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THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SYNCRETIC
AND PAGANISTIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES
IN CATHOLIC FUNERALS IN IGBOLAND NIGERIA

A b s t r a c t. “Death is generally seen as the cessation of the connection between our mind and our body”¹. Most people believe that death takes place when the heart stops beating. Death occurs when the subtle consciousness finally leaves the body to go to the next life. “In order word death is the termination of all biological functions that sustain the living organism.”² According to *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “death is the separation of the soul from the body.”³ At the moment of death, the soul separates from the body.

One particular belief that cuts across all cultures and religions is that all human beings must die and ought to be buried as a sign of respect and farewell. The question is what is the nature or rather what should be the nature of the burial and funeral rite of a deceased person? Do all human beings have the same or common burial and funeral rites or do our burial and funeral rites vary according to our religion, faith, beliefs, culture, age and understanding? Catholic Church teaches that death is a transformation and not the end of life. It is the teaching and belief of the Catholic Church that there is a resurrection and life of glory in heaven where those who have done well while on earth see God face to face.

Catholic Church also teaches and believes that on the last day, both the body and the soul will rise to see the glory of God. For this reason, the body of a dead Catholic deserves some respect and dignity. This corpse should be given the respect and dignity it deserves during burial. However, this is not always the case especially in Igboland, Nigeria. There are some

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¹ E. MOLLY, “What is death”, in *How Dying Works*, 12 January 2009, viewed on 15 January 2016, <http://health.howstuffworks.com/diseases-conditions/death-dying/dying.htm>> 19.04.2016.

² Ibidem.

³ CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition (America, Crown Publishing Group, 2012), no. 366.

syncretistic and fetish beliefs and practices associated with some Catholic burials and funerals in Igboland.

This paper therefore sets out to bring to light these syncretic, paganistic and fetish practices and beliefs associated with Catholic burials and funerals in Igboland. It will also offer some theological implications of these practices as well as the possible ways through which they can be curtailed and stopped.

Key words: syncretism; paganism; igboland Nigeria; burial; funeral; beliefs; practices; inculturation; purification; atonement; evil spirits, revenge and retaliation.

1. SOME PAGAN PRACTICES IN THE BURIALS AND FUNERALS OF THE DEAD CATHOLICS IN IGBOLAND

Christianity was introduced in Nigeria in the early sixteenth through eighteenth centuries through Portuguese Catholic missionaries. It reached the Benin kingdom in 1515 and Warri kingdom in 1555. The strategy the missionaries used was palace conversion. They aimed to convert the Oba (king) and make him accept the Catholic faith as the real religion. „Roman Catholic Church arrived in Igboland in southeastern Nigeria in late 19th century.”⁴

The Igbo people welcomed the Catholic missionaries and accepted the religion not necessarily because of the Gospel message but because of the education and development they brought. So, because of this, within a short interval, Catholicism spread throughout the Igboland in southeastern part of Nigeria. With the spread of Christianity like harmattan fire, people began to accept the Gospel with its entire message. The Catholic missionaries introduced farming and gardening which they used as a means of attracting and retaining people to the Catholic religion. For this reason, many people left their religion and followed the new Catholic religion.

So, with all these, Catholic faith spread very fast and deeply too throughout the Igboland. The lifestyle of Igbo people was deeply and largely defined and shaped by Gospel and Catholic faith. Today, one can boldly say that Catholic faith and Gospel message have indeed permeated all aspects of life of Igbo people namely: politically, socially, culturally, economically and religiously. Religiously speaking, Catholics in Igboland bury their dead ones and carry out funeral ceremonies in accordance with Catholic burial and funeral rites as contained in Canon 1176-1185. “The Igboland in southeastern

⁴ Celestine OBI, “Background to the Planting of Catholic Christianity in the Lower Niger-Igboland”, in *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1985*, ed. K. Onwubiko, V. Nwosu (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers Limited, 1985), 10.

Nigeria can today boast of having about 75% good and devoted Catholics who are ever ready and willing to have everything done in accordance with Catholic faith.”⁵ However, despite this great number of devoted and faithful Catholics, there are still some pagan beliefs, elements and practices found among these faithful Catholics especially in the areas of burials and funerals in Igboland. Some of these pagan practices and beliefs found in the Catholic burials and funerals in Igboland will be explained below.

1.1. Belief in the existence of the evil spirits

“African Traditional Religion believes and teaches that after death, the souls of those who lived good life while on earth go to the ancestry world while the souls of those who lived bad life come back to earth as evil spirits in form of witchcraft to torment and torture people.”⁶ Accidents, epidemics and misfortunes of every kind are attributed to these evil spirits. In order to render these evil spirits powerless and harmless, lots and lots of rituals are performed on their graves. These pagan practices and beliefs are not limited to the pagans alone. They are also found among many Catholic faithful.

“Many Catholics in Igboland believe in the doctrine of Reincarnation.”⁷ “Reincarnation refers to the soul of a dead person being reborn to their communities.”⁸ This belief has been discovered to be a very strong belief among Catholics. More than this, many Catholics in Igboland believe that the spirits of people who live bad life while on earth do come back to earth after death as “EVIL SPIRITS”. They believe that these evil spirits exert negative and evil influences and calamities on the living. Evil forces, powers of the witchcraft, spirit possession and attacks are often attributed to these evil spirits. These evil spirits are believed to be the causes of accidents, epidemics, calamities, disasters and sudden death. To avoid all these, many Catholics secretly practice and perform some pagan activities and fetish sacrifices during the burial of such people considered as bad and evil people while they were alive. Some Catholics also choose to perform these pagan sacrifices and

⁵ Chike MADUEKWE, “125 Years of Catholic Church in Igboland Eastern Nigeria”, in *Vanguard Newspapers, One of the Nigerian Dailies* (Lagos: Vanguard Press, 30 December, 2010), 1.

⁶ John MBITI, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited, 1971), 81.

⁷ Martin IKEOTUONYE, *Some Pagan Beliefs among Catholics today in Igboland: A Comparative Study* (Owerri: Assumpta Press, 2008), 62.

⁸ Bonaventure NWANKITI, *Catholic Church and Paganism in Igboland* (Owerri: Snaap Press, 1998), 62.

rituals later on their graves. Normally, chains are locked together with padlock and with the assistance of the chief priest (pagan priest) placed on their graves after some rituals and incantations have been performed. The aim of all these is to render these souls impotent, inactive, harmless, powerless and therefore unable to come back to this world as evil spirits. Similarly, in some parts of Igboland, women are not allowed to pour sand in the grave of their dead husbands.

1.2. Belief in revenge and retaliation in the spirit world

“Every believer and adherent of Igbo traditional religion believes that every death especially the death of a young person has a cause.”⁹ In traditional Igbo setting, when a young man or lady dies, his or her life is believed to have been terminated prematurely, that an evil one has terminated his or her life. For him to retaliate and carry out revenge, a gun, a sharp matchet or a broom is put into his grave. The Igbo believe that he will use this object to destroy his enemy and revenge for what his enemy has done to him. “The significance of matchet is that he will use it to kill all his enemies who have brought about his death. He will use the broom to sweep away all his enemies from earth. These objects are signs of revenge and retaliation.”¹⁰

Furthermore, the family and the relatives of the deceased will take further step to cement the grave of their deceased one as soon as the corpse has been laid to rest and the grave covered with sand. They do this because they, the adherents of the African traditional religion believe that the enemy who is believed to have killed their dear one can neutralize the revengeful and retaliatory acts of the deceased and so render him powerless, impotent and incapable to retaliate if he (the supposed enemy or killer) pours sand in or on the grave of the deceased. So, to make sure that he (the accused killer or enemy) does not pour sand in or on the grave, the family of the deceased normally selects those to cover the grave with sand as soon as the corpse has been laid to rest as well as those to cement the grave as soon as it has been covered with sand.

Unfortunately, this fetish practice and belief has found its ugly head among some Catholics in Igboland Nigeria or as some people will say that many Catholics still wear the fetish garment of African traditional religion. I have been an eyewitness to this ugly experience during a Catholic burial

⁹ John MBITI, *African Traditional Religion*, 82.

¹⁰ Interview with C. Okpalike on 20 April 2016 (He is a professor of African Traditional Religion in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria).

and funeral ceremony. In 2011, I was an assistant parish priest at St. Simon's Catholic Church Ukpo in Dunukofia Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. On July 10th 2011, a young man of 28 years old died in a ghastly car accident. As it is common among the Igbo people, the family believed that their son and brother was killed by someone. They believed that his death was not a natural death. On the day of his burial, a burial Mass was said. I was the officiating priest. Everything was done in accordance with Catholic burial and funeral rite. But when it was time to bury him, the family members put two sharp matchets into his grave. Their aim and mission was that their son and brother – Emmanuel will use these matchets to kill and destroy all his enemies who brought about his death. I saw this as a fetish practice and pagan belief and I therefore insisted that those matchets should be removed. The family members refused to remove them. I insisted and told them that I will leave the corpse there and go if they refuse to remove those matchets. They still refused to remove them and even told me that they will rather prefer that I go than to remove those matchets. Having seen how deep rooted this fetish practice is in them, I took my bow and left. They went on to bury their son and brother by themselves with those two matchets right inside the grave. They were later summoned by the parish priest for interrogations and explanations.

But the most scandalizing aspects of the whole scenario were: firstly, the family involved is a very good and devoted Catholic family whose last born and son was in the seminary about to become a priest. Secondly, that all those present during the ugly event, who have gathered to bury the dead man were Catholics and they never rose to condemn the fetish act. Even when I was leaving, nobody stood up against the fetish practice. This really shows that they were all in support of the ugly practice and will do the same when found under the same condition and circumstance.

1.3. Purification and atonment for bad death

Adherents of African Traditional Religion in Igboland believe that there is good death and bad death. But this belief is not limited to them alone. Experiences have shown that many Catholic faithful believe in this also. "It is a common belief among the African Traditional Religious worshippers that good death is any death that occurs in the old age of a person's life after he or she has got married, got children, raised and trained them, reached ripe

old age and then dies.”¹¹ Bad death then is any death that occurs at a very young age of a person’s life when the person involved has not even got married not to talk of getting children or even training them. In fact, in Igboland, „any death that occurs between the ages of 15-35 is considered to be a very bad death because the death is believed to be an unnatural one indeed.”¹² These traditional believers hold that a very powerful bad force, spirit or enemy must have caused such death. Such death in the eyes of a typical Igbo man or woman is an omen and an abnormal occurrence. These adherents of African Traditional Religion in Igboland believe that such death must be purified and atoned for, for the following reasons: 1. to ensure that the dead person reaches the ancestral home, 2. to avoid and prevent future occurrence of such death in the family, 3. to avoid people dying after eating food and taking drinks during the burial and funeral of the deceased.

To carry out his purification and atonement ritual, cock is bought from a distant market. Some incantations are made upon the cock by the chief priest together with some male elders of the kindred family of the deceased. The incantations will include some statements like- may (the name of the deceased is mentioned) reach our ancestral world, may this type of death never occur again et cetera. After this incantation process, the cock is killed with knife and its blood is poured away. It is their belief that the blood by being poured away has purified the dead and rendered everything associated with it clean so that the dead can now reach the ancestral world. It is also believed that the blood has taken away anything that can cause such bad death in the family in future. Furthermore, it is their belief that the blood has also cleansed and purified all food and drinks brought for the burial and funeral ceremony of the deceased. They are now very safe for consumption. These are fetish and pagan beliefs and practices that are very rampant and prevalent among pagans in Igboland.

But today in Igboland, many devout Catholics faithfully believe and observe this fetish and pagan practice. Experiences have shown that many Catholic faithfuls believe, practice and take part in this non-Christian act. There have been many instances where a dead man who was a practicing catholic was buried according to Catholic rites. When the Catholic community had finished with the funeral ceremonies and left, some people who are Catholics together with family members and relatives gathered and performed

¹¹ Regina OKAFOR, *Widowhood in Igboland Nigeria* (Nsukka: Bright Press, 1993), 52.

¹² John MBITI, *African Traditional Religion*, 103.

these fetish and pagan acts for their deceased one. The most surprising aspect of the whole thing is that 90% of those in attendance was Catholics. Only few pagans with their chief priest were in attendance.

1.4. The practice of the accused drinking the water used in washing the corpse

It is a common practice among the pagans that if a person is accused of killing or terminating the life of another person, the accused should drink the water used in washing the corpse. He or she is expected to die after drinking the water if he or she is guilty of the case of killing. But if he or she lives on, then he or she is free from the accusation. Pagans use this means in settling the disputes and accusations that normally arise when someone dies and is being suspected of having been killed by another person. They see this means as the best method of finding out the truth. That is why this method is so common and rampant among pagans. Just like other practices mentioned above, this practice is not limited to the pagan world only. Many Catholics also practice it too. It is a strong belief among many Catholics in Igboland that the water used in washing a corpse will kill the accused person if he or she is not free from the accusation.

2. THE THEOLOGICAL AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THESE SYNCRETIC AND PAGANISTIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE CATHOLIC FAITHFUL IN IGBOLAND

The goal of every missionary work is to plant Christian Churches that are both true to the word of God and historical tradition and indigenous at the same time. In the attempt to create this balance, most times, Church faithful fail to remove the aspect of the indigenous culture that are contrary to the Gospel and living tradition of the Church. Because of this incompatible mixture, they fail to penetrate the depth of the Christian message and find themselves oscillating between the redeeming Gospel of Christ and constricting traditions without settling for any. Hence, the faith planted in the African soil is not deep-rooted. It has remained superficial and has led to lots and lots of syncretic practices among Catholic faithful. This is evident in the lives, beliefs and practices of Christians in many African communities today. Catholic Church considers the above mentioned beliefs and practices as something really fetish, barbaric, idolatrous, morally evil, theologically wrong and pastorally challenging. There are lots and lots of immoralities behind these practi-

ces which make them stand against the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church.

For instance, in the pagan practice where women are not allowed to see the dead bodies of their husbands or to pour sand in the graves of their husbands, the main reason is not that it is the duty of the men to put sand in the grave of their wives and not vice versa. The main reason why pagans especially men insist that women should not pour sand in the graves of their husbands is for sexual availability and accessibility. The same is applicable to the practice of women pretending that they have not known that their husbands have died and therefore have not seen their corpses. So, the main reason for this practice is the sexual availability of these widows who have lost their husbands. This is immoral and sinful and that is why the Catholic Church is against it. "It is a strong belief among pagans that death terminates the relationship between a man and his wife."¹³ When this relationship is terminated, the woman is free to remarry or even to have sexual relationship with any other man of her choice provided that her consent is sought and obtained. It is also a strong belief among pagans that if a woman sees the dead body of her husband or pours sand in the grave of her husband during his burial, the already terminated relationship and bond is renewed and strengthened. If any man makes sexual advances towards this woman at this point, he will die. His life will be terminated for defiling and desecrating the land. So, in order to make these widows sexually available to men, they are prevented from seeing the dead bodies of their husbands as well as pouring sand in the grave of their husbands. Catholic Church is totally against this practice because of sexual immoralities and promiscuity it encourages. Many women have lost their faith because of this fetish practice.

Again, Catholic Church condemns the practice of planting the tree of life. This practice sees other gods as sources of life, creation and procreation rather than the Supreme God of the Christians. It gives worship, honor, respect, praise and thanksgiving due to Supreme God to other gods (pagan gods). This is indeed against the commandments of God and the teachings of the Church.

Furthermore, Catholic Church strongly condemns the practice of the purification and atonement for bad death common among pagans and some Catholics too. This pagan practice does not recognize God as the source of all life and all death. It believes that other evil forces and powers can interfere in

¹³ R. OKAFOR, *Widowhood in Igboland Nigeria*, 98.

the affairs of men and even terminate human life prematurely. This practice also does not give credibility to the Christian concept of heaven. So, based on all these teachings, Catholic Church is strongly against this practice. Catholic Church teaches that God is the sole creator and source of human life and death. Only God can create life and only He also can take away life. All life belongs to him. Catholic Church also believes that after life, one either goes to heaven, purgatory or hell. The concepts of ancestry world and reincarnation have no place in Catholic theology. Catholic Church also does not believe in the existence of the evil spirits. Again, Catholic Church does not encourage human revenge and retaliation. All revenge and retaliation she believes, belong to God. It is the duty of God to reward the good and punish the bad. It is never left to man to revenge. Also, putting knives, guns et cetera for revenge and fight in the next world does not in any way reflect the nature of life after death in Catholic teachings and understanding. Further still, the practice of the accused person drinking the water used in washing the corpse to prove his or her innocence as well as the practice of the basket corpse ritual are totally against the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has an identity. Her teachings and practices are based on the Gospel. In the same way, Catholic Church has her burial and funeral rites and her members ought and should be buried in accordance with her burial and funeral rites.

3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church has an identity. Catholicism is not a syncretistic religion. She has her own identity and a living spiritual tradition. To be a member of the Church therefore implies commitment to her beliefs, practices and institutional disciplines. African Catholics in general and Igbo Catholics in particular need to extricate themselves from these barbaric and fetish practices inherent in the African and Igbo traditional Religions. According to Pope John Paul II, “the search for the divine through the African soul in these Traditional Religions is not without some errors here and there.”¹⁴ Pope continued by saying, “with regard to African Traditional Religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics

¹⁴ John SOUROU, “African Traditional Religion and the Catholic Church in the Light of the Synod: 1994 and 2009”, *African Human Right Journal* 1(2014), 8:18.

from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal Creator and Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith.”¹⁵ From the statement of the Pope, one can see immediately that dialogue, inculturation and catechesis are indispensable elements in the christianization of the Africans particularly the Igbos. As Pope John Paul II described it in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, “inculturation is a process that includes the whole of Christian existence – theology, liturgy, customs, and structures. It is meant to address the deep sense in many Africans of having received a faith not totally rooted in culture and life. It is an urgent priority for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa.”¹⁶

Catholic Church has various rites for her various activities. Her burial and funeral rites are clearly stated in the Code of Canon Law. Catholic faithful are enjoined upon to follow these rites in their burial and funeral activities. But this is not always the case in Igboland. Many people in Igboland are Catholics but Catholic faith and the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ especially his teachings on death and resurrection are yet to take deep root in their lives. This is why many Catholic faithful incorporate lots and lots of pagan practices and beliefs in the Catholic burials and funerals. Many see this as inculturation. But as I have said above, inculturation is never and will never be syncretism. They are two different things with totally different meanings. Inculturation is recommended for evangelization. It entails a sincere and honest appreciation of the dimensions of other cultures in so far it does not alter the main essence of the Church’s identity. Syncretism alters the main essence and meaning of the Church’s identity. This is exactly what the above pagan practices do to Catholic Church in Igboland especially as it concerns her burial and funeral rites. These practices completely alter the entire essence and meaning of the Catholic burials and funerals. This is why the Catholic Church is totally and vehemently against them. To be a member of the Catholic Church therefore implies commitment to her beliefs, practices and institutional disciplines. Syncretism is never and can never be inculturation. Catholicism is not a syncretistic religion and this explains why from the very beginning of the Church she has worked hard to block the intrusion of syncretism in all its forms.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa”* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 59.

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TEOLOGICZNA ANALIZA SYNKRETYSTYCZNYCH I POGAŃSKICH WIERZEŃ
ORAZ PRAKTYK RELIGIJNYCH W CZASIE POGRZEBÓW KATOLICKICH
W IGBOLAND W NIGERII

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł podejmuje problem obecności synkretystycznych i pogańskich wierzeń oraz praktyk religijnych związanych ze śmiercią i pogrzebem katolickim wśród ludności Igboland w Nigerii, który to teren znany jest jako zdecydowanie katolicki. Autor charakteryzuje konkretne przykłady synkretystycznych i pogańskich wierzeń oraz praktyk religijnych związanych z pochówkiem, jak wiara w złe duchy, zemsta i odwet na zmarłym, konieczność oczyszczenia i okupu złożonego za zmarłego „złą śmiercią”, rytuał wypicia wody, którą umyto ciało zmarłego przez podejrzanego o zadanie mu śmierci. W kolejnej części artykułu zostały przedstawione teologiczne i moralne konsekwencje wcześniej opisanych wierzeń i praktyk. Artykuł wieńczy ogólny wniosek, że według autora błędem jest traktowanie tychże praktyk i wierzeń jako części inkulturacji. Uważa on, że inkulturacja, jako właściwy sposób ewangelizacji, polega na uznaniu oraz włączaniu przez Kościół danej kultury w tych jej przejawach, które są zgodne z wiarą chrześcijańską. Te niezgodne z nią powinny być oczyszczone i nie mogą być inkulturowane, gdyż wówczas rodziłby się synkretyzm, który zagrażałby tożsamości chrześcijaństwa i Kościoła.

Słowa kluczowe: Igboland w Nigerii; inkulturacja; oczyszczenie; odwet; okup; pochówek; pogaństwo; pogrzeb; praktyki religijne; synkretyzm; wierzenia; zemsta; złe duchy.