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A Review of Ikwa-Ala Traditional Conflict Resolution Method in Igboland and its Effects on Christian Faith

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Abstract

The perceived antagonism between some Christian and African Traditional Religious practices poses some kind of dialectics that need adequate resolution through proactive measures if the sanctity of the Christian Faith is to be preserved in the current wave of Neo-Paganism. This is the case with the practice of some abhorrent traditional conflict resolution methods within Christian communities with Christians compelled to accept the culture irrespective of their being antithetical to basic Christian morality. The aim of this paper is to examine select Traditional Conflict Resolution method (the Ikwa-Ala Ritual) in Light of Biblical Scriptures and Dogmatic Theology to ascertain their inherent immoral content as well as acknowledge the probability of their entering healthy synergy with the Christian faith. The relevance of this theological assessment is to engage a hypothetical framework for acceptance or disagreement with the methods with regard to credible Christian Life. The methods adopted in this study are textual analysis and phenomenology as they both allow for understanding basic Christian assumptions and the moral status of the select Traditional Conflict Resolution methods respectively. Thus, the outcome of the inquiry serves to consolidate on the present grounds of the Church's tolerance and accommodation for certain cultural tenets and practices that are alien to the Christian faith and go on to pose critical and sensitive questions to the moral integrity of Christians who find themselves within such cultural spaces and are compelled to comply to community standards of social control.

Key Words: Christian, Traditional, Conflict, Resolution, Igboland and Method

1.0 Introduction

The tension and anxiety that befall Christians who in one way or the other engage in certain social offenses like incest, murder, adultery with wife of one's kinsman (blood-related or

from same kindred), and some other spelt-out social vices, which being sinful in Christian parlance are deemed as taboo in traditional Igbo society. The anxiety and real challenge gets enlarged when the Christian is caught in

the web of making amends the traditional way. While Christianity frowns at incest, adultery and the like (especially the very scandalous instances), it sees these offenses first as sin against God and offense to the Christian community, but addresses them through prayerful reconciliation with God, while believing in His Divine mercies and in the one-and-all time efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The reunion with God through genuine repentance and forgiveness through the Church's penitential institutions given denominational settings automatically reinstates the sinner back to his place among the brethren. But the some notable ritual demands for reconciliation and resolution in traditional Igbo society are more tasking, immodest in appearance and can be inhumane and psychologically demeaning especially the mandatory *Ikwa-Ala* ritual. While both traditions abhor incest and similar scandalous social vices as immoral acts and offenses against God and community, the typical Igbo traditional resolution method (*Ikwa-Ala*) appear to go against basic Christian teachings and threatens actual problems between members of the community and the Church hierarchy in some extreme circumstances.

Unfortunately, when Christians get involved with such social vices and scandals, they

become vulnerable to erstwhile traditional laws and customs that demand that specific "rituals" some of which could be tagged as "fetish", "barbaric" and "idolatrous". The problem is not so much as it is a reconciliatory and amendment-making ritual demanded from the offenders, but the fact that the community imposes these rituals upon them as sanctions (punishment) but also as symbolic acts in the process of re-integrating the offender back to the community which by their offenses were ostracized from the community. Also it is believed that if the necessary action were to be avoided, then great calamity will befall the family of the offender. Opinion poll within some traditional societies attest to the fact that this belief is held as true and effective in the affected Igbo communities to the extent that even Christians still hold on the beliefs and get really scared of denouncing and refusing to partake in the rituals for of supernatural punishments and rejection by the land. One therefore imagines the confusion this practice actually creates in the individual but also among the Christian community where he or she belongs and the challenge to Church hierarchy. What then are the implications of this trend for the Christian faith, and in what ways can this dilemma be fixed?

2.0 Conceptual Framework

In the words of Oparanozie (2016, p.83), “in traditional Igbo society, conflict occurs from time to time. Communities are continually contending with the many conflicts which stem from multiple sources”. In further analysis, Oparanozie goes on to specify the different classes of conflicts which include: Intra-Personal, Interpersonal, Intra-Group Conflict, Inter-Group, Intra-National and International Conflicts. (Oparanozie, 2016, pp.89-90) In the context of this paper, however, the focus is on Intra-Personal, Interpersonal and Intra-Group conflicts as the case may be. This is because, it is within these conflict classes that the notion of traditional conflict resolution methods within special reference to the *ikwa ala* ritual is assessed and discussed. Specifically, Oparanozie captures this cultural context when he states that: “In the case of Intra-Group Conflict, families, kindred, villages and groups experience a lot of conflict situation which comes often times over disagreement within themselves over things that concerns them.” (Oparanozie, 2016, p.91.) While conflicts in contemporary usage of the term refer to concrete disputes between two or more persons or parties, in Igboland there are other offences or crimes that could lead to social disharmony and thus require

same resolution approaches that are used for resolving concrete dispute cases. Like Oparanozie rightly articulates, there are within given Igbo communities “disagreement within themselves over things that concerns them”. (p.91) Thus, while issues like *inu iyi* (to swear or take oaths), *Iku ofo* (traditional commendation of the unremorseful perpetrator of crises situations to the justice discretion of the gods for punishment) and *iri oriko* (a traditional meal to be taken by both conflicting parties from same plate to mark their peace-agreements and resolution not to allow that particular conflict and its ill-feelings linger among them in the future thereby building trust) are notable ways to resolve difficult crises or conflict situations, the *Ikwa ala* has a more spiritual significance in that it reunites the offender or offending parties to the larger community and to the spirits of the Land (especially, *Ala*, the earth goddess) depicting robust Igbo cosmology and what could be tagged a spiritual or metaphysical social structure. In this case, the conflict is not just seen in concrete disagreements between two parties, but a spiritual or metaphysical crises or dispute situation between the offender and other members of the community which also encompasses the living and the dead (ancestors). Resolving this kind of conflict or

crises require spiritual-religious rituals to symbolize an appeasement to the land and a reunion back to the community.

Crucial to understanding the dearth of this problem is a down-to-earth comprehension of the concept of “*Ikwa-Ala*”, in traditional Igbo parlance and what it represents in bringing about fruitful “reconciliation” and or “resolution” in the original sense of community in Igboland.

To underscore the particular perspective from which an evaluation of the “*Ikwa Ala*” tradition is sought, one has to cite it among key traditional methods of reconciliation and resolution between the offender and his or her community, as well as between his or her relationship between the deities of the Igbo Traditional Religion. As a matter of facts, in an overview of what these reconciliatory and resolution rituals and practices represent, Iwuh (2016) holds that there is the current abhorrence of:

some traditional methods of punishment that prevented crimes and sustained the ethics and moral codes of the Igbo people before the modern institutional legal process. The dying practices of *ikwa ala*, *ipa mkpo*, and *iku ofo* are three obvious methods that

guarded against incest, crimes like stealing and other forms of wrongdoing. Also threatened are *eshe* and *ituaka* that honour the dead at burials in order to maintain or restore the dignity of a family as well as prevent envy and attack of ancestral spirits. However, Christianity is opposed to these practices.

While the neglect of these practices *ikwa ala*, *ipa mkpo*, and *iku ofo* have reduced the fear on engaging in such social and communal vices like incest, stealing and other forms of wrongdoing in contemporary society, their efficacy as traditional moral strategies to check crime and preserve the moral values of some traditional societies have been upheld. However, Christianity is opposed to these practices due to doctrinal and moral discrepancies. While in the *Iku Ofo* ritual, dilemmas and difficult conflict issues (especially where truth is suppressed and the offenders persistently deny culpability), select Heads of Clans vested with traditional staffs (the *ofo*) come together in unison to place their *ofo* on the ground (earth) while placing curses on the guilty, commending them to the hands of the “spirits” and “deities” to met out justice either through death, mysterious sickness or any other ways

that the gods deem fit. At this point in time, the community robs their hands off the the crisis or problem. This method is often used in settling land disputes, murder cases, stealing and other related offenses.

Similar measures apply to the *inu iyi* tradition. In some extreme cases, the conflicting parties are expected to invite a diety (*agbara*) to which the conflicting parties would be made to swear to and allowed to be served justice by the “spirit” by which they swear to.

However, when one reviews the issue of *Ikwa-ala*, one sees a practice that is intrinsically attached to Igbo cosmology and its traditional religious veneration of the spirits that guide the earth. But then the ritual in itself looks barbaric, inhumane and apparently against the very social morality that the ritual purports to protect. The pictorial evidence below attests to this:

The important question to ask at this point in time is that when assessed and evaluated like the “*iri isi oriko*” ritual, in moral and religious terms, would the “*Ikwa-ala*” ritual be justified as morally, religiously and humanly credible?

While conflicts can be said to be indispensable in society, their resolution remains paramount in the maintenance of

peace and continued harmonious co-existence of all members of given society. This is why certain issues that could be linked to societal discomfort, disputes and conflicts may require unique structural systems for their resolution. In capturing the peculiar African traditional approach to conflict resolutions, one could gain insights from Rendall & Herman (1902, p.41) as cited in Oparanozie (2016) in their argument that conflict resolution approaches tend:

to explain change in terms of antagonism or tension-producing elements that are inherent in social systems. The causes of such conflicts leading to societal changes are especially sought in those elements of the social structure which on the one hand, are related to the establishment and sanctioning of social norms and on the other hand to the control and allocation of scare resources such as income, property, prestige, influence and authority.

It is important to note, that the *Ikwa Ala* ritual is seen not just as a resolution method but also as one of the norms in Igboland that should guide the offender into making adequate reparations with other members of

the community and with the communal spirits in order to incorporated back into the fold. Otherwise, the victim remains ostracized by virtue of the offence. At this point in time, it is necessary to understand that “conflict” in Igbo parlance covers not just disputes between two parties as can be found in land disputes, inter-village or inter-clan rivalries and other sectional conflict or crises situations that can arise between two or more parties, but also underscores situations where someone’s offense creates social disharmony, community crisis and a spiritual disconnect between the living and the spirits of the land thereby making the people prone to punishments or calamities except the “offense” or “crime” (like theft, murder, rape, incest, etc.) is atoned for under normative guidelines. This is what makes such traditional practices and rituals like the *Iku ofo*, *ikwa ala*, *inu iyi*, and *iri oriko* outstanding conflict resolution methods in traditional Igboland.

3.0 The Ikwa-Ala Conflict Resolution Method in Igboland: “Social & Religious Symbolism”

Taking a leaf from the publication of Njoku (2014) on the religious *cum* cultural insights of the “*Iri isi Oriko*” ritual as a more acceptable practice in the light of Christian

faith, a foremost argument on the plausibility of the “*iri isi oriko*” reconciliation method, one holds that:

Towards an inculturation, the resolutional equations of the Igbo cultural method of reconciliation – oriko in ala di mma – are balanced with the sacrament of reconciliation in operational life of the people who are pastorally concerned. In this context, the author refers to the Owerri archdiocesan working document on *emume nsacha na ndozi*, meaning a ritual of purification and peace, as well as to the Igbo Christian rite of reconciliation proposed by Augustine Echema. The method of these new rites is para-liturgical in nature which highlights the importance of reconciliation of human beings with themselves, their neighbours and God, whenever sin has taken place. Paradoxically, this new method of reconciliation can broaden ecumenism and strengthens the social, cultural, political and religious lives of the people. In this sense, reconciliation can be seen as a natural spiritual cord that ties

people to themselves and to God in a communal and Christian environment.

These practices and rituals did not come up as social edicts or communal contracts as social control measures and legal-moral institutions to fight crime within the community but also enhance the process of conflict resolution. They however have a symbolic link to the Igbo Cosmology and traditional religious worldviews that there are spirits that are in-charge of the natural elements and who superintend the natural order of events. The reference to *Ala*, the earth goddess for instance stand as one important cultural and traditional value in Igbo cosmology. This is because *ala* (earth) represents a lot of value to the Igbo man. It represents fertility, vegetation, agriculture, heritage and identity. It is a general view among the Igbo nation that certain offenses and immoral acts are direct insult or offense to *Ala*, the spirit or deity that governs the earth. And so, for an offense to be adequately made reparations for, the spirits of the land (*Ala* and other associated communal spirits must be appeased and necessary atonement made. The *Ikwa-ala* ritual is one major way to make atonement and to also appease the anger of the spirits, thus making it a

mandatory practice in most Igbo communities. To buttress this fact, Aguwa (1993, p,539) notes:

The Igbo traditional society, has prohibitions called *nso ala*. Some of them are serious and when infringed, an abomination occurs which brings about ritual pollution because there is ritual dirt....When the state of pollution exists whether it has been deliberately brought about or not, then a situation of danger is created. This is because pollution conceived as ritual dirt is contagious and the danger it embodies can affect other people. Infracting *nso ala* could expose one's family and community to the danger of pollution.

And so, such offenses (pollutions, using Aguwa's terms), are seen as taboos in the sense that they are offenses or pollutions related to *Ala*, (the earth) thereby requiring that *Ala* be cleansed or appeased. "The prohibitions or taboos are known as *nso ala*, and the rites for the removal of pollutions are known as *ikwa ala* or *ikpu ala*. It must, however, be borne in mind that *ala* does not only mean the physical earth. It is the great

symbol of group identity.” (Aguwa, 1993, p.539.)

4.0 Theological Basis for Assessing the *Ikwa-Ala* Conflict Resolution Method.

Having explored the concepts of *Ala* and *ikwa ala* ritual as they are seen in Igbo cosmology and in real-time practices within Igbo traditional communities, one cannot afford not to make reference to the first commandment of the *Decalogue* which clearly abhors idolatry in its different guises. In Exodus Chapter, vs 20: 3-5, God clearly states: “Thou shall not have any other god except me”... The fact that *Ala* represents a spiritual entity or goddess of fertility to which reference is given to as a deity, and to which the *ikwa ala* ritual is designed to appease, it therefore goes against the teachings of Christianity and the Christian faith. One also gets the admonition from Deuteronomy that “you shall not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you” (Deuteronomy 6:14). This affects the Christian faithful living within particular pagan communities. They are expected to maintain their moral integrity and faith by not adhering to the pagan religious principles of their host communities. There are other passages in the Scriptures that clearly restrain Christian from any form of attachment to

deities and idol worship, such as: 1 Corinthians 10:14 which admonishes Christians to flee from idolatry and 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 in which passage, Christians are reminded of the futility in idolatry and extolled to remain steadfast in worship and reference to the One God “the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.”

In another sense, however, following Aguwa’s contention that *Ala* refers to the communal spirit to which the offender severs oneself from by committing the offence, therefore the atonement is directed to the community, one still holds that the practice is fetish and cannot align to Christian belief. This suggests that a more nuanced understanding of the Igbo traditional religious heritage so as to be more informed on the best ways to address the disparity between the reverence to the “spirit beings” and that which they give to God Almighty. For as Ochulor observes: “the Igbos differentiate between high and minor deities”. (Ochulor 2006, p.28) In his opinion, while the major deities like *Amadioha* (*god of thunder*), and *Anyanwu* (the sun god) are direct messengers to the Supreme God, the minor deities which include: *Agwu*, *Ala*

(earth goddess), *Ahiajoku* (yam goddess) and other minor deities have their influences limited to particular villages. (Ochulor, 2006, pp.28-29). What is to be gathered from Ochulor's argument based on the context of this study is that the Igbo nation are highly religious people and they believe in the Supreme God, creator of Heaven and Earth, despite their reverences to other minor deities and spirit beings whom they regard as messengers to the Supreme God *Chukwu Okike*. If this is the case therefore, there is need to understand the theological importance of some Igbo Traditional practices and rituals like the ones mentioned earlier in the beginning of this paper: *iri oriko*, *iku ofo*, *inu iyi* and *ikwa-ala* to mention but a few. When reviewed in light of Scriptures and Christian values such rituals like the *iri oriko* and to some extent when done with good intentions and in alignment with Christian values like reconciliation, justice and forgiveness can enter into synergy with the Church through inculturation. However, a critical and theological review of the *ikwa-ala* ritual in contemporary times should take into cognizance the fact that subjecting people to fetish practices like going naked on the streets, and rubbed with weird stuff, with some of them forced to carry tortoises and other animals supposed to serve

as sacrifices in appeasement to these spirits and the *Ala goddess* tantamount to neo-pagan practice and idolatry. Thus the *ikwa-ala* ritual should be discarded in Igbo land and should in no way be accepted by the Christian community. This of course is in consonance with the advice of St. Paul that: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you served by which nature are not gods. But now, after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" (Galatians 4:8-9).

5.0 Moral Analysis in Light of Contemporary Pluralist Society and Religious Tolerance.

When scrutinized from the perspectives of contemporary pluralist society and religious tolerance especially as it affects the freedom of religion, Christians have the right to resist such obnoxious practices by virtue of their faith. In Nigeria for instance where the constitution clearly spells out "freedom of worship" in categorical terms (FRN, 1999 as amended), no community has the exclusive authority to impose such sanctions upon any Christian whether an indigene of the community or not. This does not exonerate the affected person or persons from paying necessary community fines as penalty for the

offense committed, but the *ikwa ala* practice in itself goes against fundamental human rights and basic civil liberties like the freedom of worship and religion. However, in cases where the matter seems difficult, diplomacy and ecumenism are suggested to breed understanding and adequate handling of the issues rather than subjecting the victims to such barbaric, degrading and inhumane treatment in contemporary times. In highlighting the efficacy of dialogue and or ecumenism in addressing conflicting traditional religious practices with Christian belief, Ajayi Crowther as cited in Ochulor (2006, p.52):

Christianity has come into the world to abolish and supercede all false religions, to direct mankind to the only way of obtaining peace and reconciliation with their offended God [...] But it should be borne in mind that Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation; where there are any degrading and superstitious defects, it corrects them...

This statement captures the essence of ecumenism and committed dialogue in approaching the issue of *ikwa-ala* and other obnoxious rituals and religious practices in

Igboland before the advent of Christianity. He further advised that, in dealing with the indigenous traditional religions, “their religious terms and ceremonies should be carefully observed; the wrong use made of such terms goes to depreciate their real value, but renders them more valid when when we adopt them in expressing Scriptural terms in their right senses and places from which they have been misapplied for want of better knowledge”. (Ochulor, 2006, p.53.) The task therefore lies in the hands of the Church leadership to carry out adequate sensitization and enlightenment on the proper function of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, inculturation and religious tolerance as it affects those traditional conflict resolution methods. This engagement should also be extended to the community leadership and mutual understanding attained. In alignment to the need for tolerance and respect for those traditional values that are truly not pagan, but fosters communal harmony, unity and growth as well as enhance in the attainment of justice and moral integrity like the *isi oriko* and the *ofo* justice principle albeit ways acceptable to the Christian faith should be encouraged. But to those clearly pagan practices and rituals like the *ikwa ala*, and *inu iyi agbara*, Christian communities should proactively jettison such involvements and remain

steadfast to the unalloyed reference to God Almighty.

6.0 Conclusion

Given the inevitability of conflicts in contemporary society but also the need to respect cultural and traditional conflict resolution methods that have clearly served Igbo communities over the years and enforced social control, one explores the particular *ikwa-ala* ritual which served to reconcile offenders back to their communities and quench further calamity due to the offense committed. This paper therefore was an inquiry into the meaning and symbolism of the typical *ikwa-ala* practice in Igboland and its effects on the Christian faith.

Thus, this paper consolidates on the present grounds of the Church's tolerance and accommodation for certain cultural tenets and practices that are alien to the Christian faith like the *isi oriko* and the traditional justice symbol and authority of the *ofo* welding Elders so long as these are done in ways acceptable to the Christian belief. However, to other ritual practices like *inu iyi agbara*, *ikwa-ala* and similar rituals, the Church continues to pose critical and sensitive questions to the moral integrity of Christians who find themselves within such cultural spaces and are compelled to comply

to community standards of social control. In this wise, and given the phenomenological review of the concept of *ikwa ala*, and the deity or earth goddess to which it is directed to, one clearly holds that such practices are pagan, barbaric and goes against the first commandment of God which prohibits idolatry.

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