

THE PRE-CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY COMMUNITY OF UMUCHU

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Abstract

Colonialism and the Christian religion weakened and transformed the basis of the traditional society. There is no doubt that the traditional religion on which the Igbo society was based gave meaning and significance to the lives of people in that society, with no exception to Umuchu community. Today, some of those values have been thoroughly affected by historical factors, by the encounter with Europeans and their Christian religion together with its accompanying new systems of living. This study, therefore, looked at Umuchu community before the coming of the missionaries for proper understanding of the tenets and values that bound Umuchu together before the arrival of Christianity in the town. This study also suggested that we should go back to the root-culture in order to form a solid base for authentic Christianity.

Introduction

Before the advent of Christianity, Umuchu was relatively quiet and peaceful. The traditional religion provided the spiritual cement that bound the individuals in the community and was satisfactorily functional; and provided the basis of behavior and conduct among the people. Through the practice of the traditional religion, the Umuchu people knew God and worshipped Him within the limits of their understanding. It controlled and was a determinant factor for all facets of human behaviour, be they socio-economic, political, and inter-group relations.

Location and Physical Features

Umuchu is one of the thickly populated communities in Aguata Local Government Area, and it is located about twenty-two kilometers to the south-east of its headquarters, Ekwulobia. According to Obiora (1982), the landscape is hilly reaching its peak in Akukwa and Umugama villages, and then slopes towards Umunze and Umualaoma, and the land

forms an undulating plain with numerous water courses. This plain is very expansive and most suitable for agriculture, which is the main-stay of the economy of the people. This affords farmland both for Umuchu people and other neighbouring communities.

Though the town is drained by numerous streams and riverlets, the most important body of water is the Uchu Lake which was named after the goddess of the town Uchu. Uchu has an outlet which joins the Imo River at Arondizuogu. In Nigeria as in other parts of the tropics, rainfall is the most important element of climate as far as agriculture the main occupation of the people is concerned. The town falls within the rain forest zone of West Africa with marked dry and rainy seasons. Temperature is generally high reaching the peak in dry season. Though some of the forests are left uncleared, most of the virgin forests were cleared for human habitation and agriculture, except the ones reserved for shrines dedicated to the gods and goddesses. The people of Umuchu are mostly farmers. The soil is a combination of red earth and loam. The loamy soil is fertile for agriculture which has remained one factor that encourages the cultivation of yam, cassava, cocoyam, plantain, banana, maize and vegetables. As a result of this, food is abundantly surplus for trade. According to Mgbemena (2012), the farming system and the cutting of timber have virtually rubbed the area of its original vegetation. However, in some parts, patches of residual rain forest still exist.

Brief History of Umuchu

Umuchu which is a border town between Anambra and Imo States is located on the south western part of the present Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. On the south, it is bounded by Arondizuogu, Umualaoma and Akokwa, on the north west by Achina and Enugu Umuonyia, in the west by Uga and Amesi and in the east by Umuomaku, Umunze and the Agho-Mmili River. The town is located on a table and at a height of about 180 metres above sea level, which shelves down a valley eastwards where Umuomaku and Umunze are situated. Umuchu has an estimated land area of 48.6 square kilometers and is one of the most thickly populated communities in Aguata Local Government Area. In the case of population, Umuchu is next to the largest town, which is Uga in the local government area. Umuchu town as a whole covers roughly thirty square miles.

The town consists of three major traditional village groups namely; Ihitenato, Amanasaa and Okpuna Achalla. Each of these village groups is again made up of villages which form the twelve main villages in the town which each of them traces its ancestral root. Though the period of settlement of these various Igbo communities that migrated into Umuchu could not be stated with exactitude. The event of that period suggests that it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That is, the periods which Afigbo (1981) described as the era in which slave trade and raiding became important factors in Igbo-socio economic life and that, that was what made the Igbo settle effectively in the area they now occupy. It was within this period too that the amalgamation of Umuchu took place.

Several factors which include geographical continuity, the presence of the Uchu River, the need to widen the scope of socio-economic inter-dependence, the presence of the Nkwo Market and the need to form a formidable and united force against frequent external threats not only from their immediate neighbours, but also from the Abiriba military adventurists

who invaded many Igbo communities hunting for slaves and human heads were considered responsible for the formation and amalgamation of Umuchu. The amalgamation according to Nnoli (1999), was done:

Through the invitation of a medicine man from Arondizogu named Akpaka, ... prepared a charm called *ichu*, which was designed to ward off enemies. On the day of unification, all the elders representing the constituent villages assembled at a common meeting place today called nkwo. After the preparation of the charm, the medicine man announced that the medicine was god-given and was to be called *ichu*, while the signatory villages should be collectively called *umu-ichu*. He told them that the charm embodied the spirit of the whole villages and was a visible expression of their strength, unity and survival which must be preserved and protected by all means; even if it meant fighting a war. (pp. 38-39).

In what may be called the constitution of Umuchu after its amalgamation, the constituent villages unanimously agreed and were bound on the following:

- i. That Ugwuakwu which is the head of Ihite, be recognized as the head of the union.
- ii. That all the constituent villages be known and referred to as *Umu-ichu*.
- iii. That the place of the great union be made a market and a meeting place.
- iv. That the representatives of all the village groups be brought together to form the union's council.
- v. That all the traditions, norms, customs, rules and regulations governing the amalgamation stipulated and streamlined.
- vi. That the union should endeavour to settle disputes between member villages and individuals as the case may be.
- vii. The institution of an annual festival to commemorate and strengthen the bond of relationship within the union. Thus, the establishment and celebration of *itu-onu-ugbogulu* festival.

Socio-Political

Like other Igbo hinterlands, Umuchu people did not come under any remarkable influence until the colonial period. Their only contact with the Europeans was through the long distance traders and oracular agents. Thus, Nnoli (1999) noted that prior to the invasion, there were early European visitors to the town dating from 1893 when a whiteman, Mr. R. Hargroves, a government official came to Umuchu. Though politically, the Igbo traditional government varied from place to place, its characteristics are always the same. Thus one thing, according to Isichei (1976), that attracted the first western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was truly practised. In Umuchu, power flowed evenly among

different groups that made up the community, and the nature of government was such that matters of public interest were discussed and the decisions taken at the general assembly.

Politically, Umuchu was not ruled by a chief, king or queen before the advent of the British. Its system of government was democratic and egalitarian and falls within the category of what Nnoli (1999) describes as Democratic Village Republic. This view was also supported by Ogbaje (1995), who asserted that the Igbo have no kings and queens, that chieftaincy was introduced to Igboland by the British native administration system of government. Prior to the invasion, Umuchu was socio-politically structured into kindred, village council, village group and the union council, which was the highest traditional law-making body of the town since the amalgamation of the three village groups into a confederation. The administrative functions of the council were to maintain law and order in the community; to ensure that cordial relationship existed among the various groups in the town and between the town and her neighbours. It passed legislations for the general well-being of the people and ensured the preservation of custom and traditions. The patriarchal system which made the male central figure through whom the descent is recorded was practised in Umuchu. The Diokpara is respected and obeyed as the head of the family unit.

Socio-politically, authority flowed from the basic unit, the nuclear family which consisted of the man, the head of the family, his wives, children including his dependants. The next level, according to Ezenwafor in Mgbemena (2012), was the *Umunna* extended family which comprised of a number of nuclear families that claimed a common ancestral father. It was headed by *diokpara* the eldest surviving man in the extended family. There are other traditional organizations and institutions of political and social control that manifest themselves at the village level and contributed to the town's system of government. They are the age grade groups (*ebiri*). Obiora (1982:4) reported that "they were in charge of labour and defence in the town." The masquerade society was also used in implementing the judicial and administrative decisions in the town. According to Nnoli (1999:54), "the masquerades function as agents for the enforcement of social sanctions, laws and order, public morality and punishing offenders who violated Umuchu custom and traditions." The *umuada-umuchu* (*umuokpu*), who are free born females of Umuchu is another powerful group in Umuchu known for their collectivity of action, unbending loyalty to a cause and unity of purpose.

Economy

In pre-colonial Umuchu society, agriculture was the most important economic activity. Land which is the greatest asset in agriculture was owned communally, though not much of the land was communally owned. Land tenure system was however, no problem to the practice of agriculture in Umuchu. Thus according to Mgbemena (2012), the method of land-use was rotational and mixed cropping. This is, a practice in which land is left fallow by a farmer for about two to four years having cultivated it for a while. He went on to state that the practice was attributed to the density of population and quest for land acquisition. The only identified serious constraint to farming was shortage of labour, which made them marry many wives in

order to raise enough children that will assist in the provision of needed labour both for agricultural and other economic activities.

Yam which according to Basden (1982), is the Igbo main economic stay, is the chief crop cultivated in Umuchu. The people engaged also in tree-planting such as breadfruit, kolanut, oil bean, pear, coconut; which provided steady supplies of cash flow in the economy of the people. Ibughubu and Achalla villages which have extensive fertile marshland grew and still grow certain crops and vegetables like maize, okro, water leaf, garden eggs, pepper and bitter leaf twice a year. Hoes and digging sticks were there main farming tools. Various species of bananas which not only served as sources of income and food supplies, but also were used to check the menace of ecological disasters like soil erosion were grown too. Animal husbandry which involve the raising and growing of domestic animals like goats, sheep, pigs, e.t.c. were important aspect of the people's agricultural practice. Fowls were raised to provide eggs and meat and were equally used for virtual sacrifices. The people engaged in this to augment what came as proceeds from farming.

Though there were other economic activities of the people like trade and commerce, local manufacturing, hunting and professional occupations like rain-making, divination and wine tapping. The practitioners did not give up farming as it was their main occupation and major source of livelihood. Agricultural practice provided the people with extra and steady supplies of food; encouraged specialization to some extent and stimulated population growth which was a source of labour. However, labour in the pre-colonial economy of Umuchu was not entirely a specialized but semi-specialized, as individuals changed occupation at will. Thus, the economy of the people witnessed tremendous mobility of labour. Each village had its market, but the central market that served as the centre for all affairs, major festivals and social functions was Nkwọ Uchu, that is the major market of the town. It was one of the institutions established at the inauguration of the Umuchu confederation in the 7th century to keep in living memory of the meeting and amalgamation, and remained the most central and nerve centre of the town's economic and social activities. According to Nnoli (1999:101), "though it is a periodic market holding every four days, little transactions *ozuru* also take place on ordinary days to meet with emergency needs of the people." The role of women as traders was limited to Umuchu, while the long distance trade was the exclusive preserve of men.

Socio Cultural

Umuchu evolved some social institutions, which were treated with great respect and sacredness. These socio-cultural institutions are discussed as follows:

- i. **Marriage:** Marriage institution in Umuchu as in other Igbo communities is an age-long and highly regarded as a sacred social institution. It is the legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. Just like other African people, Umuchu people attach great importance to marriage. Thus Mbiti (1969:130) states that:

For African people, marriage is the focus of existence, it is the point where all members of a given community meet, the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated,

renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor and actress and not just a spectator; therefore marriage is a duty, and requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal, circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him.

Marriage in Umuchu is made and solemnized with certain rites prior to the Christian era. Madueke in Mgbemena (2012) states that men do not and had no right to approach a girl for marriage as it is done today. Marriages were planned and arranged by parents or relations; and sometimes girls are betrothed at a very tender age through presentation of a necklace to the girl which she was expected to accept in the presence of her parents; and the ceremonies will be performed when she attains the puberty age. Though there was no age limit to marriage, a man of eighteen years was considered ripe to get married in those days and as well has no limit as to the number of wives a man was permitted by tradition to marry. Ilona (2007:33) states that: “men could be monogamous.” The reason why many men married many wives was not just to enhance their status but also to raise enough work forces for their farm works.

In Umuchu, before a man and a woman settle as husband and wife, the woman performs a cleansing called *ikpualu* usually done in the evening by a juju priest with the husband present; while the man performs the *iruagwu* rituals designed to rid the young man of all the evil spirits and misfortune believed to have followed him when he was a bachelor. The girls must have to undergo five traditional hair plaiting stages to be old enough to live with their respective husbands. Also the actual marriage was and is still performed in four stages before the couple could be allowed to live together.

ii. **Birth, Death and Burial:** In every marriage union, birth is conceived as an act of providence and as something sacred and a fulfilment of expectation. Thus, it is believed that the purpose of marriage is not just the universal quest to have helpmate and ensure the retention of the man’s family name, but also to raise children who would help provide the needed labour in farm work. In agreement, Ogbaje (1995:23) states:

As soon as a child is born in African community, it becomes a member of the community, and relatives visit to present gifts. Drinking and eating are organized in which the living and the dead are brought together to rejoice over the admission of a new member into the community. The growth of a child is watched not only by the parents, but also by other members of the community.

In Umuchu, gifts of babies irrespective of gender was highly cherished but was more valued if it were a baby boy. At birth the diviners are sought to ascertain who reincarnated the baby. Though the people appreciate death as a necessary end which must take place, it brings sorrow to the members of the family and loved ones. As a result of this, Mbiti (1969) posits that death is something that affects everybody. This is because it brings sorrow and loss to both the family and community. The people believed in three types of death namely bad

death (*onwu ojoo*) this is the category of people who died while leading bad lives such as thieves, assassins, prisoners, wizards, witches, those who died of suicide, swollen abdomen, abortion. Some of these people subconsciously struggled against their death and sometimes before their last breaths confessed their sins under the spell of excruciating pain, and which is known as *igba asisa*.

Another one is untimely death (*onwu ike or onwu mberede*), this kind of death is characterized by a very short illness of unknown origin or accidents resulting from a fall, motor vehicle accident, drowning, dying in pregnancy. The last one is natural death (*onwu-chi*) which is the death of people at a good old age before their children, who in turn would give their parents befitting burials. This death should not, however, be from a dreadful disease or by accident. People do not wish the first two types of death for themselves, their relatives or friends. As a result of this, Madueke in Mgbemena (2012) states that since death is for every living person and a necessary end, people always pray for *onwu chi*, and not for the other two types of death which they see as bad death.

There was the general belief that if one was not accorded full burial rites, such a person might not reach his or her destination to the ancestral world. Thus Metuh (1973) distinguished between funeral rites and death rites by saying that: the purpose of death rites is the internment of the corpse, while the purpose of the funeral rites is to assure the deceased of entrance to the spirit land. In Umuchu, those who died the bad death (*onwu ojoo*) were deposited in the evil forest, to rot away or be eaten by the birds of the air, while others are buried with sacrifices. For the people of Umuchu, what matters and considered very important was according the dead full burial rites; not just burying the dead or mere committing the dead to the mother earth. The people believe that the moral standard of a person while alive determines his destination at death and the type of death that may befall the person. Thus a close watch at any burial of the deceased in Umuchu tells what the living believed about the personality of the deceased.

iii. **Festivals in Umuchu:** Each village in Umuchu celebrated one festival or the other, but the whole town has some common festival they celebrated together annually which bound the people together politically and religiously. These include *Ituonu Ugbogulu* representing the annual census system, *itu mkpulu ji* and *iri ji ofuu* festival. According to Madueke in Mgbemena (2012), the chief priest moderated in religious festivals, performed propitiatory rites and kept custody of the shrine.

The *Ituonu Ugbogulu* annual festival was celebrated between the months of April and May, and usually on Nkwọ Uchu day to mark the commencement of a new farming season. The chief priest of Uchu puts the town in a festive mood by announcing the date for the event. Each woman comes in her best attire and make-up to the market with some pumpkin leaves tied together for the occasion. The men in turn dressed in their best outfits come out carrying at least a pot of wine to entertain their friends from within and outside the town. At the arrival of the Uchu priest, the *Ikoru*, a wooden gong was sounded and everybody made effort to see the chief priest as he made his way into the market, walking and half dancing. Nkwoh cited in Nnoli (1999) wrote that he held in his hands the *Nne Ofọ* and *Oji* sword,

which were symbols of sacredness, righteousness and authority as women brandished their pumpkin leaves which they threw at the chief priest as he danced passed, muttering words believed to be prayers. As the women threw their pumpkin leaves, they performed the *Oguguo* dance, which involves jumping up and down in jubilation, greeting everyone around. The messengers of the chief priest picked some of the leaves to be used for some ritual ceremonies and at the same time made sure nobody blocked the chief priest as he danced across the market pathway; just as they made sure also that none of the leaves touched him.

iv. ***Itu Mkpulu Ji Festival***: This festival involves presentation of seed yams by all the men in the villages in order of seniority, usually done eight days after the announcement by the messenger. Nnoli (1999:61) notes that “the feast of the first pumpkin leaves are done by women while the seed yam feast is done by men.” It was a time for yam offering during which male adult of at least eighteen years and above presented a yam tuber. During this period, rituals were performed at the *Nkwo-uchu* shrine to mark the occasion. He also states that “as one puts down his yam, one mutters prayers to the *Uchu* deity, touching one’s fore finger on the ground and then dipping it in a pot of kaolin (nzu) and rubbing same on one’s forehead and then going away.” This is one of the festivals that were established on the day of amalgamation. Thus it is usually an event of renewing, stressing their corporate identity as one indivisible, indissoluble entity and for renewal of their oath of allegiance taken by the founding fathers of the union. This oneness of purpose, one destiny and one community is however displayed in dipping their respective five fingers into the common pot. The festival meant three important things to the community.

First is that it had great socio-political significance in the traditional life of the people as it instilled new lease of life to those who participated in the year’s annual event. Secondly, it represented a traditional head-count for the adult and marked the determination of the numerical strength of its male adult that determined the military might of the community. Finally, the festival marked the community’s lunar monthly calendar. Thus the eating of the last yam tuber signaled the end of the year for the town.

v. **Religion of Umuchu**: The concept of God is not unique to any human group or race. The Igbo according to Nmah (2003:25), “are a religious people”. Ozigbo (1988:26) also states that:

Religion is one of man’s inherent attributes. It stems from his ability to think abstractly and also to symbolize. From time immemorial, Africa has been very religious, and like other people of the world, their religion has known many forms.

Traditional religion was practised by the people of Umuchu prior to the advent of the Christian religion, and they were similar in one way or the other to those found in other Igbo societies. It acted as a powerful instrument of cohesion among the people. In Umuchu, religion was centred on the existence of a supreme God (*Chukwu*), Who is regarded as the great God and author of heaven and earth. Their belief in the supernatural existence of *Chukwu* or *Chineke* as God the Creator is a pan-Igbo belief, presented by the Christian

religion. He is the Supreme Being that creates and exists to control His creatures, but was not created. The uniqueness of this God is manifested in the names the people of Umuchu bear, like Chukwudi (there is God), Chidinma (God is good), and so on. He is seen as the Supreme Spirit that is greater than other spirits.

The major frames of reference were the *Igwe/Ezenu*, the ala ancestors and other genetic gods such as *Chi* and *Agwu*. According to Egboka in Mgbemena (2012), Umuchu people revered highly the *Chi* god and everybody had his or her *Chi* who was seen as being responsible for ones success or failure. The Umuchu people believed in the existence of good or bad *Chi*, which are usually consulted for explanation on the reason for certain events. Special altars in which special trees like *oha*, *oji* or *ngwu* were planted, are normally built for these *chi* deity usually in front of the owner's compound where they are worshipped with sacrifices of food, kolanuts, wine or fowls. The people believed that divinities are a means to an end and not an end itself, thus divinities are intermediaries between God and man; and are conventional means of reaching the supreme deity. They do not exist on their own but are ministers, who according to Idowu (1973:165), "are brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of universe." Also, the Uchu River which was where the second wrap of the *ichu* charm was thrown into was regarded holy and worshiped. Ala (the Mother Earth) is revered but not worshipped in Umuchu. It was believed to be responsible for fertility as mothers were responsible for bearing children. The Ala is considered strong and sacred that any crime against Ala is sacrilegious. Odife (1996:6) states that "there are Igbo taboos in the town known as *Nsoala*."

As a result of this, it was an abomination for one to steal a fowl, a tuber of yam or cut the tendrils of a planted yam tuber, have sexual intercourse with his blood relation, commit murder, suicide, adultery, poisoning or even the crowing of the cock at dinner e.t.c. Such abominations attract serious spiritual and corrective visitations, which involves sacrificial cleansing to appease the Ala which in the case of human beings must perform or face the consequences. For this reason, some people in some cases are made to swear by the Ala in order to obtain divine judgement. It was this fear of reprisal from the gods that moderated social behaviour in Umuchu. Other lesser spirits of importance were the ancestral spirits. According to Idowu (1973), the ancestors are departed spirit beings who stand in close relation to the tribe or the family. It was believed in Umuchu that whoever lives a good life on earth, received proper burial and funeral rites would join the company of the good spirits in the next world and from there protect their lineages. These ancestors were regarded as intercessors for the living to *Chukwu* and harbingers of good fortune; and as such were venerated. Though the traditional religionists directed their prayers to the ancestral spirits, the general belief was that the ancestral spirits were the intermediaries and intercessors for their offsprings alive. In Umuchu they are addressed as forefathers (*ndi nna nna anyi ha* or *ndi gboo*). Therefore, this means that the principle of praying to *Chukwu* through the ancestral spirits was not unlike the Christian principle of praying to God through the saints. Also, the practice of traditional religionist calling upon the god of their forebearers in their prayer is in the same manner the Christians beckon upon the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

There were however, malevolent spirits that caused havoc and disorder in the society. These are souls of the deceased who did not attain that happy state; rather they lived ignoble and miserable lives while on earth and did not receive full burials. As a result of which they remained unhappy, discontented and roamed the world of men, tormenting and harassing people.

Conclusion

Christianity did not meet an empty space or land in Umuchu, rather it met a community which already had an established way of life, belief system, trade and religion. Umuchu community already has their own traditional religion which they practised prior to the advent of Christianity. This study shows that Umuchu community had long before the arrival of missionaries in the town lived an organized and systemic life, adhering to those cultural values that bound them together. This study also suggests that we should go back to the root-culture in order to form a solid base for authentic Christianity. Going back to the root does not mean going back to the pre-Christian missionary era, rather it is a return to the good values and culture found in our traditional community and placing them side by side with the true principles of goodness.

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