

GODS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF EKWUNEKWUNE IKWO, 1940 -2007

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ABSTRACT: *This study focuses on the religion and cultural practices of Ekwunekwune people in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, from 1940 to 2007. Christianity was introduced into the community in the 1940s when missionaries of the Church of Scotland Mission sailed from Calabar to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the area. Then the Church was vehemently resisted as an anti- cultural practice from the Western world. Despite that early resistance, Christianity has survived along side the culture of the people, resulting to a new social order where the foreign religion and the people's culture co-exist without much differentiation and noticeable impact on the old ways of the people. In 2007, the democratic experiment in Nigeria under OlusegunObasanjo which saw an influx of changes in many parts of the country, ended without much effect on Ekwunekwune. The study stems from an interest in the many gods of the people and their several cultural practices and festivals. It is dependent on the primary sources of data, mostly derived through directoral accounts, due to the dearth of written documents on past events in the community. It is a qualitative study which uses the analytic and narrative approaches of history to present its findings. The study uses the Cause – Effect theory to question the relevance of some of the cultural practices in Ekwunekwune. The theory examines the causes of changes in a society and how the changes affect the social order of the people. The paper argues that a people's culture, when it is change resistant, could result to stagnation of social developments, and eventually lead to their backwardness and underdevelopment.*

KEYWORDS: Ekwunekwune, gods, cultural practices, economic interest, modernity

INTRODUCTION

The people of Ekwunekwune said they have lived where they are today for about three hundred years. If that is accepted, they started occupying the area since the 1700s. That is, about the 16th century A. D. For that long, they have lived the way their fore-fathers lived, doing many things the same old way. Many of the gods of the land like the Ofekedeity, were procured by the forebears of the community to prosecute wars. Many titles, secret societies and other cultures developed in that long past. These have not changed much in Ekwunekwune, despite the advent and overwhelming influence of the Christian religion.

Christianity, together with colonialism, reduced only the number of adherents of the traditional ways but never the faith in them. There are still many worshippers of the gods as well as practitioners of the inherited cultures of the people, especially among the elders. For example, sacrifices and offerings are still made to the gods of the land with open glee, and men do still aspire and acquire status titles. They join secret societies (though with modifications), and acquire personal gods to protect them and their families from evil. Cultural festivals are celebrated by all with joyous excitement as in the pre-Christian days. Both traditionalists and Christian converts partake in the celebrations. The *Nefioha* (New Yam) festival, for instance, still receives regard and respect from all indigenes, despite their religious differences. The laws guiding these festivals and other cultural practices are honoured by all without reservation. But during the sacrifices to each god of the festivals and cultural events, Christian converts seem not to participate fully.

The faith of Ekwunkwune people in their tradition and cultures is not a recent development. It was inherited from their ancestors. Doggedness was the force that helped them in driving out the earlier settlers of the area today known as Ekwunekwune. Many now see that resilience as stubbornness; and often times, one hear the people call themselves *AgburuNkashi*. That is, *cocoyam- roots* because they are hard to cook. The paramount ruler of the community maintained that his people are always stubborn. We are very stubborn people. We have never allowed any alien culture to become dominant over us, not even from our closest neighbouring towns. No culture has been transferred to us from outside.¹

That explains the people's earlier resistance to Christianity which had declined in 1949 when finally, the new faith took a firm root in the community. The elders of the community were said to have allowed their youths who fancied the new religion, to join the church but warned that the church should "go and perform your own, let us perform our own."² Today Christianity co-exists with the traditions of the people, and the activities of the two antagonistic practices are coterminous with each other. Many traditionalists are found in the churches, and many church men still perform some traditions. The people said they have no problem with the inter-faith relations because it fosters deeper love and co-operation among them, and helps in developing their better understanding of who they are.

They said that poisoning of people; witchcraft practices, human sacrifices, and intolerance have been curtailed drastically in their community. Insecurity which was the order of the day in the pre-Christian /colonial days due to the activities of the *Oludashi* (*Let the neck fall*) group was now history in the whole of Ekwunekwune land. Laws introduced by the colonial government to protect human rights gave rise to freer movement of traders and all people in the community to do their businesses without the fear of either losing their goods or heads to the *Oludashi* members whose specialty was cutting off the head from the neck.³ Because of all these good results, the people believe that both Christianity and colonialism were not meant against their traditions.

The people and their occupations

Ekwunekwune is part of the Ikwo Clan, one of the three clans that make up the Abakaliki people in the northeast of Igbo land, Nigeria. The people said that their ancestor was Enyi Nwegu. But the other two major Clans of Abakaliki-Ezza and Izzi, said that EkumaEnyi, son of Enyi Anakiwhaliki, was the ancestor of the three clans. According to Ekwunekwune oral traditions, EnyiNwegu was the father of the founders of the clans of Ezza founded by Ezekuna (first son), Izzi founded by Nnodo (second son), and Ikwo founded by Noyo (third son). Noyo begat Alike, Ekpa, Mgboabor, Echara and Ekpa Omaka, who expanded the Ikwo clan. Each of these sons begat sons in turn to further the expansion.⁴ Mgboabor and his own son, Erim Ogwudu, were paired in the elaborate expansionist plans of the family.

The two were assigned the conquest and defense of the southern part of Ikwo. Their first war was with the Ekwurekwu group of the Cross River region. They drove away the people and pitched their first home at Ohatekwe from where they launched further south to dislodge the Otum people, another group from Cross River, whose settlement the Ikwo group renamed Agalegu, and later Nde Ofeke, after Mgboabor had setup his Ofeke deity there.⁵ As Mgboabor became advanced in age to continue active leadership of his group, Erim Ogwudu, his son, took over from him. With his own two sons- Omara and Amogu, Erim Ogwudu continued the expansionist drive of the family by creating more villages.

Agalegu-Amagu was his first achievement from where he crossed a small creek with his group to dislodge another Cross Riverian community, the Ekpete people, from a lush forest to the east of Agalegu-Amagu. The astonishing abundance of birds and bird-eggs in nests compelled Erim Ogwudu to name the area *Ekwunekwune (Land of birds)*. But the British missionaries corrupted the name to *Akunakuna* because they could not pronounce *Ekwunekwune* correctly.⁶

Ekwunekwune is in Amagu Ikwo Autonomous Community. It runs a government based on the age grade system whereby decisions of public concern are taken by the oldest age sets, and then passed on to the village head for ratification. The village head is a member of the ruling age sets which include the *Ogbo Nyirije*, *Ogbo Idagu* and *Ogbo Igwe*.⁷ *Ogbo* means age grade. The village head, apart from belonging to one of these ruling age grades, must be a person of outstanding qualities in community services and must have been chosen by other members of the same kindred whose turn it was to provide a village head for the community.⁸ There is a younger age grade called *Ogbo Ngburuma* which enforces the decisions of the older age grades and carries out other functions that serve the interest of all in the community. John Nwakpuru posited that:

*Decisions about wars, murder cases, banishments and other serious cases, must go from the reigning age grades to the village head who had the final say in all matters of the community.*⁹

Occupationally, Ekwunekwune is an agrarian community. Their major crops are yams, oil palms, legumes like groundnuts, melon, and others. John Nwakpuru said that rice was introduced of late into the community.¹⁰ The people also rear animals such as goats, sheep, fowls and cows. And some men add hunting to complement farming. Their catches are normally monkeys, antelopes, grass- cutters, and guinea fowls (*Okwa*). There were some industries in Ekwunekwune, especially

in the pre-colonial days, which encouraged trade relations between the community and other nearby and far towns. There were specialist blacksmiths who produced farm tools like machetes and hoes of all sizes; and hunting implement such as traps, gagged spears and metal clubs. Another major industry in pre-colonial Ekwunekwune was weaving which produced mats and masquerade wears (*Uwe Ogbo Enyi*).¹¹ Together, these industrial goods formed Ekwunekwune trade commodities with traders from Ezza, Izzi, Uburu, Akpoha, Ohafia, Awka and other Igbo communities as well as those from the Cross River region. Exchange was basically by barter until currencies of cowries, ivories and gold were intermittently introduced with the coming of the Europeans in the 19th century.

The gods and their duties

The religion of Ekwunekwune people is the African traditional religion where the Creator (Chiokike) or Supreme Being (Chi Ukwu or Chukwu) is worshipped through intermediary spirits that operate through inanimate objects because no human being is believed to be good enough to make direct supplication to the Supreme Being. The Creator answers the people's prayers through the intermediary spirits and receives their offerings and sacrifices (as commanded) through the same spirits. Apart from the ancestors (dead parents) of the people who are believed to be part of the affairs of their living off-springs, these spirits are acquired for communal and personal needs. Thus, there are communal gods for war, peace, defense and protection of the land, verifying the truth when in dispute as well as checking infidelity in married women. Individuals acquire gods for increased farm yields, success when taking titles, physical strength, authority and influence over their neighbours.

Communal gods

Ofeke: This is one of the deities acquired by Mgboabor, father of Erim Ogwudu, founder of Ekwunekwune Community. It is situated in a thick forest within Nde Ofeke village, and is used mainly for the *Ofiasha* initiation which qualifies men for full manhood in the community. The Ofeke deity compares with the Ogo cult in Afikpo, and the *Ofiasha* initiation associated with it the same as the Isiji initiation in Afikpo. The *Ofiasha* initiation is also the same as the adult circumcision (*Ibu Ubvu Ogerenya*) in Ezza and Izzi Clans. In all four Clans, these initiation and circumcision qualified men for adulthood and public responsibility. The initiations were particularly used for military training in all the communities in the pre-colonial days.¹²

Edukwu: This is the most important god to the people of Ekwunekwune. It is located at the village square of the people where all general assemblies of the community, including the selection of a village head and other leaders, are held. These assemblies and selections are made before the deity to ensure impartiality in all affairs of the people. According to Abraham Alobu, *Edukwu* is a temple where Ekwunekwune people gather to worship and to take decisions on important matters.¹³ The priest of *Edukwu* must hail from the Umu Omara lineage because that is the most senior lineage in Ekwunekwune.

Egwo: This is a general purpose marine deity which watches over the people in and outside the community. It is believed to possess the power to protect its worshippers from all manner of

troubles, and to guarantee fertility in the women. Its shrine is located close to a stream whose fish is sacred, and must not be caught, killed or eaten by anybody. Menstruating women do not enter the stream, and its water is not fetched with a metallic or plastic containers. Only calabashes and clay pots are used in fetching water from the *Egwo* stream. Violation of any of these rules is atoned with fowls, yams and other items or the offender risks mysterious deaths in his/her family. Fresh initiates of *Ofiasha* and men who have just acquired new titles offer sacrifices to appreciate *Egwo* for seeing them successfully through the exercise for social promotion in the community.

Alobu: This deity is also spelt as *Aliobu*. It is generally worshipped in the entire Ikwo Clan to check infidelity in married women and to punish the adulterous ones. It could kill a victim when it attacks and the person refuses to confess her deed. Children of such women could die one after the other as a proof that *Aliobu* is in action. A sign that a woman is adulterous is when she suddenly swells up, especially from the stomach. At that juncture, elders of her compound would gather to extract a confession from the woman. Her husband, as a matter of custom, severs all forms of relations with her, including eating anything cooked or prepared by her.

If she confesses, the woman will appease the deity with a fowl, yams, foofoo, palm wine, and other items before she could be reconciled to the husband. The man is not allowed to contribute in any way to the appeasement; otherwise, he dies as an accomplice to his wife's unfaithfulness to the gods and ancestors of the land. In other clans of Abakaliki and Afikpo, the deity is commonly called *Ali (Earth-goddess)*. The function is the same but the appeasement items must include a healthy live goat, in addition to all the items used in Ekwunekwune.

Nchonu: This god is revered by the people for its benevolence. The people said that *Nchonu* is responsible for the defense and general welfare of the community. In the Ezza Clan, a sister clan in the Abakaliki region, *Nchonu* is regarded as the deity of Ezekuna, the ancestor of the Ezza people. It is located at Amana, an Ezza Community and worshipped by all Ezza people and all their subsidiary communities.¹⁴

Some personal gods

Personal gods are many in Ekwunekwune. Individuals acquire them according to the peculiar challenges they or their families, are facing. For instance, strange and recurring sicknesses on a child or in the family may need a divination by a *Dibia*. The result could be the acquisition of a special charm or Juju, according to the recommendations of the *Dibia (a Witch doctor)*, for a permanent end of the sickness. Once periodic sacrifices to the juju are recommended, it becomes a family or personal god. Among the common personal gods are *Okike, Obashi, Ovoraja*, and some reptiles like the Tortoise and green snake.

Okike: Okike is associated with the creator and is worshipped as a family god in Ekwunekwune. Its shrine is located at a corner of the compounds of individuals where it is worshipped for diverse purposes but mainly for warfare. It is believed that the deity provides favours and wades off evils from its worshippers. Sometimes a recurring minor sickness like headache could be inflicted by

Okike to remind a family that its sacrifice was long over due or that it should be recognized and installed by a man and his family. A fortune-teller consulted by a family for reasons behind the repeated sickness may inform the family that *Okike* wants to be part of the family. The people of Ekwunekwune strongly believe that whatever a man or his family is passing through in life was the share he or they received of *Okike* when coming to the world.

Obashi: The deity is specifically for war and hunting. It could be worshipped communally or personally. Adult males who own personal compounds may set up an altar (shrine) for *Obashi* at the centre of their compounds. In that case, some big stones are set up together to represent the deity with its three colours of yellow (*Odo*), red (*Uswe*), and white (*Ndzu*), painted on the stones or a bundle of sticks tied at seven points and placed on the altar of *Obashi*. Chicken eggs are often sacrificed to the deity.

Before a man goes out for war or hunting, he consults his *Obashi* for advice and victory or success. On his return, the man presented to *Obashi* the human heads he returned with, and thanked the deity for the feat. For success in hunting, the man places the animals he killed before the deity as a mark of appreciation, and before the animals are cooked, some portions are first offered to deity.

At the community level, sacrifices and prayers are made to *Obashi* by the land priests (*Ishi-Uke*), who addresses the deity through the Sun (*Anyanwu*) because no one knows where *Obashi* resides.

Ovoroja: This deity is acquired and installed by individuals as a general welfare god. It is believed to be so powerful that it is compared to the *Long Juju (Ibini Upkabi)* of Arochukwu which was destroyed in 1901/1902 by a British military force to undermine Aro imperialism in Igbo land.¹⁵ The main function of *Ovoroja* is to protect the worshippers and their property as well as attract fortunes to them.

The Tortoise: This is a reptile god worshipped in Ekwunekwune Community and all Amagu Ikwo Autonomous Community. It is venerated as a grand ancestor (*Ochie*) by the people. Nobody kills it, and nobody eats it in the community.¹⁶ The *Tortoise* was said to be part of the sacrifice items in the people's pre-colonial wars. Today, the deity is venerated for wealth in the community.

The Green Snake: This is another reptile god worshipped as *Aka Nwa-Iteshi* in Ekwunekwune Community and the entire Ikwo Clan. It was also said to have been part of the sacrifice items in the people's pre-colonial wars but today, watches over the people and their community. It attacks those who would wish to inflict any evil on the people.¹⁷

In some other communities of Ebonyi State, the *Green Snake* is also worshipped as a powerful deity. For instance, in Ndukwe Village of Amaogu-Akpoha Autonomous Community, Afikpo North Local Government Area, the reptile is honoured as *Nna anyi Ochie (Our grand ancestor)*. Its shrine called *Agazi Udele* is located at the centre of the village playground. The deity is not killed or eaten, and is accorded a warm reception in any home it goes into.

In Okposi Town in Ohaozara Local Government Area, the deity is called *Aka (Hand)*, and is variously appreciated as *Aka Nwaogogo*, *Enya ani* or *Ani Okposi nine (Okposi land wholly)*.

Okposi worshippers of the deity said that *Aka Nwaogogo* originated from the *Aka Nwa-Iteshi* deity in Ikwo Clan where it had delivered the Ezi Ogwuma people out of a conspiracy by their Ikwo, Ezza, Isobo, Itigidi and Adadama neighbours. Under the guide and leadership of the deity, the Ogwuma people migrated out and eventually settled at their present home which they named Okposi. It was in appreciation of the commitment and love of *Aka Nwaogogo* that the Ogwuma people set up a shrine for the worship of the deity. Since the setting up of that shrine, the priest of the deity has always come from the Ogwuma family.¹⁸

In Ishiagu, Ivo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, the *Green Snake* is worshipped as *Akaman*. It is highly honoured by the people. People that had killed the god in the community without appeasing it, were said to have all died mysteriously.¹⁹

Cultural practices of Ekwunekwune land

Culture is the totality of a people's way of life. It comprises all the peculiar practices that differentiate one society from the other societies. The efforts and experiences of a people to overcome the challenges of their environment determine the kind of rules or norms that govern behaviours in the society. These in turn, determine their kind of traditions and cultures which are then passed on to later generations either through schools, churches, families (parents), peer groups, organizations, and so forth.²⁰

In EkwunekwuneIkwo culture has been constant since the days of the ancestors. This was the opinion of many in the community. Their culture came down to them from their fore-fathers, and much has not changed in it. Dominic Aloh said his people have always been stubborn and wary of strangers and their ways of life, especially when those strangers are within Amagu Ikwo.²¹

In practical terms, Ekwunekwune culture may not be as resilient as Aloh paints it. In the pre-colonial wars of the people against the earlier settlers, some medicine men from other communities like Item in the Bende area (in present day Abia State), were said to have been hired to ensure victory for Amagu Ikwo Community. Each group of medicine men prescribed rules that must be obeyed for the expected victory; and after the wars, to avoid the wrath of the acquired gods. The Item medicine men, for instance, had requested, in addition to their normal charges, for a portion of land for their permanent settlement within Amagu Ikwo to ensure total compliance to the rules they prescribed, and to continue as priests of the god acquired from them. Today there is an Item-Amagu Community among the Amagu Ikwo people, and the rules that honour their god have since been incorporated as part of the culture of the people. Ekwunekwune is part of Amagu Ikwo. There were other gods too, that brought foreign influence to bear on the culture of the people.

Many cultural events in the community are contemporarily held in hononur of so many gods, and people seem to have lost knowledge of why some cultural practices are associated with some deities in the community. The Edege dance, for example, associated with the Ofiasha initiation holds annually before the Edukwu deity to appreciate the god. Again, the Ikpa dance associated with the Ishi-agu cult, a secret society for brave men who, in the pre-colonial days, honoured their

fathers, dead or alive, with fresh human heads. Today the honour is bestowed on the fathers with heads of dogs, and membership of the cult has become a title which only the very brave in the community aspire for. The Ikpa ritual music is played during the burials of holders of the title. The Ukoro was another ritual music played to welcome home warriors returning from wars with fresh human heads in the pre-colonial days. It was never played ordinarily, and was not danced by all men. In Ezza Clan, Ukoro was equally worshipped as a powerful deity of war. Afoke and Nworie affirmed that when Ukoro beat itself, its oracle acted as a guiding force that ensured victory for the Ezza people in any war.²²

In Ekwunekwune, men aspired for titles to showcase their wealth or valour, and to distinguish themselves from other men in their community. But after the titles were acquired, some gods were appreciated for the feat. The *Njoke* title-taking was embarked upon by men who felt they had farmed successfully in the previous year.²³ They were expected to offer several long lines of healthy tubers of yam, strong cows, goats and fowls, in addition to sumptuous meals for the entertainment of older holders of the title, and other guests throughout the period of the initiation.

Ogbu Inya (*Horse killing*) was another title which the affluent in Ekwunekwune aspired for. It entailed the killing of a horse or horses, coupled with lavish entertainment for older holders of the title. But the highest title a man could aspire for was the *Otukpo Inyima* which was described as an exclusive title for the very rich and involved offering of two strong cows to older holders of the title as well as entertaining them and other guests for the number of days the ceremony lasted. Both the *Ogbu Inya* and *Otukpo Inyima* were celebrated with the Opi-Inyaa music which was equally played during the burials of holders of the titles.

In Izzi Clan, the *Ogbu-Inya* title was known as *Inya* title while in Ezza Clan, it was called *Omaa Inya*. In both Clans, the celebration of the title was elaborate and more expensive than in Ekwunekwune but remained only for the very affluent.²⁴ But Afoke and Nworie maintained that besides the *Omaa Inya* title, one way of showcasing real wealth in Ezza land was the taking of the *Ozza-Ozza* title.²⁵

Of cultural festivals in Ekwunekwune, *Nefioha* (*New Yam festival*) is the most important. Celebrated in the month of August every year; *Nefioha* serves a dual purpose in the community. First, to mark the end of the hard times that go with the farming season; second, to mark the beginning of a new year. The early morning of *Nefioha* festival opens with the *Ayi aboo* dance by women and children who sing and dance round the community. *Ayi aboo* means *we have survived the hard times*.²⁶ While *Nefioha* ends the farming season, *Ntofeke* or *Ajieroke* marks the beginning. Celebrated in April, the colourful display by the masquerades of the community who play the Ereke gongs, and dance around the community, adds to the festive mood of the people.

The next important festival in Ekwunekwune is the *Orinji* festival. Celebrated annually between September and October, the festival is used to remember and honour the ancestors and dead parents. Sumptuous meals are prepared and the dead are invited to eat from their living off-springs. John Nwankwegu described the festival as *an all souls day* when men who were married and had

children in their life time are honoured by their children or they were provoked to inflict disaster on the negligent off-springs for ingratitude if they were not fed on that day.²⁷ In the Ezza Clan, the *Orinji* festival is celebrated as *Onwa Eke* festival, and is rotationally celebrated by the communities within the month of October.²⁸

Christianity versus indigenous cultures in Ekwunekwune: Changes and Continuities

The Igbo traditional religion was, like Christianity, based on the supremacy of a Supreme Being called *Chi ukwu* or *Chukwu*. But while Christianity approves of direct worship of that Being, Igbo traditional religion believes that man was not righteous enough to communicate directly with that Holy Spirit. Thus, Igbo traditional religion accepts the involvement of intermediary gods to convey the petitions of worshippers to the Supreme Being. Whatever message comes from the intermediary gods is believed as the opinion of the Supreme Being, and is obeyed for answers to the needs of the worshipper. These differences in beliefs and modes of worship were the reasons for the conflict between the Christian missionaries and the indigenous religionists in EkwunekwuneIkwo in the early days of the Christian faith in the community.

Christianity came to Ekwunekwune in the 1940s, from Calabar in the Cross River region. The Church of Scotland Missionaries were the first set of Christians to land in the community. They were led by some guides from Igbudu, a close neighbouring community to Ekwunekwune. The surprised indigenes of Ekwunekwune, especially the young ones, trooped out to welcome the strange visitors, and to know why they were in their community. When the visitors addressed the people and told them that they brought good tidings to the community, the people said they doubted how good the tidings were. But when their follow up message was: *Our mission is that you change your old ways and accept the saviour,* we knew immediately that they came to destroy us. And our young men immediately pounced on them.”²⁹ The attack led to the death of some of the missionaries and their guides, forcing the few safe ones to return hastily to Calabar. Dominic Aloho opined that:

*We are stubborn people. The missionaries came to us first. But we resisted them... we did not accept them. We even killed the first set of missionaries and their guides from our neighbouring community.*³⁰

When the Scottish missionaries left, Catholic missionaries came few years after but made no serious impact on the community. In 1949, the Church of Scotland missionaries returned with many interpreters picked from around Igbo land like Afikpo, Arochukwu, Awka, Ohafia, Onitsha, and other Igbo communities. Though received without any form of molestation, mosquitoes could not allow the missionaries a comfortable stay at Mgboabor where they camped. They had to relocate to Abina, a south-western neighbour to Ekwunekwune, from where the missionaries went to Ekwunekwune daily to preach the gospel to the people. But the indigenes believed that the missionaries were in their community to do business; not just to spread the religion of Christianity.³¹

Changes that came with Christianity

When the Christian missionaries returned to Ekwunekwune in 1949, there was no justification for the indigenes to attack them a second time, having killed some of the missionaries in their earlier visit. Rather, the youths of the community were allowed the freedom to accept the new faith on personal volition. The only condition given the missionaries was “go and perform your own, let us perform our own.”³² That condition laid the ground for the persistent conflict between Christianity and Ekwunekwune indigenous cultures. Few months after the missionaries were allowed to remain in the community, their converts became so fanatical that many communal and personal gods in the land were desecrated and set ablaze publicly. Many cultural practices like the Ofiasha initiation were openly condemned as evil, even by the new indigenous converts. Title taking, membership of secret societies, and marrying of many wives were not spared. The elders of the land were at a loss. Polygamy, the very symbol of social ranking for them, was condemned as evil. Families were losing their children to the church and mission school. Thus, worshippers of the people’s gods and followers of their old ways of life were drastically reduced. Till the present the damage done by Christianity (and colonialism) to the religion and cultural practices of Ekwunekwune people remain noticeable. A traditionalist in the community said:

*All our traditional systems and social values were condemned as evil. Our objects of worship were publicly defiled and destroyed... Only the elders were left to worship the gods of the land. Even the Ofiasha initiation ... and others like the Ishiagu initiation, Ikpa and Ukoro dances, were all affected. Ofiasha, for instance, was replaced with church weddings which are strange to us.*³³

Again, in the early 1950s when the colonial masters in Enugu heard of the church missionaries in Ekwunekwune, they teamed up with the church to establish a mission primary school at Mgboabor. Though the teachers were mostly church interpreters from other Igbo areas at that early stage, both the school subjects and curriculum were designed and directed by the colonial government and the church. The first Ekwunekwune institution to fall to those foreign designs was the people’s dialect which was quickly displaced by the English language as the official language in the community. As the elders lost grip of the day to day affairs of their land, they also lost control of all socio-political institutions which had been the preserve of the oldest age grades in the community. Then Ekwunekwune was annexed to Old Calabar Province for colonial administrative ease. Later it was moved to a newly created Ogoja Province from where it was moved into the Obubra District, all within the Cross River region. It was from the Obubra District that Ekwunekwune was finally joined to the Abakaliki Province in 1959.³⁴ One effect of these administrative joggling and juxtapositions was the comprehensive erosion of all traditional institutions and values of Ekwunekwune.

Also, both Christianity and the colonial system adversely affected the traditional economy of the people. Many energetic farm hands were pulled off the farms to the churches and school, reducing the labour force of the community significantly. The result was a fall in food production. Many

people, who worked as tax officers, messengers, et cetera, in the colonial government, depended on the depleted food supply. For establishing mission primary schools at Mgboabor and other eastern Nigerian communities, the colonial government decided in 1953, to impose an education rate on the people which was fiercely resisted the following year, 1954, because the people felt the government was insensitive to the plight they had brought on the community. The direct taxation introduced in all areas of the southeastern region of Nigeria in 1928, though resisted bitterly in all communities, was still having a serious effect on the poor conditions of Ekwunekwune people. Adding another tax in the name of education rate meant heightening the poverty level in the community as well as forcing the people, especially the men, into an unpronounced slavery in their own land. Men who could not pay the taxes were arrested and imprisoned, and later placed on forced labour for the colonial government without pay.³⁵ Thus, when the people revolted in 1954 against the education rate, the colonial government had no option than to stop further efforts to collect the education rate or any other tax from the people of Ekwunekwune.

Cultures that survived amidst Christian-Colonial presence in Ekwunekwune

Christianity and its corollary colonial institutions in Ekwunekwune may be antithetical to the aspirations of the people in some ways. But in others, the people appreciate the foreign cultures as necessary evils. Besides other benefits, these foreign cultures curbed wasteful spending on many cultural practices like title taking, initiations and others. In the opinion of John Nwakpuru:

*Christianity and Western education were not totally bad to us. Many parents now see the advantage in giving their children good education instead of keeping them perpetually on the farms to satisfy some traditional interests ... Christianity also sanitized our social life. Many people have been turned away from their old wicked life. Before, people poisoning their neighbours were a rampant practice in the community which brought fear and insecurity on everybody.*³⁶

Notwithstanding, these good works were not good enough to comprehensively sweep into oblivion the worship of idols in Ekwunekwune and the adherence of the people to their old traditions. Though the population of traditionalists was reduced, the gods are still receiving sacrifices according to tradition. *Alobu*, the earth goddess that checks infidelity in married women, is still dreaded by both Christians and traditionalists. No one would dare the anger of the goddess. The Tortoise and Green snake, the two reptile gods in the community, are still popular among the people as the gods of wealth, guidance and protection. No one kills or eats them. Many people go to church but still maintain their personal gods like *Okike* and *Obashi*. Others continue adding charms, and even join more deadly secret societies which they said are for personal security and instant answers to pressing needs while they go to church occasionally, to thank the creator (Chineke) for His gift of life.

Even though many are no longer keen about the *Ofiasha* initiation, it remains an annual event for adolescents who undergo the initiation and then get married, before wedding in the church in addition. The *Ishi-agu* title remains relevant in the community but is now taken with the heads of dogs, instead of the usual human heads. Other titles like *Ogbu Inyaa* and *Opu Inyama* are still

available for whoever is interested. The *Ikpa* and *Ukoro* remain the exclusive music and dances of the very brave, especially those that had beheaded an enemy and brought the head home. The *Edege* and *Odabara* music are still the preserves of accredited traditional performers who continue to receive the customary goat, fowl and foods as prices for their performances.

Nefioha, the new yam festival, remains the highest festival celebrated annually by the people. Nobody in the community, indigene or stranger, would bring new yams into the community before the *Nefioha* day. And if that day falls on a Sunday, the churches will remain scanty of members while at the close of worship, the attendants would join their kith and kin at home to sing the *Ayi aboo* song in honour of the new yam to mark the end of the hard times of the planting season.³⁷ These changes and continuities in the traditions and cultures of Ekwunekwune people leave a question of whether or not Christianity as an acclaimed civilizing enterprise, succeeded or failed in Ekwunekwune Ikwo? For an answer, an elder in the community described the development as good because “it has united the people closely unlike in the pre-Christian/ colonial days.”³³

CONCLUSION

If past benevolence of the gods of Ekwunekwune could be repeated in the present age, the community would be a place to reckon with. In that past, the gods were said to have ensured war victories, protected the people from all manner of danger, brought fortunes, controlled infidelity in married women, and ensured high yields of crops. There were many others. For that generosity, the gods are still appreciated and honoured with sacrifices according to the rules that established them.

There are equally social titles and secret societies that differentiate men of the community and group them according to the degrees of their valour and attainments. The advent of Christianity and colonial rule set apart those old ways and divided the people against themselves, setting in place a new order that is not totally foreign or indigenous. What obtains in Ekwunekwune contemporarily is an admixture of foreign and indigenous cultures in which it is difficult to draw a line between the winners and losers in the cultural conflict that began in the community since the 1940s. But while the impact of the Christian faith and colonialism can be noticed as modernity in the life of the people, their continued worship of the gods and indulgence in their old cultural festivals depict a people whose cultures are change resistant to the terms of modernity. This paper calls for further studies into whether or not Christianity failed in Ekwunekwune, whether the many gods and the people’s over-indulgence in cultural festivals are responsible in any way for their backwardness in the modern age, and whether mono-religious faith can be taken as better than dual religious faith in terms of developmental drive. While the paper accepts religion as good for man’s spiritual up-liftment and good moral conduct in life, it was difficult to establish if a people who are inextricably tied to cultures that command spending above savings and investments would be able to meet up the requisites of modernity.

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