BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: THE DIALOGUE OF OFO, IGBO INDIGENOUS RITUAL SYMBOL AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC FAITH

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Introduction

There has been a sustained interest in Ofo from the days of European adventures in the West Coast of Africa, through the stage of expatriate Christian missionary enterprise, the period of amateur expatriate writers, trained and sponsored ethnographers, to the recent era of nationalist authors and Igbo indigenous scholars. The study of Ofo has continued to engage the attention of researchers in Igbo culture. As a direct consequence, a substantial volume of literature on different aspects of the symbol has been generated. Indeed, more than any other traditional ritual symbol our knowledge of Ofo from available literature covers most aspects of the vital indigenous artifact, including its provenance and rich structural forms, as well as its rich symbolism, significance and diverse functional range across the different sub-cultural zones of Igboland. That does not mean however, that Ofo has been exhaustively studied. A perceptive researcher could still unearth novel ideas from that mine of information about Igbo indigenous iconography, culture, society and history.

Incidentally, there is little, if any, corresponding effort to explore seriously the possibility of moving from the stage of simple interface of Ofo and the Catholic faith that has gone on for so long to that of a creative and meaningful dialogue between the two. Or, is there something inherently evil in the indigenous symbol that makes it impossible for such a dialogue to take off. If we are prepared and eager to acquire, clear and open up lands and groves which for so long were dedicated and housed the most sacred shrines of indigenous Igbo arch-deities and spirit beings (alusi) and erect our marble altars for Eucharistic sacrifice, build our cathedrals, parish churches and other vital church institutions on them, dreaded forests of yester-years, Okwuala, Ajo Ohia, Akwu, there seems to be no logically defensible argument to continue to deny our members the use of twigs of the Ofo and branches of Ngwu sacred trees that may have grown in those forests. I dare

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1 This essay is a slightly modified version of a paper I presented at the International Conference entitled “The Interface of Igbo Theology and Christianity” organized at Owerri by the Whelan Research Academy, 5th - 7th July, 2012. The original paper was entitled; “Ritual Symbolism in the Interface of Igbo Indigenous Religion and Christianity:” Certain Lingering Issues – ‘Ofo na Ogu and Mmanwu’.
state that the time for a meaningful and full blown dialogue between Ofo and the Roman Catholic faith is long overdue. And we, the fully trained, exposed and knowledgeable Igbo sons and daughters may no longer escape blame for individuals, particularly our Catholic members in parishes, who are compelled to suffer discrimination and/or other serious difficulties in their faith-life arising from issues related to Ofo on account of our negligence.

I shall endeavour in this paper to explain the important role of symbolism in oral cultural background as well as the typology, provenance, symbolism and functions of Ofo among the traditional Igbo. Next, I shall discuss the favourable cultural atmosphere and disposition that have prevailed since the Second Vatican Council that should easily promote the envisioned creative dialogue. Finally, I shall sketch some broad outlines of the path along which I think the creative engagement should proceed.

**Ritual Symbolism in Oral Cultural Background**

Human beings are by nature symbol-using and meaning-seeking animals. They are capable of using one thing to stand for or re-represent another. A symbol ordinarily is defined as a thing recognized as normally typifying, representing or recalling something of great practical importance, by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. Within this broad frame, language is viewed as the most important form of the universal process of symbolization. Humans use words to stand for things. Whether written, spoken or couched in other oral forms, symbols are meaningful to the people who evolve and use them. They are the basis of human communication. The renowned anthropologist, Mary Douglas amplifies strongly that symbols are the only means of communication and that they are the only means of expressing value, the main instrument of thought, the only regulator of experience\(^2\).

Religion itself is a vast symbolic system, as it is basically a cluster of ideas, acts, relationships or linguistic formations woven into some sort of ordered whole. Symbols, in this wide context of man’s innate process, denote many things, take many forms and have many functions. They are as vital to language and religion, as they are to culture as a whole. They encompass objects, activities, gestures and spatial units in a ritual situation. As distinct from a mere sign, symbols thus: stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions and impel men to action. They usually occur in stylized patterns such as in rituals, ceremonial, gift exchange ... and various culture traits.\(^3\)

Religious symbols are of particular interest as they are essentially hierophanies, that is, they manifest the sacred to people in one form or another. They reveal man’s experience of ultimate reality and seek to integrate the various

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levels of his awareness, the preconscious, the personal and the transcendental. Religious symbols mediate knowledge about the cosmos and man’s place in it. They are not simply communication media; they are held to be effectively charged, non-neutral in their emotional and intellectual value. Moreover, they can also be envisaged as possessing a spontaneous power, in themselves “projecting the mind towards the absolute.”

Ofo is clearly a dominant ritual symbol of the indigenous Igbo par excellence. The indigenous Igbo, it should be recalled, are a people of oral culture. They did not, prior to the large-scale exposure to Western civilization evolve a literary culture of their own as such. (The point holds in spite of the existence of the pictographic script form, called nsibidi that had been in existence among the Aro group before the Europeans came). Most Igbo depend rather on oral forms including vital symbol objects like Ofo na Ogu and important cultural institutions like Mmanwu for the preservation, and transmission of their cumulative experience, ideas, values, insights and wisdom from one generation to the next. Such oral forms are repositories and potent store-houses of meaning, crucial in any systematic attempt to understand or reconstruct the inherited wisdom of the people. The task of proper decoding and interpretation assumes critical importance in the effort to decipher the full semantic significance, and functional range of the ritual symbols on which people depend for their communication. Finally, it is pertinent to point out that “each society’s ritual symbols constitute a unique code and each society provides a unique key to that code”. Experts recognize different levels of meaning in the interpretation of ritual symbols; the operational, exegetical and positional.

Phenomenology of Ofo

The Igbo term Ofo is the proper name of two related objects. It immediately designates a particular plant species which grows in the Igbo area. In a derived sense, it identifies the twig or branch let from the wood of that tree. Both the plant and its sticks are equally referred to as Ofo. The tree is a local feral plant. Its nearest classification would probably be the Ukpaka, oil bean. Although the Ofo tree grows in all parts of Igboland, it is not as widespread in the region like such other plants as the Iroko, wild apple, and the oil bean. When fully grown, Ofo plant could tower to some sixty (60) feet high and bulk to some three (3) feet in diameter in its main trunk.

Closely examined, a typical Ofo tree shows signs of nodes as though the timber has joints. Actual joining is in fact, revealed in the fallen twigs which snap at the joints. The rounded joints could be likened to the end of the long bones of the human skeleton. The Ofo produces a small black flower. Its seeds are white.

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and encased in a capsule, which is black and rough. When cut the tree exudes a red juice. But the tree is not normally cut in Igboland (except for use as a ritual symbol), nor is any part of it put into any service other than the customary use of the fallen twigs as ritual sticks.

Both the tree and its disengaged branches are sacred among all Igbo. In most parts of Igboland, especially in the north-west, north-east and southern parts, women (particularly those within the child-bearing age) are prohibited from touching either the tree or picking up the fallen branches. Dalziel (1937) is reported to have identified the Ofo tree botanically as Detarium Senegalense. This has been the name widely used for Ofo, the tree and its twigs by subsequent writers (C.K. Meek, M.M. Green, E.N. Njaka, F.A. Arinze, E. Ikenga-Metuh, and others). But it is most likely that the more correct botanical name for Ofo is Detarium Elastica, as it is known by the Nigerian Forestry Department. In the southern part of Igboland, the Ngwu tree is also used for carving Ofo staves.

There exists a considerable variety of Ofo object types in different parts of Igboland. In individual traditional Igbo communities, it is the proper name by which specific Ofo symbols are known that provide their commonest discriminating factor. One could simply draw up a community’s list of names of Ofo ritual sticks kept by different grades of persons in that community, such as Ofo-Okolo, Ofo-Amanwulu, Ofo-Okpala, and Ofo-Umunna. There is also the taxonomy based on status including the personal Ofo type, the lineage Ofo, (Ofo-Umunna), the titular Ofo, (Ofo-Ozor), the professional Ofo and the institutional Ofo. Another form of taxonomy of Ofo object types based on structural form has also been drawn up by some experts. The list includes Ofo sticks encased completely in metal and non-encased ones. There are equally Ofo twig type and Ofo stave type. The former category could be further sub-divided into tied twig bundles and single twigs rung with varying sizes of metal strings and capped with horse tail or rung only a few rounds with metal but not capped. The tied Ofo bundle is known as Ofo Nmako.

Provenance

Abundant ethnographic evidence still exists in support of the assertion that Ofo is a pan-Igbo ritual symbol. It is known throughout mainline Igbo territory and beyond; from Onitsha on the eastern bank of the Niger River to Enugu-Ezike on the Nsukka–Igala borderline and from Aro-chukwu on the Cross River to Ikwerre of the Niger Delta, the Igbo-speaking groups of Delta State, including the Ukwuani, Anioma and Ndokwa groups.

Ogu in traditional Igbo thought is basically the binary complement of Ofo. Although not inseparable, the two (Ofo and Ogu) are intricately connected in their

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7 Ejizu, OFO: Igbo Ritual Symbol, 31-47.
respective concrete symbolic forms, conception and usage. Ogu is typically a ritual symbol object, realized in concrete symbolic form like Ofo. But it is usually carved from the plants, Abosi or Ogilisi (newbouldialaevis). Its notion typifies the characteristic traditional Igbo principle of complementarity (nothing stands alone). Ihekwuru, iheakwudebeya (Something stands always beside another). More often than not people improvise the Ogu symbol by availing of the tender leaves of palm frond (Omu) or the shoot of any readily available grass. In places like Ngwa land where the concept of Ogu is well developed, the traditional elder, priest or diviner, in his full ritual outfit/regalia usually holds the Ogu ritual object in the right hand and the Ofo in his left hand.

Symbolism of Ofo

The process of symbolization is essentially about communication of meaning. Hence, the proper decoding of the cluster of meanings telescoped in individual symbol forms by the people is a primary concern in any meaningful effort to reconstruct the network of ritual symbolism of any particular group or culture. Furthermore, experts in oral culture have advanced various levels of interpretation; the exegetical, the operational and the positional levels (Sherry B. Ortner). They have equally highlighted the different poles at which the dense meaning-content of rituals and symbols could be located, namely the sensory and ideological poles.

Specifically on Ofo, the symbol belongs to the category of symbols anthropologist recognizes as ‘dominant symbols’ (V.W.Turner), ‘core symbols’ (Schnider) and ‘key symbols’ (S. Ortner). Such symbols appear in many ritual contexts, and telescope an interconnected web of meanings into one ritual focus, which each ritual context extends. Such dominant symbols are considered pillar ritual phenomena in any culture and religious system and they serve to virtually reveal an entire religion and culture respectively. Ofo is outwardly simple, but in ritual, it is amazingly complex on account of its religious symbolism. Its recurrence in traditional Igbo ritual complex, the rich cluster of meanings which have been worked into it at various levels of experience, as well as its association with certain crucial ideas, beliefs and values in the life of the traditional Igbo, all clearly indicate that the simplicity of Ofo ritual stick is merely apparent.

As to its origin, Ofo is clearly one plant in traditional Igbo ecology that features prominently in the cosmogony. The Nri myth of origin relates that a full-grown Ofo tree, the archetype, is located at the centre of Chukwu’s compound. Several twigs had fallen from the plant and were lying about Chukwu’s compound (Obi Chukwu) at the time Eri and his wife, Nnamaku were about to set out on their epic journey to the earth. While walking round his compound with both, Chukwu gathered a few twigs and handed them to Eri. “These branchlets would help you navigate your way through the vast earth”, Chukwu instructed. Eri was
also directed to use the *Ofo* to call Chukwu’s attention from the earth anytime the situation demanded. Eri later compensated the Awka blacksmith with the gift of one *Ofo* twig for successfully using his occupational tool, the bellow, to dry up the marshy earth-surface (*Ala di degedege*). With time, Eri came to the realisation that he received Chukwu’s attention promptly any time he addressed him training the *Ofo* ritual stick skywards, that is, towards Chukwu’s abode. Thus, runs the legitimating myth that serves as anchor and an explanation charter for the rich spectrum of meanings and wide functional range of *Ofo* ritual object⁸.

*Ofo’s* dense meaning-content touches virtually every level of the indigenous Igbo’s awareness; the preconscious, conscious and transcendental levels, as also the sensory and ideological poles. This should not come as a surprise given the fact of its being an integral part of the people’s original creation narrative. Ordinarily, an average Igbo person knows that *Ofo* symbol represents sacred authority and power, and the crucial values of justice and moral uprightness that are vital to mutual interrelationship, peaceful co-existence and harmonious living. The well informed Igbo sage, would go a step further in the task of decoding its symbolism, *Ofo* represents the male sex organ, blood, the family unit, and human life (*ndu*), as well as gerontocracy, patriliny, power, authority, justice at its sensory and ideological poles of meaning respectively. As a core religious object, the symbol is capable of telescoping this rich spectrum of meanings and integrating them in the transcendental centre of ultimate meaning. The real – that is the powerful, the meaningful, the living – is equivalent to the sacred, M. Eliade points out. The skilled anthropologist of traditional and modern Igbo culture, Herbert M. Cole (1982) amplifies;

> The *Ofo* itself dramatizes the spiritual basis of even the most secular matters even today. For its power represents the authority of the high God, *Chineke*, channelled through lineage ancestors, *ndichie*, without whose support and concurrence man dare not act. Thus, the ultimate sanction for human activity - law-making, war, buying and selling, changing village sites, planting or harvesting, making and using “art” – comes not from living men but from supernatural beings.⁹

*Ogu* is no less profound in its meaning-content. As a binary complement of *Ofo*, it primarily stands for the all-important ideal of moral uprightness and innocence which the traditional Igbo strongly believe should characterize every human life and interrelationship. The symbol clearly realizes in concrete form the fundamental Igbo principle that “nothing stands alone by itself”, *Ihekwuru ihe*

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⁸ Ibid., 110.
akwudebeya (one thing stands and some other things stand by it). The Igbo elder knows that before the dynamic power of Ofo can swing into action, either to avenge a wrong that has been done to someone, or to inflict punishment, the Ogu must be properly avowed, the injured party must first have met all the requirements of Ogu (Iji Ogu) that is, publicly declaring one’s innocence. That is the ground for the regular interlink of the two concepts and symbols; Ofo na Ogu. The Ngwa people ordinarily say; Ofo na Ogu na-awieje (Ofo and Ogu go, or work together).

**Ofo in Time Perspective**

The unsettling encounter of the Igbo and the Europeans especially from the 19th-century onwards, gradually unleashed the dynamic forces and tide of change that have, over time, crystallized in the dislocation, disorganization and transformation of the traditional culture and society. It would however, be quite false to assume that socio-cultural change in Igboland dates only from the advent of the white man. Change is a permanent feature of human life. But its rate varies in time and place. To live is to change, declares Aylward Shorter, and all societies and cultures are continually changing. Even social structures exhibit discord and tension.

Specifically on the ritual symbols Ofo na Ogu some measure of change has all along been taking place. The impact of radical socio-cultural change has been quite dramatic and very much on a similar scale for the key Igbo symbols. But there was a clear ambivalence in the attitude of the external change agents; colonial government officials and Christian missionary agents.

a. **The Colonial Administration**

It ought to be emphasized that the dominant intellectual orientation and background to the resurgent European activities in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially from the 19th-century onwards are as important as the economic, political and evangelical motivations. Coupled with the pernicious evil of trans-Atlantic slave trade, the general impression which the bizarre tales of most early European explorers and traders conjured about African peoples and cultures in general was that of primitive savagery, wretchedness and woe. Wild tales fuelled the imagination of proponents of various racial theories of cultural and religious origins in Europe and North America. The Igbo field provides a typical example where the prevalent attitude of many colonial agents reflected the dominant cultural and religious prejudice of the metropolitan European home base. British colonial officials in Igboland saw themselves as vanguards of commerce and colonialism and harbingers of “civilization”.

Individual colonial agents were encouraged from the onset to combine their official duties with a study of the culture, social organization and general
customs of their respective areas of work. In another development, the Indirect System of Government which the British colonial administration evolved was basically aimed at keeping the number of colonial officers to a minimum while utilizing any available structures of indigenous administration to rule the colonial subjects. The *Ofo* system which was intimately involved in the traditional Igbo power structure definitely caught the attention of the officials of government. Hence, the colonial administration in order to facilitate the implementation of the Direct Taxation Policy billed to take off in 1928 organized a large-scale survey on the “Status of *Offor* Holders in the Appointment of Native courts”. This was between 1925 and 1928. The regional government decided at the end not to base the appointment of members of the reorganized Native Courts on *Ofo* holders, but the study had made available some valuable documentation on that vital ritual symbol.

The overriding attitude of officials of the colonial administration towards traditional Igbo cultural features was more pragmatic and ambivalent. Officials of the administration supported Christian missionary agents in fighting those aspects of the traditional culture that were thought to be oppositionist to the new socio-political dispensation. Many cultural institutions of the traditional Igbo came under this unfavourable label including the *Ibini Ukpabi*, otherwise known as the *Chukwu oracle* (*Long juju*) of Arochukwu as well as certain classes of dreaded masquerades. Many of them were forcefully suppressed by the colonial government of the region.

b. **The Christian Missionaries**

Generally, it is a truism that in the thinking of most missionaries, the mission-field often passed as a battle-field against the forces of ‘paganism’. This is particularly true of the Igbo field. Both the C.M.S. and the Roman Catholic pioneers were all united in denigrating the whole of Igboland as ‘the citadel of Satan’. Father Lutz, the leader of the Holy Ghost Fathers’ Igbo Mission, had written to his nephew that “all those who go to Africa as missionaries must be thoroughly penetrated with the thought that the Dark Continent is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of the devil”\(^\text{10}\). Rev. John Christopher Taylor, the C.M.S. pioneer, a liberated slave of Igbo parentage had also written in appeal to the Church at Sierra Leone for more hands thus; “may many come willing to labour in pulling down the strongholds of Satan Kingdom, for the whole of the Ibo is his citadel.”

Undoubtedly, the expatriate Christian missionary was a child of his age. But, it is equally true that the net result of their evangelical strategies and activities in Igboland succeeded in dislodging and supplanting the indigenous culture, including the religion, ritual symbols and institutions like the *Ofo, Ogu*

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\(^{10}\) Holy Ghost Fathers’ Archives, Paris, 191/A/5, MS. Biography of Fr. Lutz by Fr. Ebenercht, 335.
and *Mmanwu*. *Ofo* and *Ogu* in particular, like other traditional ritual symbols were dubbed ‘objects of wood which had no power to harm’. Converts were encouraged to openly disregard them.

Most expatriate missionaries of the 19th and first half of the 20th-centuries perceived their mission in Igboland in summary terms; to dismantle the traditional religion and to erect Christianity on its ruins. The author of the novel, *The Only Son* (1966), John Munonye, would seem to have vividly captured the prevailing attitude in the words he put into the mouth of the Father Superior of one of the religious congregations working in Igboland:

... call it vote of the masses if you like, in pursuit of that objective, I’m afraid we’ve got to be impatient with the culture of the people. There just isn’t the time to sort out first and label their customs as acceptable and unacceptable. To be ruthless in our method and yet successful in our aim, we must ensure that all along we present to the people good tangible evidence of the advantages of Christianity¹¹.

Christian missionaries, especially the Roman Catholics, were the greatest domesticators of western culture and civilization in Igboland. They routed the traditional gods, successfully worked for what Rev. Taylor referred earlier to as “the tottering of the traditional gods”¹² or, in the expression of E.A. Ayandele, “the collapse of the walls of Igbo Pagandom Jericho-wise”¹³.

There were a number of missed opportunities and outright failure in policies that could have benefitted the traditional language, religion and culture in the course of the relatively long encounter of the Igbo and expatriate Christian missionaries. There was for example, the historic acceptance of the Catholic faith by a prominent traditional ruler, Eze Idigo of Aguleri, Ogbu-Inyinya Onyekomeli Idigo and several members of his traditional cabinet in December, 1891. A number of important diocesan conferences were also organized by the authorities of the two major Christian groups in Igboland, the C.M.S. and the R.C.M. to discuss certain important aspects of the traditional culture. The Catholic Congress under Joseph Shanahan in 1915, (the first of its kind in Eastern Nigeria) was called to “iron out culture-specific crises in evangelisation in the region”. E. Uzukwu highlights the three major issues that were on the agenda; masquerading

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(ekpo, ekpe, muo and odo), pagan title-taking (ozo, ntinya, obong, and marriage according to the common tradition (irungbedo, popularly called fattening). The Congress, he further points out, has been criticized as a “monologue congress” that actually did not allow supporters of the cultural practices to speak but invited to listen to the missionaries. The decisions read as follows:

No Christian should be initiated into the Muo masquerades secret society nor participate in Muo public dances and processions. No Christian may take the Ozo and other titles since these tended to promote division between the slave and the free-born and keep alive oppression of the poor. No Christian should contract marriage in the traditional fashion.

Missionary analysts and historians agree that that congress was “a missed opportunity”. Uzukwu, quoting Pope John Paul II’s speech to Bishops in Nairobi in 1980, further observes that what transpired was the abandoning of the complex and difficult search for a creative or imaginative theological and ethical “understanding of the mystery of Christ ... of bringing Christ into the very centre of African life and of lifting up all African life to Christ”\(^\text{14}\).

One should equally note the failure of the post-expatriate missionary Church in Igboland. Its inability to exploit the insight, courage and creative genius of late Msgr. Martin Maduka was ostensibly a missed opportunity. The late Msgr. Martin Maduka had boldly championed the cause of mature and authentic encounter between the Christian faith and indigenous Igbo culture, genuine religious dialogue that could have led to proper inculturation of the received faith. For a long time, he remained a lone voice in the wilderness. He had bravely pursued that agenda consistently before and after the Second Vatican Council. Nnadi-Ebube, as he preferred to be addressed, possessed plenty of creative intelligence, strong and stable character. He tried to give his original imprint on several aspects of the received faith and structure of the Church. On many occasions, he had attended the annual patronal feast of the Onitsha Archdiocesan Junior Seminary, All Hallows’ Seminary Onitsha (November 1) with scores of well-crafted and decorated Mmanwu. His stated aim was to demonstrate clearly to all and sundry that there is nothing intrinsically evil or devilish about ItiMmanwu (masquerade-making) in Igboland. The secrecy surrounding ItiMmanwu (masquerade-making), does not imply anything mischievous (as the expatriate missionaries had erroneously thought). That element should not be allowed to vitiate a genuine cultural artistic creation that has considerable positive impact, psychological and social roles among the traditional Igbo. How regrettable and surprising to note that decades after those occasional captivating displays at the

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\(^{14}\) Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Traditioning and the Emerging Shape of a Local Church, a Nigerian Experience,” in *LEST* 8 (October 2011): 12.
Seminary by Nnadi-Ebube, *Ili Mmanwu* is still reported to pose serious pastoral challenges in certain parishes across Igboland.

**Vatican II Council and the Turn-Around**

The Second Vatican Council brought in its wake a radical shift in virtually every significant aspect of life of the Church. Particularly in the areas of the Church’s understanding of itself and its mission in the world, Vatican II articulated some of the most profound and revolutionary insights that have continued to shape developments both within and outside the Church, concerning particularly the well-being of man, society and religious life.

*Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), for example, opens with the declaration linking the mystery of the Church with the unity of the human race (art. 1), while *Gaudium et Spes* (the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), speaks of the universal application of the “reign of God” (*Missio Dei*), as one that is not necessarily ecclesiocentric, but does apply “to all men of goodwill in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way”\(^\text{15}\). On the vital subject of religious freedom in a contemporary world that is markedly plural and complex, the Council proclames in no unmistaken terms that the human person enjoys the fundamental right of religious freedom\(^\text{16}\).

Although, none of the documents of Vatican II mentions African/Igbo Indigenous Religions by name, there is a wide consensus that the latter are included in the all-embracing category of non-Christian Religions discussed in *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions). In one of its most oft-quoted pronouncement on the subject, the Council clearly spells out the Church’s current position on religions of the world other than Christianity, including the Igbo Indigenous Religion.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with reverence those other ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men ... the Church therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize,


preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the social-cultural values found among these men.”

Several positive developments with direct or indirect bearing on the interaction of the Catholic Church and Traditional Religions of humankind, including the Igbo, have continued to take place in the Church in the past approximately 50 years since the successful conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The establishment of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) which was not long ago headed by a highly distinguished Igbo Church elder, His Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze is one such important development. In a recent directive; “Letter of the Pontifical Council to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences in Asia, the Americas and Oceania” (Nov. 21, 1993: 4), and later to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, the agency urges greater pastoral attention and dialogue with Indigenous Religions towards proper inculturation. It states further that elements of both a religion and the culture influenced by it can enrich catechesis and liturgy and therein attain their fulfillment. On the subject of inter-religious dialogue between Catholics and Indigenous Religionists, the document insists that dialogue be understood in the broadest possible sense, namely as the pastoral approach “in the ordinary sense of encounter, mutual understanding, respect, discovery of the seeds of the Word in the religion and the joint quest for God’s will in order to present the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the most appropriate manner, so that the Church may have deeper roots among the people” (Letter of PCID to the Presidents ..., Nov. 21, 1993: 4).

The Way Forward

In statistical terms, the pendulum has definitely swung in favour of Christianity in Igboland. E.A. Ayandele may have proclaimed the tune of the collapse of Igbo Pagandom Jericho-wise rather in a haste, particularly since socio-religious change does not occur the way he implied. But with the figure of over 70% of the total population of the Igbo numbered among their members, the different Christian groups may have a modest ground for rejoicing/to pat themselves on the back. On a closer look however, there does appear to exist real indications for uneasiness and concern, including shallowness of faith and the ever growing incidents of syncretism among converts. Faith, after all, as A.K. Obiefuna had often insisted does not have much to do with numbers. Besides, the experience of the once booming Churches of North Africa that were easily overrun by Islam, and more recently, the erstwhile thriving Churches of Europe

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18 Letter of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences in Asia, the Americas and Oceania, 21 November 1993, 4.
that have been decimated by the forces of liberalism and secularism are instructive enough for any well-meaning Igbo ecclesiastic, student and scholar of culture who might be tempted to be complacent. The challenges confronting the creative encounter of Igbo Indigenous Religion and Christianity are still enormous.

The important encouragement now is that the prevailing intellectual ferment and current disposition in inter-racial and cultural relationships in the world at large, and in ecclesiastical circles, as we have tried to argue above, are very much in favour of originality and creativity. The bulk of the challenge now appears to rest squarely on the shoulders of the Church at the local level.

1. The awareness of the critical importance of the need for creative encounter between Igbo Indigenous Religion and Christianity ought to be a top priority project in dioceses across Igboland. The role of the diocesan bishop as leader of the project should not be in doubt in any way. (One can only but applaud the effort of the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri for its bold initiative in establishing and sustaining the Kristi Odenigbo apostolate/project).

2. In furtherance of the above, a full-fledged department or directorate of culture and religious dialogue, manned by well trained and enthusiastic experts (in Igbo language, or arts, or music, or religious and cultural studies, etc) working full-time and properly funded should form an integral part of our diocesan curias in Igboland.

3. Diocesan-wide pastoral councils and synod, if need be, should be organized from time to time to discuss seriously and review contentious pastoral issues arising from the encounter of Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity in parishes and communities.

4. With specific reference to Ofo, I dare suggest that the solution should not be too difficult to figure out. I find it difficult to understand why some categories of Ofo, particularly the lineage Ofo, (Ofo Umunna specifically), (the primary medium of communication with divinity and link with the ancestors the traditional Igbo evolved long time ago) should not, in principle, be permissible to Catholics who are qualified to own and hold the symbol in Igboland. The challenge is for the dioceses and the parishes involved, to articulate details and acceptable modalities for the proper integration of such Ofo types into the faith-life of the community. Once the principle is acceptable, the diocesan directorate of culture should draw up a rite for an annual renewal of commitment by the Ofo holders at the Parish and zonal levels.

Conclusion
The task of ensuring a proper interface of Igbo religious culture and Christianity is a living project that should be of utmost importance to the Church
in the region. Our aim in rehearsing the progress of that project in the past history of the Catholic Church in Igboland was not in any way for the purpose of “missionary bashing”. It was simply to enable us bring the problem into proper focus in order to be able to tackle the challenges they pose. The Igbo sage, it should be recalled, had counseled that, *Onye amaghi ebe mmili bidolo maba ya, O gaghi ama etu O ga-esi zere ya* (If one does not know where the rain began to beat him/her, he/she would not know how to protect oneself from it). The task of making faith to become culture in our land remains the primary assignment the Universal Church lays on our shoulders as worthy sons (and daughters) of Igbo parentage. It is the greatest and most enduring legacy we owe our people. There is no better way of accomplishing that goal other than by guaranteeing that the culture we inherited from our noble Igbo ancestors and the received Christian faith which the expatriate missionaries from France and Ireland sowed in our land and ‘watered’ with their blood mutually interface, challenge and be challenged, enhance and revitalize each other.