

A Re-Thinking of *Uka Di N'obi* Gender Phenomenon: A Present Deterrent to The Growth of Christianity in Igboland

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ABSTRACT

Uka di n'obi literally means that 'divine worship is subjective, personal, and should not be influenced by any public orthodox regulations'. It betrays a complex of laissez-faire attitude in one's personal commitment towards divine worship. It encourages one to isolate one's self from a common congregational worship for the purpose of maximizing leisure. This attitude readily develops into a large scale religious apathy. A close survey of people's religious piety and praxis tend to apportion higher marks to the women-folk than to the men-folk in Igboland. More of the female-folk attend religious gatherings, promote prayerful exercises, and resort to God at difficult moments. It is not a question of number or emotion but a question of interest and a conscious self-commitment. On explicit self-commitment, Karl Rahner introduced the concept of "anonymous Christianity". When applied to them, they unambiguously promote God and expect to attain salvation through the explicitly constituted Christianity but at their pace. Once their salvation is assured by their 'anonymity', they do border to question their partial or total commitment to Christianity. But what is the fate of the Christian church if every member adopts anonymity? In how far does the anonymity assure members of the desired salvation? While this paper frowns at anonymity, it devices every means to include as it invites indifferent Christians to the task of active membership. It specifically outlines the reasons that promote such isolations and uses as it applies an existent theology to reduce the furtherance of such attitude.

Key Words: *Uka di n'obi*, efulefu, Christian denomination, anonymous Christian, church militants

INTRODUCTION

Uka di n'obi, is an attitude descriptive of one's inner satisfaction over one's passive belongingness to God through Christ. It took root at the point of the earliest missionary evangelization. Some of the potential adherents then argued that active participation in Church matters is good but of primary importance is to remain a good person. By this argument they hold that their singular aim for Church membership is to be good. If then one is good already it is same with belonging to any Church. By this they hold that their whole existence has attained the *terminus ad quem* of the Church's militant. They, therefore, prefer remaining where they are so long as they are conforming to the Church's intention. They express this option by the maxim: *Uka di n'obi*: literally – church is in the heart. Indeed, it imports that being a Christian is not a matter of membership but of praxis even outside the Church structure and government. This argument maintains that being a Christian is not being bodily present in the Church. In this way, they defend their indifference, their apathy, and their consistent non-membership of any Christian denomination.

This initial argument promoted by heathens who objected to Christian conversion was borrowed by some present non practicing Christians. For the later, *Uka Di N'Obi* imports a notion of personal independence in Church matters. It relativizes Christianity and authorizes the individual to worship at one's disposition without paying heed to any common congregational formal procedure. It allows one the latitude to dictate and regulate the level of one's Christian commitment and praxis. The adherents of *Uka Di N'Obi* refrain from all financial commitments but insist on their rights as they individually recognize their Christian membership. The challenge of the era is the inertia experienced from such caliber of Christians who are more predominant within the masculine gender. It is their feeling that Church practice is a mind-set. One decides when to worship and when not to, when it is an offence, and when it is not. In this self-reconstructed-church-membership one begins to re-define an offence. One turns out a referee in the field of prayer. This is the content of *Uka di n'obi* maxim and praxis. When one is immersed in it, one becomes the judge and arbiter of one's faith and morals. The imminent outcome is a total relapse from Christianity as one turns a god to oneself.

Karl Rahner, in his appraisal of ‘anonymous Christians’, certainly argued on behalf of a relative group- those who live in the grace of God and hope to attain salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity. The difference is clear. Rahner talks of those who have no idea of Christianity but live as though they are in partnership with the Christian faith. They have not repulsed the faith in any form or manner. The advocates of *Uka di n’obi* have clearly heard about Christ. What role will their uprightness play en route to salvation? Could their Christian apathy, spiritual inertia or rheumatic faith be considered to be equivalent to a case of anonymous Christianity. To be sure, both classes seem to lack some sufficient knowledge about Christ? The members of *Uka di n’obi* cannot feign ignorance of the Christian message? They rather intend to see a Christian faith configured to their taste and culture. They do not adjust their tradition or culture to find some relevance with the doctrinal demands of Christianity. That is the crux of the matter – an African church with totally an African cross and theology. The aim of the paper is to challenge uncommitted Christians who stand on the fence and proclaims self-righteousness. They design “A WAY OF THE CROSS MADE SIMPLE”.

The Dilemma of the Early Converts

It should be recalled that the missionaries first converted the natives called – *efulefu*, worthless, e01ty men. According to Achebe, C., (1986:10) the *efulefu* are ridiculed as untitled men who sold there matchets and wore the sheath to battle. The missionaries also brought in the outcastes- a situation that the former converted natives loathed and considered as taboo. It was only later that responsible titled men joined. Achebe expressed fully what really took place.

According to Achebe C., (1986:122) the Church had come and led many astray. Not only the low born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and like a madman, he had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians.

The inclusion of the *efulefu* at the Christian foundations by the missionaries pushed the natives to rethink their belongingness to the Christian faith where such would imply total interaction with the outcasts. This great restraint was part of what stopped the initial potential converts from joining the faith. They preferred confining themselves to the god of their ancestors to the God where worship should include even the outcasts. They can be excused as they had not heard of Christianity for the first time. Just as they were suspicious of the Church so they were of the school where they initially sent only their slaves and their lazy children. Achebe C. (1986:128) reports that the early converts only sent their wards to the Church and schools later. In their view ‘the white man’s medicine was quick in working because ‘new churches were established ... and few schools with them’. The consequence of the double mindedness of the early converts should have been instructive to the *Uka di n’obi* adherents of the present era.

Current Factors Promotive of *Uka Di N’obi* Membership

Uka di n’obi adherents have no organized association. Each is on the way to total exclusion from the Christian corpus with reasons peculiar to his own situation. These reasons range from:

- (1) Polygamy
- (2) Affluence
- (3) Enormous debt
- (4) Unsettled disputes
- (5) Place of domicile
- (6) Titles

Each factor can be given due consideration to determine how each plagues the society. Each factor throws its own weight to increase the tempo of religious apathy to the detriment of orthodoxy of discipleship. They are singularly inter-connected but produce similar effects on the Church.

Polygamy

Polygamy which should simply be understood as the marriage between a man and many wives easily gives rise to a stunted Christian praxis. The first wife is privileged to continue in her original denomination. The others may manage the same with the first wife with the best of their ability while the man totally drops as he has gotten what he has bargained for. His problem might have been childlessness, insubordination in the family, or infidelity. The childlessness may arise out of the malfunctioning of the man’s organ(s) to which he generally would not accept. Following the Igbo masculine culture, the men never admit being responsible for such a marital problem as childlessness. To drive home this point, they can always get second wives, allow them to secretly connive with any man and get children which the husbands are not responsible for. By so doing, the society will believe that the woman was infertile, hence the childlessness. This situation turns into an inertia that diminishes interest in Christian

praxis. More often than not, men turn into polygamists through peculiar circumstances or cultural demands that challenge their masculinity. It is only a few married men that can, for a long time, overcome societal ridicule as they remain childless. The temptation to solve their societal problem, no matter how, pushes them to a corner where they inertly yearn for Christ but with stunted limbs. They are consoled with “not all those who call Father, Father, will enter into eternal life”. They forget that those who have their oil will surely enter as Matthew (1:13) holds

Affluence

Affluence can be interpreted as prosperity, material comfort or privileged circumstances. The biblical reference to the Lukan (16:31) rich man stands out very vividly. It occasions forgetfulness of God and self-centeredness on material things which the First Commandment forbids. To control this aberration would require insights into the footsteps of Jesus and to recall the true meanings of discipleship since the society may not consider women as exemplary in a masculine society. In the main, the aim is to avoid a godless society. The possession of children as an African value is not easily compromised with unless one's faith enjoys an unrivaled divine grace. Very few can admit being responsible for polygamy. It is always attributed to situations beyond one's control. The issue of affluence as contributive to *Uka di n'obi* preponderance is a reminiscence of the biblical invitation to the banquet where various invitees for specific profane reasons declined the invitation. The reaction of the celebrant was clear as he has fundamentally willed that the banquet hall must be filled. Whoever excludes oneself has oneself to blame. There was even a caveat against all those who will rely on worldly things as their God. “It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mtt 19:23). Not the rich men indeed but those who worship wealth rather than God. Who then will reward them in the kingdom of God since they have received their reward?

Enormous Debt

Many non-practicing Christians argue that they were marginalized from their respective denominations on account of their gross debts incurred over a period of time. As they were not able to pay, at a particular point in time, they were classed as those who will never be accorded full Christian burial unless they clear such debts before death. Their uppermost intention is to ensure that all hands are on deck in the contributions of parochial projects. Some go to the extent of doubling or tripling the amount should the relatives decide to defray the debt for any quality of Christian burial. Here, the Church should strike a balance between the worship of God, parochial development and being in communion as Kung H. (1978) harps. The idea of being our brothers' keepers comes to limelight too. Certainly, one must identify with one's society. Every society must also be guided by regulations. Where the nuclear societies do not adhere to the general norms provided by the umbrella society, something becomes wrong with the grass-root Christian praxis. Debt should not be a factor to deter adherents from participating actively. Contributions must be proportional since all fingers are not equal. The sick ones in the society must be adequately considered.

Unsettled Disputes

The leadership of certain Christian groups may stand in opposition to some of its members. Where such obtains the greater tendency is for the subject to opt out and die in silence. In such a situation the voice of the voiceless would not be heard. One finds solution in solitude and often ends up in *Uka di n'obi* syndrome. Who is to blame at the end of the day other than the marginalized? Caucuses in Igboland have such adherents who inaudibly share experiences with similar fellows and thereby expanding their frontiers. Disputes that involve Church authorities should not be allowed to deny Christians their Christian veritable heritage. A super-structure should always be resorted to in order to re-instate the marginalized and reduce the expansion of *Uka di n'obi* adherences.

Place of Domicile

Christians tend to exhibit some dormancy when they find accommodation in foreign lands. The danger of not finding the new Church or joining the new groups produces an inertia that makes one take a long holiday in Church matters. This indulgence can eat deep and be brought home. Its excess introduces one into the thought of *Uka di n'obi* because at this point one is lost in the crowd. The need to belong becomes necessary wherever one finds oneself.

Titles

Igbo people like titles. Some of these titles are frowned at by some local Churches and consequently do not allow their members to embrace them. Such title-taking as *Ozo* has raised a lot of dust in some localities. Simply put, some see it as totally fetish while others think that it is a social, and those that matter in the community must go through its ritual, they argue that Christians should embrace it to become the mouth-piece of Christians whenever the need arises. There is neither a specific uniform understanding of *Ozo* in Igboland nor any common agreements on the irreconcilable unchristian elements in *Ozo*. What is clear is that Christians of some localities who insist on their *Ozo* membership are not permitted to insist on their Christian rites. On the whole, there is labyrinth of what to globally practice. Many Christians preach the theology of *Uka di n'obi* since they are not allowed to produce a good mixture of *Ozo* title and the Christian faith.

The Scenario

In the light of the above, there is a great feeling that souls are lost that ought not be. There is growing necessity to re-examine the faith of those cut up with the *Uka di n'obi* syndrome and the constituency of those not only correctly understood as members of the Church but also explained as possessing the character to everlasting salvation. The *Uka di n'obi* school of thought argues that it is not being found in the synagogue that matters but doing the father's will. How can this be compared with the: The Doctrine of Anonymous Christians.

The Doctrine of Anonymous Christians

Karl Rahner's inclusivist theology wandered and metamorphosed into the doctrine of 'anonymous Christians'. In doing so he endeavored to ensure salvation to as many that directly or indirectly, by omission or commission desired it. According to him: "Anonymous Christianity means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of an explicitly constituted Christianity Let us say, a Buddhist monk ... who because he follows his conscience attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so, if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time, I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity.

This teaching is clear but the clarity provoked so much controversy. That notwithstanding, his theological ideals affected the Second Vatican Council. In *Lumen Gentium*, the *Council* Fathers stated: "Those also who can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience."

In *Gaudium et Spes* they wrote

"Since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery"

Lumen Gentium (LG 16) of Vatican II teaches that,

"Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation". The Catechism of the Catholic echoes the same: Those who die for the faith, those who are catechumens, and all those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized. (No 1281)

These statements indicate that the Catholic Church has become aware of the ultimate intentions of the doctrine of the 'Anonymous Christian' and that objections are welcome to the dialogue on the fate of the unchristianised dead. Roma locuta, causa finita.

It is necessary to recall that Pope Benedict XVI as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger - the then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of faith with the approval of Pope John Paul II issued *Dominus Jesus* – the document which asserts the supremacy of the Catholic Church, and the acceptance of "anonymous Christianity".

According to him:

‘Nevertheless, God desires to call all peoples to himself in Christ and to communicate to them the fullness of his revelation and love, ‘does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain “gaps, insufficiencies and errors”. Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain’ (1,8)

Following up his arguments, he continued thus:

“Theology today in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation. In this undertaking, theological research has a vast field of work under the guidance of the Church Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: “the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source”. (III.14)

There is no doubt that theological research has a ‘vast field of work’ as humans are engaged to further the divine agenda, namely that of benefiting from Christ’s ‘ransom for many’. It is because man cannot determine without error what awaits man at the end of time and how exactly God will judge the world, it becomes safest to be guided by Socrates’ injunction which instructs that *virtus in medio stat*. The Council in her wisdom preferred maintaining that with respect to the way in which the salvific grace of God – which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church – comes to individual non-Christian, it is only God that bestows it ‘in ways known to himself’. (VI. 21) [6]

Further Controversies

- (a) The Society of Pius, a Catholic group separated themselves from the Catholic teaching and indeed from the Catholic Church because of the explicit inclusivist approach adopted by the Council Fathers. According to them, Anonymous Christianity: “is a very grave doctrinal error because it declares personal justification as being realized for every man without any participation of his will or free choice and, so, without any need of his conversion, faith, baptism or works. Redemption is guaranteed to all, as if sanctifying grace were ontologically present in each man just because he is man”.
- (b) The Liberal Christians also over-reacted. They condemned the notion, because as Hans Kung put it: “It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an ‘anonymous Christian, as presumptuous.”
- (c) John Hick maintains that this notion is simply paternalistic because it is an “honorary status granted unilaterally to people who have not expressed any desire for it”. From his argument he rejected the notion because the majority of people who benefit from it are born into non-Christian families, and therefore Anonymous Christianity will denigrate the beliefs of non-Christians by supposing that they are really Christians without realizing it.
- (d) Fundamentalist Christians as should be expected took the narrowest but biblical view. They cite Acts 4:12 which reads: “salvation is to be found through him alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us”. This brand of Christians believes in Absolute exclusivism, which is the view that implies that only their version of biblical Christianity is valid. For them, all other religious systems are false and there is no hope of salvation for any that does confess the name of Christ.

Karl Rahner’s Ultimate Intention

Karl Rahner had never welcomed the Fundamentalists’ stand. It is their stand that really provoked more of his thing. His presentation of anonymous Christianity did not intend to sound derogatory to any opposing schools of thought. He only desired to bring about a theological mechanism by which non-Christians both present and those who preceded Christ might be saved. As long as the Church remains the Church of saints and sinners, according to St Augustine, it is better for Rahner’s theology to suffer present oppositions than for a clear cut exclusivism to prevail since final judgment remains for God.

Transition from the Theology of Anonymous Christianity to That of *Uka Di N’Obi*

There is no structural comparison between the practice of Anonymous Christians and the membership of *Uka Di N’Obi*. Anonymous Christians essentially belong to other religions. The advocates are Christians. As the candidacy

of non-Christians is considered for salvation, Christians who did not fight Christ in their Christian life should be given what can be called a “corrective hearing”; to lure them out of the opposing life-style; Christ was very clear: He who is not against me is for me. In the consideration of their militating problems (as in Origins 3-6) which marginalized them, some may not be judged as manifest sinners but “sinners regarded as such”. If they follow their existing conscience and follow Christ without manifesting their belief in the Church, their fundamental option for Christ overrides the Buddhist’s anonymous belongingness. Those obvious difficulties that comatosed them to behave otherwise could be regarded as “gaps, insufficiencies and errors”. In their case those factors should not be allowed to suffocate them but they should be revisited so that God “in ways known to himself” will heal them.’ Comparatively speaking, anonymous Christians don’t yearn for Christ but live out a Christian life. That is how the implicit Christians, the *Uka di n’obi* advocates yearn for Christ but do not live out their Christianity. They are explicit Christians by virtue of membership. Their latent Christianity most supposedly will invite Christ to their constituency more than the people who are totally indifferent to him. This latency pleads for their cause as they are guided by their level of conscience which to be sure require pruning. This state of lukewarmness could be a string, and now a grace, that may guide them to anchor finally in Christ ‘in ways known to him’ alone.

The Role of Conscience

Conscience, according to Peschke H.C. (Vol. I, 1979:147), “is that faculty which makes/ known to man his moral obligations and urges him to fulfill them” . St Paul holds that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23) by this he means to say that every action which is not performed with the certain conviction of its rightfulness is sin. It is good to recall that Peschke sees conscience as the appropriate faculty which tells man what his moral duties are. There is a certain conscience, a vincibly erroneous and lax conscience, a perplexed conscience and a scrupulous conscience. It is evident that our minds may not be pricking us but we are in error. In matters of faith and morals it is the Magisterium that determines when one is in error. One must therefore not declare oneself error free when one dwells head to toe on any level of conscience that is not certain. This can be the problem with *Uka di n’obi* school of thought.

CONCLUSION

In all, it becomes necessary to underline the wisdom of the founding Fathers of Vatican II who avoid the clear cut exclusivism. The reason is so that we disentangle ourselves from the error of Fulgentius of Ruspe who thought that “not only all pagans, also all Jews, all heretics, and schismatics, who die outside the present Catholic Church, will go into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. While the number of those who hold that membership to a Christian Church does not really matter it becomes unthinkable how we can argue for the uselessness of schools where knowledge is acquired. It is through identifying ourselves with Christians that we collectively learn of him and move towards him. As the Church is made up of Saints and sinners, it cannot be that the weaker members should become the models. Rather, it should be that avenues are created that none loses hope or drops on the way. One of the ways should be a broader interpretation of “ecclesiam nulla salus” to accommodate *Uka di n’obi* school of thought but not to encourage its continuity. The only appear lukewarm for perturbing reasons but do not reject Christ as their savior.

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