

Imoka festival and Christianity in Awka: Area of conflict

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Abstract

Our efforts in this research work have been geared towards x-raying *Imoka* festival in Awka and its areas of conflict with Christianity. The study revealed that most of the contemporary churches in Awka held *Imoka* festival, which is part of Awka people's beliefs and practices with contempt because of its associated root in African traditional religion. The objective of this research work is to present a way forward in reconciling the sorry nature of the two beliefs in Awka especially in this modern era. The method of approach includes descriptive and phenomenological methodologies.

Keywords: Imoka, Awka, Conflict, Polygamy, Christianity, culture

Introduction

Historically, conflict and cohesion in mission communities during the missionary enterprise in Africa depicts the attitudes of the missionary activity towards the basics to certain time-honoured institutions such as family land, polygamous economy, traditional religion, the magic world-view, divination and the like was deplorable (Nmah, 2008). The widespread missionary disparagement of tribal religion is a further case in point. The background causes advanced in the literature can be classified for convenience sake namely historical factors (most case studies on conflict have been written from historical and descriptive points of view and causes are put forward in terms of the history of a people and the missions who worked among them, usually as local factors unique to the case being studied), political factors, issues bordering on polygyny, the earth-goddess, traditional African family, colonial factors, sociological factors (the colonial colour bar policy such as in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya etc), hankering after ancestor-worship, native love of pomp and colour, missionary ignorance of Awka psychology,

language, avarice, ambition, imperiousness, and faulty biblical interpretation.

To Iwe (n.d.), Christianity in its various institutional and social forms and manifestations is a human and moral, spiritual and cultural, national and international force to be reckoned with. As a religion its claims are both human and divine. Its incarnate nature and foundations give it an inescapable and essential human dimension. In view of its human character, Christianity has, in the course of human history and in various nations demonstrated itself as the custodian and promoter of human values. It is to be remembered that Christianity had a purifying and humanizing impact on the pagan and imperialistic vices and violence of the Ancient Roman Empire.

It must be stated from the outset that when the missionaries came to Awka, their primary aim was to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Awka people. To Awka people, their understanding and hermeneutic of salvation preached in the churches went beyond the ordinary salvation from sin. To them, the concept of salvation implies more than liberation from sin. It includes redemption from physical misfortune such as sickness, road accident, sudden death, poverty, court case, oppression of the enemy, socio-cultural, political, illiteracy, economic among others (Onunwa, 1991).

In this study therefore, the research work is to be focused on a critical examination of the conflict between Awka beliefs and practices especially *Imoka* festival and Christianity. That is those elements of conflict (*Imoka*, *okuko onye uwa*, and *ikponye aja n'ili*-dust-to-dust rite, in particular) that existed between Christians and Awka community, and seemingly cohesion that were established or to be re-established in the community.

Research objectives

The objectives of the study include:

To investigate the causes of the conflict and the challenges posed by the conflict

To examine the basis of the cohesion that made Christianity to thrive in Awka

To create the awareness to the world about the encounter between Christianity and Awka culture

To investigate the various instruments of maintaining unity in the African Christian communities

To also examine the implications of the contemporary challenges towards the development of the church in Awka

Significance of the study

The significance of this study basically stems from the fact that it addresses the issues that threatened the collective existence of Christian communities, and offers a valid and insightful resource material those future scholars especially church historians can consult to gain useful information on the conflict and cohesion in mission communities in Awka.

Culture: its concepts

Culture is a fundamental concept within the discipline of anthropology (Scupin, 2000). In some cases, many people use the word culture to refer to “high culture” such as Shakespeare’s works, Beethoven’s symphonies, Michelangelo’s sculptures, government cooking, imported wines, and so on. According to Taylor (1871), culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This view suggests that culture includes tools, weapons, fire, agriculture, animal domestication, metallurgy, writing, the steam engine, glasses airplanes, computers, penicillin, nuclear power, rock-and-reel, video games, designer jeans, religion, political systems, subsistence patterns, science, sports, and social organizations.

In Taylor's view, culture includes all aspects of human activity from the fine arts to popular entertainment, from everyday behaviour to the development of sophisticated technology. It contains the plans, rules, techniques, designs, recipes, and policies for living. This nineteenth century definition of culture has become a terminology that would not be acceptable to modern anthropologists. For example, it relies on the word "man" to refer to what we presently would refer to as humanity. Presently, most anthropologists would accept a broad conception of culture as a shared way of life that includes values, beliefs, and norms transmitted within a particular society from generation to generation. This definition does not make a distinction between culture and society, but the term society.

In most countries where modern anthropologists conduct ethnographic research, the societies are extremely complex and consist of distinctive groups that maintain different cultural traditions. Thus, this simple distinction between society and cultural issues is too artificial for modern anthropologists. Some anthropologists have adopted the hybrid, term socio-cultural system a combination of the terms society (or social) and culture- to refer to what used to be called "society" or "culture" (Scupin, 2000, p.7).

When anthropologists refer to the concept of culture, they are emphasizing a non-biological property. Culture is not hereditary through our genes in the way we inherit our physical characteristics, such as eye colour or body build—indeed, we obtain our culture through the process of what is called enculturation. Enculturation is the process of social interaction through which people learn and acquire their culture. Humans acquire their culture both consciously through formal learning and unconsciously through informal social interaction (Scupin, 2000). Saggrin (1978) defines culture as the complex whole that consists of all the ways people think and do everything they were as members of society.

Another form of learning important to enculturation is called social learning, which occurs when one person observes another person or other people responding to a circumstance and then adds that response to their own collection of behaviours. Humans learn by observing classmates, teachers, parents, friends, and the media. Obviously, the form of learning that is most important for culture is known as symbolic learning. Symbolic learning is based on our linguistic capacity and ability to use and understand symbols, arbitrary meaningful units, or models that humans use to represent reality. They are the conceptual devices that we use to communicate abstract ideas to each other. We communicate these symbols with each other through our language. Humans learn most of

their behaviours and concepts through symbolic learning. Symbolic learning has almost infinite possibilities in terms of absorbing and using information in creative ways. Most of our learning as humans is based on this symbolic learning process.

According to Scupin (2000), the human capacity for culture is based on our linguistic and cognitive ability to symbolize. Culture is transmitted from generation to generation through symbolic learning and language. Culture is the historical accumulation of symbolic knowledge that is shared by a society. This symbolic knowledge is transmitted through learning and it can change rapidly from parents to children and from one generation to the next.

When discussing the concept of culture, anthropologists have tried to isolate the key elements that constitute culture. Two of the most basic components are material and non-material culture. Material culture comprise the physical products of human society (ranging from jewelry, houses, weapons, clothing styles, to temples or churches), while non-material culture refers to the intangible products of human society (values, beliefs, and norms). The term values refer to the explicit standards by which members of a society defined what is good or bad, holy or unholy, beautiful or ugly. They are well-known assumptions that are widely shared within the society.

Values are a central aspect of the culture of a society and they are important because they influence the behaviour of the members of a society. Values, beliefs, norms, and worldviews are terms used by many anthropologists when referring to aspects of culture. Thus, enculturation is an imprecise process. People may internalize the general program for behaviour – a series of ideal values, beliefs, worldviews, norms, rules, and cultural guidelines for action – but how these general principles apply in any specific set of concrete circumstances is difficult of impossible to specify.

Cultural patterns are passed on from one generation to another through time by means of education. By education method, we do not here mean only that sort of learning which takes place in school rooms namely formal school learning. All traditional societies had methods of education long before Europeans brought Western formal education, to them. Some of it was formal, that is fixed and laid down in established patterns, as in the bush school initiation rites of certain societies. Other aspects of it were informal, that is, arising out of day-to-day situations, not predetermined. But whether it was formal or informal, the function of education was to pass on the accumulated wisdom of the society to a new generation.

Every society has, in the course of its history, found ways of dealing with problems, and passes them on to its young.

If, as an African, you tell your child that the unity of the village is more important than anything else, more important even than his own individual pride, you are educating him in the accepted ways of your culture. There is thus no single pattern of behaviour which can be called culture. Every society has its own culture. The patterns of behaviour comprising culture can be analyzed in terms of four categories: values, beliefs, symbols and norms.

To Obiajulu (2003), culture is the complex pattern of living that directs human social life. The things each generation must learn and to which they eventually may add. Cultures interpret on surroundings for us and give them meaning and allow us to express ourselves (Chirot, 1994). Language, religion, science, and art, notion of right and wrong explanations of the meaning of life-these are all part of the cultural systems of a society. Culture in the words of Shark (1996) means, “The sum total of human creations—intellectual, technical, artistic, physical and moral” (p.43). Every society has its own culture. The word culture is used to mean those ways of behaviour which are customary in any particular society (Krass, 1982). Some of these customs are economic, political, judicial, religious or technological. Each society has its own unique culture or set of customs. According to Nmah (2004), culture involves the sum of all that have spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life – all social

intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and science. In other words, it is the work of man's minds and hands.

Awka people: its brief ethnography

Awka is relatively a large town (population estimated to be over 300,000 people). It is the heart and political capital of Anambra state. Some great citadel of learning are also situated in Awka; Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Paul University and the College of medicine (Anambra state teaching hospital).

Before the 20th century, when Awka gained importance as a modern centre of administration and a higher learning, it was renowned among the Igbo speaking people and some of their neighbours for the skill of its men in wood carving, metal working, and practice of medicine and for the widely feared oracle (the *Agbala* oracle).

The territory known today as the Awka has been inhabited by a man for several centuries, perhaps for millennia. In the 1930s stone tools were discovered in the area, which belong to the Neolithic stage of human development. It is largely, because of the antiquity of man in this area that the 'core' Awka people do not have any memory of migration from outside the Awka area; they claim that they have been there from the beginning of time! These first Awka people lived on the banks of the Ogwugwu stream in what is now the Nkwelle ward/village in Awka.

How they got there, who their migratory leaders were, whence they came, are all lost in the haze of remote history. We do know that these earliest people consisted of three kin groups Urueri, Amaenyiana and Okpo-and were collectively called the Ifiteana. 'Ifiteana' "people who sported from the earth". The primary occupation of the Ifiteana people (the Old Awka people) is farming. However, big-game hunting constituted a very important sector of their economy. Their most prized game was elephant; its tusk was a very valuable article of trade. The Ifiteana already knew the art of smelting iron ore and fashioning the implements of farming, hunting and, of course, war. Their first and chief god was an old deity called *Okikanube* (usually shortened to *Okanube*). According to the myths of these people, *Okanube* was a supernatural being who came from the sky and taught the Ifiteana people of old the arts of working iron and making medicine. His name *Okanube* means 'He who is pre-eminent with the Spear'. He was basically a hunting god and the myths say he showed the people how to hunt with iron spears (*ube*) laced with medicine, hence his name. The elephant tusk called *Okike*, was the symbol of the god *Okanube*. In every Awka family compound there is this important ritual symbol kept in the family chapel cum reception hall (*obu*). In the fifth month of every Awka year, (that is, towards the beginning of the dry season when hunting started), the *Okike* was venerated and the

people asked their god *Okanube* for a fruitful hunting season. The *Okike* was brought from its sacred hiding place and unwrapped. A goat or a chicken was sacrificed and buried in a hole in front of this symbol. Then the *Okike* was re-wrapped and taken back to its sanctum. Nobody will see it again until the next hunting season; therefore, whoever sets eyes on *Okike* before the fifth month was struck with madness.

Awka was once a haunt of elephants. A part of the town is still called Ama Enyi (Elephants' quarters), and until recently there was a pond in the town called *Iyi Enyi* (Elephants' pond) where the elephants used to gather to drink and slack their thirst. Over-hunting rendered the poor animals virtually extinct even before the coming of the British colonialists. The last elephant seen in the area was killed in 1910 by three hunters using the *ada-ngene* medicine. As elephants became scarcer, the god *Okanube* became less important, for this reason people stopped worshipping it. The post where his shrine once stood is marked by a lone spear stuck in the ground. But his memory survived him worship. According to history, the Ifiteana called themselves *Umu Okanube* (the children of *Okanube*) or *Umu Oka*; thus, the name of the town, *Oka* (anglicized as Awka) was derived. A market was also named in *Okanube's* honour—the *Oye Okanube* (*Oye Oka*) market. The *Oye Oka* market square was the centre of Awka political life, where weighty matters were

deliberated on and important decisions made, until the British Government put an end to its meetings in 1928. The decline of *Okanube* in popularity led to the rise of another god to take this place as the most prominent god of the Awka people. The name of the god is *Imo-oka*. According to oral history, a young Awka girl named Nomeh fell seriously ill. Her kinsmen brought doctors from the neighbouring town, Umuezeukwu, to treat her. Unfortunately, Nomeh died. (Umuezeukwu does not exist today; Awka wiped the town out in a war following the death of Nomeh). She was buried on the grounds that later became Imo-Oka's shrine. After a few years, the dead girl began to haunt her Awka kinsmen. Children died prematurely. Awka people believed the spirit of Nomeh was angry because her life had been cut short, and she never got to marry and beget her own children. To calm her angry spirit and ward off her wrath, her kinsmen hired a team of powerful medicine-men from 'Idomaland' (called '*Akpotos*' by Awka people; it is quite possible that the medicine-men were Igala). The 'Idoma' medicine-men prepared a charm for Awka called *Akwali Omumu umu Oka* (example a charm for the procreation of Awka people). The charm was buried on Nomeh's grave. In time, the charm grew in potency and became so powerful that the people began to revere it as a god in its own right. They called this new god *Akwali Umu Oka* or simply *Imo-Oka*. Till today, Awka animists still regard *Imo-Oka* as the

great protector of the town. The *Imo-Oka* carnival (called the *Egwu Imo-Oka*) marks the beginning of the Awka native year; and is practically the only pagan celebration in Awka that has survived to the present day. The ‘Idoma’ medicine-men who made the charm were not allowed to return to their own land, for Awka feared that they might go away and make a similar charm for a rival community. So Awka showed them land to settle on; and the medicine-men started a community of their own which grew into the town of Okpuno, on the northern border of Awka. Okpuno Town is often referred to as Okpuno Oka chi, that is, Okpuno under Awka’s patronage until the coming of the Europeans; Okpuno paid a yearly rent to their Awka ‘landlords.’

Today, African tradition is held with contempt especially festivities because of its associated root in African traditional religion. In view of the tie between festivities and traditional religion derogatory words such as ‘fetish’ is used in describing such traditional events. Given the damages inflicted on Africa festivities calls for cultural revival, reincarnation of traditional art and revolution of our cultural festival.

This desired cultural revival would be successful depending on the value we attach to such cultural activities and its associated objects. Festival are symbolic base on which the unity of community rests. Therefore,

throughout the history of human culture certain days or periods of time have been set aside to commemorate and ritually celebrate events and seasons which consolidate community solidarity. Thus, Awka people regard festivities as special periods that are sacred and ritualized. It is a time for man to identify and reunite himself with his gods, community and ancestors. Nsofor and Maduakor (1979) gave an overview of festivals in Igboland in the following words:

Festivals in Igbo society are ...periods set apart by communities or groups of individuals for commemorating important events which may be connected with homage to God, gods, ancestors and spirit or they may be connected with the transition from one season to the other...in almost all case, festivals are part of these commemorative events and rituals overtones can be detected in majority of these festivals.

From Nsofor and Maduakor's view it is crystal that festivities in Igboland entail more than eating and drinking. It also involves moments of sober reflection on man's spiritual life. In this vein Onyeneke (1987) noted that:

Every Igbo community whether at the village group, village or major lineage level

occasionally observes festivals? They are public celebration of events considered important and of high value by community. Events that invite public celebration may be those of life crises of individual birth, puberty, marriages, title taking...death, celebration, marking the farm cycles of planting and harvesting and the veneration of local deities, personal 'chi' (gods as personal spirit) and the community ancestors.

Looking at Onyeneke's opinion nearly all events celebrated in Igbo community has a festive undertone. Thus it is a vivid indication of the numerous natures of Igbo festivals, which filled their life with relaxation and entertainment. This to an outsider is a life of idleness as Modum (1978) observed that:

One of the things that first strike the ethnographer about African traditional societies is the sheer numerical importance of ritual festivals and ceremonies. Indeed, it has been said that the earliest Europeans who came to Africa were struck by the number and frequency of such ceremonies that they thought our people had nothing else to do. The truth is that every human society has its peculiar norms which not

only characterize it but which determines the life of its members. In traditional African societies this role is played by festivals and ritual ceremonies

One would agree with Modum that festival is indeed an indispensable event in African community. It comprises series of cultural events such as ritual, music and dancing, masquerading etc. Analyzing the above literature one would agree with me that festival is one of the key factors that has helped in cementing community life in traditional African community especially Awka town. On this note Nwuneli (1987) using the *mmonwu* festival of Anambra state brought to light the objectives and salient achievement of the festival in the following words “it was an attempt to link those who have often drifted from rural to the urban areas for many years heritage, boosted tourism and was a great significance to the national pride”.

Awka indigenous festivities

In ancient Awka community every month has a feast attached to it except for the fourth month. This month according to Awka feast calendar is counted as the lost month. Awka people lay so much emphasis on season because it guides and directs their cultural activities. Therefore, Okafor (1992) opined that “Oka” year had variable months because of the need of following the

seasons for farming, hence “*ngu aro*” system arose the “counting of the year.” The following are rundown of all the feasts observed in Awka in sequential order.

Awka Calendar	Feast
Month	
<i>Onwa nvu (nbu)</i> May	<i>Egwu Imoka</i>
<i>Onwa Ibo</i> June	<i>Onwa Ukwu</i>
<i>Onwa Ito</i> July	<i>Obubu Amanwulu</i>
<i>Onwa Ino</i> August	<i>Onwa</i> fulu <i>Manful/Onwa Evuru m</i>
<i>Onwa Ise</i> September	<i>Chi</i>
<i>Onwa Ishii</i> October	<i>Alo</i>
<i>Onwa Asaa</i> November	<i>Otite</i>
<i>Onwa Teghete</i> January	<i>Ede ozo/Ede Onwa</i>

sel Ukwu

Onwa Illi

February

Onwa Egwu-ovbuvbe

(ofufe)

Diokpala Onwa Illi

March

Agbala-Imoka

Onwa Ogugu aro

April

Ede-mmou

As modernity takes shape in Awka, some of these festivals faded away. Among the survived festivals is the *Imoka* Awka festival. This is the first feast observed in traditional Awka calendar. It ushers in the beginning of a New Year and planting season. *Imoka* feast is the most colourful and famous festival collectively celebrated in Awka. It is a medium through which the community pays homage to the *Imoka* deity beseeching her for a prosperous New Year season.

Imoka feast originated from the worship of *Imoka* deity which is the greatest male god revered in Awka. It is communally worshipped and its origin could be traced down to ancient times during the time when Awka people were continuously menaced by their neighbours. Among their oppressors is a terrifying king Okoli Ijeoma of Ndikelionwu who planned to invade Awka. At the hint of this impending invasion, the elders of the land sent some

delegates to Akoto near Idoma, a land known to be inhabited by potent herbal doctors to invite one, who would prepare a charm that would fortify their warriors. The elders returned with a renowned herbal doctor by name Okoyeke who prepared a charm to prevent the invasion of the land peradventure war becomes imminent that the charm would notify them. He cautioned that for the charm to be effective it must be venerated by the community. This leads to the worship of the charm deity which the people called *Imoka* (the Avenger god of Awka people). Also a feast called *Egwu-Imoka* (The dance of the gods) was initiated to commensurate the worship. The feast was scheduled to hold annually at the beginning of the planting season which is the month of May according to Awka lunar calendar. An altar was built for the god at Amachalla village Awka close to the Nkwo market both the market and the forest close to it were dedicated to the god.

However, after so many years of peaceful living Awka people had a dispute with their neighbor Nwafia over a piece of land. Unknown to them Nwafia people laid siege to attack the people but unfortunately the forest they encamped was that which was dedicated to *Imoka* deity. So the deity sent his emissaries the monkeys living in the forest to notify the people. Seeing monkeys roaming the village square were strange so a diviner was immediately consulted who exposed the invasion plan of Nwafia

people. The sacred drum *Ikolo* was mournfully sounded to assemble warriors ready for war. The unsuspected attack launched by Awka people against the Nwafia people brought them victory. Hence, *Imoka* emissaries (monkeys) were also dedicated making them totem. Thus it became a taboo with severe consequences for Awka people to either kill or eat the meat of monkey till date.

Procedure of Imoka festival

Egwu Imoka (*Imoka* feast) is celebrated in the fifth (5th) week of Awka lunar month (*izuonwa nese*). It lasts for one native week apart from the first day. The feast commence on *Avbo* (*afor*) day. On the evening of *Oye* market day preceding the feast, the trumpet (*Opu-eke*) was blown, the *abia* drum beaten and *Ikolo Imoka* sounded to marshal in *Egwu Imoka*. During the ancient times once the *Opu-eke* sounds all forms of work must stop, if not so it is believed that *Imoka* deity punishes those who defied his sacred week by setting fire on their houses. As people retire to their various homes passing through the path leading to *Imoka* shrine stops to shower praises on it saying “*Okporimili*-the dark blue sea”, “*Omuta onezue anya*-the god that looks after his children”.

However, a week before the general announcement of *Imoka* feast was made at the Nkwo market square. Immediately the *Imoka* moon has been sighted, masquerades are sent to inform the natives of Umuokpu

village Awka (the only Awka village outside the community boundary) of the on-coming *Imoka* feast one native week away. Therefore, after the announcement, the music makers retire to the shrine of *Imoka* eating and drinking and would stay there till the end of the festival.

At the early hours of *avbo* (*afor*) day, the *Opu-eke* were sounded again to fill the air with festive mood. On hearing the sound, young adult boys come out of their various homes cleaning the village square by sweeping. While the sound of pounding fills the still air of the dawn. The food for the feast is pounded yam and *ofve avbulu* (bitter-leaf soup). Animals to be used are killed during the early hours of dawn so as to welcome the presence of the gods. The offal including the intestine is thrown beside the shrine for the gods, which would be eaten by the vulture. Their presence in places of sacrifices invariably signifies the gods' acceptance or rejection of the offering. In view of this Okafor (1992) writes "if a sacrifice was made and the animals were killed and the vultures did not appear the officiating priest would beat a gong (a resonant bell shaped metal) and call out *uko! Uko!* Meaning messenger, messenger and vultures would appear. There was a saying in Awka that "*agbafa aja ma shi afvro udene, ifve meli be mmou*-when there is a sacrifice and no vulture appears something wrong must have happened in the land of the gods". With the influence of modernity men today eat the offal which was solely meat for the gods.

After eating, all marched down to *Imoka* shrine to pay homage to the god. During the early hours of the day the chief priest enters the shrine brings out the emblem of *Imoka* god dressed with masquerade attire and make incantation, calling on the god to bless the day. Adherents go to the shrine to present the following gifts; yam, local gin, white chalk (*nzu*) and money. Men use the chalk to draw a symbol of sonship on their eyelid and on the ground known as “*ime odo*”. On receiving the gifts the chief priest- *Eze Imoka* prays to the god to bless his children. The chief priest during this special occasion dresses in white cloth wearing coral bead on his neck and a war cap (*okpu-nwawali*). He also dabbed both eyelids with white chalk (*nzu*). Previously, during the past the chief priest would receive the yam from men and slice off a little of its bottom using it to touch the man’s forehead, left and right male adherent in return pours out his heart desire to *Imoka* and takes his leave using the white chalk to dab his eyelid. On the other hand women dab their breast and feet white the white chalk (*nzu*). The above procedures for receiving blessing from *Imoka* shrine has gone with modernity. Today people only present their gifts and leave the shrine. The Day’s celebration comes to an end after all the offerings had been received, the chief priest-Eze *Imoka* uses an iron gong (*ogene*) to shower praises on *Imoka* god. After this, the shrine apprentice takes up the mobile altar of the god down to the *opu-eke*

square for the dance of the gods. The movable altar is for making sacrifices to the god represented with an iron emblem of *Imoka* grafted on a long wood rapped round with white cloth and a red piece of cloth tied round the iron emblem of the god. Others at the village square join in the dance of the gods after which the shrine apprentice takes the movable altar back to the shrine still held high in the air and put down only at the shrine. This signifies the end of the day's celebration.

The early hours of the second day is meant for the women folk alone marching to the shrine been led by *Eze Nwanyi* holding the white chalk (*nzu*) in her hand. Also it's a day of masquerades' entertainment as various kinds of masquerade parade this day to honour the women. It is usually in this day that great masquerade like *Ijele*, *Afo anu*, *Enyi Nnunu* etc come out. However, the masquerades are meant to converge at the square with the *abia* drum used to beat out special rhythm of the masquerade dance. But, presently masquerade just parade the streets dancing and running about thrashing one another with sticks. The law of flogging one another with sticks (*anyachu*) requires the one being beaten to retaliate to avoid unnecessary trouble. The major sound heard at the dancing square is the swish of whips. It is a test of endurance of pain. This activity lasts into the night when everybody retires to his abode.

The third day being Eke, people move from village to village, eating and drinking while the masquerades run about causing excitement everywhere. All this continues till nightfall after which everybody including the masquerades and dancing groups retire to their homes. This is a day of relaxation. Elders held various meetings and consultations, setting problems and family affairs. Also masquerades move from house with their followers being entertained with pounded yam and *ofe avbulu* (bitter leaf soup). In addition on this day most people and families cook to entertain friends while to most young men it is a forum to welcome age long friends.

However, as known in the past, event of this fourth day is the initiation of young boys into masquerade cult in their father's *obu* (family hall). Coconut is used for the entertainment and it would be provided for by the mother of the household. This is the last day of the feast. The same eating and drinking continues till dawn. After lunch people would congregate at the *Nkwo* market place close to *Imoka* sacred groove for theatrical display. This could be in form of mock trial, making a case against one another causing lots of laughter to the audience. On this note the festivals end with laughter. Nevertheless, today the festival ends with an orator amusing the people with memorable stories of Awka past heroes

The cultural aesthetics in the Imoka festival

Imoka festival is a traditional event which thrills its spectators with the following aesthetics:

Mock battle

In the olden days, the *opu-eke* was being danced, this dance took the form of a mock battle called (*nro-nta*). The essence of this battle was to test one's strength and endurance of pain. During the battle all would be dressed in battle dresses holding machetes and clave (*mgbolo*) including the *ekpeke* (shield) were used for defence. Since it was a mock battle everybody was expected to cut their opponents body slightly and not brutally. In reality no one cuts to kill although blood could flow. This form of battle is basically for the male folk though the female folk could watch. The mock battle had been part of *Imoka* festival for ages but was banned after Udenabo in Amachalla village Awka was killed in one of those encounters. Henceforth fighting with machetes was replaced with sticks (*anachu*). Today the mock battle no longer requires battle attire with the ban on machete. Young men dress in simply clothes and flog themselves with sticks until opponent surrenders.

Theatrical display

The theatrical display of *Imoka* festival is dramatized by the eldest woman in Ifite Awka and the masquerades. On the second day of *Imoka* feast being Nkwo early in the morning at the sound of the *Opu-eke*, the eldest woman in

Ifite Awka would go to the Nkwo market alone carrying her wares in her basket. At the market she would sweep her portion and display her ware as if there was a real market gong on. After displaying her ware, she would stand facing the shrine and shower praises on *Imoka*. Then after half an hour, she repacks her wares in her basket and goes home. This meant that the market had been for the god which signifies that the market never closes. Also on the final day of the feast masquerade congregate at the Nkwo market square close to *Imoka* sacred grove for theatrical. They entertain and amuse spectators with different kinds of drama.

Dance

Dance is physical aspect of the festival in which both the performer and the people are involved. It is physical participation in the celebration as people dance to the rhythm of the music. *Imoka* festival is also known as the dance of the gods. It is a feast dominated with dance of various kinds. The eve of the festival when the *Opu-eke* trumpet sounds all the masquerades converge at the Nkwo market square close to the shrine. There the masquerades display different dance steps in accordance with the rhythm beaten out with the *abia* drum along with other musical instruments including the *opu-eke*; after which these masquerades continue with the dance entertainment in a procession to Umuokpo (an Awka village situated

outside the boundaries of the community) to announce the date for the feast. The women folk are left out of the dance of the gods, this they do on the early hours of the second day of the feast. In the early hours of this day the women folk alone marching dance to the shrine in a procession led by *Eze Nwanyi* with young women singing praises of *Imoka* god.

Costumes

Costumes make the festival colourful. The celebration of *Imoka* is apparent in the array of colours. The *Imoka* Chief priest and *Eze Nwanyi* (priestess) usually dress in white dabbing their body and eye lids with (*nzu*), a form of white chalk. Titled men appear also in their traditional attire. Likewise the different dance groups also come in their unique attire. While any youth participating in the event must dab their face and body with *nzu* (white chalk), this proves their sonship as sons of the soil. All the different display of attires by the different groups and their different colours add to the beauty of the festival. The unique impact of these attires is to show different groups with different performance in the festival.

Initiation into the masquerade cult

The initiation rite of passage into the masquerade cult in Awka takes place on the fourth day of *Imoka* feast. It requires diverse test which the initiate undergoes. The

significance is to enable the initiate to keep the secrets of the masquerade society. During one of the tests he would be showed a strand from a spider's cobweb and he would be told to take hold of it and climb it. Definitely this is an impossible task. As the test continues, he would be given a handful of raw bitter leaves to chew while chewing he would be asked to laugh at the same time. The appearance that this act leaves on the face of the initiate as he munches bitter leaf at the same time laughing is quite comical and it amuses the spectators.

The last test is usually the most tempting of all. He would be asked to identify a masquerade. If he truthfully names the man behind the mask, the spectators would scream as the masquerade slumps down in a mock death unknown to the initiate. The spectators would accuse the boy of killing a masquerade. The shock of the act is meant to send the boy to his early grave. He would stand in the mist of the crowd helpless looking confused. The boy would be ordered to carry up the dead masquerade, because he revealed the man behind the mask. While he would be trying to lift the giant masquerade the crowd would sing for him, singing with his name that he has killed a masquerade. Hence, seeing that the boy has suffered enough, the masquerade would get up to the initiate greatest shock and relief. During this act the boy has being taught a lesson never to say that humans carry masquerades instead masquerades are spirits. At last the

boy would be initiated. This qualifies him to carry his own stick (*anachu*) and accompany masquerades during their parade.

Masquerade display

Imoka festival in its entirety entails the display of various kinds and ranges of masquerades known in Awka. It is these masquerades who are accorded some sort of spiritual status that actually dance to the rhythm of the dance of the gods. The sense of spirituality attached to the social institution has helped it to maintain its secrecy that masquerades are spirits and not men. The function of the various masquerades on parade during the *Imoka* feast is purely entertainment. They honour the women folk by displaying the most fearful and powerful masquerades such as *Ajo-anu*, *Ijele*, *Enyi*, *Nnunu* etc on the second of the feast meant for the women. Other masquerades come out in colourful robes accompanied by young men with sticks, traditional dancers and music with masks of different types depicting local beliefs and practices.

Areas of conflict between Christians and traditionalists in respect of Imoka festival

1. The traditional believe that the colonial masters who brought about Christianity did not take time to study Awka culture and tradition. They came to eradicate African culture and tradition, Awka inclusive.

2. Christians do not like the festival for the fact that *Imoka* festival is usually celebrated on Sunday.
3. The name *Imoka* is of a deity, but if it changes to *umuoka* it will mean children or indigenes of Awka
4. Christians argued that it should be more of a carnival if most of the rituals and sacrifices are been removed.
5. The use of sticks during the festival should be discouraged.

Recommendations

The celebration of *Imoka* festival is a call for communion between men and deities. It marks time and season of mass return of sons, daughters and visitors of Awka community to celebrate and preserve the traditions of the land. Such traditional festival has some places of conflict and can be in harmony with Christianity in the following ways:

1. The church and the traditional leaders should come to a conclusive understanding that there is only one Supreme God. Arinze in Ezenweke and Kanu clearly states that “God is the Supreme spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals him in power.” Worshipped in the church or shrine, he remains the one true God, worshipped in various ways by different tribes and religions. Igbo inclusive. Ezenweke and Kanu (2012) states that, “The Igbo people are one of the races of the world

who believe strongly in the idea of one Supreme God. Yet they do not commune or worship him directly”. Both the church and the traditionalists have priests respectively through whom they commune and worship God via angels, ancestors, *chi* and other spiritual forces who are messengers of the one Supreme God (*Chukwu*).

2. *Imoka* festivals act as a hook to attract tourists. Thus, exploring the role of festival as a via path for tourism promotion in Awka and the church cannot be over emphasized. This can be envisaged by analyzing its impact in various areas of life, notably its influence in the economic well being of the community. *Imoka* festival attracts visitors who spend money within the community, enhancing the local economy through restaurants and hotels. The church could capitalize on this great opportunity to enhance the economy of the church by building rest rooms and its eating places.
3. The church should send some trusted members as delegates during the planning of the *Imoka* festival whose duty are to involve fully in the planning and organization of the *Imoka* festival. These delegates will also help to impact positive thinking in mind of the traditional ruler and his people.
4. In Awka, it is an abomination with death penalty for any one to be accused of murder during *Imoka* festival using poison (*nshi*). Therefore the church could use it as a basis to make the period of *Imoka* festival a conducive atmosphere for her members

and others. It will also serve as a means of discouragement to Christians who go to obtain powerful charms to harm their fellow men and be more powerful.

5. Apart from eating and drinking, *Imoka* traditional festival as celebrated in Awka encourages relaxation and entertainment through music and dancing. On this Basden (1960) writes “festival is nothing, but a fete with dancing, music, feasting and general manifestation of pleasure and enjoyment with congratulations for the years past and good wishes for the year ahead”. Despite the idleness as a result of the relaxation which accompanies the festivities, it enhances community life as Mbiti (1970) outlined in the following benefits;

Through festivals the life of the community is renewed. People are entertained and their tension finds outlet. It also brings together the people as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion. Religious and secular values are repeated and renewed through communal festivals. Artistic talents are utilized, drama and oral communication. Where the festival involves beliefs concerning the unseen world, the link between human beings and the spirit is renewed.

Turaki (2001) supported the above in the following words, “It serves as social control mechanism in society by establishing patterns of loyalty and prescribing parameters of acceptable conduct integrating people into the religious system. The frame work of socio-cultural customs is to meet the socio-psychological needs of man” (p. 149). This implies that festival meets the diverse needs of man in society be it social, religious and cultural. Therefore the church should not deny her members whom are mostly natives of Awka town the pleasure of entertainment and merriment; rather it should admonish her members not to participate in evil doing during the *Imoka* festival.

6. The traditionalists through the good office of the traditional ruler, the chief priest and others should honour the church and her good ideas in memory of the first Awka man Lawrence Nwonuegbunam, who brought Christianity to Awka and loved also Awka traditions and customs as Anagbogu (2001) writes “Nwonu’s love for Awka beliefs and customs is well known. It is on record that he played a very prominent role in the negotiations with Awka people for the participation of Christians in the ancient traditional *Ajaghja* and *Ozo* titles. Having achieved this, he then led the way in performing the *Ajaghja* title in December 1981, and in April 1982, he was initiated into the prestigious *ozo* title”.

Methodology

This research employed the use of primary and secondary sources to obtain data. The primary source involved oral interviews while secondary source entail books, journals, and internet materials. These furnished the researchers with the basic information that was necessary for the comprehension, understanding, and analysis of the relevant issues discussed in this work. The research is also based on the deconstruction theory. In this work, this theory was objectively used to reconstruct the contemporary realities in line with the historic principles and ethics of the conflict and cohesion in mission communities in Africa. Deconstruction theory as used in this work envisaged that perhaps if misunderstanding occurs, it deemed it necessary to apply the George Simmel and Lewis Coser's theory respectively. This is because the foundational cause of the problem lies in the influence of culture and modernism. To Simmel's basic approach can be described as "methodological relationism", while to Lewis Coser (1956), conflict not only generates new norms, new institutions, but it is said to be stimulating directly in the economic and technological realm.

Conclusion

Traditional festivals are cultural entertainment through which a community showcases its diverse cultural endowment to visitors. Awka community is enriched with

colourful festivities celebrated to honour the deities, consolidate social ties and maintain culture. Behind each of the festivals celebrated lie a legend or myth of events put together or constitutes the history and traditions of Awka community. The *Imoka* festival otherwise known as the dance of the gods is a masquerade festival which affords Awka the opportunity to show case its numerous cultural activities. The resilient nature of *Imoka* festival rooted in the legendry of unity in Awka community has sustained this cultural event not going into extinction as against other traditional festivals whose relevance have been overtaken by modernization. More importantly *Imoka* traditional festival has been a platform for enhancing bond in the community through ages. This festival has served as a medium for cultural contact whereby the younger generations are initiated into various traditional rites and cults so as to preserve the traditions of the land. Furthermore, festivities in Awka traditional community go beyond the religious ritual to physical entertainment. In this vein, Ogbalu (1973) observed that the last day are dominated by display of masquerades, dances and presentation of citizens in the squares celebration is a form of eating and drinking. Festive merriment helps in relaxation yet if care is not taken during such moments traditional norms might be broken as a result of excesses. Amakulor (1973) buttressed the ills attached to excessive eating and drinking during

festivals in the following words, “festivals are marked with such excesses and transgression as drunkenness and exuberant sexual trait or license”. He further stated that music, dance and song to the community are instrument for creating social emotional and aesthetic solidarity.

Modum in Ogbu (1978) clearly stated that African festivals are characterized by music and dance. He writes, “Dancing is performed by men and women or in some cases by both sexes depending on the festival and society”. He compared Imoka, festival with *Egun-gun*, *Ekurole*, *Obatala*, *Ogun*, *Oranyan* and *Ifa* festivals of the people of Ede in old Oyo quoting Beier that the characteristic features of these festivals include: “A marked desire to associate by means of dances, musical performances, prayers, incantations and sacrifices with the persons of the god and the spirits of the ancestors and with life of the community. There is a strong belief that in so doing, the community ensures the continuity of its existence through the process of periodical regeneration.”

The church therefore should understand the importance of Imoka festival in the light of the above and get herself involved in order to help eradicate fetish believe and use of charms during and after the festival.

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