 144). Hence the popular Nnewi saying that ‘O bu Nnewi si Edo nwere Nkwo’ - It is the Nnewi people that asked Edo (deity) to guard Nkwo (the traditional market). All these also underscore the fact that man has a serious input on the recognition given to these deities whose activities should not be allowed to imprison or destroy him. Hence Metuh (1996) insists that, “God is the Lord and sole controller of morality. He does not need the mediatorship of the deities or ancestors. He fulfils both the primary and secondary causes of morality” (p. 85).

3. Worship of Angels

By this we mean the particular ritual or cultic activity that characterizes and enhances the interaction between human beings and the deities. Ekwunife (1990/2003, p. 16-17) gives the importance of rituals as a whole. In all they help to vitalize the effective link between human beings and the spiritual realities.

The cult of the Igbo deities is characterized by Worship and Sacrifice. Worship has been described as the exhibition to the supernatural being by some act of mind or body of the honour and reverence due to him by reason of his supreme dominion (Anyanwu, 1999, p. 99). This can take place on a regular basis or occasionally, on a specially mapped out holy/sacred day or as directed by a diviner, at a specified or designated place or with the instrumentality of some natural objects.

Sacrifice as an aspect of worship involves the offering up of some objects to these beings. This is why Achtemeier (1999, p. 1143) loosely describes worship as “an attitude and acts of reverence to a deity, while sacrifice is a gift to God”. This (ritual

sacrifice) has two distinctive forms: Oblation and Immolation. While oblation only involves the offering of food stuffs, immolation involves the shedding of the blood of birds or animals, including human blood. However, a particular sacrifice can include the two as in Igbo Traditional sacrifices to the deities.

Here we recognize the difficulties of legislating to the traditionalists who feels the need to sacrifice to the deities for a number of reasons, especially when the particular deity does not evidently reject such sacrifices (by answering or advocating to the needs of the devotee). However it appears more convenient for Christian theology to advise a distinction between the form or level of worship due only to the Supreme Being-God and other important/ significant spiritual beings like the angels and deities (who are mere creatures, and so not necessary beings) especially now it can also be proved that the Igbo God is not a Deus Otiosus (Metuh, 1999, p. 20-5). So we can say that with the total submission that sacrifice involves, it can be made to God alone as in Christian theology, while the deities and spirit forces can make do with other forms of cult. Furthermore, one notes with dismay, the error of offering human sacrifices to these deities on two grounds:

-They are too costly to be demanded by the deities who are supposed to be serving man's interests.

-They cannot legitimately be demanded by the deities when the Supreme Being whom they represent does not seem to like/ legislate that as any part of direct sacrifices to Him. The shedding of human blood therefore remains evil for whatever reason that is done.

Finally, the Blood of Jesus has been voluntarily shed for all so that our sins, no matter how grievous, can be forgiven by the power of His name (Matt.26:28; Rom.5: 20-1). This belief in Christ's mediatorship should indeed be more firmly posited and strengthened any time the roles of these deities could generally cause more harm than good.

G. Summary and Conclusion

The possibility of an African theology is no longer debatable, so also the fact that in most cultures it has already "passed the Assimilation stages" (Metuh, 1996, p. 8). Such can be said of Igbo theology.

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In spite of their great merits in African/ Igbo theology so far, this effort indeed remains superficial for a number of reasons. For Oboshi (2005), some of their postulations appear as mere philosophical speculations and specifications because of what might be perceived as much disagreements on trivialities. Most importantly, they also appear to have neglected/ overlooked some elements of the world view, like the deities and spirit forces, which have major influences on the day to day lives of the people.

This is exactly what this paper has sought to expose among the Igbo because of the writer's love for clarity and his conviction that the God, Deities and Man relationship is more fundamental and stronger than the God, Ancestor and Man relationship to which most African theologians have almost fruitlessly devoted much of their resources.

At the end of this study, we submit that;

- The Igbo should be more open and specific with their deities as most civilized cultures have done, in order to better define their relationship with them as well as take their rightful place in the universe.
- Since the Deities like angels are more of forces discovered in the universe, those which are known to actively desire or cause harm or evil should not be regarded as serving God's purpose, so also those who claim their influence.
- There is need to differentiate and specify the mode of worship due to God alone for who He Is, over and above other creatures including the deities.

When this is done, the Igbo Christian would have made more significant progress and can lay claim to a more solid basis for further authentic Igbo Christian theology and community life.

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