

UKA DI N'OBI: A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE ON COVID-19 EXPERIENCE IN IGBO-AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The idea of Uka di n'obi has both metaphysical and physical implications. Metaphysical because it tallies with the process philosopher – Alfred North Whitehead's postulation that Religion is what we do with our solitariness; if we were never solitary, then, we were never religious. Thus, a feeling of the self as the basis for true spirituality and not necessarily because we are part of organized religions. Physical, because it shows that the true church is not the physical building or monument but the heart as a reflection and sanctuary of charity, good works and moral rectitude. The Coronavirus pandemic that halted the activities of the World in all ramifications from late part of last year to now, has exposed the common adage that Uka di n'obi and not necessarily that people must congregate on particular days of worship, say Sunday, to worship the Divine. Using the philosophical methods of analysis and hermeneutics, this present study seeks to evaluate the concept of Uka di n'obi and interpret it in the light of the pandemic experience within the ecology of the Igbo society, as a conspicuous example of a society that actively believes in the Sunday physical

presence in the Churches and what becomes of them, if there is a paradigm shift as witnessed during the lockdown caused by the pandemic. The Study concludes that true spirituality begins with the self before alignment to organized religions and that a personal relationship with God is better and will give more existential authentication than lip-service assembly and deviant lifestyles that have not aided society in the development index or better it in any way.

Keywords: *Uka di n'obi, COVID-19, Igbo, African, Religion*

Introduction

The Igbo adage that *Uka di n'obi*, which translates to mean church-going or fellowship is a matter of the heart or conscience, is further interpreted to mean that spirituality is a personal thing. Being a church-goer is not an indication that one is spiritually minded or sound.

In Traditional Igbo culture, the idea of spirituality and having a personal relationship with one's *Chi* (personal god) predates the coming of Christianity into Igbo land. The idea of *Odinala*, *Odinani*, *Omenala*, *Omenana*, *Omenani*, indicates cultural patterns/systems infused with many things including matters of spirituality and all that. Every Igbo man, in the pre-Christian era, has a place of worship in his *Obi*. The *Obi* meant here is not the heart but family place of abode. There is no common place of gathering of different men in a community. Although, there is usually a big shrine (at the centre of some Igbo communities) reserved for the Chief Priest of the community, popularly known as *Dibia* or *Eze-mmuo*. Such shrines are basically the central place of the community's major deity or pantheon of gods, they worship or venerate. However, they still do not gather there on particular days of the week, be it *Orie*, *Afor*, *Nkwo* or *Eke*. Most of the times, any large gathering is prompted by either a feast or when there is a Divine message from the Chief Priest to the rest of the community to ward off an impending doom on the community or other related or non-related issues.

The Igbo adages –*onye na Chi ya* (One with his/her God); *muna Chi m so aga* (I walk with my God); *Chi m zuru m ókè* (My God is enough for me), among others, are indications that in the Igbo traditional system, a personal relationship with one's God is the most important. It does not involve the “they” but the “I.” The self is the key participator in this relationship with the Divine. Not in a congregated manner but in a personal sense. Early in the morning, you see an Igbo man enter into his small family shrine and gather only members of the immediate family or even alone and perform the *igò òfò*. This is done as a ritual seeking for the gods and ancestors of the land to bless the efforts of one for the day, the family, fruitful returns of farm produce in the land, long life and health of mind and body (*ogologo ndu na aru-isi-ike*), among others.

The advent of Christianity in Igbo land, came with a lot of disruptions of *omenala* (traditions). Sundays became the official day of worship of the Christian God. On Sunday, being the first day of the week, led to the term of *izu-uka* as the commencement of a new week beginning with Sunday. The Igbo became famous by the beginning of the 20th century as a church-going people who abandoned for the most part, their traditional ways of life and embraced Christianity. Thus, Sundays are sacrosanct for church going and not to be traded for any other thing.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic struck and a lockdown was imposed by government as a measure to curtail the spread of the dreaded virus. Thus, the sit-at-home became such that no one went to church for the period the lock-down lasted. Churches became empty monuments/buildings and hence, triggered the revisualization that true spirituality is indeed personal and not organized.

In this study, we shall explore and philosophically treat the idea of *Uka dì n'obi*, look at the Igbo traditional society before the advent of Christianity, Christianity and Igbo culture and a post-pandemic forecast of how church-going will be afterwards.

Traditional Igbo Society before the Advent of Christianity.

The traditional Igbo Society has a strong religious and cultural face that are intertwined. It has existential meaning for them, and follows them all through life from birth to death. There are many Igbo

Scholars who generally agree on this. C. Okeke, C. Ibenwa and G. Okeke citing Mbiti noted that:

Igbo culture is traditional in the sense that it is rooted in their culture. It is received by oral authority by one generation and transmitted by the same process to subsequent generations and, thus, has effect of being widely diffused among its adherents and of deeply colouring their consciousness. It exhibits for this very traditional peculiarity highly ontological phenomena, pertaining to the question of existence and being. Furthermore, within the traditional life, the individual is immersed in a religious participation, which starts before birth and continues after death, for the life of an Igbo man is like a religious drama, which vitally links the living with the ancestors and those yet to be born in a mystic continuum.¹

From the study of Okeke, Ibenwa and Okeke, it is understood that the Igbo religion is self-evident and does not need to be preached or doctrinally explained. The religion has an instinctual outlook in any Igbo born into the Igbo society, as against what we see in religions of the book, like Christianity and Islam.²

Scholars such as Ejizu pointed out that there are threefold objects of Igbo worship and veneration. They are: God, nonhuman spirits, and the ancestors. The Igbo believe in the Supreme Being, who is the controller of the world and all that are in the world. Their firm belief in the Supreme Being is manifest in the names they give their children.³ Ugwu added another dimension of the Igbo religiousness, pointing that it has a default and ontological pedigree, before Christianity began an assimilative and annihilative assignment in the 19th century in Igbo land. He asserts: "The Igbo . . . are a truly religious people of whom it can be said as it has been said about the Hindus that they eat religiously, dress religiously, sin religiously . . . religion of these natives is their existence and existence is their religion."⁴ Thus, it makes no sense to think that the Igbo has inferior religious lifestyle before the coming of imported religions.

The Igbo person also has attachment to his *Chi*. This *Chi* has personalized attributes on the part of the Igbo person. It is on this pedestal that the core Igbo man believes that true religious experience for him, is based on his personal relationship with his *Chi*, which foretells a person's destiny and what one will make out of life. The experience with this *Chi* is not collective but personal. Everyone has a different *Chi*. Scholars of Igbo study are beginning to acquaint this idea of *Chi* with one's destiny and a benevolent spirit or force leading the outcome of events in one's life.

Corroborating this, both Metuh and in an interview with Anwaegbu, as quoted in C. Okeke, C. Ibenwa and G. Okeke, are of the view that:

Chi is a force in Igbo social behavior or pattern, which is characterized by an attitude of man; every being is the architect of his own fortune. In spite of the fact that the Igbo believe that the individual is the maker of his own fortune, they also believe in predestination, for they also agree that one's *Chi* refers to one's luck, which is associated with his destiny. In other words, what the person is going to be has already been preordained before he came into the world. This destiny can be written on his palm and palmists can interpret this destiny.”⁵

Therefore, the point to establish here is that traditional Igbo society had a strong religious ethos of its own before Christianity penetrated. The traditional Igbo society also has direct link with the republican nature of the Igbo, which means that it is steeped in individualism. However, this should not be confused as narcissism, or the fact each Igbo person values self and interest to the collective or the common good. Not at all! On the contrary, it shows religious culture in Igboland as a solitary journey of life, meaning and truth. A personal encounter with the Divine within one's life, enclave and domain. No two people have same experience and no general place of worship facilitates the coming together for shared religious experience as witnessed in Christianity and religions of the book.

The Idea of Uka di n'obi

The idea of Uka di n'obi is not so much about contending with Christianity or discouraging modern adherents. The idea of *Uka di n'obi* is rather a journey into the tradition and culture of the Igbo, especially as it concerns religion. It is a reinforcement that Traditional Igbo society is not empty in matters of religious experience. On the contrary, it has rich individual participation in it that leaves an indelible mark for the participant.

The Igbo have their cultural approaches before the advent of Christianity. *Uka di n'obi* has more spiritual quality than the quantity or idea of crowd gathering in modern religious worship. The question now is: What really is the concept – *Uka di n'obi* all about? In the course of this study, we have reiterated the meaning or talked about it but for more philosophical emphasis, we shall ratiocinate on it once more.

From a Philosopher's perspective, *Uka di n'obi* is simply the view that true religious experience should be a personal one. It should be a lifestyle, a life-time and every day experience without resorting to days, venue and time of participating in this religious experience. It should rather be entrenched in the heart than in monuments/buildings or lip service. Thus, whether in religious gathering or in personal religious encounter, it is the heart that matters.

It is important to understand the qualities of the heart in human physiological and psychological affairs. We will briefly look at it from both the physiological/anatomical perspective and from the figurative and literary perspective. This is to connect the concept of *Uka di n'obi* to the understanding of true religion as a personal experience.

The heart is believed to be the seat of every organ in the body. It is the most important organ. An animate being whose heart fails to function, dies instantly. In the fourth century B. C., the Greek philosopher Aristotle identified the heart as the most important organ of the body, the first to form according to his observations of chick embryos. It was the seat of intelligence, motion, and sensation -- a hot, dry organ. Aristotle described it as a three-chambered organ that was the center of vitality in the body. Other organs surrounding it (e.g. brain and lungs) simply existed to cool the heart.⁶

In his treatise *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, written in the second century A. D., Galen reaffirmed common ideas about the heart as the source of the body's innate heat and as the organ most closely related to the soul: "The heart is, as it were, the hearthstone and source of the innate heat by which the animal is governed." He also observed carefully many of its unusual physical properties. "The heart is a hard flesh, not easily injured. In hardness, tension, general strength, and resistance to injury, the fibers of the heart far surpass all others, for no other instrument performs such continuous, hard work as the heart." He argued that the expansion and contraction of the heart was a function of its role as an intelligent organ: "The complexity of [the heart's] fibers... was prepared by Nature to perform a variety of functions... enlarging when it desires to attract what is useful, clasping its contents when it is time to enjoy what has been attracted, and contracting when it desires to expel residues."⁷

From the foregoing, it is clear that the heart is the most important of all body organs. It determines a lot of physiological functions. Analogously, we can say that the heart of man is the most determinant of a lot of things. If the heart is loaded with good feelings, positive thoughts, healthiness, empathetic dispositions, clean from envy, malice, greed and avarice of every kind, then, it is godly-like. The point then is that, what makes a person a good person is not so much about whether one is an adherent of organized religion but more about being a good person, which reflects godliness. The ontological nature of God is goodness. Therefore, those created in his image and likeness, ought to be good.

Christianity and the Pandemic Obstruction

The Christian religion is one of the most vaunted religions in the world. In Nigeria, it is the number one religion as at present and only rivalled by Islam. In South Eastern Nigeria, which is our focus in this paper, it is predominant. Hardly do one see an eastern Nigerian, that is not a Christian or claims to be a Christian, at least nominally.

The Igbo domiciles in South Eastern Nigeria. Majority are Christians who have abandoned their traditional way of life and religion long ago. Every Sunday, they converge to worship and are always in large

gatherings. In late December, 2019, the Coronavirus pandemic gained stronghold, first, in Wuhan, China and later spread to different parts of the world. Nigeria was equally affected. The Federal Government imposed a lockdown in the country and everything was grossly affected.

For religious gatherings, government noted that not more than 20 persons be seen per gathering. Although, some complied to the government's directives, some did not and continued holding services in full swing. The reason, it was discovered to be economic than salvific. Most modern religious institutions survive by way of congregants paying through their nose in form of tithes, offerings, first fruits, covenant money, among others. In Igbo land, this was no exception. Churches became empty and these religious leaders that so much behave larger than life and always look superhuman could not do anything to quickly stop the virus, as it lasted for months.

During the period of the lockdown, people worshipped from home and this led to another dimension of looking at religion, as against what has been the norm. If people can worship from home and churches can set up digital means of holding religious activities, then it exposes the fact that physical presence is not so much necessary in religious experience. It means the telepathic attribute ought to be incorporated in religious experience. It further confirms the biblical adage that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. The most necessary condition for the worship of the Divine is the Heart and not so much about the body or physical presence.

The effect of the Pandemic on religious gatherings is such that it affected their revenue. While some engaged in charity in order to cushion the effect of the virus on either their congregants or the general public, some did not and almost experienced bankruptcy for lack of patronage. This greatly exposed the fact that not all religious institutions were out to for the purpose of helping people find spiritual meaning but rather established as an avenue to wealth creation and fame. The Pandemic caused an obstruction, never witnessed in modern history and this was telling not just in other parts of Nigeria but more so, in Igbo land.

Concluding Reflection

This present study has been able to establish the fact that religious worship is more a matter of the heart, a personal relationship than a congregational thing - *Uka di n'obi*. It has also been able to emphasize the importance of the heart in religious experience.

The Pandemic despite the economic wreckage also came with some shifts in approaches to matters of life including Religion. The prediction is that henceforth, some persons will become less dogmatized and brainwashed and no longer follow blindly everything their Pastor or Imam says. People have come to understand that religious places do not provide answers to all of life's problems and challenges.

People have equally come to the rational understanding that what matters in religious experience is the heart and not so much by physical presence or appearance. However, in a country like Nigeria and among the Igbo people in particular, it will not stop their going to church, for instance. Church-going will continue because the Igbo like other Nigerians, to borrow from Mbiti, are notoriously religious.

This present study also exposes the fact that the Igbo culture has a place for spirituality without the necessary gathering on Sundays by Christians or even Fridays by Muslims. Every Igbo man has a place for the Divine in his life and in his compound. The worship of the Divine commences with members of his household. Every morning, outpour of prayers and libation is witnessed (igo-oyo). This personalized religious experience in the traditional setting is not inferior to other organized religions.

Finally, the idea of *Uka di n'obi* is simply a reminder that what matters in religious experience is the fact that the worship of the Divine should be a personal experience. It aligns with the Igbo name like *Chi ma Obi m* (God knows or sees my heart). One must not be a church-goer or be seen in religious activities from time to time, to have a personal relationship with the Divine. The important thing in one's existential journey is to be engrained with moral rectitude and godliness. There is more to prayer than going to church everyday or shouting the Holy Name of God. *Uka di n'obi* maintains that religious worship should emanate from the heart but should not stop there. It should radiate from the heart to our neighbours and society at large.

Endnotes

1. C.O. Okeke, C.N.Ibenwa & G.T. Okeke “Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example,” in *SAGE Open* (April-June 2017), pp.1–10
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