

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Religion remains a major aspect of people's lives today. Even though the tilt toward religiosity may be waning in Europe and elsewhere, Africans maintain a strong sense of commitment and attachment to the spiritual realm, upholding the belief that *"the spiritual controls the physical."* The central role of religion in human life is evident in its influence on global issues such as the Middle East conflict. In Africa, the arrival of Europeans and Arabs introduced new forms of religion—Christianity and Islam. While these religions have been widely embraced, African Traditional Religion (ATR) continues to command significant followership. The Awka people long worshipped their deities in indigenous ways before the introduction of Christianity. Although a large section of the town embraced Christianity, both religions have coexisted though not without tension. Christianity often regards traditional practices as evil, leading to misunderstanding and conflict. This religious discord has hindered communal unity, making it difficult for the town to collectively address shared challenges such as insecurity and poor infrastructure. By historicizing the religious evolution of Awka, this paper aims to highlight the far-reaching impact of Christianity on the indigenous religious system of the Awka people. It also proposes strategies for fostering harmony among the various religious groups and their adherents. To achieve this, the study draws on both primary and secondary sources, with oral interviews playing a pivotal role. Ultimately, the paper argues that if the strained relationship between the Christian Church and traditional religion practitioners is not addressed, it could have grave consequences for Awka and indeed, for Anambra State.

Introduction

People in different parts of the world have diverse religions and cultures. **Religion** can be defined as the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal god or gods. It can also refer to a particular system of faith and worship.

Christianity, a religion founded by Jesus Christ, has spread across the world, including Nigeria. It was introduced to **Awka** in the year **1903**.

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of Christianity on the traditional religion of Awka—to understand the indigenous religious practices of the people, and to analyze the positive and negative effects of the introduction of Christianity on their mode of worship. This study also highlights the advantages and disadvantages of Awka traditional religion and its influence on society.

As this area has received limited scholarly attention, the research hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge on religious tolerance in Awka and, more broadly, in Igboland. It is expected to serve as a valuable resource for future studies.

The Awka People

Awka people lived their religion and their life was permeated with it. There is a mystery with regard to the origin of the Awka people, that nuclear group around which other people attached themselves to form Awka town. "These first Oka people were known as Ifiteana. To them others came and joined... and they all fused together to become one whole Oka people of today. These Ifiteana people were living in Oka under the names of Urueri, Ameayiana and Okpo respectively. The origin of the migration of Oka people lost in the mist of time, Oka people simply said of themselves that they were Ifiteana stock".¹

According to Amanke Okafor, the Awka people are the most ancient nation in Igboland and that no other nation surpassed them in antiquity.

Consequently, other people have stories/history of where they came from, Oka has none. "They believed that other Igbo communities took the names of their gods and days of their week such as Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwo from them."²

The name Awka was coined or derived from *Okika nube* shortened to *Okanube*. Okikanube is the god of war and hunting. "The Ifiteana people, the progenitor of Oka worship Okikanube so they were called *Umu Okika n'ube* (Umu Oka) which was why their town became Oka. The name Oka was changed in 1908 to Awka by a British colonial secretary Mr. F. S James."³

In addition, the Ifiteana people lived together at the present day Nkwelle. Later, they separated. Urueri remained at Nkwelle with the original Nkwelle people namely; Achalla Oji, Umunanwoke, Agbana-Umudoba, who came

and joined them and they became one village. It was unfortunate that Uruei decreased in number and they joined Achalla Oji family. Ameyiana on the other hand were later split into two - Amenyiana and Ndu group. They all lived in Okpuno Ochu present day old Enugu and ring road junction.

The main Amenyiana does not live together because of the fact that they killed their brother and were asked to leave the town. Ndu group moved to Umuayom and formed Umuokpandu family, and then took the headship of Uruei. The Okpo people made up of Amachala, Amudo Umuzocha popularly known as Amachalla nato meaning the three Amachalla village. They moved and lived near Nwanna stream. Other people that came to settle in Awka are Umudioka and Agulu.

Umudioka came from a town in Idemili known as Umudioka Akpom. They were popularly known as Dioka. They were business men before one of them known as Ichide settled at Awka. He later got married to Nwanyanwu from Amikwo Awka, who bore him four sons. "Ichide noticed how he succeeded in Awka and he thereby invited his brother Udeke and they are the founder of the five villages in Umudioka Obunese."⁴

Another story of Awka origin has it that the founding father was Nneoshi. He was a farmer and a hunter and in searching for a better place, he migrated to the present-day Ugwuoba in Enugu State and settled. He had two sons - Ugwuoba and Oka, when their father Nneoshi died. The first son Ugwuoba occupied the father's house (obi) and lived there, according to tradition, and this grew into Ugwuoba till date.

The phrase Awka noshi, Ugwuoba noshi is commonly used in Awka especially among the elders. "It was stated that when Awka became the headquarters of the new Anambra state, Offodile and other dignitary went to Igwe Odibo of Ugwuoba. There, the delegation suggested to the Igwe if he and his people would not consider rejoining Awka division of which they were a part since the British colonial government came to Awka in 1905 until 1979."⁵ To their surprise, "the igwe replied that perhaps we did not know that Awka and Ugwuoba were brothers. According to him they were two sons of a woman known as Noshi, hence the saying Awka Noshi, Ugwuoba Noshi."⁶ According to Offodile, when the two brothers reached Ezu river at a place now known as Ugwuoba, the senior brother told the junior brother to cross over to the other side of the river to survey it. The junior brother did as he was told. He was impressed with the area. When he returned, he told the senior brother that he would like to settle at the land across the river. "He told him that the land was stable, looked fertile and thickly forested with no hills, valleys or ravines. Furthermore, he proposed to build his blacksmith forge, farm and hunt there. The senior brother agreed with him, so he moved across the river. The igwe further said that their ancestors told them that the name of the junior brother was Ayom."⁷

According to Offodile, the igwe asserted that "the people of Ugwuoba had been contemplating on meeting with Awka to plan a biannual conference of the children of Noshi at Ugwuoba, the ancestral home."⁸

"Oka who was the second son moved out and lived or settled at Ameanyi (meaning abode of elephant)."⁹ In the present Awka, his families founded Ifite and Ezi. "Ifite was the original inhabitants of Oka while Ezi is out skirts, which explains why Ifite takes first share before Ezi in Awka."¹⁰

"Awka comprises thirty-three villages grouped into Ezi and Ifite section and each was divided into three and four quarters respectively."¹¹ The two sections are Ezi and Amikwo quarters. Ifite comprises of Ayom na Okpala, Amachalla, Nkwelle and Ifite Oka quarters. Ayom na Okpala always take first before other quarters because they belong to Amenyiana, Umuokpandu family who became the head after the disappearance of Uruei, while Nkwelle takes the second share: the thirty three villages in order of taking share Umuayom, Umunnoke, Umuoranma, Umuokpu, Achallaoji, Umunamoke, Umudioka, Agbana, Amachalla, Amudo, Umuzocha, Ezinato, Ifite, Enuifite, Agbana Ifite, Omuko, Umueri, Umukwa, Umuogwali, Umuogbunu I, Umuogbunu II, Umudioka, Umudiana, okpaeri, Igwe Ogige, Isiagu, Obunagu, Umuogbu, Umubelle, Umuonaga, Umuike, Umuajagwo, Umuenechi, and Umuoruka.¹²

The Traditional Religion of Awka People

When Awka is mentioned, first thing to come to mind is their religion. There is no understanding of Awka without their religion. "Religion is defined as the recognition on the part of man of a controlling super human power entitled to obedience (reverence and worship, religion is derived from a Latin word "religion" meaning fear of gods."¹³

Awka religion is called Ovbuvbe (Awka pronunciation of the word Ofufe) which means worship. The Awka man's life is a perpetual prayer. He observes religion in many ways, in the way he works, in the way he eats and the way he plays e.g. before any other man eats his food, he will throw a morsel outside as a sacrifice to the gods

and before drinking any wine, he will go outside and pour a libation on the grounds to the gods. Same thing while breaking kolanuts in sacrifice to the gods. He remembers his gods in all he does.

Awka people despite having many gods recognized one God (Chi-ukwu) Chikwu as their Supreme God and creator of the universe. "They call him Chikwu-Okike (God the creator, Olisebuluwa" He from who all blessings flow. Amashiamachi (the unknowable)."¹⁴ They believed in Chikwu and prayed to him but have an altar or sacrifice to him.

There is a power called Chikwu, Eze-uwa nine (Lord of the Universe). He started the world both co-existed because he created man and gave him Mma-Ndu (life). He then created man, and gave him Mma-Ndu from Chikwu, man was called Nna (father) Onyennata maka na onatal Chikwu ndu" so Chikwu created all fathers. Nna asked Chikwu 'What am I going to do with all this Mma-Ndu you have given me? God then created woman, Nne and said to him, this is the person to look after Mma-Ndu I have given you. She will be the keeper of life. Nne do-nye any. So God created all mothers, nne, then he said Nna and Nne, I will make your life on earth everlasting. So he created "Nnwa" (the child for them). He directed that one child should produce another and so down the line to eternity. Nnwa muta nnwa, nnwa amuta ibie. He told them, I have given you everlasting life on earth, one child will beget another forever and ever.

He created everything and made a law to guide them and told them to keep the law and if they break the law, they will be punished. In other to keep the law, Chikwu created law enforcer called Alushi. He also created lesser gods all to make sure laws are enforced. They are equally called 'Alu ma muashi' meaning don't break my law which was shortened to Alushi and he said to men "Igbaghana Ifve chukwu kwulu" meaning don't argue what God said". Alushi only kills those that did bad things like when someone lied under oath and that is why is said Alushi anara egbuna nkiti (meaning the gods do not kill an innocent person).

Lesser Gods Recognized and Worshipped in Awka

- 1) Okika-na-Ube (Okanube) God of war and hunting, the inspirer of the Oka people.
- 2) Obe – The god of seasons and of agriculture.
- 3) Ovbuvbe – "This goddess solved all human problems (ona ara mkpa) she was goddess next in rank to Chikwu."¹⁵
- 4) Ngene-Son of Ovbuvbe – also solved problems. He controlled all streams, all bodies of water. Ovbuvbe was female, Ngene male. Every Ovbuvbe must have her Ngene that is every female must have a male.
- 5) Udo – god of purity and holiness. He controlled the Amanwulu celebrants (the first Oka title). His priest was called Eze Udo.
- 6) Aro – He was the messenger of Ovbuvbe. His shrine was always at the border of town. He was a god that indicated when hostile people were around, who gave early warning of the approach of enemies.
- 7) Agwu – the god of confusion and madness. He brought hardship on humans for their misdeeds. He was the executioner or punisher of the gods. At the beginning of any farming season, a small patch of land was farmed and sown with crops and was said to be Agwu. It was a sacrifice, then the farmer could farm his own without being afraid of bad harvest "Agwu na akpa" meant that a person was visited by Agwu, everything was scattered for that person including his senses, the companion god to Agwu is eso or Uke he was the devil in Christian religion, he was not revered or worshipped.¹⁶
- 8) Akogheli – The strengthener before the community went to any competition with another community that was not of Oka, the young men went to the shrine of Akogheli and took some feathers from his Ovbo and Oku (calabash) and pinned same to their hair when they get to the opposition community. It was believed that if any person wished to do them harm by means of "nshi" (poison projected at a person without physical contact). Akogheli would manifest its power and the "Nshi" would be turned back on the body (or the person) of its projector.
- 9) Imoka – the Avenger. Whenever an Oka man was going on a journey he took a piece of chalk from the shrine of Imoka and wrapped it in a piece of cloth and put it in his luggage. At his destination, he hung this wrapped up pieces of chalk in his workshop or place of residence as a protection against evil and hostile people. Imoka was known as "Ogbachi obodo" the Avenger and any person who harmed an Oka (man had himself and his whole family wiped out by Imoka).
- 10) Ajoka god of the territory of Oka - he was male and he watched over the territorial integrity of Oka town.
- 11) Ajana – female goddess of the earth - her shrines were ten. She punishes the offenders of the law. "Her priest is called Eze-Ajana. Eze in Oka means priest."¹² She cleanses a widow which was done at night. Oka people have rules and conducts in their religion which are called Omenana or Ona-eme which was divided into three;
 - i) Iwu – It was made to regulate ordinary affairs. It is an ordinary regulator.

- ii) Nso – These are weighty rules of conduct or prohibition. They were part of Awka life, and any breach must be cleansed in a ceremony by Eze-Ajana.
- iii) Alu – Abomination. It is absolutely prohibited and it touches the very existence of Awka. Such as having canal knowledge of his blood relation or betraying his town, etc. Anyone committing a lot might be punished by death and can only be cleansed after the offender has suffered penalty by *Nwanri*, there, nwa means *Nwoke* – Nri which means a man from *Nri*. Nri did the cleansing ceremonies of Awka town.

Tools Used in the Worship of Gods

Ovbo (Ofo): It was nothing but a moveable altar for sacrifice. It is different from other alters because it can be used for sacrifice for all gods.

“Every god in Oka, every Alushi had an altar made for him. No sacrifice was made to a god except on his particular altar. Ovbo was an exemption. It was used for all god”.¹⁷

How to Make an Ovbo (Ofo)

“You get a branch of *Ofo* tree or *Ogilishi* tree (in absence of *Ofo* tree due to its rareness. It is believed that both trees are favoured by the gods. You also dig up the roots of the tree, get a wooden bowl called Okwa, and scrape the bark of Ogilish stem into Okwa. You also put the roots into the receptacle and get a bit of a plant called Ofo-Ishi (not same as Ovbo tree). You get ose-ora plant (alligator pepper) and scrape the back of the stem into the okwa, then add its leaves. You also get nzu (white chalk) and add to the content of the wooden bowl. You pound all the (ingredients together with a pestle until the mixture is drawn. When the mixture is drawn, you get akwala rope (rope procured from the raffia palm tree).¹⁸

You paste the mixture into Ogilishi stem round and round, and then put the paste. As you paste round the Ogilishi stem, you hold the paste in place by tying it with Akwala rope. You go on doing this until you have the layers to the size you want. A part of the wood is left as a handle then leave to dry.

On the sanctification day, people assemble in Obu and ose Ora alligator pepper is tied to a palm frond. It is used to cleanse the Ovbo saying “Ivbe ashill ya bulu, ka oga abu” all those present will answer “E-o-o” (let it be what we say it should be).¹⁹

Then ‘emeghene, esughene fulu ishi ovbo and people will respond same “e-o-o” which means so be it.

Finally then Mkpologu (root) malife, magu amena nso” the same response follows (root! Be effective and powerful but not partial, after which it becomes on ovbo and could be used for sacrifice to all gods at their altar. Ovbo is a holy instrument and altar for all gods.

It meant truth Ovbo was a witness of the agreement of man with the gods to act righteously at all times, and one broke the agreement at one’s peril.

OBU

Obu is a small or big house in a centre of any Oka man’s hosue (like a government house of the family, where Ovbo is housed and where the family worships. Every Obu contains a set aside place where a movable altar for sacrifice is placed called ‘Ikpo mmuo” or shrine.

Oka gods have no form or shape but a mental concept. Their deity existed in the mind. It could not be seen. Only a few instance where they were believed to have appeared in human form. They never carved or made image of their gods. Unlike other religions, their religion only existed in the mind.

Classes of Gods in Awka Religion

At the centre of it all was the Chiukwu. He is believed to be the creator of all things. The second category comprises the gods who had never been human before – Alushi. They were gods worshipped by the generality of the people. These gods had existed from the beginning of time. The third were gods who were human beings before, but had become gods after re-incarnations through death and had ceased to come on earth. The fourth were the dead ancestors called family gods, who had not finished the cycle of reincarnation. Any human being who died became a spirit (mmuo). All gods in Oka religion except Chukwu is either ndu mmuo or Alushi). The point of contact Oka people used in reaching their gods is through sacrifice. They believed in sacrifice and their religion is based on that. For appeasement of their gods, they used oji (kolanut) in praying to their gods. Oji was the smallest item of sacrifice. It was offered to gods at all times and everywhere, Oka na ago oji, they use oji for prayer where kolanut was broken. The broker dug up the cotyledon from each piece of the kolanut. The reproductive organ in the kolanut (ile oji) and threw them outside”.²⁰

It was believed to be the part eaten by the gods and the remaining is eaten by humans.

Selection of Priests

Anyone can be chosen as a priest to minister to the gods and give them food. It is a very prestigious position, in terms of family structure. The head of the family acts as a chief priest and he alone can take down Ikpo mmuo (the domestic shrine), and will perform the rituals of worship and sacrifice single handedly.

Then for Alushi, which is not a family god but a general god. It was the person called by divination, dibia or extra ordinary sign like (omuma), cluster of bees in a compound or a tortoise visiting his compound that is chosen to be a priest of a particular god. When the priest dies, a successor is identified by similar ways. Oka people also have different altars. They have Uluchi, which some call Okpenshi. They are kept in Obu for sacrifice.

Second category of gods are worshipped by the community as a whole called Nkwu. "An nkwu could be made of iron, wood or stone".²¹

Apart from Obu, there is Olulu which is an opening under shady trees, a place set apart for the worshipping of a general god apart from family gods. There, they worship, appease and invoke their god. "It was there its Nkwu or altar was brought by the officiating priest. The shrine was usually in a groove trees or under one big tree. The tree or trees which gave shade were often decorated with a white cloth, to indicate that it was a holy place not to be defiled. It was there that people went to make sacrifices to the god. In doing so, they were not sacrificing to the tree but to the god whose sacred place or shrine or place of worship it was".²²

A sacrifice is placed on an Uluchi. If it is in Obu or Nkwu and is being taken off by small children and is called Nseli mmuo and this worship of ancestors declined because children became Christians and started going to school. This is as a result of the connection between small children and gods. The worship declined because there is no child to take food or meat being sacrificed off altar. Every sacrifice has its own ritual.

The messengers of Oka gods. Udene (vulture) is the messenger of the gods and they are used as a measure to know if their sacrifice is accepted or declined. "When Ifa sacrifice was being made and if animals are killed and vulture did not appear, the officiating priest would beat a gong (a resonant bell-shaped mental) and call out "Uku! Uku!! Meaning messenger, messenger, and the vulture would appear thus, the saying Agbafva afa ma shi avbuna Udene ivbe mel be mmuo"²³. (where there is a sacrifice and no vulture appears, something wrong must have happened in the land of the gods.²⁴ That is the reason when the white missionaries said they were messengers of God, Oka people called them Uku-chukwu (vulture of gods) ie. Since vulture (udene) is a messenger, the Uku was later corrupted to Uko Chikwu.

It was the Nkwu, the missionary people called Juju, (which means toy in French. It is a big misunderstanding where the missionaries said that Oka people worshipped juju or toy but what they worship in essence is spirit (mmuo)

There is also god of a family known as Chi, guardian spirit, a person's god, personal to himself. Everyone has his Chi. What a person is, they said is determined by himself and his Chi.

The dibias (native doctors) are the ones that reveal the knowledge of gods, likes and dislikes and anger to the people. A dibia is a very important person in Oka with his divination (avba dibia is a prophet, medium and diviner in Oka traditional religion.

He also heals with herbs and knife. He works with mind and spirit. They help in making people stick to the laws and customs of Oka.

The religion of Oka took them many and uncountable centuries to develop into its uniqueness. They believed that gods of one people had no power in the territory of other people, unless those who chose to worship them. For instance, "a total stranger in Oka can join Eze Imoka to eat the meat of animal sacrificed to Imoka, but not an Oka man can join Eze Ajana to eat the sacrifice to Ajana goddess.²⁵ An average Oka man refused to worship foreign gods other than their own, because they believed that if you worship as a people worship, you will think as they think and they will control your mind. This explains why the missionaries found it difficult to convert Oka people to Christianity when they came to Oka.

Oka man always stalk his life in doing what he considered right, thus the saying in Oka "jide Ovbo", do what is right or else suffer the consequences.

Oka people always hold firm to their *Ovbo*, while speaking and will always say "Ejim Ovbo". Ovbo tree is a very useless tree, so when they say Ejim Ovbo, it means I am holding Ovbo, let my life if I am doing injustice be like the Ovbo tree, barren and useless. Holding the Ovbo and acting rightly is the only way to avoid terrible fate.

The Oka man tried to be just and upright in all his ways. To know him you must know his religion.

The Advent of Christianity in Awka

Christianity came to Awka in 1899. In 1899, which was their first visit, it was one of the major market days and their arrival attracted a large crowd. Oral sources have it that Avfo Agulu was in full swing. Men and women doing their businesses, suddenly there was unusual excitement from Umuenechi end of the market and when people gathered, they saw an Umu-okpu man leading the missionaries, a white woman and two white men. According to people, there was a quick stop at the house of Awo Uka, Ozo in Umuonaga Village. The missionaries were of Anglican Communion. They preached the gospel and promise a return which they did in 1903 and they were given a land to build in a place called Ajo-Ofia (Ulu forest) by Agulu quarters. Later another land was given to them at Iyi Okpu quarters near Udo Shrine and they built both church, schools, known as St. Faith School and St. Faith Church respectively.

Today, there are many churches in Awka such as Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Nigeria and Presbyterian Church of Niger, the Baptist Church, Redeemed, Winners, etc.

Coming of the Roman Catholic Mission

Roman catholic was believed to come to Awka because of anti imoka education the C.M.S gave to Awka boys and their desire to correct it. The Roman Catholic mission came to Awka after some boys from St faith iyiokpu CMS school came to Nkwo ameanyi and vandalized the imoka groove. Apparently the boys were carrying out the injunction of moyses as stated in the Bible, 'when the lord your God brings you into the land which you are to enter and occupy...tear down their alters, smash their sacred pillars , destroy their idol by fire'

This dissatisfied chief offodile nwamalefvi who chased the boys away and believed that was anti Awka. These boys were taught at C.M.S schools , and this made him to seek another mission to impact better values to Awka boys.²⁶

Nonso noted that he called his son chukwuneke and asked him to take some of his friends from government school and go to igboariam and invite some reverend fathers to open up a mission in Awka which they believed would teach them English language which will enable them replace foreigners in court and in district commissioner's offices.²⁷

'Chukwuneke heeded his father's advice and assembled thirteen of his colleagues for a trip to Igboariam. These colleagues were festus Nnatu dilibe of Amudo village, Richard chukwuneke Anagbogu of Amachalla village, Samuel nwanenye nwsu of nkwell village, Jeremiah Nwobuajulu okeke of nkwell village , Christian Anachebe , Egbunonu of umudioka village, Nathaniel Nwejim Ndife of umuayom village, Nwalie nworji of umudioka village, Ben onwuegbunem of Ugwuoba town, Anagor ike of Nduoraabeke town, Vincent nwuba ndukwe of umudioka village Awka, Dibo Udeozo of umuogbunu villae Awka, Joseph Ekwunife Ekweanya of Umunnoko village and Alexandra onwumeli okoye of umudioka village Awka. When they got to Igboariam, they met with the reverend fathers and they were directed to Nteje where there was a catholic parish.²⁸

According to nwaume, when the men from chief offodile met the catholic parish priest, he sent a word through them to chief offodile to wait for him at court road junction and his summoned some of colleagues in the persons of chief nwsu oraonwu of umuoranma, nwsu Okoye Orji of umunnoko. Onwuegbune of umuzocha, nwajana agba of amudo. He also pointed out that the reverend father's name was father Bubendrof .²⁹

According to Offodile''father Bubendrof rode on a motorcycle while brother Joseph sat on a bicycle that was tied to the motorcycle, Chukwuneke and his colleagues met the two men on arrival to Awka and they sent one of their colleagues to chief Offodile's court to inform them of the men's arrival. When they went to inform Chief Offodile, they found out that none of the other chiefs who were expected to meet with the Reverend fathers kept the appointment. The chief came and met with the Reverend and after they were formally introduced he took them to his house. There, he presented them with one Cock and four yams. From there, they went to Nkwo market arena and still none of the other chiefs had shown up. It was later learnt that the villages who did not want the Catholic Church to establish in Awka had carried propaganda about the church and secretly advised the chiefs against supporting the venture. After Chief Ofodile and the priest came to resolution with the issues of establishment of a mission school in the area, he gave them a piece of land that belongs to Ndubishi Okpo of Umunnoko. The land is at the end part of Awka and as soon as the reverend fathers left, Chukwuneke and his colleagues went to work and cleared the land of bushes and erected a mud house and attached it with raffia mats. The school became operational by 1916 and father Bubendrof posted Mr Felix Udeme as his first teacher.³⁰

Udeozor asserts that in 1923, father Bubendrof opened a new site on Offodile's land known as St Cyprain. He records that Chief Nwsu Oronwu who was one of the chiefs that disappointed Chief Offodile went and reported him to the district commissioner to close the Catholic Church but the district commissioner dismissed the case²⁹. Also in 1932 reverend father Thomas fox suspended all of her members who did not marry in the church.

Rev Fox who was then a parish priest at Adazi and in charge of Awka mission refused these men access into the church during Sunday worship. Consequently, many of them left the church and threw the church memberships problems into crisis. At the heat of this controversy the church membership has dropped to only about 30 school boys, plus a few more from Umudioka who had boycotted the St Faith Church Iyiokpu. It later became evident that some of the boys who boycotted St faith church did so because of the strong policies of CMS Church, in respect to baptism, At baptism in order to prove that they have severed all ties with Imoka , the boys were made to kiss the skulls of the black monkey. This was taken as evidence that they are now truly non believers in Imoka and could eat its black monkey. Despite the drop in membership, the church persisted and made some converts among which was Agbata Ezeneme onyeanusu of umuorannma who was first to marry in the catholic church. He soon became the father of the church and a ‘‘ bulwark’’ in all the churches in awka.³¹

In 1934, Isaac Moneke gave Fr Liddanne a piece of land at umuzocha between David Obuekwe’s and Nwakwudo Anaere’s compound. They built a school there, St Patricks school and posted a certified teacher, the late Peter Arize Onwuka to run it.

In 1948, Holy Rosary school was established known now as seat of wisdom primary school (Amamife). It was built on a god forsaken bush called NGENE UKO. It was accounted by ozoekwe that it made Moses Agbata who led the boys to work on the bush sick and never recovered.

In 1950, Awka was made a parish with Fr Seagrave as the parish priest. He was replaced by Fr brady who later bult schools at Nkwelle, ifite Awka, and Umubelle.

In 1962, the reverend sisters of the order of St. John of God established St John of God girl’s secondary school at umuzocha Awka.

In 1974, His Grace, The late Archibishop of Onitsha, the most reverend Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp laid the foundation stone of St Patricks Cathedral Awka. In November 1977 Monsignor A.K Obiefuna was appointed the first bishop of Awka.

In 1983, Regina Caeli Hospital and maternity Awka was built. Same year Conference and retreat center was built at Okpuno.

In 1991 St Marys pro cathedral was completed, in 1994 bishop A.K Obiefuna started building another Cathedral for St Patrick’s Church Awka.³²

The Impact of Christianity on Awka Traditional Religion

In Awka, Christianity is seen as another foreign religion that had impacted positively and negatively on Awka religion. Positively speaking, apart from preaching the gospel, they taught their converts to read and write, employing them afterwards. They also enlightened them through western education. They built so many schools in Awka like Girls’ Secondary School Awka, Igwebuikie Grammar School Awka, St. John of God, St. Faith Church and School e.t.c. They also helped in curtailing excesses like drinking alcohol, risky sexual practices and excessive inhaling of tobacco (utaba).

They granted some Awka children scholarship to study abroad which in turn empowered young Awka indigenes to become more civilized and enhanced creativity through modern improvements in blacksmithing, iron fabrication and welding.

They also helped in converting Awka language in a writable form.

They helped in the building of roads and establishing local road network that led to every schools and Churches.

Negative Impact of Christianity on Awka Traditional Religion

They enslaved their minds. In as much as it is inculcated that the only way to human dignity and full grown personality was to be and act in everything like Europeans and to despise their own culture, it was in this way that Christianity arrived in Oka dressed up in European garb. It was immediately associated with civilization in the sense of being well dressed in European fashion and proficiency in the use of the English language with a corresponding disdain for their own culture, a disdain which resulted in their inability to speak their language well or properly.

Christianity also resulted to the neglect of the instruments used in Awka traditional worship like Ovbo. They see it as juju (toy in French language) and anything they did not understand in the Oka religion was viewed with disdain and tagged evil or devil. Their interference in Awka religion also led to the problem of Oka and Catholic Church. This is evident in the issue of women performing the dust to dust ritual during burials (pouring sand on

her husband grave) which is a taboo in Oka traditional religion. It led to the demise of some Awka Customs which were viewed as paganism and evil.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the traditional Awka person strove to be just and upright in all aspects of life. He made every effort to live according to the dictates of his religion, which governed his entire moral code.

It is important to note that it is not the intention of this researcher to discredit the Catholic Church in its "*dust to dust*" stance, but rather to provide deeper insight into the impact of Christianity on the traditional religion of Awka. Christianity has undoubtedly had a significant influence on Awka's religious practices, and this research has succeeded in presenting an accurate account of the original religion of the Awka people.

The conflict or differences between Christianity and Awka traditional religion, as discussed, can be addressed through sustained engagement with the local community—via dialogue, conferences, workshops, and spiritual revivals. Furthermore, there is a need for the Church to intensify teachings on relevant issues and to promote peaceful coexistence, recognizing that both religions ultimately worship the same supreme deity, Chukwu.

Endnotes

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- 11) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 42
- 12) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 80
- 13) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 42
- 14) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 100
- 15) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 96
- 16) Peter Ozoekwe, 50 years, civil servant, interviewed on 16, May, 2023
- 17) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 88
- 18) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 86
- 19) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 89
- 20) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 89
- 21) Emeka Nwamu, 56 years, A trader, interviewed on 10th June, 2023
- 22) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 80
- 23) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 82
- 24) Chijioke Ifesinachi, 45 years, An enterprenuer, interviewed on Feb 12, 2023
- 25) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 80
- 26) Ijeoma Okafor, 67 years, farmer, interviewed on March 30, 2023
- 27) Nonso Nwanno, 48 years, civil servant, interviewed on April 20, 2023
- 28) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 81
- 29) Nwaume Okechukwu, 67 years, trader, interviewed on March 12, 2003
- 30) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 85
- 31) Amanke Okafor, *The Awka* ... 87