

Egba Chukwu in Obukpa Religion as Praeparatio Evangelica: A Theological Discourse

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Abstract

Obukpa, the Igbo people of Enugu State, South East Nigeria have a festival dedicated to God called EgbaChukwu. Chukwu is worshipped in Obukpa Religion even before the advent of Christianity and colonization. Obukpa indigenes are deeply religious people from antiquity. This paper discusses Egba Chukwu in Obukpa as Praeparatio Evangelica from a Christian theological viewpoint. The findings of this paper show the vast and deep Christian elements in Egba Chukwu such as koinonia and its relationship with the solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, et cetera. One of the strongest persuasions of this work is its robust advocacy for the inculturation of the good christian values in Egba Chukwu. These positive aspects are indubitably the God-given preparations for his gospel (praeparatio Evavgelica). The conclusion of the study is dawn from the entire discourse.

Keywords: Egba Chukwu, Obukpa Religion, Praeparatio Evangelica, Christian Theology and Theological Discourse

1.Introduction

Some initial Studies on African tribes and their religion had negative prejudices about the continent and her ethnic nationalities and indigenous populations. These biographers, ethnographers, anthropologists, colonialists, traders, explorers and even some missionaries had derogatory perceptions of the African people and African world view. Emil Ludwig, a German biographer, for instance, believed that the African minds could not develop nor grasp the concept of God. In his words: "How can the untutored African conceive God... Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing" (Smith, E.W. 1950 in Metuh, 1991). The above view is in line with those of D. Westermann (1935) who understood Africa's God as *deus incertus* (the uncertain God as in agnosticism) and *deus remotus* (the far God), in other words, the African God is *deus otiosus*, (an idle god who has retired from the world he created and is passive about its daily operations), and *deus absconditus* (a withdrawn, hidden god). As J.O' connel (1962) reported that African God is "said to have no temples or shrines. No prayers or sacrifices are made to him directly", G.T Basden (1938) held that "the influence of God in Igbo life is negligible. It is purely theoretical and has no marked influence on life and character" (Metuh, 1991). But contrary to the above erroneous perceptions, the African God is immanent, (*Chukwu no nso*), accessible in daily prayers (*igo ofo ututu*), and in constant communication and communion with his Igbo people at the altar of sacrifice (*onu ma/Chukwu ekwu aja*). In Igbo land, the Supreme Being has altars, temples, grooves and festivals dedicated to him.

In the words of Iwe, N.S.S (1988): "For the Igbo, the Supreme Being is neither uncertain nor remote but an integral aspect of their communal being, such that "the refinement of public morality in the light of contemporary beliefs' cannot be achieved without a fruitful dialogue between the Igbo theological heritage and the Christian belief structure which has been superimposed on it by recent history". The influences that God has on *Ndi Igbo* (Igbo people) in their thought patterns and actions are much and vivid. If the African minds were primitive and therefore "cannot conceive God", according to Emil Ludwig, it becomes necessary to explain the prevalence of the knowledge of God found among African tribes. The epistemological constructs of God in African cosmology were explained by Sir A.B Ellis (1887) and J.J. Williams (1931) respectively to be "the Christian God borrowed and thingly disguised" and "somewhere in the dim past, a wave, or more probably a series of waves of Hebraic

influence swept over Negro Africa leaving unmistakable traces among the various tribes, where they have endured even to this present day” (cited by Metuh (1991).

The above assumptions explain the idea of the African God as imported from Judeo-Christian traditions. However, the African universe of things are proper to the Africans and are not drawn from alien cultures nor Abrahamic religions. This is where both Ellis and Williams’ importation standpoints went wrong. Ifesieh E.I (1989) wrote that Portuguese in the early days of their travels visited the Southern Coast of Africa and falsely reported that “the people are all Hottentots and they have no religion”. (Booth, S.N. (ed.) 1977 in Ifesieh, 1989). One of the difficulties these scholars and travelers had with African Traditional Religion were its poor understanding that they had and their false interpretations of the African world view. They studied the Religion of the African from the outside. As Ele, C. (2015) observed, “...Religion viewed from within (an adherent’s experiences) and from outside (a non-member’s/observer’s finding) cannot be exactly the same”. To study African Traditional Religion meaningfully and validly, according to Ifesieh (1989) one “ought to begin by either indigenous and interested scholars in the subject or others, who by virtue of their long and close association with the particular ethnic group or groups have come to accept and see the groups from inside”. One must not practice African Traditional Religion in order to study it from *inside*; he or she can also study it effectively from *alongside* as advocated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith that “one cannot study religion from above, only from alongside or within...” (Ifesieh, 1989). The results of improper methods or approaches to the study of African Traditional Religion are denials of its concepts and categories or their false interpretations, distortions of their values and significance and impositions of identifiable characteristics quite foreign to it. African Traditional Religion is indigenous to the Africans and expresses their conscious and natural quest for the Ultimate Reality. Long before the advent of Christian Missionaries, Muslim Jihadists, colonial masters and explorers, Africans were already religious, venerating their ancestors and worshipping their gods and God, the Supreme Being upon their altars. They had their religion and other cultural forms, ethics and social institutions.

This paper seeks to discuss EgbaChukwu in Obukpa Religion as *praeparatio Evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel) from a Christian theological perspective. In other words, this study wants to understand the extent this feast in Obukpa Religion disposed Obukpa people to accepting the Christian faith. Obukpa Religion is a specimen of African Traditional Religion. Obukpa as a people are Igbo by tribe whose native place is in Enugu State. South East Nigeria. They have one common ancestral progenitor Asadu Ideke Alumona with Nsukka, Okpuje and Eha-Alumona Towns, his brothers, all in Nsukka Local Government Area. Hence, the Asadu Ideke Alumona suffixed to their names like Obukpa Asadu Ideke Alumona as one example. Egba means feast or festival. Chukwu means God, the Supreme Being. EgbaChukwu means therefore a festival in honour of the Supreme Being.

In Obukpa Religion, the festivals dedicated exclusively to God are two; namely: God as Supreme Being (EgbaChukwu) and God as Creator (EgbaOkike). God is the Supreme Being (Chi-Ukwu) the ChukwuAbiamuUra (Deus incomprehensibilis) and God is the creator (Ezechiteoke – EzeChukwuOnyeOkike), God the king who alone can create; God created all things, *ex nihilo*). God as both ChukwuAbiamu and Ezechiteoke express one and the same Reality of who God is in Obukpa Religious Metaphysics. According to Ugwu, C.O.T. and Ugwueye, L.E. (2004): “Traditional festivals and their observance are of immense importance to the people of Africa. The religious significance, which is the most important, is that the festivals are observed in honour of the divinities. Traditional Africans believe that spirit beings, cosmic and nature forces underpin all vital aspects of life. Festivals are seen as supreme acts of worship offered periodically to such supersensible beings and forces often time to thank them for their protection and their benevolent activities. Festivals and their observance make it possible for people to strengthen their faith in the beliefs about their relationship with the supernatural order and life in general. The festival meals constitute an opportunity of communion between the supernatural order and worshipper, and between the worshippers themselves. Festival times are really occasions for renewal of covenants”. EgbaChukwu is a communion sacrifice between Obukpa and Chukwu and also among the people.

Praeparatio is a simple Latin word for “preparation” while *evangelica* is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *evangelion* which means “Good news” or “the Gospel of Jesus Christ”. In the light of the encounter between *EgbaChukwu* and the Gospel of Christ in Obukpa, those points of theological intersections which could be of help in the effective appreciation and inculcation of Christ’s gospel constitute critical components of our theological discourse. However, this work recognizes the fact that *Egba Chukwu* as a feast in African Traditional Religion must have some elements which the *Christianization* values and process of the Gospel would reject. In that case,

those unchristian elements like idol worship (Psalm 115:1-8) should give way according to the principles and practice of inculturation.

2. God in Obukpa Religion

Obukpa has a monotheistic religion that believes in one God, *Chukwu Abiamu Ura* and *Ezechitoke Abiamu Ura*, that is *Chineke*. In Obukpa world view, God is transcendent (*Omamaamasiamasi*) yet he is imminent (*Chukwu no nso*). Before the Advent of Christianity in Obukpa, Obukpa people bore theophoric names such as *Chukwudi* (God exists), *Chukwu ma* (Ominiscience of God), *Chinyere*, *Nkechinyere*, *Onyinyechi* (Adeodatus, Donatus, Theodore, Theodora -the child comes from God as a gift), *Ngozi Chukwu* (*Benedicta*, *Benedictus*, Divine Blessing), *Eberechukwu/Chidiebere* (Divine Mercy), *Chukwuka/Chika* (*God is Supreme*), *Chimuanya* (God doesn't sleep), *Chinwe* (all belongs to God), *Ogochukwu* (Divine favour), *Chukwuemeka/Chidalu* (Thanks be to God), *Ifeoma/Chidimma* (Agatha, Divine goodness), among others.

There are also folk stories which narrate the divine origins of things like the "toad and the dog" sent by God to humanity with the messages of death and life respectively. The former had the message of death while the latter had that of life. The dog with the message of life got distracted on the way and could not deliver; it fell the short of its "speed and accuracy" expectations. The toad in its "slow and steady" pace reached humanity with the message of death. This explains the origin of death from one perspective in Igbo mythology. Again, the *NwaAninga* folk story fits into the cosmological argument that sees God, as the *First Cause and the Prime Mover*; and so on. A good study of ethnomusicology with reference to Obukpa traditional music would discover the names, attributes and perceptions of God in the people's world view. The peculiar music called *egara* and the other types with *oja* (flute) or *opuzara* (elephant tusks) could trace families back to their ancestral roots and to *Chukwu Abiamuu*, the Source and Sustainer of all persons and families.

In Obukpa, the philosophical thoughts expressed in wise sayings, proverbs and parables also depict the influences of God, his sublime and superlative qualities. Such deep thoughts like *Chukwubu o jiji, jidejimma, onyechoro o wanye* (God is the sole determinant of favours and to whom he gives them), *Onyevuru Chi yauzo, o gbagbueonweya n' oso*. (it is futile to organize one's life without God). With such proverbs (*ilu, ett'*), moral lessons and rich ideas are generated, communicated and taught in ordinary, interactive life situations and in the processes of socialization especially the young generations. Other spirits, deities, *Nnumu-kwome*, which is a goddess, divinities, and ancestors, are not understood as *Chukwu* in Obukpa religion. They are messengers or intermediaries according to their status in the hierarchy of spiritual beings determined by their relationship with *Chukwu*, the Highest, Ultimate and Supreme Being. Obukpa indigenes are in communion with *Chukwu* through worship expressed variously like in festivals dedicated exclusively to him. One example of such acts of worship is *Egba Chukwu*.

3. Egba Chukwu

In Obukpa Religion, *Egba Chukwu* is the solemnity of the one supreme God. There are other traditional religious festivals such as *Onunu* which is the ancestral feast and the feast to mark the end of the old year (*ichuahua*), *nkpuru-nkashi*, the new yam festival in honour of the god of crops and the *Chi* (personal gods or guardian angels in Roman Catholic theological category). In Obukpa world view, apart from the supreme God, *Chukwu* every individual person has a personal god called *Chi* whose functions are similar with those of the guardian angels in Catholic angelology. According to Ugwu C.O.T. (1999) citing Ilogu (1974), "The concept of "Chi" is very vital among the Igbo. It is seen as the divine seed (Logos spermatikos) given to man by "Ezechiteoke", the Supreme Creator at birth. This becomes the spirit double of a man-good or bad-fortunes, successes or failures or weaknesses are to his "chi". Hence it is said: *n'onye chi yaegbuhonammaduenweghiikeigbuya* (No human being can kill another, unless the one was killed first by his or her *chi*). Favour and good luck are attributed to *chi* who brings blessings (*Ngozi*) from God (*Chukwu*). Ugwu, D.C. (1987) describes the *Egba Chukwu* in Obukpa, thus: All the households in the village cook and gather in the village square (*otobo*) for sacrifice to God. The sacrifice is very simple. The shrine or the altar of the one true God is some five feet high crowned with a small clay pot or a stone is erected. This is not God, it is the altar on which the village offers sacrifice to God on behalf of the villagers. All the villagers gather at the *otobo*, each house-hold carrying cooked food, palm-wine, oil and kola-nut and the whole village producing a cock, a hen or a goat for sacrifice. The priest of *Chukwu* is the *Onyishio* of the village. He sits together with the village elders at the foot of the altar from where he proceeds to the column to offer the village sacrifice to *Chukwu*.

He prays for the village, reads some litanies assisted by the village elders and the rest of the villagers. After the *onyishi* would have offered the sacrifice, the villagers gathered to partake the food, wine, nuts and meat in a sort of village communion. After this, all the villagers retire to their various homes for a day-long merriment and festivity. The *Egba-Chukwu* was usually celebrated four times in the year, twice for the men and twice for the women. Now it has been reduced to two celebrations in the year. Metuh (1991) wrote that A.J. Shelton published photographs of some altars and shrines dedicated to Chukwu in Nsukka area. The village communal shrine dedicated to God is called *onuchukwu*. One of such altars is found in Umunne-Gwa village Nsukka outside Obukpa Town. This gives evidence of the extent of the spread of this feast in Nsukka cultural zone. In Umunne-Gwa village, “This altar is in the village square, and is set upon a conical earthen mound four feet in height. The altar itself is the wooden carving place atop the earthen mound and its main face is directed toward the east, where the sun rises.” The above descriptions inform us about the altars and the direct sacrifices made to God on them in Obukpa and Nsukka Area. These sacrifices and festival dedicated to God are widely spread across Igbo land. In the next section we shall study *EgbaChukwu* as preparatory to the Gospel message of Christ.

4.Egba Chukwu as Praeparatio Evangelica.

One can readily identify some Christian elements in the *egba chukwu*. These are:

1. The existence of God: God exists in Obukpa Religion as *Chukwu* (Supreme Being) and *Chineke*, God the creator.
2. The presence of Shrines: The shrine dedicated to God is known as *Onu Chukwu*. It is a sacred place respected *as such*.
3. The erection of the altar: In the shrine (*Onu Chukwu*), one finds the Altar (*ekwu aja*) on which the sacrifice takes place.
4. Victims of sacrifices, prayer, thanksgiving and communion: These material items and spiritual forms of the entire ritual sacrifice, the *koinonia* in and the festivities that follow both in the *otobo*, the entire village and in homes/ families (*ezi na ulo*) prompt joy in the persons and Community. They also promote peace and good relationship with God had and neighbours.
5. The Role of the Priesthood: The *Onyishi* is the priest who offers the sacrifice. He is the eldest (*presbyter*, priest).
6. The recognition of spirits: Even though, *egba Chukwu* is exclusively dedicated to God, other spirits are recognized in the Obukpa cosmology.
7. The solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity – *Egba Chukwu* is akin to the solemnity of the Triune God. Even though *Chukwu* in Obukpa Religion is not understood in the persons of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, but God is One God. The Christian God is one God.

The elements in *egba Chukwu* mentioned above are already known by the Obukpa people through their religion before the advent of Christianity. These familiar concepts and ideas became preparatory grounds and pre-disposition factors that helped facilitate the understanding and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ. This is because those materials and theological ideas are not strange in Christian culture. Good catechesis goes from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Pope Paul VI in this *Africa Terrarum*, teaches: “The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the Africa Tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because she sees them as proriental, as the basis for spreading the Gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ”. (Cited by Gbuji, A.O. (1987). In every good sense, *egba Chukwu* in Obukpa is theologically valid as *praeparatio evangelica*. This is understandable because it falls within the scope of general revelation and contains elements which could mirror the evangelical message and by that force facilitate its propagation and acceptance (Metuh, 1987). General revelation is attested to in the *Letter to the Hebrews* 13:1-2; we read: “

At various times in the past and by various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the worlds”. Roman Catholicism planted as a mustard seed in Obukpa in 1930 has grown into a vast vineyard today in 2017, 87 years later. It is worthy of note that the first house where the earliest catechism classes and moral instructions took place was the hall dedicated to *Nnumu kwome* the earth goddess believed to be the Mother of Obukpa. According to Nwodo R. et al (2013): “As expected, this hall was dedicated to Nnumu Kwome. The legendary goddess touted as the mother of Obukpa and who made Obukpa victorious in wars.

This young school housed in Ulo Nnumu attracted young Obukpa boys who had contact with Christianity in Nsukka and elsewhere. They soon introduced teaching of Catechism and moral instructions in the school. They also sought for assistance from catechist and teachers from Eke in Udi.

So the birth of Catholic Church in Obukpa can rightly be said to be in 1930. Between 1930 and 1931 the young Christians organized communal labour and erected a thatched Church building at the very site where the parish Church stands today. It was later named St. Paul's Catholic Church Obukpa by Rev. Fr. J. Mellet C.S.S.P. By 1933 the number had grown to about 100 and by 1936 the number of converts in the town had grown to about 150". Today, Obukpa Town which is predominantly Catholic is presently arranged pastorally and canonically under 5 parishes; namely: St. Paul's Parish Obukpa (the mother Parish) St. Theresa's Parish, Owerre Obukpa, St John's Parish, Nkalagu Obukpa, Immaculate Heart Parish, Ejuona Obukpa and Divine Mercy Parish, Obukpa New Layout created in 2015 by Bishop Godfery I. Onah, the Bishop of Nsukka Diocese to mark the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (*Jubilaem Extraordinarium Misericordiae*, held from 8 December, 2015, the feast of Immaculate Conception to 20 November 2016, the feast of Christ the king initiated by Pope Francis. The physical infrastructure which belonged to the earth goddess, her house and land were all *preparations* for Christ's Gospel as both the earth and its fullness belong to God (Psalm 24: 1- 2). The Christians understood the solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity with effortless ease because they already had their *egba chukwu* in the religious world view. The issue now is the possibility of *inculturating egba Chukwu* so that Christians will participate in it, not around the altars in the shrines dedicated to *Chukwu* in the religious spaces of Africa Traditional Religion but in Christianity. This incultradition process that would expunge all unchristian elements in it would make it more universally acceptable and perhaps, celebrated in the context of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. Both the Church hierarchy in the Diocese of of Nsukka, the Presbyterium, the religious and the laity have a great responsibility in the light of this pastoral theological concern. The Conciliar Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate* (1965) teach that: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrine which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non- Christians, also their social life and culture." The Holy Mother Church asks her children who engage in the dialogue with other religions to unceasingly proclaim Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) in whom God brought reconciliation to all things (2 Cor. 5: -18-19) and to be conscious at all times that human beings find the fullness of their life, meaning and fulfillment in Christ.

Recommendations / Conclusion

Egba Chukwu is a feast in Obukpa religion which has enormous religious significance in Christian Theology. The pastoral value of this feast is worth the need for further theological researches with an eye on inculturation process. The material culture in Christian civilization, some theological ideals and concepts which the foremost missionaries used to communicate their Christian message were already known to Obukpa people. This background became fertile for the seed of the gospel and nurtured its pastoral harvests. It is therefore gainful if this feast is elevated to the status of a Christian festival, say of the Most Holy Trinity.

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