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UMUNNA ECCLESIOLOGY: THE INDIGENIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN IGBO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly work delves into the profound relationship between the Umunna family structure and the indigenization of Christianity in Igbo society. It acknowledges the historical influence of Western culture on Christianity and advocates for an authentic Igbo church aligned with local culture. Using ethnographic fieldwork and an interdisciplinary approach, the research integrates sociological, anthropological, and theological dimensions to present Umunna Ecclesiology. It argues for an indigenized church rooted in Igbo/African family structure, departing from foreign worldviews. The study suggests the Umunna system, known for unity and co-responsibility, as a model for structuring the Igbo church. Exploring the Church as a family of God, it emphasizes the potential to strengthen social bonds and promote Christian values. In conclusion, the study calls for Igbo and African theologians to engage with Umunna Ecclesiology, bridging tradition and modernity for a harmonious integration of Christian principles within the community.

Keywords: Igbo Family System, Umunna Ecclesiology, Indigenization, Christianity, Igbo Society.

Introduction: Towards an Indigenized Church

It is a truism that Christianity has not always and everywhere been spread intact; rather, its manifestation has been modified, remodelled and moulded by cultural realities of the West. The elements within the church, such as Episcopal paraphernalia, have been modeled on European practices from specific historical periods. For instance, when asked to identify a bishop, people might think of items like a pectoral cross, sash, or purple cassocks rather than recognizing the bishop's role as a father, shepherd, and teacher (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2024).

Jesus Christ represents the only trans-cultural reality and serves as the exclusive basis and criterion for making theological judgments about any culture. Examining Christ's message reveals two fundamental characteristics: (a) faith in God and (b) love for God and neighbors. The cultural context in which these messages appear is not intrinsic to the core message of Christianity. Consequently, the dominance of Western culture in the church and Christianity

should yield to the emergence of an authentic Igbo-African church and Christianity (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2024).

The true universal nature of the Church of Christ allows for diverse expressions. Just as humanity, being universal, can manifest in various cultural forms like Chinese, African, or Indonesian, Christians emphasize universality when their faith is expressed in different cultural contexts. Christ's incarnation underscores the idea that he became human to bring humanity closer to God, not the other way around (Banda, 2019).

Therefore, for the Church to have an impact on the Igbo people, it must undergo an Africanization process within the Igbo society. Jesus himself demonstrated the importance of being understood by the specific audience to whom the message of the kingdom is preached. He often used Jewish parables in his teachings, and the choice of bread and wine for the Eucharist could be seen as practical and relatable symbols within that cultural context. This suggests that if Jesus were born into a different cultural setting, such as Ghanaian Fante, the symbols used in Mass might have been palm wine and kinkey instead (Anizoba & Ande, 2021) thus the call for an indigenized church from many African scholars and church leaders. Magezi, & Magezi (2017). Lugira (1990) on highlighting the urgency of such a need averred;

> As the western type of Christianity has miserably failed to provide us (Africans) with any effective mode of educating our children in justice, honesty and good morality, should we not start making use of our traditional modes of education – rites and customs, songs and dances, stories and proverbs in our catechetical classes. These and such like are pertinent questions, which catholic intellectuals should help to solve (p.2).

In order to achieve such a church in Igbo society therefore, the church in Igbo society must be original to the Igbo/African family structure. By this, we are proposing that the church in Igbo society must not be second hand, nor be defined by foreign world-views, be genuine, and has the power to develop and suggest new thoughts and models on which it should be patterned.

Methodology

To enhance the comparative perspective, this study aptly juxtaposes findings from Igbo communities with those from diverse cultural contexts, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of the indigenization of Christianity. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, the research encompasses sociological, anthropological, and theological dimensions to present a holistic understanding of Umunna Ecclesiology. A paramount focus on ethical considerations permeates the entire research process, ensuring a profound respect for cultural sensitivity and maintaining confidentiality in both interviews and observations.

The utilization of both qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis enables a comprehensive examination of the research objectives. The study strategically incorporates Missiological research theory, contributing to a clear narrative that synthesizes historical, cultural, and theological dimensions. This approach significantly deepens our understanding of Umunna Ecclesiology within the specific context of Igbo society.

Igbo/African Family Structure

Family holds paramount significance in the lives of Igbo people, functioning as a cornerstone institution that profoundly influences all aspects of their existence. Rooted in Igbo culture is the belief that every relationship, whether within the family or beyond, originates and takes shape within the familial context. The family, therefore, serves as the primary crucible where individuals, from the moment of their birth, embark on the journey of understanding and navigating human relationships. (Isidienu, 2015)

In Igbo society, the family is not merely a social unit; it is the foundational nexus from which all social bonds and connections spring forth. From the earliest stages of childhood, individuals are immersed in the intricate web of family relationships, providing them with the essential groundwork for comprehending the dynamics of human interaction. The family becomes the initial school where values, traditions, and interpersonal skills are imparted, shaping the way individuals engage with others in the broader community (Ufearoh, 2018).

In essence, the family is the epicenter of social education in Igbo culture, laying the groundwork for how individuals perceive, relate to, and collaborate with fellow members of society. The intricate tapestry of relationships woven within the family unit serves as a microcosm of the broader social fabric, and every child born into an Igbo family begins their life journey by assimilating these fundamental principles of human connection. (Onwuatuegwu, 2020)

In Igbo cosmology, the predominant family structure is the *Umunna*, derived from "*Umu*" (children or sons) and "*nna*" (father). Translated as 'kindred' or 'kinsmen,' *Umunna* represents the extended family of one's ancestral village. It embodies a patrilineal system among the Igbo, tracing male lineage to a common ancestor. *Umunna* groups, named after the founding ancestor, consist of closely related families led by the eldest male member.

Umunna stands as the cornerstone of Igbo social structure, shaping family arrangements and indicating social standing. It involves a weekly assembly for male clan members, serving as a traditional forum for conflict resolution. Over time, *Umunna* elders have played a crucial role as peacemakers, fostering robust and harmonious communities with enduring peaceful coexistence (Ebisi, 2016).

Church, a universal family

The Church is a family of God. This idea of the Christian family and the use of family terminology for the church shows that the relationship among church members and the characteristics of the church adopted the spirit and the structure of the Christian family. This idea also depicts the universality of the church because it includes all members of the Christian community (Dinh, 2006).

The model of the church as family of God appears frequently in the patristic writings, from the earliest times, and continues to be influential in church documents. In particular, the concept of the church as the family of God has drawn much attention from the local churches in Latin Americans, Africa and Asia. It does not only emphasize the importance of the family structure in the church but also to be the various cultures concerned. It has emerged as a theme

requiring further critical examination. The Christian family, the most basic unit of church life, is sometimes called the domestic Church (Dinh, 2006).

Embracing the Umunna family System in Structuring the Igbo Church

There is a need to be clear about the kind of family structure we are envisaging in the Igbo church. Is it the African tradition family, or the contemporary western influenced family structure? However, in any case, the African family whether traditional or contemporary, is still hierarchical. The father figure is still very much feared by other members of the family.

In the Igbo context, the African culture "family model" should be recommended for authentic Igbo church. However, it is important to agree that this does not mean any of the family that is not yet fully liberated. We must therefore create a vision of an Africa family where equality is guaranteed. Clear sharing responsibility is accepted, the clear option for the disadvantaged member is made, and deadly tensions are eliminated (Ekeocha, 2020).

In Igbo society, the family structure is strongly emphasized on *Umunna* clan system. *Umunna* is a group of people who trace their origin to a common ancestor who is usually a male originator of such group of people, and usually, authority in the village group was vested in a council of family lineage (Umunna) heads (elders) who are usually influential men (Okoli, 2022).

Umunna (Clan) system is the most powerful socio-religious and political institution in the Traditional Igbo society. Iweadighi (2011) agreed that:

> The family (*Umunna*) relationship or co-operation then is one of the strongest institutions and the strength of the Igbo tradition society as well. This family relationship is based on either "bond of blood relationship or relationship through marriage between two families. The family relationship regulates or even dictates often the whims or grades of the individual to his fellow human beings. If one has a problem, he turns to the other side of the relationship – *umunna* – for help. Even in the case of sickness, *umunna* is involved. Nobody is left alone to carry the burdens of life (p. 32).

Ilogu (1974) also posited that;

> *Umunna* is a form of patronage maintained by the Igbo. Law starts with the *umunna* which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor (whom the lineage is sometimes named after) with groups of compounds containing closely related families headed by the eldest male member. The *Umunna* can be seen as the most important pillar of Igbo society. (p.6)

However, just like the concept of *Umunna* family-clan in Igbo society, the church in Igbo society should be primarily structured in the same family way.

The Historical and Contemporary Relevance of the Church as a Spiritual Family

Even the early church has also a similar structure and perception. Christian family or community of disciples is also characterized by the use of family terminology, such as brother/sister, father and son. Such terminology appears many times in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters.

Ilogu, (1974) also confirmed that;

> In early church, members of the house church formed a community in which they were concerned about each other's welfare and had a sense of belonging, of togetherness and of interconnectedness with other house churches. Indeed, the house church promoted a strong sense of family and community and broken down socio-cultural barriers. The head of the household and other members of the house served each other members of the household church served each other's material and social needs since they were brothers and sisters in Christ. Such divine brotherhood/sisterhood became a virtue which attracted others to the Christian faith (p.16).

According to Uchem (2001) the theme of "Church as the family of God" is one that appears repeatedly in the document of the 1994 Synod on Africa (Ecclessia in Africa). She observed thus;

> The Synod on Africa adopted the model, 'Church as God's Family' as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa" (Ecclesia in African). This image suggests "care for others solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (No.68). Seen as "an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa" (no. 63), this model of Church was a practical implementation of inculturation (p. 1).

In the words of Orobator as cited in McGarry (1995);

> The Fathers of the Synod made a fundamental opinion of the Church as family. This became an integral framework of our understanding of the Church, such that whenever we think of the Church, we express it's meaning in our lives as family (p. 34).

Furthermore, the Anglican perception of the church of Christ as a family is rooted in the Bible. This was vividly captured in the Church of England biannual Anglican compass magazine, 2015 edition. According to Roseberry (2015);

> In John's Gospel, Jesus builds a new form of a family from the cross; a family made of believers who are related to him not by blood or birth, but by God. The vision set forth in John 1:13 is realized in John 19:26. Again, this is a profound mystery: they are a new family under Christ their Lord (p. 3).

Through baptism, Christians are adopted as Christian in a spiritual family called Church. They were born again into this new family, by the Word of God, but with heavenly values inspired by the Holy Spirit. This rebirth and initiation through baptism was the fundamental reason for a distinctive Christian lifestyle.

Paul also used words and expressions which are most naturally located in a family context in order to emphasis the centrality of love between him and Christians and among Christians. He referred to Onesimus, Luke and some others as "beloved" (Rom 16:5, 9-9, 12; Col 4:7).

Igbo Family Dynamics in the Ecclesiastical Context

The notion of the church as family is directly related to the human experience of family; and this can be explored in a variety of cultural, historical and social settings like that of the Igbo cultural framework. For instance, the *Umunna-family* system is an intimate community of

persons bound together by Blood, which is equivalent to the family ideas of Church. Becoming a Christian means being adopted into God's family as a child of God and brother or sister to fellow believers. This understanding explains why we refer to the church as a family. On the basis of this adoption, Christians or the children of God received the Spirit to call God "Abba", Father" (Rom 8:14-15). Also, the *Umunna-Clan* usually must be people of the same ancestral origin. Hence, the Pauline pastoral approach, along with that of Peter, highlighted the intimate family relationship of Christians with Jesus (Rom 8:4-17) who is their eldest brother and ancestor. God is literally our Father, Jesus is literally our elder brother, and we are literally brothers and sisters in Christ (Onwuatuegwu, 2020).

The *Umunna*-Family system usually has common possession as inheritance as land. Also, Christians as one family with Jesus Christ are to become co-heirs with Christ and free people living in the spirit (Gal 4:7; Rom 8:14-17, 29). In the same manner, the New Testament main described Christians as members of God's family in two complementary approaches. Paul described the new family in terms of adoption and of inheritance when Christians participated in God's family. (Dinh, 2006)

Culturally, the idea of church as the "family of God" develops and promotes the human family and its values just like Umunna-family system in Igbo society. The church, as family, emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships and the veneration of ancestors. In a family or clan; human relationships become very close among its members. This characteristics is very special to the peoples in Africa especially the Igbo. For Igbo, the human relationships extend not only to the living but also to the deceased members of their family or clan. In this context, the Church as a family of believers should look at Jesus in the Igbo (African) images of family and at the Communion of Saints (Anyanele, 2019).

In Igbo, the institution of the family remains an important value and dimension of life. It constitutes part of the wealth of our cultural life which the Church of Africa much seeks to share and offer to the entire Church within the setting of the African Christian community. (Hickey, 1982)

Certainly! Onwuatuegwu (1981) rightly notes that Africans often define themselves in relation to their immediate or extended family, emphasizing the importance of the family in African culture, hence, the African family should be like a small living unit, influencing how people perceive the Church and their experiences in Africa. Pope Paul IV's concept of the family as a "domestic Church" aligns with this idea, suggesting that the family embodies various aspects of the broader Church (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 71).

From the African conception of family, the family constitutes the pivot of African social systems, "the fundamental base of humanity and the society and the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge" (Africa Terrarum, 1967). This point illustrate Pope Paul IV, affirmation that African culture is defined by its palpable sense of family' a high spiritual vision of life and the sense community.

The Igbo-*Umunna* family structure is characterized with unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility. The family is a place where life is welcome, nurtured and revered; shared in common with the living and the living-dead (ancestors); understanding, living and being

together, fraternity, mutual aid, reconciliation through rites, traditions and authority; and hospitality (Orobator, 1995).

From an African perspective, the Church-as-family receives its fundamental identity in the Eucharist not only because it constitutes the "centre" around which the family gathers in order to evoke its ancestral memories (Agboka, 1994). In this sense, as some African theologians already hold, the Eucharist is an ancestral meal an inexhaustible source of life for all the co members of the family (church)

Conclusion

The family system stands at the very core of the gospel, playing a pivotal role in its incarnation and development within the context of Igbo society. In light of this, it becomes imperative for Igbo and African theologians to actively embrace the challenge presented by this theme. Their task is to delve into the intricate dynamics of the family structure and its significance, extracting profound insights that can contribute to a fresh and enriching comprehension of the Igbo church and its relationship with Christianity in the broader societal context.

This endeavor requires a thorough exploration of the symbiotic relationship between the family system and the gospel, emphasizing the cultural nuances and unique values embedded in Igbo society. By undertaking this challenge, theologians aim to unearth the positive aspects of the family's influence on the Igbo church, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between traditional values and Christian principles.

Furthermore, the theologians must engage in a thoughtful examination of how the family system, as a fundamental aspect of Igbo culture, can be harnessed to promote and strengthen the teachings of Christianity. This involves recognizing and celebrating the central role of the family in shaping individuals' spiritual journeys and contributing to the overall fabric of the Igbo church community.

In essence, the call for Igbo/African theologians to tackle this theme is an invitation to explore, interpret, and articulate the ways in which the family system acts as a linchpin in the gospel narrative. Through their efforts, these theologians aspire to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, creating a narrative that not only respects the cultural heritage of Igbo society but also aligns harmoniously with the principles of Christianity, thus fostering a holistic and integrated expression of faith within the community.

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