

## **The 1987 Clash between Oghu Cultural Festival and Christianity in Okwudor**

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### **Abstract**

The advent of Christianity into Okwudor shook the very foundations of the culture of the indigenes of Okwudor, who before then, professed traditional religion. One of the effects of the advent of Christianity was the derogatory way it treated adherents of oghu cultural festival. The tongue lashing on the festival kept on resurfacing, disrupting the relationship between staunch Christians and oghu adherents. This paper attempts to dissect the crisis between Christianity and oghu cultural festival, as it affects the unity of the community. The coming of Christianity into Okwudor was supposed to engender peace in the community but instead, sowed a seed of discord as a result of ideological differences between the people. There are few researches on this community, hence the research into the 1987 clash between oghu cultural festival and christianity in Okwudor. This study analyses the resolutions of the committee formed to resolve the crisis between oghu adherents and Christians. Adopting the culture conflict theory, data for this paper rely on primary and secondary sources. Findings show the derogatory remarks used in the resolution document which were offshoot of the view held by Christians corroded communal integration. Also, not all aspects of the resolutions are adhered to as girls are still being flogged and the 'ebeleri' masquerade still moved about with charms as at 2005. This study

recommends that the Christians and oghu adherents should imbibe the philosophy of live and let live.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Crises, Oghu Cultural Festival, Okwudor, Resolutions

## **Introduction**

Okwudor is an autonomous community in Njaba Local Government Area of Imo State made up of four villages viz Umufeke, Umuduruogba, Umuseke and Umuelem .Before the creation of new autonomous communities by the Imo State Government in 2002, there were eight villages including Umuneke, Umuewi, Umuokwara and Abazu. These four villages make up the new autonomous community known as Ihebinowere. The ‘new’ Okwudor is today bounded by Egwedu, Nkume, Ekwe and Ihebinowere. This study will treat the ‘new’ Okwudor and Ihebinowere as Okwudor. The Njaba river flows through Okwudor. The tradition of origin of Okwudor is not controversial like that of other communities. There is only one version about its origin as people of this community traced their origin to a neighbouring community called Ekwe in present Isu Local Government Area of Imo State. No one knows the real name of the founder of this community. The founder named the place Okwudor meaning heap of sida acuta (a kind of fodders for goat) because of the abundance of the plant in the area.

The crisis between Christianity and oghu cultural festival in Okwudor is an illustration of a clash between modernism and traditionalism. Modernism refers to modern ideas or methods<sup>1</sup> while traditionalism is the belief that customs and traditions are more important for a society than modern ideas<sup>2</sup>. This paper posits that Christianity is encapsulated in modernism based on the fact of its advent into Okwudor, coupled with the nature that was foreign when compared with the oghu cultural

festival that had been performed in Okwudor long before the advent of Christianity. Oghu originated from a village called Ndu Igu in Nkwesi autonomous community in Oguta Local Government Area in the present Imo State. From here it moved to Awomamma before getting to Okwudor.<sup>3</sup> A school of thought believes it first originated from today's Bayelsa State before moving to Nkwesi. It might have moved from Ijaw land of Bayelsa State to Nkwesi in Oguta Local Government Area.

In a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Television lecture in 1963 delivered by Professor Hugh Trevor Roper at Oxford University, England, he looked down on Africa. His response to students' request for some African history courses to be taught was shocking. He said, "Perhaps, in future there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness . . . And darkness is not a subject of history"<sup>4</sup> This view of Africa being enveloped in darkness depicting backwardness is not new as such sentiment was espoused by Europeans during the era of slave trade and so-called legitimate trade. The indigenes of Okwudor being brainwashed by europeanised Christianity equally regard Oghu as an aspect of darkness and decided to challenge its existence. This must have led to the physical clash between oghu adherents and Mary League members of the Catholic Church in August 1987.

The theoretical framework is based on culture conflict theory also known as cultural deviance theory. This theory posits that the clash of values of different social groups espousing different ideas of acceptable behaviour results in crime.<sup>5</sup> The different belief system of the Christians and oghu adherents which to each of the two groups, is acceptable, caused the clash between these two groups. The oghu adherents regarded the idea of members of Mary League coming out for a

programme on the last day of the festival in August 1987 before 12 noon as a crime. The Catholics saw the physical manhandling of Mary League girls because they flouted the rule of prohibition of movement by the female folk as a crime, as it infringed on their human rights in relation to freedom of movement. The crisis emanating from this clash was settled out of court with some resolutions reached between the two parties.

Clashes between Christians and African traditionalists were propelled by early Christian missionaries. Obiechina observes that they (initiators of Christian religion) “no sooner come to a place than they begin activity to destroy the religions, and therefore, the ideological foundation of society . . . it is only a matter of time before serious conflicts develop”<sup>6</sup>

Ayandele aligns with Obiechina thus

The sustenance of their allegation was that the missionary activity was a disruptive force, rocking traditional society to its very foundation. . . Destroying the high moral principles of traditional religion, without an adequate substitute and transforming the mental outlook of Nigeria in a way that made them imitate European values slavishly, whilst holding an irrational contempt of valuable features of traditional culture <sup>7</sup>

Isichei quotes Reverend Dr Raymond Arazu thus:

For all practical purposes, the first article of our creed which was our first commandment was ‘thou shall hate paganism’ and all that is connected with it, with thy whole heart, with thy whole mind, with thy whole soul and with thy whole strength <sup>8</sup>

Maduka recognizes the damage done to our culture by missionaries. He opines thus:

Through tutelage by white church men and political white men our Indigenous custom and culture suffered a fatal blow which left them between life and death. Many of those sent to learn the white man's Secrets and powers in order to fight him back and restore our cultural dignity became whiter than the white men<sup>9</sup>

According to F. k. Ekechi, the traditionalist society was brain washed following the teachings of the missionaries as Christianity was seen as a license to eccentric behaviour and flouting of moral code.<sup>10</sup> Beals making use of degradation hypothesis of polygenesis posits that man was created a civilized or semi-civilised being based on assumption mainly from theology. He goes further to say that non-literates were those whose culture had been downgraded almost to the level of an animal.<sup>11</sup> This idea of downgrading was caused by Trans - Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and imperialism. European influence on Okwudor made the indigenes to look down on anything African as Europeans were seen as being next to God. There are a lot of works on the non - cordial relationship between African culture and Christianity, but very few on Okwudor hence, the essence of this research.

This paper posits that derogatory remarks made on oghu cultural festival should not be encouraged as these remarks continued from the advent of Christianity into Okwudor and could be seen in the statements on the resolutions reached between oghu adherents and the Catholics. This study is divided into advent of Christianity into Okwudor, Oghu cultural dance, crisis between oghu and Christianity, conclusion and recommendation

### **Advent of Christianity into Okwudor**

The first Church was brought in by Joseph Onyejelem of

Umuduruogba, Okwudor. It is argued in some quarters that the name of the church was the Apostolic Church<sup>12</sup>. This is not true because Apostolic Church began in Nigeria in 1931. The Church had its members converted to Catholic. This has made some people to regard Catholicism as the first brand of Christianity to move into Okwudor. Joseph accompanied a relation to Okrika, Rivers State at the end of the First World War in 1918. Here, he joined the Christian worship and became interested in exporting it to Okwudor. In 1919 he came back home and converted his relations, kith and kin into his new faith. He only knew that the church was headed by a white man but never knew the name. He got a lot of converts in geometrical proportion. In the late 1919, he was pursued from the church premises by the landlord following a fire outbreak. Joseph and some of his members went to Ozubulu, Anambra State where they met Reverend Father Bundel who was the priest of Ozubulu Catholic Church.

The Reverend Father followed Joseph down to Okwudor with a catechist by name Muodebelu who acted as the interpreter. A new piece of land was got where they built a new church in the juju forest of Eke Ogwuiyi in Umuduruogba where we have the present St Paul's Catholic Church. The Rev Fr converted the converts to Catholics when he discovered that their system of worship was not Catholic. Ozubulu became the first Church parish headquarters for the Church in Okwudor. Another Church was also established at Ogwuochasi juju forest in Umuseke. The activities of the Catholic mission in Okwudor is traced to Onitsha in 1885 of two Holy Ghost Priests, Reverend Fathers Joseph Lutz and Horne. Obi Anazonwu of Onitsha gave them a befitting reception. They were given a piece of land where they established their mission. Fr Joseph Shanahan arrived in Onitsha in 1902 as an assistant to Father Leone Lejune and revolutionized the approach to missionary work. In 1905 he

became the head after the death of Lejune.<sup>13</sup> In 1908, a mission was established at Ozubulu leading to the establishment of the Catholic Church in Okwudor.

As a Church was being established in Umuduruogba, by 1925 other villages wanted their own Church. The brand of Christianity that came was African Church. In 1924, three men from Umuelem went to Umuahia now in Abia State to negotiate the opening of African Church in Umuelem. These three men were Akwa Okorochukwu, G Mbachi and D Mgbeahuru. A Church was built and villages such as Umuokwara, Abazu, Umuewi, Umuneke and Umufeke demanded for theirs by going to Ubuluihejiofor. African Church was built in these villages. These Churches were locally called 'Okupam' Churches which meant free Churches because of the practice of syncretism. Many conversions were made. The first African Church teacher for Umuelem was Mr John Udensi of Arochukwu who arrived on 6th November, 1926. Gilbert Ejiofor of Ubuluihejiofor was the first teacher for Umuokwara. Initial attempts to build a Church in Umufeke failed.

In 1936, the African Church embraced the Church Missionary Society, invariably becoming Anglican Church. A delegation was sent to Rev Ekpunobi of the Anglican Church at Nkwerre in today's Imo State. The delegation was made up of members from Abazu, Umuokwara, Umuneke, Umuewi and Umufeke. The delegates had agreed within themselves that since Umuokwara African Church was roofed, it should be the site for the new denomination (Anglican Church). The Church has remained here to this present day. The first teacher was Mr F. U Eke from 1937 to 1940.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Oghu Dance in Okwudor**

This is just an aspect of the oghu cultural festival. The head of oghu (onye isi oghu) declares the dance open. Each dancer

(okorosha) dances for about five minutes or more and spectators spray money on him. His dance could be interrupted by a spectator who moves into the platform and hail the drummers. He sprays money on the drummers and they beat the drum for him to perform his own dance which can equally be interrupted. The okorosha puts on white 'polo' or long sleeve with a head gear (isi oghu) with feathers. A white lining material dangles from the head gear covering the face. They also put on hand gloves and white socks on their legs with rattle (mgbirigba) fasten around the legs. Some of them have gongs (ogele). After the turn of the okorosha, it is the turn of the ebeleri. The ebeleri is a beautifully dressed masquerade, who dances majestically. The costume for the ebeleri is a well knit material (usually black) made from ropes which covers every part of the body. The head is elongated with a mass of hair making it taller. The ebeleri is broader in size than another group of masquerade known as udo. It has a shield which it uses to collect gifts from people. There are always guides moving about with the ebeleri. Next in line to dance is a group of masquerade called agwu oloko or onye ure. The agwu oloko puts on a mask that may look beautiful or frightening. After the agwu oloko must have danced, it is the turn of the udo that brings the dance to an end. The udo puts on a material made from ropes, which covers their body. The stages of the dance mentioned above are not water tight because the adanchere (only woman involved in the dance) could come in after the okorosha or ebeleri to dance. It is unfortunate that today one hardly sees a woman dance due to the effect of Christianity.

The oghu dance could last for about one hour during which young girls will be running about for protection behind boys and men so that they will not be flogged by the udo. The udo demand for appeasement from the person protecting the ladies. It is only in oghu ojo (ugly oghu) that an udo disturbs



young girls. In oghu oma (beautiful oghu) there is no such disturbance. Udo is popularly called enyi umuagbohobia (friend to young girls) or nwadike. The udo generally doesn't look attractive like the ebeleri. A village could have four to six performances depending on the sponsors. The youths may decide to organize one usually branded as oghu umuokorobia (oghu for young people). A family may want to honor a dead father by organizing one.

### **Crises between Oghu and Christianity**

Christianity claims that oghu is performed in the worship of the marine spirit. It says it originated from the riverine areas where the worship of the marine spirit is in vogue. This question is always asked: why is it that the Adanchere always displays a miniature paddle. Christians say the paddle symbolizes a river and therefore it has something to do with the river. The Church is in strong condemnation of the worship of marine spirits quoting Exodus 20:3 "Thou shalt have no other gods before me"<sup>15</sup>. Adherents of oghu are saying that no marine spirit is worshipped that they regard oghu as a pastime. They defend this point by saying that the paddle held by adanchere signifies the idea of crossing the river on a canoe by the woman who brought oghu from Oguta. They say there is a difference between oghu mmiri and the ordinary oghu. Oghu mmiri worshippers are the agents of marine spirits.

Those in support of oghu say it is their culture and a people without a culture are like a tree without its roots. The performance of oghu should be seen as an aspect of identifying 'omenaalaejiamaraobodo' (a community is identified by its culture). They assert that their forefathers performed this, so they cannot allow it disappear into the thin air.<sup>16</sup> Christianity interference in the destruction of oghu is seen as an influence of foreign culture over their tradition. In a

two day workshop entitled media practitioner and culture reawakening in Nigeria, Yakubu stressed that “the state of our cultural heritage is nothing too cheerful. There is need to rediscover the positive values of the good old day - culture which has suffered erosion.”<sup>17</sup> The Church does not see or view oghu as an indigenous culture rather it sees it as being imported from outside Okwudor.<sup>18</sup>

Christianity sees it as an instrument of discrimination against the womenfolk. Maryam Babangida’s view on marginalization of women as cited by Rose Acholonu goes thus “... women have been subjected into psychological situations where they perceive themselves as non- powerful and even non-human.”<sup>19</sup> Christians frown at the idea of allowing only men and the only woman (adanchere) to perform. This school of thought is of the view that oghu should be made open for everybody both men and women, since everybody is equal before God.<sup>20</sup> The womenfolk even argue that ‘what a man can do, a woman can do it even better.’ The Beijing Conference held in China in 1995 condemned all the inhuman practices against women, saying it is man’s inhumanity to man. Oghu adherents counter the aforementioned that biblically women are to be submissive to their husbands. This implies that men dictate the pace. Oghu being branded evil is because the majority of people making the population of the Church are women, who thereby brand it evil.<sup>21</sup> Oghu adherents utter that adanchere represents the womenfolk.

Christians argue the ritual sacrifice of a cock before the commencement of oghu runs contrary to the teachings of the bible quoting 1 Corinth 10:20 “ ... the things, which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils and not to God...”<sup>22</sup> Sacrifice is an essential part of African religion. Three kinds of sacrifice in most African communities, which are expiratory, petitive and thanksgiving sacrifices. Expiratory

sacrifices are believed to scare evil spirits and pacify an angry deity or an ancestor. Petitive sacrifices are carried out to seek for a favour or blessing from the ancestors, spirit or deities. Thanksgiving sacrifices come in after blessings or favours have been received. The oghu sacrifice comprises of the first two. Its adherents indicate that such sacrifice is no longer performed. Even if it is performed it is not evil since it doesn't involve the killing of human beings (human sacrifice)

Some men of God are in support of the culture and are even members while others are opposed to it. Hollis R Lynch states thus:

If the modern superficial critic of African customs would only read history, he would find ... the civilized world practiced most customs... Roman spectator encouraged men to butcher each other... but from a morbid love of amusement at the sight of blood.<sup>23</sup>

Such issue concerning men butchering one another raised by Lynch should be more serious than the killing of animals for sacrifice.

Furthermore, the issue of civilization has been controversial. Civilization is a state of human society that is very developed or organized. Christians accentuate that Africa was a dark continent and uncivilized before the coming of the whites. Africans were backward in every aspect of human endeavour. It is interesting to note that during the Dark Ages in Europe the old Kingdom of Ghana reached the peak of its civilization.<sup>24</sup> Christians claim that Africans were cannibals and barbaric. The whites came with the bible and civilized them. They are oblivious of the fact that it was still the whites who introduced Trans-Atlantic slave trade which resulted in the death and sale of many Africans in the middle passage and

the New World. If the whites were really civilized in the first place, they would not have introduced Trans-Atlantic slave trade, which was heinous. They came with the bible to right their wrongs. These missionaries were just there to ensure a complete take over of Africa. The idea of regarding oghu as inferior and Christian religion as superior could be neutralized by Blyden's theory of race. According to him there was no superiority or inferiority among races, but that each of the major races did have certain inherent attributes, which it was the duty of members of each race to develop for the ultimate good of humanity.<sup>25</sup> To some scholars, separation into superior and inferior was a product of conquest. The present researcher subscribes to this view.

Oghu is regarded as a secret cult by Christians. It is not opened to all unless initiated members who must abide by its rules and regulations. Uninitiated members who break the rules and regulations are penalized. Oghu supporters emphasize that every institution even the Church has its rules and regulations, when broken the culprit is punished. On the issue of initiation into oghu, this question is asked: why is it that those ordained as priests in the Catholic and Anglican Churches must perform certain functions during service and not allow members of the laity to do them?

It is really an irony that Africans fought against their indigenous culture more than the white missionaries. The African Christians were hell bent to see their culture suppressed. All this comes from the old European myth that Africa, south of the Sahara was the land of people without a past and without achievements. Thomas Hodgkin argues thus "if the inhabitants of Nigerian Plateau were producing the admirable Nok sculptures ...at a time when the British were being slowly civilized by the Romans, what is left of the myth of Africans as a people without a past?"<sup>26</sup> Basil Davidson adds "historical discovery is now proving that the

development and growth of society and civilization in Africa really contradict this stereotype of centuries-long stagnation”.<sup>27</sup> Ronald Segal’s quotation could conclude this argument adequately thus “long before, in the evolution of man himself, Africa has helped shape history”<sup>28</sup>

In August 1987, on the last day of the festival, Mary League (Umu Mary) decided to have a crusade that morning<sup>29</sup>. The festival was supposed to come to an end at 12noon. The Umu Mary of Orlu Diocese were to be hosted at Umuneke. On their way to church the girls were flogged and beaten. According to oghu tradition, the girls were supposed to come out after 12noon, since the festival was supposed to come to an end at 12 noon. The matter was taken to the Orlu High Court by the Catholic Church. The case was later settled out of court. It was agreed that gunshots signaling the end of oghu would be a mere formality, so that girls and women could go about their normal business. The oghu heads agreed among themselves to fire the gunshots at 6a.m.

#### **Resolutions of the Out of Court Settlement on 30th June, 1988<sup>30</sup>**

- Itonkwa: This refers to the bringing down of the musical instruments that were hanged in the last oghu dance, in marking the beginning of the oghu festival. The head of the oghu did entertain members during this occasion with goat meat and wine, and also members came with drinks. It was agreed that there would be no more killing of a cock that had its blood sprinkled on the instruments.
- Initiation of a new member: Registration of new member was five naira and wine that might be approved by supporters. It was agreed that there would be no longer initiation rituals.

- Masquerade: No masquerade particularly ‘ebeleri’ should go about with dangerous charms and there should be an end to the flogging of girls.
- The female member ‘adanchere’: Fortune tellers should not be consulted for the selection of the adanchere, the only female member in case of death.
- The vigil ‘oghuzor’: That the night masquerade called oghuzor should be appointed by the original kindred in case of death and not by consulting fortune tellers.
- Death of oghu member: That when an oghu member dies, the oghu dancing ceremony should be performed in public and the dancers should put their normal okorosha costume.
- Death of the head of oghu: That at the death of the head of the oghu cult, his son or brother should succeed him and not the selection being done by a fortune teller. The idea of killing goats and fowls should be discouraged.
- Last day of oghu season: That on the last day of the oghu festival, no masquerade should move about performing as okorosha. Women should be allowed freedom of movement on this day, no matter the time of the gunshots signaling the end of the festival.
- Season of peace: There should be no rancour and bloodshed by indigenes of Okwudor at home and abroad during the festival.
- Defaulters: A peace and disciplinary committee made up of a cross section of the community was to be formed to checkmate defaulters.

Going through the tone of the resolution signed between the Catholic Church and heads of oghu the researcher discovers the derogatory remarks heaped on the oghu adherents. The letter written by the St Paul’s Catholic Church to the Registrar

of the High Court in Orlu, Imo State titled ‘settlement out of court’ contained copies of the resolution. The document containing the resolution reads thus “An Agreement reached by Christians and the Pagans of Okwudor community on the celebration of oghu festival this 30th June, 1988”. Describing the oghu adherents as pagans is derogatory. During the spread of Christianity in the Roman empire, the people in the rural areas could not be reached and they were known as *paganus* meaning rural dwellers. They practiced polytheism or ethnic religions other than Judaism. Today, if one’s religious belief is not part of the world’s main religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, such a person is regarded as a pagan. Who gave the above interpretation? It should be the Europeans. What yardstick did they use to know the main religions? Is it the population of the worshippers or the nature of the religion? In the researcher’s opinion, referring to someone as a pagan because he worships idol means belittling the person’s religion. It will be more appropriate to refer to such belief system as African traditional religion. The Christians copied the word from European missionaries that used the word ‘pagan’ to show the superiority of Christianity. It was really shocking that the heads of the oghu festival all signed the agreement without demanding of the expurgation of the word pagan as contained in the title of the agreement.

It was also shocking for them to agree that there will no longer be sprinkling the blood of a cock on the instruments like gong, slit drums and leather drums. There is nothing wrong with the sprinkling of blood since it did not involve human blood. The initiation rites of new members were frowned against by the Catholics and it was agreed that it should be terminated and these rites did not involve any torture. Based on this, there is nothing wrong with such rites. On the issue of not consulting fortune tellers on certain issues, which is beside the point because the consultation is for

adequate direction? This paper is of the view that charms should not be carried by the masquerade and girls should not be flogged. The gunshots signaling the end of the festival was finally brought forward to 6a.m from 12noon, just to allow freedom of movement for young girls as a result of the agreement.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The derogatory remarks on the oghu cultural festival did not start today as it emanated from the activities of Christians in 1919. If one attended an oghu dance before the mid 1990s, the dancing square was full of the old and young. If one arrives late, the person might not have a space to view the dance. By 2000, a lot of people displayed lukewarm attitude towards the festival owing to the influence of Christianity. Not all aspects of the agreement are adhered to like girls are still being flogged and the ebeleri still moved about with charms as at 2005. Going through the agreement, one realizes that it was an attempt to christianise oghu festival. Oghu adherents should be the ones to decide to change their practices since culture is dynamic and not being compelled to do so by the church. It is the view of this study that the Christians and oghu adherents should imbibe the philosophy of live and let live. Chapter IV Section 38 of The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

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