IGWEBUIKE THEOLOGY OF *IKWA OGWE* AND THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS OF THE MISSIONARY ERA

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Abstract

This piece on Igwebuike theology of Ikwa Ogwe has attempted at building a bridge between two conflicting inheritances or worldviews of the African Christian: the Western heritage and the heritage of his/her ancestors. The researcher attempted doing this with maturity and creativity, and without destabilizing the wholeness of the African Christian. It defined Igwebuike theology contextually, and the Igwebuike concept of culture as a preparation for the gospel, basing this on Clement of Alexandria's Stromata. This created a basis for an Igwebuike theology of Ikwa Ogwe. It argued that until this bridge is built, the Word of God cannot be effectively communicated- in such a way that the people hearing the Word understand who they are and who others are. It observed that communicating the gospel without building a bridge would rather take people away from themselves, thus, creating a problem of identity. It discovered that the major task of the gospel message, which is the transformation of worldviews and conceptual systems, would not be adequately achieved without Ikwa Ogwe. Igwebuike theology of Ikwa Ogwe, therefore, emphasizes identifying with the people and communicating the message through their categories. The purpose of this study is to make a contribution to the ongoing efforts at resolving the cross-cultural conflicts of the missionary era. The theoretical framework employed is the Igwebuike holistic and complementary understanding of evangelization and culture, which focuses on the bigger picture of reality and believes that all parts of reality are interconnected.

Keywords: *Igwebuike*, Theology, *Ikwa Ogwe*, Missionary Enterprise, Culture, Conflicts

Introduction

In the 20th century, with the movements towards political changes leading to independence in many African colonial territories, the quest for theological independence became unavoidable. In the contention of Parratt (2001), "It

seemed incongruous to African Christians that while African nations were becoming independent politically, the church in Africa should remain essentially controlled by European missionaries" (p. 2). The late Harold MacMillan, one time British Prime Minister (cited in Mbefo 1989), remarked about the events of the time thus:

> We have seen the awakening of national consciousness in people who have for centuries lived in dependence of some other power… In different places it takes different forms, but it is happening everywhere. A wind of change is blowing through this continent, whether we like it or not (p.11).

The echoing of the quest for freedom within the walls of the Church, as though the struggle for political independence was also a demand for an independent African Church, was unavoidable, since the Church cannot be spoken of in isolation of the world, for the questions that the Church grapples with are the questions raised by and in the world.

Interestingly, around the same period and within the same context of the search for independence, there was a positive appreciation of African traditional beliefs and customs among Africans, together with a marked sense of their cultural identity. There was a great impetus from the literary movement in French-speaking Africa, popularly known as Negritude, which emerged through the study of human sciences, like social or cultural anthropology and sociology, and through the monographs of trained anthropologists and the surveys of scholars such as Geoffrey Parrinder, among others.

The factors that led to a positive appreciation of African traditional beliefs and cultures and the emergence of African theology were not only from within, several external factors also made it possible. Such factors include the contribution of some Western missionaries who observed a problem with the current method of evangelization and, thus, saw the need for a different approach. These include great African missionaries, like Father Placid Tempels, a Belgian priest posted to Belgium DRC Congo where he worked for 29 years, and as a result of his great experience among the Congo nation, he developed the Bantu philosophy, which was rich and systematic in its presentation. Later, missionaries, like Bishop Sundkler and Harold Tuner, promoted the study of African Christian theology by editing several works done by African theologians (Barga, 2012). A second impetus from outside of Africa was the Second Vatican

Council which has a positive appreciation of local cultures and called for the need for adaptation in all spheres of Church life, including theology.

The development of *Igwebuike* theology may be considered a third stage in the development of African theology. It is not primarily concerned about the failings of the missionary approach to evangelization, even though it not totality cut off from it. It is not focused on emphasizing the need for an African theology, even though it is a product of that struggle. It rather focuses on attending to the conflicts between the African and Western religious cultures in Christianity for the purpose of making the Christian faith more at home in Africa. This study is important as the African church still lives with the consequences of an unresolved religio-cultural conflict emerging from the encounter between the Missionaries and African culture. To ensure the resolution of the above-established conflict, this piece, therefore, proposes *Ikwa Ogwe* (bridge building) as a method in *Igwebuike* theology for the resolving of this conflict so that the gospel brought to Africa can become culture, and culture becomes the gospel.

The Concept 'Igwebuike Theology'

Igwebuike theology is an attempt to make theology more contextual, and as an African theology, it aims at making the African to understand and enter more deeply into the community where they have been placed by God, and to discern and respond to His presence and action in such a manner that greater witness is born. This is contrary to the model that first kicks off by introducing the African into the world of the evangelizer, that through the world of the evangelizer, the African may discern and respond to God's presence and action- this approach leads to conflicts and stunts understanding and appreciation of the faith.

Igwebuike theology is structured on the Incarnate Word who became man at a particular place and time. It is contextual and biblical: the Bible is made up of various books, written to various people from particular places, and such books are shaped by the particularity and peculiarity of the place, and sometimes requiring the knowledge of the particular place and culture to understand the particular text. This is the spirit that animates *Igwebuike* theology. It takes into cognizance the African worldview and the basic elements of the Christian message in African theological discourse.
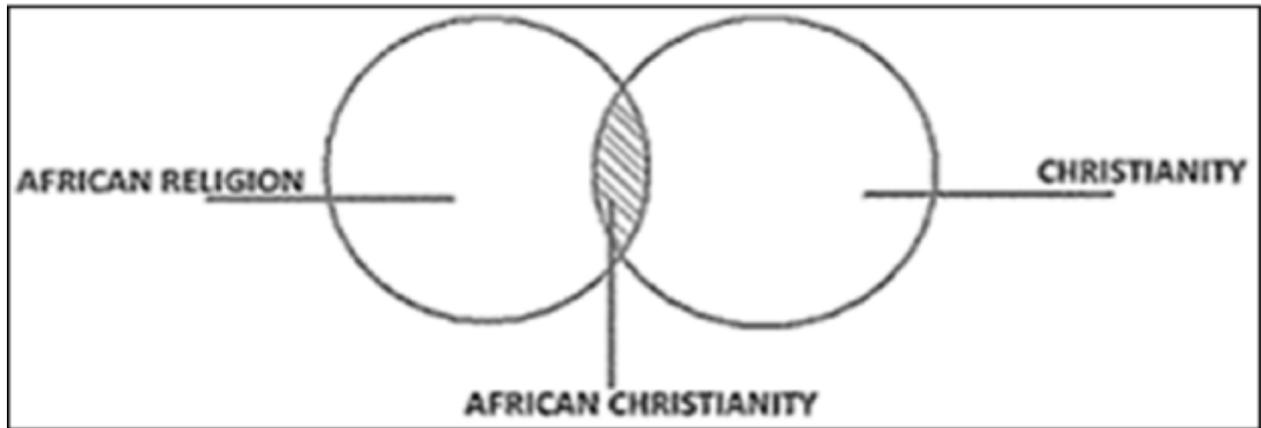
Figure 1- Source: Mndende, M. (2013)

The diagram above from Mndende (2013) describes in a pictorial way what evangelization should have done, and if followed, what evangelization in Africa should have brought about. Evangelization should have taken into cognizance the African culture and religion, which should not only have served as a vehicle for the communication of the Christian message, but would have enriched the Christian message. If this was taken into consideration in most parts of the missionary engagements with African culture and religion, such an engagement should have given birth to an African Christianity.

In defining *Igwebuike* theology, it is worthwhile to mention that *Igwebuike* as a concept began as a methodology and philosophy. However, its philosophical elements are beginning to have serious implications for theological discourse, especially with the increasing need to do theology that arises from the philosophy of the African people. Such a theology would always have an inescapable element of philosophy, speaking to people in their own native context, because it is expressed in categories of thought that arise out of the philosophy of the African people. Thus, the value that the concept *Igwebuike* brings into theology is that it creates a context for theological discussion or reflection, a context that is the African complementary worldview.

This notwithstanding, the expression, *Igwebuike* is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike,* with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Literally, *Igwe* is a noun which means 'number' or 'multitude', usually a large number or population. The number

or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances; however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is. Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu, 2016a&b). *Igwe, bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu, 2017f). However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike,* it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. It is used within the Igbo linguistic setting to refer to relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu, 2017g). The closest words to it in English are complementarity, solidarity and harmony. In this way, *Igwebuike* conceptualizes or captures the nature of the African universe.

What *Igwebuike* does is that it captures the nature of the African universe and uses it as a framework for discussions within theology or philosophy. The value that it brings to the table of theological discussions is its emphasis on the African worldview as an indispensable element in any successful African theological discussion. The purpose or relevance of this framework in philosophical or theological discussions is that it makes such a discussion relevant to the African and his/her environment. As such, *Igwebuike* theology would mean the quest to arrive at a unique understanding of faith in Christ in such a way that it captures the African worldview and the life circumstances of the African people. Only thus will evangelization respond to the inadequacies of the missionary enterprise, give birth to a new African personality, address contextual issues and be in accord with the legitimate aspiration of the African people. The fact of *Igwebuike* theology does not in any way imply a change in the Church's theology- it is the same theology, a systematic and scientific discourse on God, presented in such a way that it fits into the African religious, social, anthropological and philosophical realities, mentality and needs. The focus on Christ, the Scripture and tradition is not altered in any way. They remain the inevitable revelatory agents.

This notwithstanding, *Igwebuike theological* approaches include: understanding theology as contextual, that is, a theology of life and culture that is accountable to the context in which the African people live; understanding reality as complementary and interconnected; understanding African traditional religion and culture as a preparation for the gospel message; understanding theology as an enterprise that provides answers to the African person's innermost and deepest longings, that is, the search for happiness (God). Its sources include: the Bible,

Church tradition, African philosophy, religion and culture, African anthropology, and African experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this research is the *Igwebuike* holistic and complementary understanding of evangelization and culture. *Igwebuike* as a thought current focuses on the bigger picture of reality and believes that all parts of reality are interconnected. How will this approach affect this study? There are two dimensions to this framework that are relevant to discourses in African theology:

1. *Igwebuike* understands culture as an incomplete enterprise that continues to evolve as long as the human person continues to adapt himself/herself to the environment. When this approach speaks of culture as incomplete, it means that even the Christian culture that was brought by the missionaries was not complete and thus needed the African incomplete culture for its completeness. For the grounding of Christianity in Africa, therefore, the African culture becomes the missing link. While the African culture finds completeness in the Christian culture, the Christian culture would reach its full potential in the African culture, especially as the African people are involved. The incompleteness of the Christian culture here referred to does not speak of the core of the Christian faith; it rather refers to the cultural garment in which it was clothed and brought to the African people.

2. Within the context of the *Igwebuike* framework which is complementary (Kanu 2017), the African culture is understood as not only completing the Christian message that has been brought to Africa, but makes the Christian message richer and more meaningful to the African people than it came. In this sense, the encounter between both cultures has a way of sharpening the different cultural perspectives; that is, if both cultures maintain connection with the resources that are outside of them. In terms of this openness to the other, Torrance (1970) writes that: "One becomes human by making use of the energy available from outer sources to become a better integrated personality, to interact at a deeper level with the environment, and to achieve greater fulfillment of his potentialities" (p. 10). One loses his/her humanness when he/she is estranged, isolated, rejected, and cut off from other sources of information, inspiration and

spiritual strength. This also happens each time a culture denigrates the other rather than allowing the other to enrich her.

This framework will provide the need for understanding culture as a preparation for the gospel message and the basis for the *Igwebuike* theology of *Ikwa Ogwe,* that is, building a bridge between the African culture and the Christian message.

Igwebuike Concept of Culture as a Preparation for the Gospel

A major problem with the missionary enterprise is the clear gulf that was created between the African religion and culture and the Christian message, and the stories created around each that made the possibility of their relationship look like the impossibility of heaven and hell meeting together. Rather than understand culture as a disjointed element in relation to the gospel message, *Igwebuike* theology understands it as a preparation for the gospel. The concept of culture as a preparation for the gospel message was analyzed by Clement of Alexandria at a time and in a culture where philosophy was considered worthless and dangerous for Christianity. The African culture was also thought in the same way in relation to Christianity.

In his work, *Stromata,* Clement of Alexandria addressed the issue of the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christianity. This was necessary at a time when Christianity had moved into the Greek world where Neoplatonism was the dominant idea. He argued that pagan philosophy contained seeds of the *Logos* and was given to the Greeks by God to prepare them for the coming of Christ, just as the Law was given to the Hebrews for the same purpose (Mirus 2015). He writes thus:

> Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. "For thy foot," it is said, "will not stumble, if thou refer what is good, whether belonging to the Greeks or to us, to Providence." For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring "the Hellenic mind," as the law, the Hebrews, "to Christ." Philosophy,

therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ. (*Strom.* 1, 5)

His own interpretation of Greek philosophy is that it was not only necessary for the Greeks as an intellectual enterprise, but very useful in preparing Christians to accept the faith, as well as helping them to understand it better and defend it against error. His idea becomes clearer when we understand that the early Christian thinkers used Neoplatonic concepts to clarify the Christian message, thus, using philosophy as a vehicle for conveying the Christian message.

To give a divine origin to his perspective, Clement traced Greek philosophy to the prophecy of the Old Testament. He took his time to show that, through a comparative study, Plato learned much from the books of Moses. In this, he proved that all wisdom, whether of the Jews or the Greeks, has a common origin: God.

The African culture and religion belong to this category. Thus, *Igwebuike* theology of African culture and religion as a preparation for the gospel message points to the fact that African religion and culture, if appreciated, could contribute to the understanding of the Christian message to the African, as it would deliver the message within categories that the African would understand. It understands African culture and religion as a gift given to the African people from God. Imperfect as it was, it contained great wisdom that kept the African in the path of goodness. This, therefore, creates a basis for the theology of *Ikwa Ogwe* (building a bridge) across the chasm created between African culture and religion, on the one hand, and the Gospel message, on the other hand.

Igwebuike Theology of *Ikwa Ogwe*

Ikwa Ogwe is taken from the Igbo language, and it means to 'build a bridge'. The *Igwebuike* theology of *Ikwa Ogwe* is based on the complementary relatedness of the African reality and thought which works by building systems and thoughts as a pre-condition for the attainment of true knowledge and gaining insight into reality. It is within this context that Igbo traditional thinkers would say: *onye kwa ogwe amara uche ya* (when a person builds bridges then you know his/her mind). This means that it is only by establishing connections that you come to understand the reality that is being communicated. Understanding reality without recourse to the aspects that make its whole leads to inadequate and

dangerous knowledge. The missionary enterprise would have been greater, with less conflict, if such bridges were built across religious cultures.

The idea of *Igwa Ogwe* brings with it a new reality: the understanding of the search for knowledge as a scientific and systematic, as it involves a system that ensures building knowledge from a solid foundation and then making the connections and strengthening what is known. This cannot be understood better with the modern understanding of building bridges. In Igbo traditional societies, bridges were built with bamboo sticks and ropes. This involved standing the bamboo from the ground and connecting different bamboos, taking into cognizance the different angles needed and how the bamboos matched with one another, and then tying them together with rope. It was more of weaving together than just building a bridge. It is this process of making bridges, which follows one step after another (*ime ihe na usoro na usoro*), that makes *Igwebuike* theology a science.

However, according to Asouzu (2007): "No matter the way the master-builder builds the bridge, what makes his art useful is its relevance to all users of the bridge and this he does taking cognizance of the multidimensional composition of all bridge users and not in consideration of the exclusive rights of some individuals" (p. 125). This has great implications for evangelization among a 'local' people and the development of theology. It has to be a theology that is relevant to her users. The missionaries built a theology that was relevant to them while they served as missionaries. However, with the emergence of African theologians, there is the need for the reconstruction of the bridge in such a way that it serves the interest of the African people. The theology of the missionaries lacked the science of weaving together - that which is African and that which is Christian; and the consequence is that it was not very meaningful to the African people.

To refuse to reconstruct the bridge is to await the danger of the collapse of the bridge and everyone would run the risk of being submerged, that is, the collapse of Christianity. It is important at this juncture to make reference to the Christianity in Ethiopia and the Christianity in North Africa. The major reason why Ethiopia remained a Christian nation after the attacks of Muslim Jihadists was because it was a Christianity that had taken home in Africa: there was a weaving together of basisc elements of the Ethiopian religion and culture with the Christian faith for the realization of an Ethiopian Christianity - the context of the Ethiopian people was put into consideration to the point that it has become

their religion and not the white man's religion. In the case of North Africa, which produced some of the finest of the Church Fathers, Christianity collapsed, not just because of the Muslim Jihadists attacks, but because it was an opportunity for the people to revolt against the Romans, a Church that taught them in Latin rather than in their local language. It was rather a Roman Church in North Africa.

This systematic framework of bridge building, beginning first from the foundation of understanding the human person who is involved, makes the mission to have a head and a tale (*ihe nwere isi na odu*), that is, that which is complete. It is difficult, if not impossible, to administer a message to the people that you do not know. If you do not know a people, how would you then deliver the message through what Okonkwo (1998 and 2000) refers to as the press of the people? The missionaries built the bridge in such a way that it was so tight that it could not allow for multidimensionality or recognition of the multifarious nature of the bridge users. The consequence is that it has led to chaos in its usage, and in fact this chaos was the basis for the agitation for an African theology and the reconstruction of the missionary approach. This kind of bridge succeeded in blocking communication and stiffening the African church.

Conclusion

Africans, as a result of the relationship of centuries that they have had with the West, and the relationship they continue to have with the west through the instrumentality of globalization, have now become a people of two heritages, a kind of a cultural hybrid, the one foreign and the other indigenous. However, our wholeness depends on our ability to handle these inheritances with maturity and creativity. This piece on the *Igwebuike* theology of *Ikwa Ogwe* is an attempt at building a bridge between the two conflicting inheritances or worldviews. It is regarded as a conflict because of the clash of the two worldviews involved in this historical encounter. Such a bridge is possible only when there is a better understanding and appreciation of both religious cultures. To appreciate one and not appreciate the other is the basis of the conflict.

Figure 2: source- Agnati, et al (2013)

Until this bridge is built, the Word of God cannot be effectively communicated in such a way that the people hearing the Word understand who they are and who others are. Communicating the gospel, without building a bridge, would rather take people away from themselves, thus, creating a problem of identity. The major task of the gospel message, which is the transformation of a people's worldview and their conceptual system, would not be adequately achieved. *Igwebuike* theology of *Ikwa Ogwe*, therefore, emphasizes identifying with the people and communicating the message through the press of the people or the media of the people, using the language imbued with the people's 'mundus sensibilis' (perceived world) which is indicative of their 'locus intellectus' (context for understanding), and putting into consideration the people's pastoral geography and social physics as the Incarnate Christ did. The act of building a bridge between both religious cultures is to ensure that the gospel becomes

culture and the culture becomes gospel; thus, the gospel message becomes culturally situated, and tongue-dependent.

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