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- All charts/diagrams which must not exceed 3.5 inches by 5.0 inches should be scanned and fixed into appropriate positions within the text.
- Authors should adopt the MLA referencing style and endnotes should be used instead of footnotes.
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An Appraisal of the Nature and Activities of Okonko Society in Igboland from a Catholic Perspective

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Abstract

Pope John XXIII in 1962 summoned the bishops of the Catholic Church to a council described as Vatican II Council. One of the key decisions taken during the council was to engage the society and various cultures in dialogue. This was informed by the fact that no one has a monopoly on the truth. Based on this decision, the socio-cultural lives of many nations already removed from the public domain by the early Catholic Missionaries started making a comeback. This major comeback, following the Vatican II Council's decision impacted greatly on Okonko Society and caused it to re-emerge to the limelight. Okonko Society is a socio-cultural institution in Igboland consolidated with initiation and mystery rites. However, how to engage Okonko Society and Catholic Christianity to dialogue has remained an issue in Igboland till date. The paper therefore discusses the nature and activities of Okonko Society as a way of creating a platform for dialogue between the society and the Catholic Church as an institution with rites of initiation. The approach is historical and expository since Okonko Society is sustaining the cultural heritage of the Igbo in spite of the presence of Christianity.

Introduction

It is evident that there are vast cultural and religious potentials in Africa which can benefit and enrich the faith traditions that have established in African soil. That is why it behooves the faith traditions, particularly Islam and Christianity to heed the exhortation of the Vatican Propagation of the Faith issued in 1659 to missionaries going on evangelism. The exhortation envisaged the cultural and religious potentials of the recipients of the "new message" thus:

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Put no obstacle in their way; and for no reason whatever should you persuade these people to change their rites, customs, and ways of life unless these are obviously opposed to religion and good morals..., on the contrary, keep their ways of life, admire and praise what deserves to be respected.¹

It is only in heeding to the above that the missionary religions could become indigenous in African soil.

It is in the context of African cultural potentials that this paper highlights the reality of Okonko Society, its history in Igboland, membership and initiation rites. This exercise is particularly relevant to buttress the fact that the forebears of Africa reasoned logically and acted along strict syllogistic lines within their own framework. This paper also investigates the framework of Okonko Society in the light of Catholic sacrament of initiation. Again, it also tries to create a platform for dialogue between African Religion and Catholic Christianity by examining initiation rites in Okonko Society and in the Catholic Church.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand properly the nature of Okonko Society in Igboland, it is necessary to have a theoretical framework. The concept of "initiation" forms the key word in this paper. Consequently, this paper applied the framework of Phenomenology of religion under a restricted category of initiation to make an expository analysis of rites in Okonko Society and in the Catholic Church.

The term "initiation" is understood in the Phenomenology of religion to mean a form of passage into a new socio-economic and spiritual status. Thus,

Initiation is a rite of passage ceremony marking entrance or acceptance into a group of society. It could also be a formal admission to adulthood in a community or one of its formal components. In an extended sense it can also signify a transformation in which the initiate is "reborn" into a new role.²

This understanding of initiation is influenced by the writings of Mircea Eliade, Van Gennep and V.W. Turner.³ These scholars underscored initiation as a secured anthropological phenomenon in all cultures.

It was Marcea Eliade who really widened the understanding of initiation rite. According to him, initiation rite is a "body of rites and oral teaching whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiation".⁴ This clearly implies a ceremonial ritual of death followed by rising to new life. Eliade saw initiation as a principle of religious act by traditional societies. He further argued that initiation being a basic change in existential condition

liberates man from profane time and history.⁵ According to him, initiation in all cultures recapitulates the sacred history of the world. And through this recapitulation, the whole world is sanctified anew; those initiated perceive the world as a sacred work, a creation of God.

Arnold Van Gennep, on his part, limited the term "initiation" to "rites of passage". He noted that, "the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another".⁶ Following Gennep's thought, the similarity in meaning to the term "initiation" becomes clear when rite of passage encompasses all those ceremonial patterns which follow a passage from one situation to another and from one social world to another.

Arnold Van Gennep agreed with Victor Turner that rites of passage often unfold in three stages. At the beginning there is usually a phase of preparation and separation, followed by the liminal state and the third stage is the rites of incorporation or reacceptance into the community. In both scholars' view,

the first act in the ritual drama begins with a period of separation of the participants from the profane, ordinary world. The second phase, a liminal or transitional period, is a time in between, a time when the participants are no longer what they are to become. The liminal phase is especially important in bonding the initiates together and establishing a sense of community. In the third phase, the transition from one status to another is completed, and the communicants are reincorporated into the community.⁷

This triadic structure of separation, liminality, and reincorporation expresses the symbolic death of one stage of the communicant's life and the passage through a ritual threshold to another stage.

In the course of these three stages, the initiates are dramatically cut off from their former life. In most cases, this is effected also by separating them from their relatives. In the event of the initiation, they go through tests of courage and self-purification, partly communicated in a coded language. The "elders" who conduct the initiation mediate the coded and previously unknown knowledge step-by-step to the initiates.

The History of the Igbo

The people now known as the Igbo are found in the south east of Nigeria and they thought of themselves as *Awka*, *Bende*, *Aro*, *Ngwa* and *Ibeku*. The word "Ibo" was perhaps derived from "*Heebo*" which, according to some European traders of the 19th century, was the name given by *Biafran* traders on the coast to the hinterland area where they traded. Subsequent European traders slightly changed the word to "*Eboe*" from which "Ibo" was derived. It should be noted, also that the same *Biafran* traders on the coast differentiated between the "Ibo" in the

hinterland and the "*Kwa Ibo*", that is, Ibos living on the *Kwa* River. The latter are now known as *Ibibios*. The merchants, of course, were merely using the word "Ibo" as a general nomenclature for people living in the hinterland rather than for a tribe in the modern sense of the word.⁸

Again, the riverine groups on the banks of lower Niger, *Onitsha*, *Osomari* and *Oguta*, refer to their hinterland neighbours as "Igbo", a term which they do not apply to themselves. Thus, it would seem appropriate to say that, modern tribal consciousness, represented by the application of the term *Ibo*, *Ibibio*, *Ijo*, *Ogoja* in Biafra, was fostered not by the people themselves but by foreigners who were ignorant of the intricate bonds which held the country, Nigeria together.⁹

According to Edmud Ilogu, where the southeasterners (Igbos) came from and when, will remain for a long time a matter of conjecture, because of absence of helpful records.¹⁰ However, it can be asserted that Igboland has been under continuous human occupation for at least 3,000 years and, as is now being discovered, that her people developed an ancient civilization that is about half a millennium before the emergence of the kingdom of Benin. Linguistic information also confirmed the antiquity of the main languages spoken in the area. Therefore, the main groups of southeastern Nigeria were indigenous to the territory and contact among them has existed, through Okonko Society, since primeval-times.

Igboland is demarcated to the west by the lower reaches of the River Niger and its Delta, to the East by the Obudu Plateau and the Highlands of Oban and Ikom, the south by the Bight of Biafra and to the North by an administrative boundary following approximately, the 7 deg. N. latitude. The total area is over 29,400 square miles.¹¹ This means that Igboland is almost as big as Gambia and Sierra Leone put together. The region is bigger than Togo or Rwanda and Burundi Combined, and is twice the size of the Republic of Israel.

In terms of natural endowment, Igboland is well vegetated throughout the year, lying to a large extent in the basins of Niger River, the Cross River, the Kwa River and the Imo River. Three quarters of these river basins are lowlands less than 400 feet above sea level. Today, with a very high population density in some Igbo areas (about 711 persons per square mile) resulting in the difficulty of finding enough food through agriculture to support the population, many Igbo people migrate to different parts of the world.¹² With this physical mobility, goes the spreading of the Okonko ethos in other parts of Nigeria as well as inculturating the Igbo way of life through influences from other parts of the nation. This phenomenon was dangerously affected by the recent Nigerian-Biafran war.

The Nature of Okonko Society in Igboland

Society in general is made up of individuals who contribute to the general well being of the community. In traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries.¹³

Within the larger corporate Society are also other "societies" which Awolalu and Dopamu described as closed associations, guilds, or cult groups.¹⁴ They are termed "closed" for the fact that initiation into the Society is not open to all and sundry. Other idiosyncrasies of such associations are "the wearing of special insignia, a hierarchy of ranked grades that determine the allocation of authority, and mystery rituals from which the non-initiates are prohibited."¹⁵ Apart from carrying out vital functions aimed at the promotion of community-living and well-being, members of such societies often engage in esoteric activities to the impression of non-members.

Prior to the period of Christian missionary activities in Africa, African Traditional Societies were in existence all over, especially in Nigeria. And they continue to operate in post missionary Africa, though in a much Christianized forms, originally, traditional societies served many useful purposes. They were instituted for the purpose of self-preservation, Community preservation and they enforced and tradition, customs, and beliefs. They functioned to determine ritual behaviour and regulated social attitudes. They were the power of the community where they functioned.¹⁶

According to E.A. Ayandele, every member of ancestral Society was expected to be a man of respect and integrity who must confide absolutely in all members and help members in distress.¹⁷ Thus, Traditional Societies in Africa (TSA) are not fundamentally and essentially Satanic. According to Ade Dopamu, what the Western World understands by devil worship is alien to the Yoruba and by extension alien to Igbo customs and traditions. Dopamu clarified this fact with his reference to *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* wherein:

Satanism was defined as the worship of Satan or other figures of demonology. It may include the perversion of religious rituals (e.g. the Black Mass), the practice of witchcraft, and other practices associated with the occult. The Christian tenets of being Satanic.... From the later Middle Ages witchcraft and Satanism were considered synonymous.¹⁸

What this means is that even when Africans and the Igbo in particular believe in mysterious powers and the existence of ancestral societies of which Okonko is one, they do not see them as devil worship or "...foul pagan".¹⁹

Clarifying the concept of Satanism or Devils worship, Dopamu submitted that, devil worship is a type of religion with its own beliefs, doctrines and practices, and worshippers understandably make Satan or the Devil their own god.²⁰ In Igboland with particular reference to Olokor community, the above description of devil worship does not in any way, fit into the theory and practice of Okonko Society. Members of Okonko Society understandably do not regard Satan or the Devil as their own god. They do not practice splitting of blood and oath taking sealed with invocation of idols. They are not Satanists in any sense of the word.²¹

Okonko Society in Igboland has social and religious character, it has a standard code, language, ethics and world-view which are carefully guarded and has a way of social control of the community. Their influence and enormous power over the affairs and conduct of people in the communities where they function are well known. They determine ritual behaviour and social practices in most communities in Igboland. The nature and dynamism of Okonko Society have religious and ethical contents. Butt Thompson's observation supports noble features of Okonko. He said that the initiates are,

Taught pride in their ancestry, the pride that is the foundation of most religions, ancient and modern, civilized or barbaric, the pride that fosters admiration and reverence, and suggests regulations for the conduct of life, and here they are taught the theology of their people....²¹

This implies that the nature and framework of activities of Okonko Society are well known to one and all in the communities where they functioned. The whole range of their functions made them the cohesive, social and often religious, political force in many places. There were traditional societies in Africa with religious background that were connected with puberty rites and initiations into ancestors' communion. While some others were solely anti-social, like the Leopard Society in Liberia, in Ivory Coast and the Ekumeku Society in Western Igboland, N.I. Omenka in his article, "the Church and Traditional Leadership in Igboland", has this to say:

In Western Igboland, where religiously induced violence assumed extraordinary dimensions, the Ekumeku secret Society featured very prominently. Formed at Ibusa as a response to the activities of the Christian Missions and their colonial administration allies, the Society organized and spearheaded a number of Violent raids on Mission establishments in the Ika Igbo region between 1898 and 1904.²²

Okonko Society which is the main concern in this paper falls within the Traditional Society in Africa that has religious background and connected to the rites of puberty, rites of passage and communion with the ancestors. Okonko in Igbo Society represents the accumulation of a people's wisdom and identity. It is real and without it a people is without a name.

The reality today is that Afrel (African Religion) symbolized in Okonko Society attempts to be among the world great religions through the activities of African scholars. This is because the religion which a man accepts is that of the community in which he lives, which makes it obvious that the influence of environment is what has led him to accept the religion in question.²³ Therefore, Okonko in Igbo Society constitutes a major element in Igbo culture and an integral element in African culture. It existed and operates presently to give meaning to the people. It

has functional values for the community and for the adherents. So, the reality of Okonko in Igbo Society is not out of place with the observation and teaching of Vatican II Council. In *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2, the Council noted that other religions which are found throughout the world attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by out-lining a programme of life covering doctrine, moral precepts, and sacred rites.²⁴ For Christian religion, particularly Roman Catholic Church in Igboland, the challenges raised by this teaching in the face of Okonko Society can be traumatic.

Okonko as part of Igbo religion and by extension, Afrel, emphasizes basic human values. It has a transcendently grounded and imminently operative system of coordinates, by which the adherents orient themselves intellectually, emotionally and existentially. Like any form of religion in the world, Okonko Society attempts to provide comprehensive meaning for life, guarantees supreme values and unconditional norms. It creates a spiritual community for members. Therefore, Okonko in Igboland is not enemy to be fought by Christianity but an ally in the attainment of the final purpose of life, which is to bring the created condition to the perfection which God has wished for it.

Far from being the work of the devil, Okonko in Igbo Society constitutes the result of a high level of human intellectual exploration. It is a representation of a structured response to the questions of life needing acceptable answers. Questions like, "what is the meaning and purpose of life? What is goodness and what is sin? What gives rise to sorrow, and why? What is path to true happiness? What is truth about death, judgment, and retribution?...²⁵ The efforts by different expressions of Afrel and Okonko in particular, to find answers to these deepest mysteries of human existence show that we are in a very different world from that of the church that accompanied the European powers in the 16th and 19th centuries. It shows that other religions are no longer the inventions of Satan in his incessant struggle against God. Okonko in Igbo Society is not abomination to be destroyed by fire or sword. The society is the cultural identity of all the Igbo that have "Mmama" and "Ndeeno" as their forms of greetings

The Okonko Society in Igboland, it must be noted here, arose from the depths of the Igbo mind in its search for truth, justice and peaceful coexistence. Thus, Vatican II Fathers pressingly urged Church leaders in Africa to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.²⁶ The Church Fathers are of the opinion that Christians while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, should acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found in authentic religious expression like Okonko. This exaltation also recognizes the social life and general culture of the Africans.

Membership of Okonko

Membership of Okonko Society was and is open to all free-born Igbo who could pay the prescribed initiation fee. The Okonko Society is open to all free-born

because it is an honourable Society. It is viewed as the organization of honourable men, who have resolved to be of good character, and of service to others in their respective communities. Consequently, affluence, physical fortitude, ability to bear the rigorous and gruesome initiation rites, as well as other personal qualities are extremely important. Ayandele's description of membership of traditional society aptly captures that of Okonko. In Okonko Society, "every member was expected to be a man of respect and integrity, must confide absolutely in all members and help members in distress."²⁷

Okonko membership is traditionally for males and there exists the female group in Igboland called "Uma ada" (the Society of first daughters in Igboland). But the "Uma ada" Society is more incline to domestic family welfare. They are not as powerful as Okonko Society. However, even though all males are theoretically qualified for membership in Okonko Society, social outcasts, thieves and loquacious men cannot become members. On insistence, loquacious men can be admitted as members but will be denied the knowledge of the secret symbol of Okonko Society. This is "for fear that they might divulge secret of the Society to non members."²⁸ The secrecy is the source of power in Okonko Society. And it is strongly the case that no member can ever reveal the secret mysteries and symbols to "Okpo" or non members. The law is, "do not reveal the secret."²⁹

The *Eze-Nghara* presided over the regular meetings of Okonko Society. He carried out this function in conjunction with the multi-titled holders, who constituted the second rank in Okonko membership. The single titled holders are called *Eze Okonko* and those seeking initiation are described as *Okpo*. They formed the third and fourth ranks respectively in Okonko membership. It is from among these ranks that the administrative organ of the Society is formed.

A free-born male who feels in mind and can afford the resources informs the Okonko members of his intention to join the Society. He presents to them a certain amount of palm-wine and local gin. These items must be provided out of the young man's sweat or resources. "No matter how beloved a child may be to the father, the father does not make this provision for him", said Mazi Emeka Nwosu, a staunch member of Okonko Society in Umuahia. If, in the view of the members, he is considered fit to become a member, these items are accepted from him, if not, the drinks are rejected. According to Daniel O. Offiong,

This rejection is a way of communicating to the person that he is a social outcast, if the drinks are accepted he is told of the fees and other things that he must provide in order to be initiated. The fees and other requirements are high and as a result even though membership is open to all males (excluding slaves) not every male can afford to join the Society.³⁰

In the light of the above, once a good member of "*Okpo*" (novitiates) have been accepted for initiation into "*Ezumezu Okonko*" (membership), the time for their sequential initiation is set. In narrating how he was initiated into the first stage of Okonko Society, Rev. Father Chukwubuike classified membership of Okonko into three stages. They are, "*idanmmiri*, *ikpu-ulo* and *iba obia*".³¹ Generally, "*ida-mmiri*" initiation can be done for a new born male child by the father. It can also be done in anticipation of a male child. "*ida-mmiri*" is initiation ritual of acceptance into the community. It is not an automatic membership of Okonko. After *ida-mmiri* the male child continues to grow and develops within the community circle. At that stage the person is described as "*okpo*", that is a non-initiated into Okonko. Thus, the period between "*ida mmiri*" and "*ikpu-ulo*" is all about the experiences of growing up: helping others to group up and seeing male adults in the community grow up. Skills and techniques are involved. And the elders in families of these growing male children know what should be done, especially when the male adults express intentions to be initiated.

It is at the second stage of "*ikpu-ulo*" that the free-born male becomes an "*ezumezu*", that is, an Okonko initiate or a full-grown man. That is to say that Okonko Society, like all other Traditional Societies, admits members by initiatory rites.

Initiation into Okonko and the Catholic Sacrament of Initiation

The point of initiation into Okonko Society is of great significance for the male adult in Igboland. The major significance of this stage is that the initiate can eat and drink with the elders. And he can be trusted to sustain the integrity of the society which is respect, truth and honesty. At this stage, the male adult enters the second grades, grips the passwords and the secret symbols, crafts and arts of Okonko Society. Furthermore, the adult is prepared to participate in all minor and elaborate obsequies in which members of Okonko Society are associated with in Igboland. According to Awolalu and Dopamu, "... initiation is rather elaborate, and it can last several days..."³² In the first step, all intending members are jointly required to go to the sacred bush where they build huts. The huts are called *ulo igo akaghi* (huts built by you). To get to the sacred bush, one has to pass through a tortuous path over which are hung slits of fresh palm fronds, "*omu*". In the process sacrifices are offered to the spirits of the sacred bush, that is, the "*agbara ala*". This is believed by the Igbo to be the custodian of secular morality. Francis A. Arinze described the "*agbara ala*" as, "the most important spirit after Chukwu, she is the Great Mother Spirit the queen of the underworld, the owner of men and custodian of public morality in conjunction with the ancestors".³³ The goddess is approached with chicks, cowries, while chalk, charcoal and other things believed to be efficacious in luring the blessings of the mother-spirit.

Having appeased the "*agbara ala*", who is believed to be the one to make the initiation rites successful, the second step of the initiation sets in. This is what

Chukwubuike Ogbenna called "*iba obia*" (entering the sacred bush). The initiates are secluded for several days in reporting the processes of initiation into Okonko; Offiong noted that the end point is to make the initiate feel more than the "*Okpos*", the non-initiates. He wrote,

All initiation activities are designed to test the initiates' manhood. During this period of initiation, a dusk to dawn curfew is imposed... all initiates have their hairs shaved. In the night all of them appears naked and are escorted to the sacred bush by the Okonko priests. All these are designed to make the initiates believe that they are really marching into a new life and that they are truly something more important than the non-initiates.³⁴

At this stage, the initiates feel both proud and nervous given the fact that the mystery of Okonko can never be adequately expressed. What resonates is silence.

On their way to the sacred bush, a masquerade emerges, representing the tutelary spirit of the Okonko. It is the masquerade that will talk to the initiates about the sacred world into which they are about to enter. The mask over the masquerader looks awful and always terrifying and it is made to emphasis the tremendous nature of the unknown.³⁵ In the sacred bush, the initiates are taunted, flagellated, made to climb ropes precariously hung on trees, carry heavy logs and move around the bush. They are also taught,

specific types of magic against techniques of sorcery. Specific types of magic against witches; magic connected with agriculture... with games... with natural forces... with disease and sickness.³⁶

It is at the moment of initiation into Okonko Society that the adults are taught the ancient and preserved values of the community. The mysteries and identity of the people are revealed to them. This indicates that there is truly indigenous elements of thoughts and values developed, preserved and transmitted from one generation to another through Okonko Society.

All through the initiation, the initiates are restricted from eating certain things in the sacred bush. Should an initiate die during the initiation, his death is blamed on the violation of one taboo or the other. Therefore, nobody mourns his death. Death is... the punishment for being disobedient and dishonest. Such people do not receive normal burial rites and his body can be cremated so as to prevent reincarnation.³⁷ This point remains valid, noted Daniel Offiong and since nobody wants to die such shameful death, the initiates into Okonko Society gather courage within their reach to survive the rigours of initiation rites.

On the last day in the sacred bush, all the initiates are symbolically killed and brought back to life. This is expressed by thoroughly intoxicating them with palm wine till they become insensitive. When they regain their consciousness they are

believed to have moved from their old life to a completely new, mature and sacred life. It is at this stage that they are given and taught the Okonko signs, code of conduct and symbol called "*Akpan*". All these are kept strictly away from women, foreigners and the uninitiated. In the whole initiation rites, "*ikpu-ahia*" entering the market square comes last. It represents a reintegration with the people. This comes up on a special market day called "*Nkwo*". The initiates wear prescribed clothes, decorations and they are led by proud and admiring relatives as well as teeming spectators.³⁸ The initiates, now called "*ezumesu*" jubilantly march into the market. Offiong observed that the "*ezumesu*", pretend to be new to the environment... they pretend to be reformed men from a completely different world who find things around them very strange.³⁹ Before the *ezumesu* enter the market, a fifteen gun salute is fired. Admirers and relatives surge forward to demonstrate their admiration for the "*ezumesu*". Valuables and other gift items are thrown at them. This gradually leads to the end of the initiation into Okonko Society characterized by feasting, dancing and display of different types of masquerades. The initiates from here are allowed to return home and henceforth are free to attend the weekly meetings of the Okonko Society. Regular attendance of the weekly meeting will enable the initiate to master the complex Okonko language through the use of symbols only known by members. However, Christian influence in Igboland has affected and modified the process of initiation in Okonko Society today. The inhuman aspects have been eliminated.

In the Christian tradition, the same turning points in life, highlighted above, is described as "sacrament of initiation". The Catholic sacrament of initiation is also aimed at producing a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person receiving the sacrament. Thus, Michel Dujarier submitted that,

the rites of Christian initiation develops a vision of the catechumenate as a gradual initiation which involves not just the catechumens, sponsors, catechists, and priests, but the entire local Christian community. The process of initiation is much more than just the celebration of a number of rites, but an integral formation in all the aspects of Christian life.⁴⁰

In the context of Dujarier's submission, it is noted that in the life of an average Christian, birth, puberty, marriage, and death are punctuated by rites of initiation. Even for those Christians who do not practice their religion regularly, they still present their children for baptism and confirmation; Church weddings are still common and church burials are performed.

In Christian sacrament of initiation, baptism is always the starting point. And baptism in the post-Easter perspective already contained the imagery of death and resurrection, along with the integration of the baptismal candidate into a new relationship with community. And these components in the Christian sacrament of initiation are also contained in traditional rites of initiation which is

valid for Okonko Society. Therefore, the validity of traditional initiation and Christian initiation requires respect and dialogue. There is no need for Christians in particular to forfeit integration into their native community simply because they want to practice a new religion. In dialogue and respect for cultures, the significance of traditional initiation practices in relation to Christian initiation could be identified.

It is significant to note that the Roman Catholic Church has taken a lead in the effort to dialogue and understand traditional initiation rites. On the part of the Roman Catholic Church the effort is seen in the instructions to mission agents contained in the Vatican Council Document of December, 1963. The council states: "in mission countries, in addition to what is finished by the Christian tradition, those elements of initiation rites may be admitted which are already in use among some peoples insofar as they can be adapted to the Christian ritual."⁴¹ Since rites of initiation are central to both Okonko Society and Christian religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, the issue of mutual respect and dialogue becomes unavoidable in Igboland.

Conclusion

To understand Okonko, one must focus on the tremendous deposit of mystery and high level of commitment to keep the things made secret therein as such, realizing that Okonko functions for a purpose, men's true being and security against social alienations. Okonko Society therefore, helps its adherents to eliminate all kinds of human alienations which result from the presence of physical conditioning and social structures. Again, man's finite nature makes him trust in God who acts in history and controls, in a mysterious ways, the affairs of men. As Paul puts it, "creation awaits impatiently..." (Rm. 8:19-20). The focus on the future is essential in the framework of activities in Okonko Society. God reveals himself through it and Christian traditions or any other tradition can only enrich it.

Okonko language, ethics, code and praxis are part of a family of religious languages and "parts of an immense work of imagination and articulation by which humans seek to express in their many languages the voice of the utterly absolute"⁴² Therefore, honesty and friendly dialogue is imperative. This is because for the man who believes that his life is determined by an arbitrary fate or by evil powers, salvation is only achievable in the overcoming of those powers. This is what Okonko Society achieves in the life of a man through the initiation rites.

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