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IGBO CHILD INITIATION
AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM:
A CASE STUDY IN INCULTURATION

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Fundamentally, the church lives to evangelize, following Christ’s mandate: to make disciples of all the nations. Evangelization, therefore, means making Christ present to the people of every culture within their own cultural milieu. To implement Christ’s mandate, the church is faced with numerous theological and pastoral difficulties. The church therefore makes use of the positive elements of each culture where she wants to implant the gospel message. This thesis thus aims at exposing the positive and negative elements of the Igbo culture, especially on Igbo child initiation, which may help the church in her work of evangelization.

This work also is an attempt to collaborate with the hierarchy of the church in Igboland towards lessening and if possible eliminating the problems that exist between Igbo traditional religion and Christianity particularly in the area of child initiation.

The first chapter of the thesis is an analytical survey of the term «inculturation», a term much used in the missionary literature because of its utility in describing the gospel/culture relationship in the life of the church. The part brings out what is and what is not inculturation, showing its necessity and relevance in Igbo culture. It exposes some authentic values in Igbo culture that would form the «Semina Verbi» on which inculturation may start, and some problems that may militate against the work of inculturation. It also gives a working definition or description of inculturation as: The work of the Holy Spirit by which the essence of Christ’s gospel message is inserted or incarnated into a given culture and allowed to penetrate and transform the culture and manifest itself through every aspect of the cultural life.

The extract concentrates more on the belief and ritual celebration of Igbo child initiation, demarcating the positive and negative values found in it. Effort is made in this section to expose the beliefs behind some ritual practices and how they can be
catechetically useful in explaining some doctrines on christian baptism. The last part proposes a dialogue between christianity and Igbo culture, bringing out elements that would facilitate or make the dialogue difficult.

The aim of this work, therefore, is to present the christianity of Igbos as a way of life that is not incompatible with the Igbo cultural way of life but which rather fulfils the aspiration of the Igbo traditional religion, especially its belief and hope for a place of future happiness. We are thinking specifically of the Igbo concept of life as having two main dimensions: the historico-temporal and communitarian dimensions. In each case, child initiation incorporates an individual into the stream of life and makes him a beneficiary of both divine and communal assistance in his state of dependence.

To realize this work we depended much on the documents of the church for the first part. For the second part, we made use of the anthropological and theological works dealing with Igbo culture. For the part dealing with Igbo child initiation, we relied specifically on our field-work investigation, which consists mainly on type-recorded interviews with many Igbo people, both christians and non-christians. The field-work investigation exposed the rationale behind some Igbo ritual practices.

Finally, we thank all those who helped in the realization of this work: the Vasconia Foundation for the scholarship to study in Spain; all the Professors of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarra. Our special thanks goes to Prof. Dr. José Alviar, the director of both the licenciate and the doctoral thesis. Together with him, we give our sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. José Morales. Their patience and direction really gave the work its actual form.
Map of Igbo Territory .................................................. iii
Acknowledgments ......................................................... V
Table of Contents ........................................................ VIII
Abbreviations ............................................................ XIII
Introduction ........................................................................ 1

CHAPTER ONE
INCULTURATION IN IGBO PERSPECTIVE

1. 1. Evangelization and Culture ........................................ 16
   1. 1. 1. The Church's Attitude Towards Culture .................. 19
1. 2. Inculturation .......................................................... 24
   1. 2. 1. The Magisterium and Inculturation ....................... 24
   1. 2. 2. Inculturation in the Teaching of Pope Paul VI ........ 26
      1. 2. 2. 1. Pope Paul VI and 1974 African Synod ............ 30
      1. 2. 2. 1. The Evangelii Nuntiandi ......................... 33
   1. 2. 3. Inculturation in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II ... 35
   1. 2. 4. The Essence of Inculturation .............................. 43
      1. 2. 4. 1. What Inculturation is not ......................... 43
         a) Imposition ...................................................... 44
         b) Translation ..................................................... 45
         c) Acculturation .................................................. 47
         d) Inculturation .................................................. 48
         e) Indigenization ................................................ 49
         f) Adaptation ...................................................... 50
         g) Contextualization ............................................ 51
      1. 2. 4. 2. What Inculturation is ................................. 52
         a) An Insertion or Penetration ................................ 52
         b) A Process of Exchange ...................................... 53
         c) An Interaction of Cultures .................................. 54
         d) A Continuous Dialogue ...................................... 55
         e) The Work of the Holy Spirit ................................ 56
   1. 2. 5. Theological Bases of Inculturation ....................... 58
      1. 2. 5. 1. Creation, A Primary Form of Inculturation ...... 58
      1. 2. 5. 2. Incarnation, A Concrete Form of Inculturation .... 60
1. 3. Inculturation in Igbo Context ......................................................... 64
  1. 3. 1. Some Positive Elements of Igbo Culture In General ............... 65
    1. 3. 1. 1. Religious Values ......................................................... 65
    1. 3. 1. 2. Cultural Values ......................................................... 68
    1. 3. 1. 3. Some Liturgical Values .............................................. 71
  1. 3. 2. Some Negative Elements of Igbo Culture in General .......... 74
    1. 3. 2. 1. Excessive Desire for Offspring ................................. 75
    1. 3. 2. 2. Defective Ideas on Human Suffering .......................... 77
  1. 3. 3. Problematic Tendencies in Igbo Culture .......................... 78
    1. 3. 3. 1. Cultural Traditionalists .......................................... 78
    1. 3. 3. 2. Fanaticism Among Some Christians .............................. 81
    1. 3. 3. 3. The Problem of Syncretism ....................................... 82
    1. 3. 3. 4. Lack of Courage or Self-Confidence .......................... 85

CHAPTER TWO

IGBO RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

2. 1. Belief in the Supernatural Beings ............................................... 90
  2. 1. 1. Belief in the Supreme Being (Chukwu) ................................ 90
    2. 1. 1. 1. Chukwu (God) in Igbo Morning Prayer ......................... 93
    2. 1. 1. 2. Chukwu in Personal Supplication ............................... 95
    2. 1. 1. 3. God's Attributes in Igbo Names ................................ 96
  2. 1. 2. The High Gods, Deities and Spirits .................................. 99
    2. 1. 2. 1. The High Gods ......................................................... 99
      a) Amadiqha (The god of the thunder bolt) ............................. 100
      b) Igwe (The sky god) ......................................................... 101
    2. 1. 2. 2. The Deities .............................................................. 101
    2. 1. 2. 3. The Spirits .............................................................. 103
  2. 1. 3. Ancestors and Ancestral Cult .......................................... 105

2. 2. Igbo Cosmology .............................................................................. 111
  2. 2. 1. The Origin of the World In Igbo Thought ........................... 111
  2. 2. 2. The Igbo Concept of Life .................................................. 114
    2. 2. 2. 1. Symbols of Life Among the Igbos ................................ 114
      a) Oji as a Symbol of Life ..................................................... 115
      b) Blood as a Symbol of Life .................................................. 116
  2. 2. 3. Two Dimensions of Life ..................................................... 118
    2. 2. 3. 1. The Communitarian Dimension of Life .......................... 119
    2. 2. 3. 2. The Theological Dimension of Life ............................... 120
  2. 2. 4. The Purpose of Life .......................................................... 122
    2. 2. 4. 1. Cosmic Purpose of Life .............................................. 122
    2. 2. 4. 2. Anthropological Purpose of Life ................................ 124
    2. 2. 4. 3. Eschatological Purpose of Life .................................. 124
  2. 2. 5. Life After Death ................................................................... 126
    2. 2. 5. 1. Igbo Burial and Funeral .............................................. 129
### TABLE OF CONTENTS OF THE THESIS

2. 2. 5. 2. Belief in Reincarnation and Ògbanje ............................................. 131
   a) Reincarnation ......................................................... 131
   b) Ògbanje .............................................................. 136
2. 2. 5. 3. Life in the Underworld ................................................. 138
   a) Personal Immortality .............................................. 138
   b) Collective Immortality .......................................... 139

2. 3. Moral Norms in Igbo Religion .................................................. 140
   2. 3. 1. The Social Nature of Igbo Morality .............................. 141
   2. 3. 2. The Concept and Classes of Evil .................................. 145
      a) Abomination (Arù) ........................................ 145
      b) Njọ/Mmezie .................................................. 147

2. 4. Sacrifice in Igbo Religion .................................................. 149
   2. 4. 1. The Importance of Sacrifice ................................ 149
   2. 4. 1. 1. The Essential Characteristics of Igbo Sacrifice .......... 150
   2. 4. 1. 2. Kinds of Sacrifice .................................... 151
   2. 4. 2. Igbo Priesthood ........................................... 152
   2. 4. 3. The Communal Dimension of Sacrifice .......................... 156
   2. 4. 4. Sacrifice to the Supreme God (Chukwu) ....................... 157
      2. 4. 4. 1. Direct Sacrifice to God (Chukwu) .................... 159

### CHAPTER THREE

**CHILDBIRTH CEREMONIES AND INITIATION RITES**

3. 1. The Importance of Children/Offspring Among the Igbos ............... 164
   3. 1. 1. Offspring as Means of Salvation ............................ 166
   3. 1. 2. Offspring as the Epicenter of Igbo Marriage .................. 169
   3. 1. 2. 1. Plight of Childless Couples .............................. 170
   3. 1. 2. 2. Pregnant Women in Igbo Society .......................... 173

3. 2. Childbirth Ceremonies and Rites .......................................... 176
   3. 2. 1. Childbirth Ceremonies ..................................... 177
   3. 2. 2. Omuggwo/Omugo and Rites within the Period .................. 179
      3. 2. 2. 1. Reincarnation Rite (Ilo Uwa) ........................ 182
      3. 2. 2. 2. Umbilical Cord Ceremony (Ili Aọ Nwa) ................ 183
      3. 2. 2. 3. Circumcision (Ikwa Ukwu/ Ime Ihe Nka) ............... 185
      3. 2. 2. 4. Naming Ceremony (Iba/Igu Aha/Afa) .................... 187
      3. 2. 2. 5. Outing Ceremony (Ahia Nwa/Omugo) ...................... 191
   3. 2. 3. The Role of the Mother-in-law in Omugo ....................... 192
   3. 2. 4. Theological Reflection on Igbo Names ......................... 194

3. 3. Importance of Initiation in Igboland ..................................... 199
   3. 3. 1. Initiation as Entry into Communion with the Deity and the Community 201
   3. 3. 2. Initiation and Economic and Social Security ................ 203

3. 4. The Notion of Oghu in General ............................................. 207
   3. 4. 1. Origin, Spread and Kinds of Oghu ............................ 207
CHAPTER FOUR
THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN DIALOGUE
WITH IGBO CHILD INITIATION:
KEY ELEMENTS IN IGBO CULTURE
RELEVANT FOR INCULTURATION

4. 1. The Dimensions of Life in Igbo Thought ........................................ 239
   4. 1. 1. Life as a Stepwise, Dynamic and Continuous Process ........... 239
   4. 1. 2. Life as a Community with Other Beings ............................. 245
       4. 1. 2. 1. Communion with the Community as Basis of Child
                     Initiation ................................................................. 245
       4. 1. 2. 2. Communion with the Departed as Basis of Child
                     Initiation ................................................................. 254
   4. 1. 3. Child Initiation and Man’s Final Salvation .......................... 260
   4. 1. 4. Communion with Chukwu as Basis of Initiation ....................... 262
4. 2. Certain Negative Aspects of Igbo Child Initiation ......................... 266

Conclusion .................................................................................. 272
Bibliography ............................................................................. 283
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I. INTRODUCTION

Igbo people may be said to be lovers of offspring, they live and think of offspring. This quest for children might be misconceived as a mere desire for procreation, if an in-depth study were not made on the Igbo thought pattern in relationship to their love for offspring. The Igbo quest and love for children in fact transcend all terrestrial preoccupation and is linked to eschatology. This necessitates our study, which seeks to demarcate the positive and negative aspects of the Igbo care for children and ways and means of integrating elements of the Igbo traditional child initiation within the christian baptism, and also to see how the authentic elements of Igbo child initiation can be used in explaining the christian baptism and other sacraments as means of salvation.

The Igbos love and rear their children. I use the term rear because of the basic conviction of the Igbos that children are really «tabula rasa» at birth—blank sheet of paper. It is the fundamental duty of the Igbo parents to imprint some basic concepts on their children. Thus Igbos liken childhood period as ôme ji (the tender plume of yam), that needs to be tenderly cared for, assiduously grided and wisely directed. Through action and tender care, therefore, parents inculcate into their children the intimate relationship that should exist between an individual and his immediate and extended family, between an individual and the entire community (Umunna). It is no wonder, then, that the Umunna solidarity is so strong among the Igbos.

The intimate love and affection between a child and the mother make Igbo mothers carry their children on their laps,
close to their bosom or to tie them on their back on a journey; and to share the same couch with them when sleeping. To suggest a pram or cot would raise doubt to the mother's affection for the child. This, in Igbo thought would be equivalent to treating the child as an object of little or no importance.

This sort of intimacy expresses that children are life itself and life is Chukwu's greatest gift to man to be preserved, lived and accounted for to Chukwu, the Giver. Therefore couples are proud to be parents and try their best to be responsible parents to their children. This idea makes the satisfaction of the need of a child take a primacy of place in the Igbo scale of values. It is no wonder that an Igbo mother suckles her child anywhere: in the market place, in the church or inside the bus without any shame of exposing her breast or feeling of immodesty.

Childbirth among the Igbos is a thing of great joy and festivity. It affects the whole aspect of Igbo socio-religious life. It is a community concern. The way it is accepted and celebrated emphasizes the importance of offspring both in the whole community and to the family in particular. Above all, childbirth among the Igbos is a mysterious event, in that through it man who is mere flesh and blood (Aja na ntu) becomes a co-creator with Chineke. The mysterious nature of childbirth is expressed in the term with which a nursing mother is described: olo tuo la, she has climbed down. This word «climbing down», depicts the fact that a pregnant woman is taken as someone situated on a precarious height. The danger is as unpredictable as that of one on the top of a palm tree, whose whole art of climbing does not always assure him of absolute security, which always depends on the mercy of the gods. Therefore, when a woman delivers safely, it becomes an occasion of immense joy, thanksgiving, celebration and ritual sacrifice.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF OFFSPRING AMONG THE IGBOS

The importance of offspring among the Igbos stems fundamentally from the Igbo concept of life as sacred and as coming from God (Nwachukwu) and as special gift to the family-Onyinye chukwu (Gift of God); or blessing from God (Ngozi Chukwu). It
is reckoned among the Igbos as the highest of all gifts. Just as life itself is supreme and ranks above all other gifts from God-Ndụbụisi, offspring, bearing life itself, are also a supreme gift from God to an individual, family, and the entire community.

The importance of children is also to be considered from the purpose of man’s life on earth. In the catalogue of values, which constitute the purpose of life on earth such as, having children, wealth, and reaching the place of rest after death\(^1\), offspring come first because, a child is greater than money (Nwakaego), a child is also greater than wealth (Nwaka aku). These Igbo names portray the supreme value of children in the Igbo category of values. For one to reach the place of rest after death, offspring play an indispensable role because apart from the good moral life lived here on earth, Igbos see «proper funeral rites» as a prerequisite for entrance into the world of the ancestors (the home of God)\(^2\) and it is the customary duty of children to accord their parents their burial and funeral rites.

Funeral is so important in African eschatology that it is believed that the more elaborate, the more colorful and the more expensive a funeral is the more honorable the reception in the spirit world would be, G. T. Basden, on the importance of funeral among the Igbos says that:

«The Ibo will endure everything demanded of him in this life, nivel put up wich hard ships, misbehavior of his children, indeed everything, in order to ensure that his burial will be properly performed. His whole future welfare depends on this and hence it takes all times, and hence a prominent place in a man’s calculation»\(^3\).

If befitting funeral is so necessary for entry into the world of the ancestors, the place of peace, it is no wonder that an Igbonman both tries to provide and absolutely appreciate those who would accord him such last and important hononrs.

1. Offspring as means of salvation

To understand the real meaning of the Igbo name, Nwanadọ, (A child liberates or delivers) is to penetrate the role
of children in the Igbo concept of salvation. The word salvation is a complex term, when considered as an inter religious and cultural concept. Different religions and cultures have different concepts of what constitutes salvation and the means of attaining it. This is so because what may be a problem which demands salvation for one religious group or culture may be quite another thing in another religious or cultural system.

Salvation in Igbo context is a dynamic process by which man tries to live above and be delivered from all the forces surrounding him, be they physical, social, economical or spiritual. This shows that there are different types of salvation, as M. Dhavamony attests:

«Salvation from human conditions of fettered existence, from bondage to the misery of rebirth and all the evil that is consequent to that kind of existence, from suffering and desire or passion from which arise all human misery and unhappiness».

These existential problems from which man needs to be delivered are pertinent to Africans, hence Mbiti describes Africa as a continent, where national crisis, like warfare, famine, epidemics, locust invasions and major changes in the weather cause a revival of religious activities or innovation of new ones. When Igbos are beset with any of these crucial existential problems or the problems of the hereafter, they have recourse to God and the spirits to beg for deliverance. This yearning for deliverance, though in a vague way, is a yearning for salvation. It is a total salvation that is sought, even though at a particular moment in time the need may be particular. Therefore the quest for better living conditions, achieved by increase of harvest is a quest for salvation; likewise, the quest for social status through initiation, and the quest for the perpetuation of the family lineage through offspring, who keep in constant communion with the ancestors.

From the ongoing it is clear that salvation for the Igbos has both physical and spiritual dimensions. This is so because the temporal and the spiritual are not radically separated but always intertwined in the world and in man himself.

Children therefore are considered as means of salvation par excellence because it is their traditional duty to sustain their
parents and help increase the farm produce. It is therefore understandable why to seek and care for children is considered as seeking and caring for salvation. Children are in the real sense liberators, in other words, saviours, (Nwanadọ) because they are customarily bound to provide for their parents and accord them most of their existential needs and more especially effect the spiritual prerequisite for entry into the place of rest. In this case the purpose of life as bigething affspring is not only terrestrial but also eschatological. Since all other values mentioned above like wealth and money can liberate only from temporal enslavement, offspring solves the transcendent leap from the present time into eternity.

2. Offspring as the epicenter of igbo marriage

Another way of expressing the importance of offspring among the Igbos is to see its relationship with marriage. Marriage is very important and plays a very significant role among the Igbos; It makes an Igbo a man indeed, di bu ulọ (an owner of a home). The importance of marriage is shown in the careful negotiations involved, prolonged preparations made, with ritual ceremonies and celebrations involving the whole community. But the whole aim behind all this labour around marriage is to beget offspring. Thus offspring is the epicenter and the primary purpose of Igbo marriage, and one can rightly say that any marriage that has no offspring has completely failed in its purpose. Following this line, we shall therefore explain more the importance of offspring by surveying the following topics: The plight of the childless couple in the family and society.

Pregnant women in Igbo society.

a) The plight of the childless couple

The basic tenet that the primary purpose of Igbo marriage is offspring, highlights the ridicule and the sense of failure with which childless couples are held in Igbo society. The woman suffers the ridicule most because many a time the failure is blamed on her, and her marital position in the society becomes very
unstable, because children are regarded as ties in many marriages, and where are no children either because of infertility or impotency, the bonds of marriage are thought to be loosened. This negative social attitude towards the childless couple constrains the couple to do anything possible, to go to any length, risk their lives, ignore their social status and even forfeit their faith in order to get offspring, especially a male child. T. O. Oditola comments that:

«...most Africans still place a very high value upon having children. Thus there is a general belief that women should not limit the number of children they are capable of producing. Childless women are still treated with contempt irrespective of the social status. When women adopt children, they are treated with no less contempt. In fact Africans regard the child adoption as an anomaly».

This type of social under rating and contempt because of childlessness spurs people to consider everything as secondary in pursuit of offspring, so as to be like the others (a di ka ibe). The pursuit of this ideology of being like the others makes most Igbo, even christians to defy their faith and offer sacrifices to their family gods in order to have children.

The strain and distress shouldered by childless couples in Igbo society are such that they often weaken the faith of even the strongest christians. The Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SEHAM) appreciates the situation and in search of a solution states that:

«As we realize the value and importance of fertility for the African people, we may legitimately ask ourselves whether or not the time had not come to examine this point and list it among the conditions of invalidity and annulment of marriage. What, in fact are the consequences of our refusal to take this into account?... The wife is simply sent away without any annulment of the marriage, thus making it impossible for both husband and wife to approach the sacrament».

SEHAM is not alone in expressing concern and seeking a way of solving this difficult situation of the childless couple in African
society. Pope John Paul II, in his historic visit to Nigeria addressed himself to this issue when he said:

«I know that in your country the childless couple bears a heavy cross, one that has to be borne with courage all through life. To couples who can not have children of their own I say, you are not less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of apostolate, to the needs of the world» \(^\text{14}\).

It is true the Supreme Pontiff has expressed deep concern and offered a way of solving the problem: redirection of their love and energy to apostolate in the world and sharing the love more with neighbour, but one can not help asking whether such a solution will fully answer the yearning of childless couples in the Igbo society?

Finally it is important to mention that a childless man is in no way better in the Igbo society than an unmarried person. An unmarried man among Igbos is called Oke okpuru. A simple analysis of this word will throw more light on the situation of an unmarried. The word is a composite word from:

Oke which means male; okpiri means dry stick; meaning therefore a dry male, who is of no use to his family and the society as a whole. He does not contribute to propagating the progeny of the community. As far as the solidarity of the community, the prolongation of the lineage and the communion of the community with the ancestors are concerned, the childless man is as salt that has lost its savour, which is good only to be thrown away. The Igbo proverb; «omemere chi ekweghi, onye uta atana ya», (there is no blame on one who has tried his utmost best), is in fact used to describe the situation when one has married several times and still remains childless, or when the childlessness is the result of multiple infantile mortalities.

b) Pregnant women in Igbo society

Pregnancy is for Igbo society a joyful indication that another member of the family is on the way. The expectant mother becomes a special person and receives special treatment
from the society. The special treatment is an eloquent testimony to the importance of children in Igbo society. Married women are generally respected, loved and honoured as cooperators with and helpers of their husbands in the building up and conservation of family life. But the love, respect and honour are radically intensified, made more delicate towards the pregnant women, because, apart from the fact that they help to perpetuate the family lineage, the pregnant women are said to be carrying the image of God (oyiyi Chukwu).

Usually women are advised to associate themselves with children and babies, in order to conceive. They must love and cherish little children, be fond of them as a visible manifestation of their desire and wish for children. When a woman eventually conceives, the Igbo attitude and care towards her, from the first day of the news, makes it abundantly clear that she is carrying in her womb a real human being and deserves the best of care and treatment and everything the family can afford, if not for her person, for the sake of the unborn, whose destiny yet eludes everyone. Therefore the abundant care, love and good treatment are generated by the deep desire for and importance of offspring within Igbo society.

There is a great joy and sense of fulfillment when a wife finds out that she is expecting a baby, the arrival of which is one of the greatest blessings of life. She normally informs her parents and the husband with joy, and the news soon spreads within the vicinity like a wild wind. Immediately measures are taken to ensure the safety of the child and the mother both during and after pregnancy. If it is her first pregnancy, it assures everyone else that she is fully a woman, capable of bearing children. Her marital status is considerably made more secure and her relatives treat her with greater respect than before.

There is a series of cultural observances, restrictions, regulations and taboos a pregnant woman has to meticulously observe so that all may go well with her and her baby. The fundamental reason for all these observances is for the safety of the pregnant woman and the child, to avoid any complication during pregnancy and ensure free and safe delivery. It is a great shame on anyone who shows no respect to a pregnant woman, who beats or fights with her, angers her or does anything harmful to
her whether by word or action. She carries two lives and these two lives deserve double consideration and care. An Igbo proverb sums up the preferential care and love shown to a pregnant woman in Igbo family and society: «Asi achaghi, achaana nwanyi di ime». If nobody is allowed to pass through, a pregnant woman must be allowed to pass. This proverb implies in the strict sense that pregnant women have a certain immunity in society, such that most laws, no matter how strict or rigid, must give exception to and yield to the needs of a pregnant woman.

III. CHILDBIRTH CEREMONIES AND RITES

The desire for offspring, as stated above, is the epicenter of the Igbo concept of marriage. As Igbo marriage is a public affair, which attracts the attention of the neighbourhood (Umunna), it is even more so with the advent of a new child, the much desired fruit of marriage. Thus the birth of a new child into the community can not be passed over without adequate ceremonies. As a pregnant woman draws nearer to her ninth month, she becomes excudingly the center of attention within the vicinity. People look at her with feelings of admiration, love, sympathy and anxiety. Anxiety, because no one knows what her fate might be will she give birth to twins, will the child present itself abnormally or will she give birth to a normal child in peace and joy? These form the preoccupation of the pregnant woman, her family and the whole community.

When the child eventually arrives safely and in peace, it becomes a very important social and religious occasion, an event of greatest joy that eases the whole tension. The joy involves not only the extended family but the entire lineage and village. The joy with which a new child is welcomed in society emphasizes further the importance of children in Igbo society and family.

At the birth of a new child, the attendant nurse normally gives a joyful alarm (Oru ọnu), which instantly summons all the women who could hear it to the family. It attracts all women within the vicinity without exception, passers-by, those in the farm around, if they could hear the joyous alarm. All who hear the oru ọnu abandon all other engagements and give it a primary
attention. Instantly the women burst into festivity with wine, and whatever the husband is able to provide.

This instantaneous feasting spontaneously turns into music and dancing in thanksgiving to God, the Chi, who gives offspring, and to Omumu, who apportions offspring to families. The popular music of this occasion is:

\[
\text{Azuta nwa n'ahia q na ala} \quad \text{If children were bought in the market, they would be seen only in the families of the wealthy but God gives them to whomever he wishes}
\]

\[
\text{n'ezi ndi ukwu, ma na Cukwu mere ebere si onye q manyere ya erie}
\]

The feast also ends spontaneously with the women going back each to her own place, now bearing the symbol of childbirth (nzu nwa) on any part of her body especially on the neck, arm or ankle. The nzu mark spreads the good news of the new baby, as the women try to respond to the question; onye muru nwa who gave birth? As they respond, they give praise and announce the marvellous work of God to the nursing family. Meanwhile the nursing mother enters into the ritual period of omugo.

1. Omugwo/omugo and rites within the period

The period from the first day of a child's birth to ahia nwa or ahia omugo is known as the period of omugo. It lasts for seven market weeks izu asaa, 28 days. The nursing mother is confined in the home for recuperation. She is restricted from doing any strenuous job both in the home and in the farm. Her mother is customarily invited to care for her and the new baby all through the omugo period. The former takes over the house duties of the nursing mother, as far as her health and age would allow.

Omugo also refers to the various rites of initiation and ceremonies that follow childbirth. It is a very expensive period, as the nursing family feasts the people lavishly in thanksgiving to God and the spirits for the gift of a child. The parents also welcome and initiate the child into the family and the community. These elaborate and expensive feastings are never termed as squander, no matter how lavish the feast may appear because ac-
cording to C. Akalonu, «the Igbo believe that one can not spend enough on behalf of children»

The compound of the nursing family is always kept alive with people coming and going, in a welcoming gesture to the new child and the family. Each visitor normally dips the right hand into an ever-present bowl of a mixture of nzu and water called «omumu» the pot of fertility. Pregnant women and those seeking fertility, (Mkporo nke afo) usually rub the nzu on their stomach, expecting the blessing of the spirit of omumu.

This period also is a period of gifts both to the nursing family and to the new child. Every family in the neighbourhood umunna, manifests the spirit of solidarity with the nursing family with gifts and identifies with them by sharing the joy of a new baby because otu onye anaghi enwe nwa-children do not belong to one person. No previous dispute, quarrel or animosity is enough excuse to fulfill this customary ethos. Each kindred woman (ndi onyom di) offers the nursing mother among other things a ball of salt.

The nursing mother receives best treatment both in feeding and affection from her family and the entire kindred. It is regarded as the worst sign of bad will if one fails to show concern and affection at least paying a congratulatory and cordial visit to one’s kinsman who has given birth to a new baby. Pastoral care today in Igboland requires this type of visit from the pastors of souls. Some Igbo pastors do pay such visits and it makes an indelible impression on the family and leaves them not only contented and proud but also more strengthened in their faith.

The rites for the child within this period are:

a) Ịọ uwa ceremony  Ceremony of reincarnation
b) Ịli aọ nwa    Burying the umbilical cord
c) Ịbe ugwu/ Ịkwa ukwu  Circumcision
d) Ịba/Igu aha   Naming ceremony
e) Ahia nwa/omugo  Outing ceremony

These rites and rituals, which are forms of gradual initiation, as shall be explained later, progressively initiate the child into the family and the society as a child who has come to live-nwa biara
iji ndu. The child now begins his progressive life of initiation, which will eventually culminate with the initiation into the spirit world after his death.

The period of omugo, which witnesses these series of child initiation rites, culminates with the naming ceremony. This ceremony initiates the child into the family and is believed to dissociate him from whatever spirit he may have entered into contact with, either in the womb or at child birth.

On the day of the naming ceremony the husband presents the nursing mother with the omugo gift, from which the period derives its name ILE NWANYI OMUGO. It is a token of appreciation from the husband for delivering safely and doing him the honour of maintaining his progeny.

a) Reincarnation rite (llọ ẹwọ)

Reincarnation, as seen above, is the belief that the dead ancestors come back to life in the form of new born babies. That this belief is still alive among the Igbos today is shown by the fact that the first question asked by visitors who come to see the child before the naming ceremony is: Onye lọrọ ya -who reincarnated in him? Logically then, the first ceremony for a new baby is to find out who the child really is. Put in another way, who has reincarnated in him? Who has come to visit the family in the person of the new baby? The answer to this question preoccupies the whole family from the moment of the child’s birth.

Traditionally therefore, after the delivery of a child, one of the members of the family, a friend of the family or an in law, in person or by proxy, consults the fortuneteller (Dibia afa) to ascertain exactly who has reincarnated in the child. This is relevant because the fortuneteller sometimes predicts what the ancestor wants to be done to welcome or appease him and sometimes the name by which he wants to be called.

Normally a thanksgiving or an appeasing offering is made to the visiting ancestor, praying that his visit may be cordial, graceful and eventful. This practice may still be noticed today even among some christians. It is this belief and the consultation of the fortuneteller that sometimes influence the giving of such names like:
Ogoma: A worthy in-law (indicating that the child is the reincarnation of either the mother or the father of the wife).

Nnanna: The father of the father.

Nnenna ya: The mother of his father.

b) Umbilical cord ceremony (Ili alo nwa)

Igbos accord the new baby every affection and treat him with tender care. The affection he is given is meticulous though sceptical, to see if he has really come to stay. The remaining umbilical cord (Alo) is carefully treated with juice from the banana skin to remove it. When it eventually falls away, it is not merely thrown away but accorded with every respect due to the human body. This helps to emphasize the Igbo concept and respect of human life and body as sacred.

The umbilical cord is ritually buried at the foot of a palm tree (Nkwu oṣuṣṣikwu) called nkwu alo. The mother of the nursing mother’s husband usually dedicates one of her special species of palm tree for this rite and the palm tree is given to the nursing mother to own in perpetuity. It must be noted that it is in this rite that the mother of the husband appears in public since the birth of the child. This is precisely because by burying the umbilical cord, which is a part of the child’s body, the child is initiated to the Earth goddess (Ala) and thus becomes a son of the soil —Di ala (a free born). The Earth and the ancestors are besought to protect the child and bring him to ripe old age and never to be in a hurry to call him back to the underworld. They are also requested to break all the previous bonds the child may have contracted and to enlist him into the living community.

Palm tree is chosen for this rite because of two specific reasons: Firstly, palm tree is a very valuable economic tree. None of its various parts is wasted; rather all is usually utilized in one way or another to enhance the normal life of the Igbos. Therefore the child is expected to live a valuable life in the community. Secondly, if the child is the first issue of the mother, this means that she has established her status in the family, especially if the child is a male child. She has proved her coming into the
family to be worthy and fruitful, and is thus fully incorporated into the family. The donation of the palm tree signifies that she can now establish her own nuclear family and cook her separate pot — isi boro nri.

This in fact expresses the importance of children in Igbo family. A male child stabilizes his mother's stay in the family because a childless woman has a very variable and fragile position in Igbo family. Thus some mothers name their first male child Ihekwoamba — The source of my pride.

c) Circumcision (Ikwa ụkwụ/ime ube nka)

Circumcision is another important ritual celebration for the child at cradle. Around Orlu and Mbaitoli areas, it is performed any day from the 16th day of the child's birth. The actual day of circumcision varies according to the locality. Among some Igbos, especially those from the West of the Niger, circumcision, especially for the girls, is performed at a later age and is closely linked with the rite of puberty. The rite at this age and its close relation to puberty brings out more clearly its religious significance. Traditionally circumcision is universally practiced and rigidly regarded. Among the Igbos it is a ritual celebration with religious significance and is closely associated to the rite of marriage and fecundity. Without circumcision it is believed that conception would be hard, if not impossible, and that if a woman conceived she would die at childbirth. However in recent times circumcision is more for the purpose of cleanliness. Basden holds this view but denies circumcision any religious significance; «As far as can he ascertained there is, nowadays, no religious significance connected with the operation».

This assertion may be correct, especially as circumcision is today performed in the maternity home/hospital, where the newly born is circumcised without rites, but traditional belief still values the practice. As it is linked to puberty as a preparation for marriage and fecundity, no man or woman up to the present day can marry an uncircumcized person for fear of premature death or sterility. In time and space, circumcision is far removed from marriage but conceptually it is ordered to marriage as an Igbo proverb shows: Nwata ana eme ihe nka, ya na ebe akwa, ọ
makwa na ọ bụ abụ ahia ka anakwaziri ya —which literally means, a child who cries during circumcision, does he not realize that his market basket is being prepared for him?

The blood shed during the physical operation of circumcision binds the person to the land and consequently to the earth deity and to the departed members of the society. It is an eloquent testimony that the individual is alive and wishes to enter into the bond of communion and be tied to the community and his people. It serves as «a covenant or a solemn agreement» between the individual and his people. This bond the Igbos call «Umuene.» It guarantees the individual respect as an integral person in the community, help and assistance in difficulty, and the shedding of his blood by anyone in the community is considered as an abomination.

d) Naming ceremony (Iba/igu aha/afa)

The naming ceremony is the most elaborate and significant celebration for the child during omugo. It draws the attention of all the relations of the nursing family: Ikwu nne —the relatives of the mother; Ikwu nna, the relatives of the father. Also in attendance are the kindred community —umunna, the friends and well wishers of the celebrating family. The ceremony normally takes place on the 7th, week— Izu asaa, of the child’s birth.

The ceremony, like most African rites, is composed of the ritual celebration and feasting. The ritual celebration is performed in the eldest man’s parlour (Obi), where the image of his personal god (Ikenga) is situated. This is so because, as the head of the family (Ezi na ụlọ) he represents the ancestors, who are believed to participate in the naming ceremony.

The child is brought for the first time into the family head’s obi (Living room, where he entertains visitors), where the family head is already seated with some elders of the community. There is kola nut (Oji), a bowl of clean water and his ọfo (The symbol of authority and justice). The family head first of all washes his hands and that of the child, saying some prayers; after the washing, he breaks the kola nut, saying prayers of thanksgiving to God, who gives offspring. He also prays to his personal god. After the prayer, he carries the child in his bosom and facing
Ikenga, his personal god, he utters the name of the child. Thus, traditionally, he is the first to give the child a name. After him the nursing mother together with her own mother gives the second name.

After the second name has been given, the eldest member of the kindred present pours out libation to God, the ancestors and the spirits, and, after some admonitions, prays for the child’s long life and success.

«The elderly person rubs his hand over the child’s head, prays and spits in its ears to implant the name into the baby’s head. After that the name is then announced loudly to the crowd, and prayers are offered for long life and prosperity» \(^{33}\).

The first name of the child, which most often survives other names given to the child is absolutely the prerogative of the family head. In recent times, most families living abroad, request their parents to name their child born abroad, especially the first child. In the choice of the child’s name, many factors come into play which may influence the decision of the family head. These may involve religious, social or economical factors; or the situation in the family; or circumstances surrounding the birth of the child or the influence of the oracle from the fortuneteller. After the ritual celebration, the nursing family holds a lavish feast for all present. The climax of the feasting aspect of the ceremony is the presentation of ọmụgọ gifts to both the nursing mother and her mother by the father of the child and all present.

The husband’s gift is traditionally symbolic and includes: Wrapa —Akwa ọmụgọ, articles of clothing, a special type of fish —Azu ọmụgọ, yam, and whatever he can afford. There is no limit to the gift, for some today give, bicycle, motorcycle or even car, as Ọmụgọ gift —the ejiri lee Ọmụgọ.

Traditionally, the nursing mother is seated enthroned on a special seat to receive these gifts and those of the visitors. She shows special signs of solidarity with her fellow women and normally touches the younger and expectant women on the forehead saying a prayer of good wish: May you be blessed with the same kind of fortune I have received —Ka ihe ọma merelam mekwara ga.
The naming ceremony marks the ritual end of omugo. It incorporates the child into his family and the society because an Igbo proverb says that, Nwa n’enweghi aha, anaghi eku ya eku a child without a name is not believed to be living. The child, who has obtained a name, given by man and sanctioned by the ancestors is believed to have been completely separated from spirits, the living-dead, and is ritually integrated into the living segment of the family as a child who has come fully to live.

The Igbo naming ceremony makes christian baptism more easily understandable and meaningful to the Igbos, as a sacrament of incorporation and regeneration. As will be explained later, with the growing number of catholics among the Igbos, the naming ceremonies could be reverently and fittingly adapted to the christian baptism. Thus Igbo liturgists should evolve a new and more meaningful rite of infant initiation, taking into consideration the Igbo naming ceremony.

e) Ahia nwa/omugo outing ceremony

The market day following the naming ceremony, the nursing mother goes to the market. The ceremony has a double significance: First, it is the ceremonial outing of the nursing mother (Nwanyi omugo). After it she resumes her normal life in the family and farm. Secondly, the child, having been given a name, is presented, in a sort of epiphany, to the whole community, the living and the dead.

The church in Igboland has shown a sense of inculturation in this aspect. The outing ceremony, ahia nwa, which is very important to the nursing mothers is no longer done in the market place but in the church. Today it takes the form of ceremony (Uka nwa) as ahia nwa. After the child’s baptism, which, due to pastoral reasons, takes place on the weekday, the parents bring their baptized children and present them to the celebrating community on a Sunday, with gifts, joy and thanksgiving. They are normally accompanied by relatives and friends. Christian families accept and value this adaption, so much so that to deny a family the opportunity of churcging ceremonies tantamounts to a denial of the privilege of faith.
2. Theological reflection on Igbo names

Igbo names have a deep significance and cannot be overlooked, if one is to gain some insight into the theological thought pattern of the Igbo people. Igbo names, like other African names, are not simply personal labels, but have inherent meanings and are "capable of interpretation and translation." A. K. Obiefuna rightly holds that "for Igbo people names are records of living personal memories of persons and events."

From the natural standpoint, there is more in Igbo names more passion, more sorrow, more pathos and more joy, more tragedy and more comedy, more humanity and more inhumanity, than is possible for some civilized people to realize. Igbo names therefore constitute a font from which one draws a first hand information about Igbo: their beliefs and hopes, their aspirations and desires; their fortunes and misfortunes. This explains why the Igbo naming ceremony has such a religious significance. Following an Igbo proverb, Aguo nwata aha, chi ya anu ya —when a child is given a name, his guardian spirit hears and sanctions it. It is not surprising then, that Igbo names should be considered not as mere identifying labels but as words rich in meaning, with spiritual import attached to them. A. K. Obiefuna rightly says that any one trying to behave towards a child contrary to the latter's name is simply waging a battle against his guardian spirit.

In his homily during confirmation in Holy Trinity church omuma on October 1987, Rt. Rev. G. O. Ochiagha, the Bishop of Orlu diocese, emphasized the moral and theological significance of Igbo names. He urged parents to be careful in choosing names for their children and to avoid such names like Obiagaeri (literally, one who comes to enjoy) but insisted on choosing names like Ujunwa (literally, the ideal child) and Uzoamaka (Excellent way or manner). He further admonished the children to be worthy of such good names and to live up to the proper significance of their meaning.

The importance of Igbo names and their direct link with the spiritual world explain why it is traditionally the sole right of the family head to give the child his first name. He is considered to be the person in the right position to analyze the circumstances...
surrounding the child's birth, the family situation and at times the oracle of the fortuneteller, in order to give the child his proper name.

While other civilizations document their theological and other forms of thought in their memoirs and diaries, the Igbos immortalize theirs in the names they give their children. In the names Igbos record their firm belief in God (Chukum), his attributes as the creator of all that is, the giver and sustainer of all life, as already studied in the second chapter of this work. Perhaps a brief examination of a few Igbo names will do to illustrate how Igbo theology is expressed in names.

a) Ḍ年后 kwughaa Let the mouth that spoke retrieve
     Ḍ年后  ekwusi    Let the mouth stop speaking
     Ebosia          After all accusations

This type of names indicates a sigh of relief by one who had been maliciously accused of fraudulent moral character, but who had been proved innocent by historical events. A practical example is a lady accused by people of being incapable of conception due to immoral behaviour, abortion or destruction of her womb but who after marriage gave birth without delay.

b) Ngirikanwa Child is supreme
     Ifeyinwa    Nothing is like a child
     Nwadiri    Let the child live

These names and their like show not only the supreme position of offspring but more especially the value of life as sacred. Life ranks first in the Igbo scale of moral, social and economic values. In the question of life, all other values must give way. Therefore Igbos can go to any length in search of offspring and the life of the child is heavily defended by tradition, hence an Igbo proverb: Ebe ọbụna nwa siri lọọ ụwa, ya ziri —it does not matter what the circumstances are, that surround the conception of a child, be it adultery, concubinage, rape, incest, single parenthood —allow him to live. Igbo tradition holds some of these circumstances as moral evils, others as crime, but in so far as life is involved, the life produced must not be destroyed but accepted. Igbos therefore consider that a child born outside marriage is
legitimate, provided the father accepts him, which he must. Likewise abortion is foreign to the Igbo pattern of thought.

The foregoing in no way shows that Igbos condone immoral relations but simply stresses that they distinguish between the moral act and its effect. The child has to live, that is, the life involved has to be spared, though the transgressors have to bear the consequences of their immoral action as stipulated by tradition.

c) Iroegbule Let anger not kill
    Ugwoegbù Let hatred not kill
    Ugwoepuqome Let hatred not prosper

This type of names contains numerous moral implications. It is more prominent in large polygamous families, where natural rivalry among women may create hatred, anger and envy. It is also employed in families with few or no outstanding personalities, and who are therefore maltreated by neighbours. It is a living vocalization of innocence to the unjustified way one is treated by one’s neighbours. It also assures the neighbours that their maltreatment is to no avail and is bound to prove ineffective in so far as it is capricious and unmerited.

A. K. Obiefuna discusses the same line of thought and gives Abôka—which is an abbreviated form of Abôka atùny isi - this meaning: if one insists much on revenge and retaliation, one runs the risk of losing one’s head/life in the process of seeking revenge. Such a name is given in time of crisis and open animosity and serves as a warning to all the untiring avengers and persecutors of the family. It reminds them that all their evil plans, wishes and actions should fall back upon them as a boomerang.

Names, too, immortalize some historical facts that play an important role in fashioning the understanding of the mystery of life and death:

a) Ògù a di mma War is not beneficial
b) Ònwù ama egbu Death is not reasonable

These names and the like reflect the tragedy of war and death and why they should be avoided or prepared for. They normally devastate the people and produce retrogression. Death sometimes puts off «the light» of a family, throwing its members
into darkness and confusion. Such events make Igbos reflect and confide more on the deliverance of the spiritual powers.

Thus, we may conclude that through names, the Igbos project their world view, their theological thoughts, their aspirations and their response to the mysterious world around them.

IV. IMPORTANCE OF INITIATION IN IGBOLAND

Initiation, which G, O’Collins and E. G. Farrugia describe as «introduction in stages into the mysteries of religion»⁴⁰, is full of symbolism, significance and importance among the Igbos. Its importance stems from the fundamental concept of the Igbos that life is not a finished product by nature but rather has to be developed, enhanced and fully realized by individuals through personal endeavour and achievement.

Oghu Initiation, which we will discuss, is particularly important in that it forms a central bridge between childhood and adulthood and ties an individual to the community and people among whom he has been born as a child. The child birth rites in fact constitute the primary initiation, which is oriented to, and culminates in, the all important initiation into Oghu or one of the cultural masquerades—a rite which offers the individual the opportunity to manifest publicly his passage from childhood to adulthood. Once initiated, in this latter way, one joins the stream of his people and becomes truly one with them.⁴¹ One is completely engrafted in the society, acquires new status, enjoys full privileges and shoulders various responsibilities, both in his immediate family and the community⁴².

The full significance of initiation may be seen more clearly in those areas in Igboland where the initiates are separated from the community and live for a period in seclusion all by themselves. This practice is a symbol of solemn unity and identification, as each initiate unifies and identifies himself with other youths with whom he forms a batch of initiates. In some areas the batch crystallizer into an age grade with political and religious significance, which Mbiti, mistakenly calls a secret society⁴³.

This period of withdrawal from the society, absence from home, during which time the initiates receive instructions is sym-
bocally rich in reaning. The withdrawal symbolizes the experience of the process of dying, living in the spirit world, while rejoining their family and community symbolizes regeneration. This latter signifies that the initiates are new, that they have new personalities, that they have lost their childhood. In some communities, they receive new names.

This initiation stage has an important educational purpose. It offers the youth the opportunity of acquiring new knowledge, which previously was not accessible to them. G. Parrinder, commenting on the educational aspect of initiation holds that:

«Instructions on behaviour, tribal customs and religion may go on for years before the arrival of puberty. This is increased and made explicit in initiation ceremonies, and without passing through such rites the young people could not take part in the adult life of the tribe» 44.

For Mbiti, initiation awakens the youth to many things:

«They learn to endure hardship, they learn to live together with one another, they learn to obey, they learn the secrets and mysteries of the man/woman relationship» 45.

It is this preparation that forms a bridge between the male and the female, fatherhood and motherhood, since its terminus signals the official permission for one to get married and bear children. It is also thought to join the living with the departed, the visible with the invisible, because after this initiation, a person may perform religious rites. In fact, in many localities, many get married immediately after initiation.

1. Initiation as entry into communion with the deity and the community

Every religious community is a «mystery of communion» 46: communion among the members, as they enter into spiritual and social solidarity with one another; and communion with the divine, by which man enters into a covenant bond with the deity.
The covenant establishes precepts of give and take relationship between man and the spiritual powers. The covenant people therefore need to observe certain rules as obligatory in order to merit the privileges of the bond.

Birth, as a natural phenomenon, automatically introduces one into human society, as a member of a definite family (Ezi na ulo) and a specific community (Umu nna). He has the natural potentialities; mental, physical, psychological, etc., to live a truly human life within the community. But this natural phenomenon, birth, does not introduce one into all the cultural aspects of life among the Igbo people. He needs to be initiated, in order to be incorporated fully into the religious and cultural life of the people.

At birth, the community accepts and welcomes the new child as a gift from God (Chi nenye nwa). The child shares with them the same blood relation (Umene). But the new child is also expected to return this love shown him at birth, by accepting and cherishing the community through the process of initiation into the cultural life of the people.

Igbo initiation, in a way similar to christian initiation, gradually introduces one into the covenant community, whereby an individual accepts the «option of acknowledging» the deity of the covenant, as his personal god, and «of accepting all the members as unitedly affiliated to the deity» 47. He thus enters into a covenant solidarity, with the hope of partaking in the security and the benefits contained in the bond.

Through initiation the young Igbo experiences a personal insertion into a new community of the faithful. Just as Baptism inserts the subject personally into a new and eternal covenant, as member of the chosen people, and makes him sharer of the Trinitarian life of love and participates in the messianic, prophetic and priestly mission of Christ. Traditionally, Igbo initiation engrafts the initiate into the celebrating community, enabling him to participate in the sacrificial meal and to carry out, in collaboration with other initiates, the obligation and mission stipulated in the covenant.

Initiation therefore becomes the only channel through which one is incorporated fully into cultural, social and religious life.
This makes Igbo parents anxious to see that their children begin to be incorporated into the life of the people through initiation as soon as it is physically possible, after the child’s birth. This solicitude becomes a motive of pride and boast in society life: I did this and that for my son, I made him a man. The concept of initiation as incorporation into a community is an important cultural element that makes infant baptism readily understandable to Igbos. Igbo Christian parents will do everything possible to see their child baptized at the infant age.

2. Initiation and economic and social security

Igbos are not alone in the anxiety with which they behold the future. The uncertain nature of the future fills men of every culture down the ages with amazement, bewilderment and absolute concern. It is unpredictable, unfathomable and rich in possibilities; hence Igbo proverbs and names that describe the future this way:

- Echi di omimi: The future is mysterious
- Echi di egwu: The future is wonderful
- Echi di ime: The future is pregnant
- Onye mma echi?: Who can predict the future?

In equating the future with pregnancy, the anxiety of which among the Igbos is especially keen, as we have discussed, the proverbs instill in Igbos the idea of keeping prepared. Every available opportunity is therefore to be used to guard against any event which might arise. As an Igbo husband watches his pregnant wife with anxiety and gathers himself together economically awaiting for her delivery, so also do Igbos watch the future with creative economic strategies in order not to be taken unawares.

This dynamism with which Igbos view the world makes them conscious of the fact that the world and all its natural and social forces have to be manipulated for man’s better future. Uchendu commenting on this fact, says:

«This world is a dynamic one—a world of moving equilibrium... But the Igbo believe that these social
calamities famine, epidemic and continuous drought and cosmic forces which disturb their world are controllable and should be manipulated by them for their own purpose.*

It is therefore imperative for the Igbos that all cosmic, social and natural forces be held in control, so as to live a better life and become as far as possible less cumbersome to others, in spite of the goodwill and the concern of the extended family system which caters for one at age. The question that now remains is how can this be achieved?

An Igbo proverb gives an insight to one solution: Nkụ akpatara na ọkọchi ya ka ana anya na udu mmiri, which literally means that the firewood collected in dry season is used during the rainy season. As the tropical torrential rain in Igboland often traps people indoors so that no one ventures into the forest to fetch wood, so does old age reduce human strength and capability. The proverb therefore takes future/old age analogically to be the rainy season and the youthful age to be the dry season. As one prepares for the rainy season during the dry season, so should one prepare for old age during his youth, when one has his strength and capabilities for more buoyant economic endeavours. T. Nwalo says that, «youth is a period of achieving something and becoming somebody».

Igbos normally take heed of this warning and use their youth-age to prepare for the future by contributing to the building of a peaceful and just society. They seek to maintain a cordial relationship with the ancestors and the spirits, convinced that man’s real security and deliverance essentially come from spiritual forces. They also build their extended family solidarity, in an atmosphere of peaceful living together and reciprocal help. Above all these, they invest the wealth they have accumulated through their labour in the farm with the hope of future dividends.

Traditionally the Igbonian has one other way of achieving future security. He «invests» on initiations and title-takings. The goods collected from the initiation of younger members are normally shared among the older members, so that these latter, having passed earlier through such initiation stages, now draw
economic benefits from their own initiations and titles. With this dividend, an Igboman becomes to some extent economically self supporting at his old age, as he is the beneficiary of all his initiations and titles till death. One can hardly lose the right to his initiations and titles, unless by extremely serious moral abominations, which is very rare if not unheard of. Thus initiation and title-taking, apart from being religious rites, accord social status and honour to an Igboman and provide him with social and economic security for the future. We shall now survey Igbo initiation into the Oghu cultural masquerade.

V. THE NOTION OF OGHU IN GENERAL

Igbos traditionally thought of themselves in terms of towns, not country. Therefore the Igbo words, Mba and Obodo, translate both country and town. Each Igbo town is distinct from the other and is identified with one form of cultural festival or another. This gives rise to various cultural festivals among the Igbos like: Mmanwụ, okorosha, ọkọnko, etc.

Even though these cultural festivals go by different names and exhibit remarkable differences and distinctiveness in their respective localities, initiation into them, as a central bridge between childhood and adulthood, is marked with a basic resemblance and identity. In some localities like Mbanọ, Ngwa, Ikwaọ, Mbaise, Nsukka etc. the initiation into adulthood is done through the process of Iwa Akwa. In this thesis, we shall limit the study to the Oghu cultural festival and initiation rites.

1. Origin, spread and kind of oghu:

Oghu or Owu, as a cultural religious festival, pervades a good part of Igboland, especially the central part: old Orlu and Owerri Provinces. It is also practised among the neighbouring towns like; Nembe, in Brass, up to Sankiri and Borinima, all in the River State. There are a series of myths, folklores and traditions as regards the origin and spread of Oghu among the people. We shall content ourselves with the most popular ones. The first
myth holds that Oghu originated from an encounter between some fisherwomen and the River Mermaid called Echere. They entered into a covenant bond, by which Echere promised them protection and fertility of both soil and man, while the women promised her worship and yearly ritual festivals. They planted an «Akpu Tree», on which sacrifices of white fowls, goats, and nzu (white chalk) were offered, as a symbol of this covenant. Later this tree grew into a shrine, normally decorated with white and red cloths. Pilgrimage was made to this shrine by the sick, and the troubled seeking recourse. This is the origin of the famous Oghu shrine of Oguta, which survived till recent times.

Another myth relates that the encounter was at Nembe, between Oghu, with his daughter Echere, and the villagers. The same covenant bond was made. This myth is still alive among the people living around Oru, Okworji, Awo-Omamma, and also in Nembe\textsuperscript{51}.

The fundamental elements in these myths are that Oghu originated from a covenant pact between the god of the river and man. There is a promise of protection and fertility, while man accepts to keep an annual ritual memorial of this encounter. Moreover certain elements mentioned in the myths still survive to date in Oghu ceremonies; sacrifice of white animals and the use of nzu. The dancers of oghu normally wear a costume of skirt made of red and white cloth, with white feathers worn on the head. And the use of nzu is very prominent during initiation ceremonies.

2. The spread of oghu

The spread of Oghu was very much connected with the Igbo marriage and cultural contact or acculturation. If a man wanted to marry an Echere or the daughter of an oghu priest, one of the conditions was that the man should be initiated into oghu and should promise to propagate it in his own area. The Echere thus carried oghu to her matrimonial home, just as in the Bible the wives of Solomon may be seen to introduce their foreign religions and gods into Israel.
Apart from this, the traditional history of Oguta, which survives to date, holds that Oru of Oguta went to Osumari to marry the daughter of an oghu priest. The lady was also an Echere. One of the conditions was that Oru must be initiated into oghu and propagate it in Oguta and neighbouring towns. He was therefore initiated and oghu was brought to Oguta. For this reason, every first wife of an oghu priest has some privileges in oghu.

Traditionally, with basis on the myth of the origin of oghu, oghu as a festival was performed exclusively by women; but at present women are mere spectators, hence the Igbo proverb; oghu nwanyi buru laa di, dizi ya na nso, (woman is forbidden to participate in oghu, which she brought to her marital home). There are different opinions based on folklores and myths to explain the transformation of oghu from a women’s to men’s affair. The hypothesis argues from the fact that man is the head of the family, including his wife and therefore has every right over whatever belongs to his wife. This group follows an Igbo saying that; Nwanyi nata egbe n’ebe, obu di ya nwe ya, (every achievement of a married woman is normally appropriated to her husband).

The second hypothesis argues from the nature of oghu. Oghu is expensive, and energy sapping, and as women could not cope up with its demands, they ceded it to their husbands. This opinion follows an Mgbele myth, which relates that once, Echere, the daughter of Oghu, was drowning in the river and the fisher women around could not rescue her until some men arrived to help. Echere therefore transferred the responsibility of keeping the oghu covenant pact to men, who could offer some assistance in case of difficulty.

Yet another opinion comes from the reinterpretation of the oghu convenant bond. This is more prominent around Umuaka. It argues that oghu is an annual ritual celebration for protection and fertility of the soil. The chief crop produced by the Igbos is yam (Ji) which gives meaning and makes an Igbo a man of wealth and the owner of the land on which he lives. Therefore Ahajoko (the god of yam) was inserted into the content of oghu ritual celebrations. But yam (Ji) belongs to man and not to woman; women only cultivate and enjoy the fruit of their labour by feasting on yam. It was therefore left for men, not women, to appease Ahajoko, the god of yam.
3. Kinds of oghu

One notices different types of oghu cultural festival, as one moves from one oghu celebrating community to another. This difference is not only in the cultural display but also in the essential content and ritual observances. But it is necessary to point out that they all trace their origin to the same myth of man - river god encounter, which culminated in a covenant bond. Thus the differences originate from practice and interpretation of the implications of the covenant made between god and man.

Essentially oghu can be grouped into four different types: Oghu Oma, Oghu Echere, Oghu Mmiri and Oghu Agbara. The popular opinion among christians is that they are all different expressions of the same fundamental worship and honour given to the god of the river or Mermaid. But a deeper study of oghu shows that oghu Echere is a modification of oghu Qma, while Oghu Agbara has much in common with Oghu Mmiri. This work is specially dedicated to the study of oghu Echere, which is prominent around Orlu, with particular reference to Oghu in Umuaka and the surrounding towns.

a) Oghu Qma

Oghu Qma is the most complicated and superstitious of all the forms of oghu. Most people hold that many models or versions of oghu especially oghu Echere are various modifications of oghu oma, due to its complexity and ritual demands. It is still practised at Nembe, Egbema, Obinze, Obido, Ejemekwuru, all these in the River State of Nigeria. In Imo State, it is practised in Orodo, Otura, Atara, Ifekala, Umunneoha and Oguta, all these in old Owerri Province. Around Orlu, it is seen at Awo-Omamma, and Umuelem —Okwudor.

The dancers (Okorosha) are normally owned by ndi isi oghu (the leaders or oghu priests) and membership is not open to all initiates unlike in oghu Echere. Each leader initiates his dancers with rigorous initiation rites (Idu okorosha), which take place once every seven years. At the death of a leader, his dancers cease to perform unless adopted by another leader or inherited by the deceased's son with some rituals.
b) Oghu mmiri

Oghu Mmiri manifests some peculiar features. Sacrifices are still offered on the river bank at the beginning of the festival. Commenting on this type of oghu, P. Ijeoma gives an eye witness account, and says that the dancers (okorosha), normally hold the ancestral staff (ọfọ) and seat (Okwukwu) in their hands. Ọfọ symbolizes truth and justice, while okwukwu stands for the elders and is a symbol of fidelity and purity. These practically signify their allegiance to the river god and their continuous link with the ancestors.

c) Oghu echere

Oghu Echere, as said above, is a modification of oghu Oma. This modification was necessitated by the complex and rigorous ritual demands found in oghu Oma. There is a shift of emphasis from the god of the river, Oghu, to the princess, Echere. This radical change originated at Okwuorji, a village in Awo-Omemma, after «marrying» oghu from Mgbele.

The basic aim of the change was to portray the mild and gentle nature of the princess, who is accorded a privileged place of honour in the whole festival of oghu Echere. Echere is normally represented in this type of oghu by a woman participant called Ada Echere (the daughter of Echere) or simply Echere. This is a vocational office and no woman aspires for it, unless one is called and appointed by Echere herself through fortunetelling or divination (Iwa afa). It is believed that the choice is irresistible and is normally manifested to an individual through a series of spiritual or abnormal phenomena.

4. The nature of oghu in umaka

From all indications, oghu entered Uumaka through Umuele village, which embraced it from Okworji in Awo-Omamma. The rest of Umuaka villages married oghu from Umuele by fulfilling
certain requirements: the gift of some jars of palm wine, kola nuts, fowls, goats, eight big yams (ji igwe), and four hundred cowrie shells (ego inu ihe). Oghu in Umuaka today is so flexible that each village allows innovations and modifications. This feature may be hardly noticed among the neighbouring towns, and is the result of early contact between oghu and christianity in Umuaka. The history of christianity in Umuaka contains a series of clashes between oghu and christianity. Each clash introduced new elements into oghu or a reinterpretation of oghu tenets to accommodate the christians, who were part and parcel of the community.

These innovations or modifications may be observed in various artifices introduced by different villages, to add colour, splendour and diversity to this valuable cultural religious festival. Thus we have Okirikoto display at Achara; Oku nwokwa, Ori nwododo and Nworie mkpu, at Isiozi; and Egwuruoso at Umuele. There is also a constant and continuous reinterpretation of the content and essence of the festival, such that today only four out of the ten villages of Umuaka still have Echere, while some of the villages are trying to devise a suitable alternative means of electing women to participate fully in the oghu celebration, since one of its elements, divination (Iwa afa), is fundamentally against the christian faith.

5. The essence of oghu

The oghu cultural, religious festival is a yearly celebration in Igboland. It begins on the sixth month (Onwa nkarummi) and extends to the eighth month, thus lasting for about three months. This period is the heart of the rainy season in Igboland when all the farmers have finished labouring in the farm. To an outsider or an observer, the gorgeous celebration offers the aged, who have laboured strenuously in the farm, a period of relaxation to enjoy the first fruit of their farm, and to the youth and the children, a reasonable recreation, in the damp, cold weather, as they follow the masquerades, which normally pay cordial visits to the kith and kin.

For the initiate or insider, however, Oghu is much more significant than this. It is essentially a sacred period, marked by
peace, mutual and peaceful living together among families and neighbours. It is a period of family and kindred reunion, as people travel back home from far and wide to celebrate this feast together with their families. It is a period of exercising practical charity, as the rich and the well to do normally give generously to the poor, who in turn show their appreciation and gratitude by showering praises, thanks and prayers for the protection and long life of all, especially for their benefactors (I go ofo ogologo ndu n’ahu ike).

It is also a period of conglomeration of sacrifices and offerings for rich harvest and protection. The sacrifices consist in killing animals and presenting articles to the gods at the shrines, while the offerings consist in throwing out food and drink to the spirits and the ancestors. Numerous sacrifices are offered to the Mother Earth, the Oghu deity, Ahajoko (the god of yam), the Ancestors and many other deities, asking for rich harvest, protection and fertility of man, cattle and land. There are also sacrifices for individual initiates, as initiation into Oghu takes place only during the Oghu period.

In this festival the entire people request the ancestors, who are the kindred guardians, their closest relations, from whom they inherited the custom, ethos or way of life, to purify and transmit all their actions to the Supreme Being and obtain from Him and all the other gods connected with fertility, abundant harvest and increase of offspring. The ancestors are taken as mediators, the invisible segment of their lineage; they have tasted this physical life and being aware of all human frailty, are in the best position to help.

The festival is central in the people’s life. It forms a focal point towards which the whole year’s activities are oriented, and around which the year’s calendar revolves, just as the paschal mystery is the pivot around which the whole catholic liturgical year hinges. In other words, the oghu festival gives meaning to the whole existence of the people as does the Pasch to the Jews, and Easter to the whole Christian world.

Oghu is for the people an indelible signal in the history of their existence as a people because their existence as a people depends on the productivity of the earth. The fertility of the land is vital for it ensures abundant produce, especially of yam, the
king of all crops. Thus this yearly festival also commemorates the invaluable gift of yam from God, which tantamounts to life itself for the Igbo people and whose increase assures them of their permanent settlement at a particular place as a people.

6. Religious significance

Oghu has a profound religious significance: hence in the preparatory period prior to its celebration, religious elements are enforced and practised. There are elements of fasting, temperance in expenses and moral purification. As the time of the festival draws nearer these spiritual exercises are intensified to prepare adequately for the celebration.

Economically, these measures help the people to save for the flamboyant festival. But the main objective of these acts of mortification is for the people to purify themselves and be worthy to celebrate the feast. These religious actions prepare the people to present themselves before the gods and to placate them, who in return would heed their prayers and grant their requests. In a way this bears a resemblance with the Catholic liturgical calendar of Advent and Lent, as penitential periods in joyful expectation of the mystery of the Incarnation at Christmas and redemption at Easter, respectively.

The period of oghu festival vividly reminds the people of the importance of their sincere and conscious observance of all the moral codes enshrined in Igbo tradition (Omenala, the moral code of the people). Emphasis is placed on uprightness of life, valour, purity and chastity and the avoidance of all kinds of abomination, crime and any form of malpractice in society. All these moral norms are reminded vividly to the people during the oghu festival as a way of living a new form of life and being in intimate communion with the gods and the ancestors.

The Oghu chief priest, on the sacred night that ushers in the oghu season, enunciates all these norms to the entire family of oghu priests, in a form of catechesis, so that these in turn may transmit them to their wards and subjects. Prohibitions that seem to have been forgotten or neglected during the course of the year are strengthened and inculcated to the people, in an oghu musical
rhyme called abu oghu. Oghu puts new emphasis on all the prohibitions and irregular behaviour which might occur frequently among the people, and imposes physical sanctions on the transgressors. For example, during the period:

1. Fighting, guarreling and unfuindly words af any kind are put under some sanction.

2. Stealing in all its forms becomes a crime. This is so meticulously emphasized, that children are forbidden to pluck any economic fruit especially pears.

3. Marital fidelity: couples are urged to live together in the spirit of tolerance and forgiveness. Men are forbidden to maltreat or beat their wives, or to send them away for any cause. Women, on the other hand, are bound to keep to their marital homes, and any woman who deserts her matrimonial home during the oghu period commits a serious crime.

4. Promiscuity is strictly checked among the youths through the prohibition of all moon-light plays. This is to inculcate among the youths the need for a chaste and pure relationship with the opposite sex both in word and deed, and to value the fundamental purpose of conjugal love as procreation and companionship.

Practical charity is given a place during this season. The whole festival is coloured with an ever-flowing exchange of gifts, and nobody is left to bear the hardships of life alone. The rich are obliged to help the poor to have a meaningful oghu celebration and in turn expect abundant benefits from the gods in the form of rich harvest and posterity.

7. The structure of oghu

Oghu is hierarchically structured. This structure exhibits a very interesting resemblance with the structure of the catholic church. The initiated members are basically classified into: non ministerial and ministerial ranks; the laity and the priests respectively.

The non-ministerial ranks of Oghu consist of: Okorosha, Onodoro Oghu and Dinkwa. The non-ministerial ranks initiate
one into communion with the Oghu celebrating community and the ancestors and constitute one as a participant in the cultural life of his people. As an Okorosha, one gains the primary initiation, while Qnqodo Oghu offers one the opportunity to publicly acknowledge and manifest one's initiation, which may have taken place during infancy. One therefore confirms and consolidates one's state in Oghu and becomes a defender or soldier of the Oghu cultural festival, in a way analogous to that of confirmation, which strengthens the faith and makes one a defender of the Good News. These ranks involve little sacrifices and prayers at the oghu shrine and can not be inherited by one's descendants.

The ministerial office consists of Qnyakpa and the Oghu priesthood. Qnyakpa, which literally means «bag carrier» is a ministerial office similar to the catholic diaconate. It is basically attached to the oghu priesthood and ministers to the Oghu priest. Its installation involves more sacrifices of conferment of power, honour and authority, some of which are performed in the person's ngwuru chi —the shrine to the personal god.

Finally, the figure of the Echere stands specifically on its own, attached to the whole community and to Oghu deity. We shall give a little detailed description of the installation of an Oghu priest and of the Echere.

a. Onye isi oghu (The Priest)

This is the highest oghu office, which bears a functional similarity to the catholic priesthood. The term «Ochichi» to ordain, is normally used to describe the rite of consecration of the onye isi oghu. It is the most complex of all the rites in oghu initiation. It involves countless consultations with an oracle as to the candidate's integrity and moral probity. The individual must distinguish himself in the knowledge of Igbo moral norms (Omenala) and oghu tenets.

The investigations on the worthiness of the candidate last for a long time, hence the candidate has to declare his intention to the oghu priests well in advance before the oghu period. If all the enquiries find him worthy, he is elected for installation in the next oghu season.
The installation ceremonies last for sixteen days (Izu na ano—four market weeks). The offerings required, among other things, are: four goats, eight big yams (Ji igwe), sixteen kola nuts (Oji), sixteen gallons of palm wine, some fowls, and a stipulated amount of money, called «Ego ndu aku»\(^72\). The candidate has to plant an «Akwu tree», hence the ceremony is also called «Ima akwu oghu»\(^73\). Three of the goats are sacrificed at three different places; his nguru chi, Ikenga oghu, and before the Akwu tree, planted by the candidate.

The fourth goat, called «ewu ofe ihe», is sacrificed at the backyard of the candidate. This is the sacrifice of constitution and consecration. Only the priests, and the ministerial servants (Onya akpa) participate in this sacrifice and partake of the sacrificial meat. In this sacrifice the rite of conferment of authority and power on the new oghu priest is inserted.

The presiding chief priest hands an engraved dry stick (osisi awala) to the new priest, with words of constitution and conferment of authority and power. Then the chief priest takes back the symbol and buries it at the very spot where the goat was sacrificed with some prayers of intercession\(^74\).

This carved stick (Osisi awala) has the image of the ancestors engraved on it. It signifies maturity and transfer of authority and power from the ancestors. The priest is thus reminded that he is not free to alter the doctrine nor abuse the authority handed down from the ancestors, and which has now reached him. The new priest is then welcomed into the family of the oghu priests (Ndi isi oghu), with embracing and hand shaking by all the priests present. He is then presented to the people with the acclamation «ochila isi Oghu» (he has been consecrated an oghu priest). The people normally give a joyful applause of acceptance.

The offices of Onya akpa and Isi Oghu are transferable; for example, they may be inherited by one's descendant at death. Traditionally it is the right of the first son to inherit it, but he must be worthy of the oghu priestly office. The rite of transfer of office can be inserted at a specific point within the funeral of the deceased, but normally it is a distinct ceremony. The rite is basically meant to ask the deceased to transfer the power and
authority of the office to his son. Then there are sacrifices and prayers of intercession at the candidate’s shrine to his personal god (Nguru chi). If the son is not found worthy he may lose the right of succession.

b. The echere

The Echere is a woman who has special privileges in the Oghu cultural festival. She is fundamentally the representative of the river princess, Echere, who occupies a privileged place in Oghu Echere; hence she is called «Ada Echere» (the daughter of Echere) or simply Echere. The choice of an Echere and the installation of an Oghu priest (onye isi oghu) constitute the greatest problems for the catholics, because they involve consultation with the oracle. The Echere is an office strongly believed to be an election of the deity, not a mere human choice.

The Echere, as a representative of the river Mermaid, is thought to be personally chosen by the river goddess herself and elected by the ancestors through an oracle (Iwa afa). For the Oghu celebrating community, this choice can neither be questioned nor resisted without grievous consequences such as sudden death, or some serious misfortune in life. This explains why some communities of Oghu Echere function without an Echere. The office of Echere is not transferable.

The ritual constitution of an Echere involves among other things: white hens (nnekwu ocha), because she is a woman, eight kolanuts, prepared meat-salad and a stipulated amount of money. Only the priests participate in the sacrifices, which take place at the personal shrine of either the father, in the case of an unmarried woman, or the husband, in the case of a married woman. After the sacrifice she is presented at the Oghu shrine and prayers of intercession are offered for her.

An unmarried Echere maintains her Echerehood after marriage, because it is a life-long vocation or title. She only needs to present herself to the chief priest of her matrimonial community, who ritually incorporates her into the Oghu community as an Echere.
VI. INITIATION INTO OGHU COMMUNITY

Membership into oghu community is open and mandatory for all the males born in the community. Any male who fails to be initiated completely cuts himself off from the cultural life of his people and is considered as an alien to the community. He becomes odd and strange to his own people, especially during the oghu period. Consequently parents feel obliged to initiate their children at the earliest opportunity available.

Distant relatives of the community are allowed the privilege of initiation, but as extraordinary members. This group consists mainly of: the grandchildren of the community (Umú nwa nwa), and the in-laws (ndi Ogo). This form of initiation allows the candidates free movement and communication within the community during the oghu festival. The extraordinary initiates can not aspire to any of the ministerial offices. This type of initiation is devoid of rigorism and is normally performed with simple rites. The raison d’être for this form of initiation is to avoid unnecessary desecration of oghu norms, as the presence of these relatives during oghu festival is rightly presumed.

1. Initiation rites

Oghu initiation, as all other initiations in Igboland, is a communal celebration par excellence. It gathers together the kindred (Umú nna), kith and kin (Ikwu na ibe), all the extended family relations, married daughters (Umú ada), grandchildren (Umú nwa nwa), and in-laws (ndi Ogo). All these contribute according to their capacity in cash and kind to help the hosting family shoulder the expense involved in entertaining guests.

The rites of initiation into Oghu include:
   I. Ego ịnọ nti
   II. Icha ihe agwu
   III. Ikwa mmuo
   IV. Iwo ụkwụ n’ekwe

Most of these rites are performed with only the initiate, his parents (in the case of an infant), and the oghu priests in atten-
dance. It is only the last rite, Iwọ ụkwú n’ekwe, which is the culmination and the presentation of the candidate as a fully initiated members, that involves the whole community. These practices and their parallelism with christian baptismal rites, make it hard for propagators of oghu to see in oghu traditional rites of initiation anything contrary to christian faith and practice.

a. Ego iña nti, icha ihe agwu and iwọ ụkwú n’ekwe

The process of oghu initiation rites starts with ego iña nti, which literally signifies the rite of listening or opening the ears to listen. The candidate or the parent, for an infant, approaches the oghu priest, with a stipulated amount of money and other items to request that he be initiated into oghu. The priest touches the ear of the candidate with the money and gives a warning advice, that the candidate should be careful to hear and observe all oghu precepts. This is a very symbolic rite, which resembles the rite of Ephpheta in the catholic rite of baptism.

After this rite, the oghu priest fixes a day, in which to announce to the whole body of oghu priests, the intention of initiating the child. On this day, most often on «Nkwọ market day», the rites of Ich a ihe agwu amd Ikwa mmmọ are performed. The Ich a ihe agwu consists mainly of notifying the whole body of oghu priests in attendance of the intended initiation. They thereafter pray to the spirits and the ancestors to help the candidate realize his initiation.

Ikwa mmmọ essentially is the presentation and consecration of the candidate to the oghu god and it is usually performed at the oghu shrine (Ikwga oghu). A sacrifice of white fowl is normally offered to oghu at the shrine and intercessory prayers are made for the candidate. The priests implore the ancestors to enlist the candidate into the oghu celebrating community and endow him with an art to distinguish himself with success in the oghu festival. The items involved are: kolanuts, yams, fowl, a small basin of «ihe ahia» 78 and some amount of money.

b. Iwọ ụkwú n’ekwe

The rite of Iwọ ụkwú n’ekwe culminates the initiation rites into Oghu and also presents the candidate publicly to the com-
munity as a full-fledged member of the oghu community. It mainly consists of merry making, feasting and some symbolic act performed by the priest and the candidate.

Once the previous rites have all been satisfactorily concluded, the candidate is presented to the oghu celebration community on a stipulated day, most often on Eke or Orie market day. This day is called the candidate’s initiation day (Ubọchi ịa n’oghu). The community on that day accepts the candidate as a fully initiated member with joy and jubilation.

The rite is called by this name because the candidate, either by himself or carried by the priest, steps on the ekwe musical instrument, used for playing the oghu music before he is allowed to dance to his first oghu music. The rite is a public manifestation that the candidate has been initiated.

The candidate is marked with white chalk (Nzu) on the ankles and arms. With the same white chalk (Nzu), the chief priest makes a symbolic mark on the ground in front of the musicians, in the form of four sun-like-rays. This symbolizes the four Igbo market days —and this is a symbolic way of calling on the market spirits that make up Igbo week to come and witness the ceremony. The candidate is made to stand on this symbolic Nzu mark, facing the crowd, who normally gathers in a circular form, making room for the dancer. The candidate dances to his first four different tunes of oghu music, starting from and ending at the symbolic mark before the musicians. People congratulate him with gifts.

The rites of initiation culminate at the oghu shrine. There, a sacrifice of petition and thanksgiving is offered and the newly initiated partakes of oghu sacrificial meal for the first time. This is the climax of oghu initiation. It introduces the initiate into communion with all the initiated members both the living and the dead and makes him a beneficiary of the protection and guidance of the ancestors. In a way it resembles the infant baptismal practice in Eastern church, where the initiation ceremonies culminate with the administration of the Eucharist.

After the initiation, properly understood, people retire to the compound of the initiate for the feasting; there are normally
many symbolic gun-shots, in congratulation of the initiate, in honour of the oghu god and the spirits.

VII. THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN DIALOGUE WITH IGBO CHILD INITIATION: KEY ELEMENTS IN IGBO CULTURE RELEVANT FOR INCULTURATION

1. Nature of the dialogue

Dialogue connotes honest conversation between parties. It is that sincere relationship that promotes intimate understanding of each other in order to exchange ideas and values amicably. In our study, dialogue denotes a sincere comparison of religious beliefs, ethical values, and cultural elements in an attempt to sort out areas of agreement or similarity and areas of disagreement or dissimilarity, and also to identify the merits and demerits of Igbo cultural practice of child initiation in so far as it helps or hampers evangelization.

The result of such a dialogue, hopefully, will be the ability and preparedness to integrate those elements that are similar; heal, purify and correct the defective elements; and amicably drop or remove those elements that are purely contrary to the Christian faith, that is, the inauthentic human values of the Igbo culture, so that the whole cultural milieu may be sanctified and elevated and incorporated in Christ, the Saviour of all mankind. For this is the task of inculturation, as we have tried to expose in the first chapter of this work.

This dialogue has been the aim of the church in dealing with other religions or human culture. Archbishop Ezeanya describes this dialogue as a great task facing the Nigeria church in evangelization, since it is the most effective way of inculcating the gospel message. The Catholic Bishops of Nigeria emphasize this idea, observing that the Nigerian church finds herself in a multi-religious society. In daily life, the faithful have to relate at all levels to the Muslims and adherents of the traditional African religion.

It is therefore necessary that diverse ways and means be found for living in peaceful co-existence with our brothers and
sisters who do not follow the catholic religion. This is more so, adds the Bishops’ Conference, because the whole humanity forms one single community. All stem from one stock which God created to people the entire earth. All share a common destiny namely God. His providence, evident goodness and saving designs are extended to all without distinction (Acts. 14: 17). Also, all men and women, even those who do not know or accept Him and His leadership with us, are summoned by Christ, the universal Lord of all.

The statement of the Bishops is a useful starting point for constructing a dialogue with Igbo religion, for it points to some basic convictions among Africans that are advantageous for inculturation. Among other things, it points to their belief in the common paternity of God to all creation, which forms the bedrock of inculturation and the basis of dialogue between the church and all human cultures. Starting from this common ground, the conversation may extend to all the aspects of the people’s cultural existence, as the Bishops’ report further points out. African traditional religion has many favourable elements to christianity—the value of human life at all levels, respect for the sacred, the use of symbols, close link between the living and the dead. These, continue the Bishops, have the possibility of enriching and supporting the christian experience to an enormous degree.

The Nigeria Bishops’ Conference also enumerates in another communique some more specific elements in African traditional religion that may be of immense help in dialogue. They see these elements as a suitable earth for the gospel message to blossom in the heart of Igbo culture. These elements include:

«Belief in God (Chukwu), spirits (good and bad), life after death, immortality to some extent, helping the dead through ritual prayers, belief in the sacred, sacrifice, proper shrine, confession of sin and expiation, participation in the sacrificial meals, organized worship, religious feasts and months, strong community aspects of religion and the priesthood»

The Bishops in listing these positive elements have set out firmly the platform for the dialogue. They really stress that these
elements existent in Igbo traditional religion can and should be used in proper catechesis in presenting the gospel message to the Igbos. The elements form the seed of the Word in the Igbo thought pattern and merely to substitute them may mean doing violence to the African’s religious and cultural life, or building another world which may prevent the gospel message from enrooting itself firmly in Igbo culture.

The Bishops’ Conference balance their observation by also presenting in their communique those negative elements in the traditional religion that should be cautiously rejected as they prove to be contrary to Christian faith and morals. It is important to keep in mind that the task of evangelization is not only to assume the positive elements of any culture but also and very importantly to discover ways and means of compassionately removing those negative elements in such a way as not to generate a feeling of destruction which may arouse the hatred of the traditional religionists.

From the foregoing, it is clear that our aim in this concluding part of the work is a comparative one: evaluation of all our previous observations on Igbo child initiation in the light of the Christian sacrament of infant initiation. We shall focus on those elements in Igbo belief and practice in relation to child initiation, which could provide a fertile ground for basic Christian concepts, as well as elements that could imply difficulty. We shall now proceed to discuss these elements, hoping that they would be of use in presenting the Christian sacrament of initiation to the Igbo people.

2. The Dimensions of life in Igbo thought

The Igbos may be said to conceive life in two principal dimensions: its time dimension and its communal dimension. As life runs its course from conception and heads towards the final goal —happiness after death, life is realized in a relationship of communion between the individual and his God, other spiritual forces, and the entire community (both living and dead). We shall now discuss these two dimensions of life so central in Igbo thought and so crucial in planning catechesis on Baptism among the Igbos.
A) Life as a stepwise, dynamic and continuous process

In the time-dimension, the Igbos see life as a gradual progress, in steps, that begins with conception and heads towards a future state of final happiness. This final goal of happiness is thought to be the primary reason why Chukwu grants the gift of life to man in the first place. In this light, the different initiation rites in Igbo religion may be seen as moments of a stepwise advance towards the fullness of existence. S. N. Ezeanya, the present Archbishop of Onitsha, commenting on this point states that:

«By various rites of initiation an individual Igbo child passes formally from one age grade to another with the rights, privileges and obligation that accompany the passage. Some of these simply mark the passage of the candidate from one religious status to another.»

The child initiation in particular, which culminates with initiation into the oghu cultural masquerade, can be considered as the first important step in the realization of an individual's proper existence or life. This idea could be useful in explaining the dynamic essence of christian life, which begins with the sacraments of initiation and heads towards eternity. For the *Catechism nke Nzukọ Catholic* defines sacrament as: «the external sign of inward grace ordained by Jesus Christ through which he leads us to eternal salvation.» Thus the sacraments represent milestones along a christian's historical path towards eternal salvation.

Through the gradual initiation, an Igbo child is introduced into the whole process of life itself, for Igbos think that life as a whole is not a finished product by nature but has to be fulfilled gradually through individual effort. An individual should endeavour to live in communion with the spiritual forces which offer necessary help to man in all his hardships.

We want to make it clear that we are not in any way trying to equate Igbo child initiation rites to the christian sacrament of initiation, nor are we opting for the substitution of the latter with the former but simply trying to sort out their similarities and dissimilarities for more effective pastoral work among the Igbos, if possible employing valid ideas of the Igbo initiation rites to explain Baptism to the Igbo christian community.
A careful examination of the christian and Igbo traditional initiation rites indeed reveals this first important parallelism: both are seen as initial steps in a gradual process of introducing an individual into a dynamic life-history, which leads to the final place of happiness after death. This hopeful life-long journey towards eternal happiness is not conceived as starting automatically through natural birth, but as requiring some form of religious initiation in the case both of christianity and of Igbo traditional religion.

Natural birth introduces a child into the family and the whole community, a great gift from Chukwu. The child is joyously received as one who shares the same blood relation (Umune) with the entire family and the community of Umunna and as a creature and image of the same Chukwu, the Creator; just as among the christians a child is seen as a wonderful creature of God, who bears the image of the Creator God. But the child yet needs to be initiated into the common religious and cultural existence of the people: christians through the sacraments of initiation, and Igbos through the process of child initiation rites, in order to share in all the community’s spiritual and cultural goods.

Both initiations are a community activity of all the believers. In the case of christians, baptismal initiation opens into the participation in the church’s life of prayer and of worship, while in the case of traditional religion, the initiation introduces the candidate to the Igbo community’s own mode of worship and cultural life. This fact, perhaps, has to be borne in mind when preparing the baptismal liturgy and when celebrating the post-baptismal feast.

The similarities above are highly relevant in catechesis for they would enrich the manner of presenting the importance and necessity of christian sacraments of initiation as the only normal way to the eternal happiness which the Igbos seek. If these similarities are ignored, some Igbo christians may miss the importance of the christian sacraments of initiation, and may even see the sacraments of initiation as something supra-added, or superfluous, merely a matter of convenience and not of necessity in the spiritual life.

The study to deepen the awareness of the Igbos about the sacraments as milestones in an individual’s spiritual history is so
important that the problem was raised by the Nigerian Bishops' seminar, stressing that, in all cases the sacraments, the external signs of inward grace, still remain the life-wire of the church. The teaching that Christ gives and increases life through the sacraments may be attuned to the ears of the Nigerian Christian and to his conceptual frame of reference for his practical life, beginning from the sacraments of initiation through marriage to the anointing of the sick. In fact an important call was made to the Nigerians to begin an important investigation on the resemblance and manner of association the sacraments have with the Nigeria rites of passage corresponding to the different stages of life in the Nigeria/Igbo culture.

This leads to another important element that falls within the temporal dimension of life as seen by the Igbo: the sequence of the reception of the sacraments of initiation. For the Christians, the sacraments of initiation consist of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. Following the new Catholic rites, they are to be received at once, in the case of adults. This entails the risk that the real significance of these sacraments may be lost to an Igbo who conceives initiation as a gradual, progressive advance towards maturity.

Apart from the case of adult baptism, which involves receiving Confirmation and Eucharist immediately, Latin-rite Christians receive Confirmation and Eucharist only after attaining the age of reason. This time-distance from baptism would have a pedagogical value for the Igbo as well, since it indicates that spiritual maturity must pass through stages. Similar «waiting periods» between initiation rites are practiced among the Igbo, as we have stated above.

The spacing of the rites of initiation in Igbo cultural life gives the initiate the opportunity to assimilate the significance of each stage, live out its demands; and being strengthened in fortitude, he advances gradually towards maturity or perfection. Thus once again we find a common point of contact between the Catholic view and the Igbo thought pattern.

In the life of the church the sacraments recall the past, situate the present and project the future. They recall the past by bringing to memory the passion, death and resurrection of Christ; in the present life they open the individual to the life of
Christ while promising a more perfect union with Christ in the glory that awaits those who receive the sacraments and manifest the effects in their daily lives.

A similar intermingling of past, present and future occurs in the Igbo traditional rites of initiation. For example, in the Igbo naming ceremony, the washing of the child’s hands (Isa aka mmuo) is believed to liberate the child from any prior bonds the child may have contracted either before or during birth. The rites also link towards the future by promising the happiness that awaits all who joyously live a noble and good moral life as an initiate. Thus Igbo initiation rites can offer a good catechetical material for explaining the eschatological hope contained in the Christian sacraments of initiation.

B) Life as a communion with other beings

We come now to the second dimension of the Igbo view of human life. Igbos see life as an entry into a growingly intimate communion with other beings: with the community and with God, the Creator and Sustainer of all life. This double communal dimension of solidarity makes an individualistic way of life foreign in the Igbo pattern of life, because for the Igbos, the human person is primarily a social being. He lives in a community and for the community. The individual can only develop his personality and realize his salvation by acting in continuous communion with Chukwu and with other members of the community, both living and dead. Thus individual salvation may only be achieved within the perspective of community salvation.

1) Communion with the community as the basis of child initiation

The notion of communion with fellow human beings is particularly strong among the Igbos and it is considered that no man lives alone, but rather assists and is assisted by his fellow man or harms and is harmed by his fellow man. In this context we may understand better why child initiation is assigned so high a value in the Igbo community, insofar as it signifies the full incorporation of a child into the community’s religious, social and cultural existence,
just as baptism incorporates one into the mystical body of Christ, the church. This phenomenon must be borne in mind in catechesis, as it may prove useful to explain one of baptism’s effects.

In Igbo child initiation, as we have seen, the incorporation into the community and participation in the community life is brought out more clearly in the rites and symbolic elements used during Igbo child initiation. For example, in the naming ceremony, there are some symbolic elements like water and ọji (kola nut). There are also some symbolic actions like the washing of the child’s hand (isa aka mmụọ) and the breaking of the kola nut. Ọji (kola nut) symbolizes communitarian life and fortune within the community of umunna and the breaking of kola nut during the naming ceremony symbolizes incorporation into the Umunna communion solidarity.

All this can serve as a background material for presenting to the Igbos the doctrine of baptism as a sacrament of incorporation into the mystical body of Christ, the church.

Although initiation is universally a community exercise in principle and practice, it may be affirmed that Igbo child initiation is celebrated with particularly abundant signs of solidarity and communion. It draws together the entire community, old and young, male and female, with each contributing as is able to help the hosting family. It is characterized by feasting and dancing, a whole atmosphere of gaiety and presentation of gifts to the initiate and to the parents of the initiate. It may be stated that any celebration that is not colourful, devoid of communal festivity, through feasting and merry making; or that is poor in religious gestures, through spontaneous prayers, music and dancing and other bodily manifestations, is either not truly Igbo or has not touched the Igbonman’s spirit of celebration.

As a member of an Igbo community, the child shares in all that pertains to the community: the joys and sorrows, hardships and fortunes, sufferings and happiness. He also identifies himself with the community by rendering service and contributing his quota for the building up and strengthening of the bond of communion in the society. This identification facilitates the understanding of baptism as uniting a person with the members of the mystical body, the church, in the life of faith, and lets him use the divine gifts received for the work of building up the church.
The above explanations present Igbo initiation as an essentially community event. The community joyfully shares its expectations of the new child and expresses its thanks to Chukwu and the deities for the new member. The new member is to increase the number of the community and be a sort of reinforcement in the building up the community. He is to labour with the community by employing all his gifts, energy and talent for the welfare of the community. This type of involvement is a practical way of expressing Igbo solidarity within the community, whose members are bound strongly together through a common initiation.

If the Christian sacraments of initiation are presented to the Igbo as a bond of solidarity that ties the people together in union among themselves and with the church and Christ, through charity, the Igbo would more easily grasp the type of commitment expected of the baptized and see baptism as an introduction into a lifelong struggle of witness and of defending the gospel message in words and deeds within the solidarity of the faithful people of God. They will understand baptism and other Christian sacraments as containing a vocation to build up a community of participation, a community of communion and mutual interpersonal help through exchange of prayer and assistance.

Another important communal manifestation in Igbo child initiation is the closing ceremony in the marketplace (or the outing ceremony). This is a kind of «epiphany» of the child to the whole town and beyond. By this ceremony the child is manifested beyond the immediate environment of his community (umunna) to the wider society of the entire town's people, both the living and the dead.

As we have seen, the market, for the Igbo, is not simply a place for buying and selling but more importantly a place where an individual presents himself as one being in communion and working with other beings—the deity that owns the market (Agbara nwe ahaia), the ancestors and the entire townspeople (obodo). This prepares the hearts of the Igbo for the symbolic meaning of the Christian Sunday gathering.

The Christian faithful gather on Sundays not only to break the bread nor simply to fulfill the obligation of Sunday rest, but more importantly to offer themselves as a single living sacrifice to God, their Father, to worship as a community of brothers and
sisters of the same faith, and to exercise their belief in the communion of the saints.

They are also gathered to be fed with the word of God through the gospel readings and well-planed admonition and with the Eucharist. Through this spiritual feeding, the faithful are equipped for a continuous life of virtue and apostolate all through their life. It would seem, therefore, that initiation of Igbos into the christian community would be more meaningful if done on a Sunday, that day of especially intense gathering. This explains the recommendation of the General instructions on infant baptism—infant baptism should better be administered within the Sunday Eucharistic celebration.

The apostolic dimension of the christian life can also easily be related to the Igbos by bearing in mind their social interaction in the market. The Igbos have the custom of visiting their colleagues whom they did not see on market day (the Igbo day of rest), just to share their plight and their experience that prevented them from coming to the market. Although christian apostolate is much more profound, the Igbo concept of concern for others may be directed beyond a purely human solicitude, to a concern for spiritual welfare of neighbours.

Let us now pass on to another aspect related to baptism’s communal dimension. In recent times, especially among the Igbos, there exists a peculiar problem in infant baptism. The bone of contention is the baptism of the children of non-christians, «irregular christians» or children of the single parents. By «irregular christians» is meant, «those involved in invalid marriage, those legitimately married but who have relapsed in their regular practice of faith and those who seek baptism for their children merely for some social reasons».

Attempts have been made to resolve this issue. The code of canon law and the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith insist on the adequate provision of the christian education of the child. The solutions offered agree on the importance and emphasis placed on the christian education of the child and on the possible deferment of the sacrament in the absence of a substantial manifestation of such assurance. Apart from these solutions, which raise some moral problems in deferring the immediate sanctification and salvation of the child on grounds of
some future probability, the church has maintained the practice of infant baptism, since in reality, it is in her own faith that the children are baptized.

Child initiation in Igbo culture can help explain the catholic practice and custom of baptizing the infants in her own faith, because an Igbo child by initiation is engrafted into the cultural life of the people and it is the entire community which takes the responsibility of rearing up the child in the cultural and moral life of the whole community as enshrined in omenala (Moral code) of the people. Each individual in the society feels the guilt of omission if he fails to direct, guide or correct any child drifting from the normal course of the community life.

Another relevant aspect of Igbo child initiation is the mode of choosing the child’s name, for this could help in explaining the right the church has, as a mother, to impose a name on all her christian children. In Igbo rites of initiation or title taking, which involves change of name, it is also the society which names the candidates, at least mediately, through a list of names or prefixes allowed for the rite. The candidates choose from these and none other.

Along this line, in her task for choosing adequate names for her Igbo converts and children, the church might bear in mind the names given during the Igbo traditional naming ceremony. A close examination of such names exposes the supreme importance attached by Igbos to religious ideas. The majority of Igbo names express, in one way or another, the people’s awareness of their complete dependence on the Supreme Being—Chukwu, the Creator and giver of all life; they also reflect the communion with other spiritual beings, into whose communion the child is being initiated—the ancestors or the minor deities.

We are in no way questioning the use of christian names nor the tradition of patron saints in the life of the church but simply trying to see how the right of the church to choose christian names can be understood easily by the Igbos. Besides the fact that the church has the right to give her children their names, it must also be remembered that Igbos prefer names in their native tongue. In fact, Igbo names form a hidden treasure of natural religious sentiments. A deep study of these names shows that the names express, among other things, confidence, joy, humility, gratitude, fortitude, religious fear, repentance, hope and faith in Chukwu.
A most important aspect of some Igbo names is that either by their interpretation or significance they have English, Latin and French equivalents, and also can be compared with some biblical names and those found in the official catholic catalogue of the saints. A few illustrations will suffice:

- **Amalachukwu** (God’s benevolence) means Ann
- **Chukwuanugo** (God has heard) means Simeon
- **Chukwubawanye** (May God increase) means Joseph
- **Ngozi** (Blessing) means Benedicta
- **Nkwume** (Rock) means Peter

The church perhaps ought not forbid the use of such names nor the names of some victorious ancestors whose lives were especially exemplary in society; but as a parent who gives her children suitable names that have some link with their departed saints, the Igbo names may prove to be a rich source for the church to draw from. While the Igbos accept the parental role of the church in at least providing the christian names mediately, they also prefer having native names which seem more meaningful to them.

2) **Communion with the departed as basis of child initiation**

Another important aspect of christian initiation is that it inserts an individual into personal communion with the saints. The church believes and teaches the existence in three dimensions of the same mystical body of Christ, the church, held together by supernatural communion: the victorious church in heaven; the suffering church in purgatory; and the pilgrim or militant church on earth. There is a mutual communion between these three bodies of the same church of God, by which the militant church on earth prays for the suffering members in purgatory and the victorious church constantly intercedes for the pilgrim church. Christian initiation incorporates an individual into this exchange of mutual relation and communion with the rest of the members of the church.

Igbo child initiation bears some similarity and might help explain properly to the Igbos the mystical relationship that exists
among all Christ’s faithful, both living and dead. In Igbo child initiation, one is incorporated not only into the communion of the living but also and more essentially into the communion of the living dead—the ancestors; whereby one assumes the obligation of venerating the ancestors as the heroes of the society who have triumphed over the suffering, pain and hardship of this life and have reached the place of rest which is the end purpose of man’s creation. One is assured of the help and intercession of the ancestors if one observes the bond of the covenant which unifies the whole community—living and the living/dead.

The belief in an invisible link with ancestors is so strong in Igbo religion, and some Igbos go to such an extent in their veneration of the ancestors, that an outsider who does not really understand the situation might condemn them as worshipers of the ancestors. Some converts, in fact, give up their faith in Christ to pay their allegiance to the ancestors because they cannot reconcile what they believe to be a conflict between their allegiance to Christ and to their ancestors, and feel that their ancestors have a greater claim over them.

We may now ask, can the idea of the ancestors be used to explain better the communion with the Christian saints? The saints are our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters who have borne the pains, sufferings and contradictions of this life and insistently witnessed to Christ by living in their daily lives the bond of their initiation into Christ and his faithful community. Kuping the memory of the saints and venerating them inspires and urges us to achieve through faithfulness, patience and fortitude the victory they themselves have won. We are normally helped by imitating them and following their footsteps.

In the Igbo world-view, the ancestors are believed to be those members of the community who have received a «well-done» judgement for the good and exemplary life they lived on earth, and have now received the reward of happiness from Chukwu who judges all creation.

It is thus clear that both in Christian religion and Igbo traditional belief, not all who are initiated into the communion of the faithful or the communion of the community are raised to the rank of either the saints or the ancestors, but only those who in their lives kept the covenant bond of the initiation heroically and
fervently. Thus the Igbo notion of ancestor can help in explaining the christian doctrine of the church triumphant; so also the christian communion of the saints can be clarified through comparison with the Igbo communion with the ancestors.

Furthermore the Igbo venerations of the ancestors could be of help in explaining the christian doctrine on devotion to the saints. The living members of the Igbo community venerate and commune with the ancestors because the ancestors are believed to be:

a) The invisible segment of the whole community or family.

b) The representative of the ideal moral life of the community, providing an inspiration of hope for the living that a good moral and upright life will be rewarded.

c) The intermediary between Chukwu and man. They also pray for and protect their living members.

It is proper to emphasize that the problem we are considering is not that of equating or identifying the saints with the ancestors but rather of solving the problem of double allegiance—to the saints, as christians; and also to the ancestors, as initiates of the traditional religion, which may be blamed on the double initiations the Igbos have. It is important to show how baptism opens the door to communion with their dearly departed

From the cult of the ancestors, further elements might be extracted, since it contains such positive values as filial love, gratitude and hope of future reunion in the place of happiness. Such elements may be elevated and christianized by purifying them of those aspects that are excessive or defective to make them really christian.

The Igbo communion with the ancestors, as in many other aspects of the religion, forms a dim figure which needs to be illumined by Christ and his salvific mystery, because it lacks the most fundamental element—revelation. From this fundamental difference certain shortcomings may be observed.

The communion in Igbo religion is limited in scope, comprising merely of the members of community (umunna) and its ancestors. This is explained by the fact that it is not a universal revealed religion. The church is to widen the concept of community in Igbo religion to include the whole of humanity and to
elaborate the concept of veneration of the ancestors to go beyond the ties of family and immediate community.

Another shortcoming of the notion of ancestor is the criteria for qualification. There is some over emphasis on some minor elements that do not constitute sanctity in the christian concept: for example, befitting funeral and offspring. This may be because Igbos see life as a continuous process of initiation; therefore one has to be initiated into the spirit world no matter his moral virtue on earth; likewise an adequate initiation into the spirit world depends on whether fitting funeral rites are organized by one’s offspring, and not only on the moral virtuous life on earth. This is a misdirected emphasis which christianity has to correct by asserting the fact that the funeral rite is an assisting ritual of prayers and does not necessarily constitute a qualifying or disqualifying criterion for the place of rest. It may, however, help to understand the christian idea of offering sacrifice for the dead.

We end this section by saying that, though it is wise and beneficial to study the similarities and dissimilarities that exist between the two models of initiation (Igbo and christian), it is fundamentally important to stress that we can not in any way confuse the two: the latter comes from divine revelation, which no human culture may invent. Thus, although the two initiation models foster solidarity and communion (both human and divine), the solidarity and communion worked by Igbo initiation is somehow limited in scope, binding together only the family, community, town and perhaps the clan, whereas the christian communion is a universal communion, open to the whole of humanity. We propose that the church, in catechesis, widen the Igbo idea of initiation solidarity, thus raising the limited notion to a truly universal concept.

3) Child initiation and man’s final salvation

The importance and relation of Igbo child initiation to man’s final salvation can not be over emphasized. The child begins a life-process and the initiation ritually constitutes a starting point in life directly linked to man’s eternal rest here after. This means that by child initiation an individual begins a spiritual
journey or war-fare which gradually progresses and advances towards the final salvation through a virtuous life that complies with the mandates of the covenant entered into during initiation, and a growing in communion with both the community and the gods. Igbo child initiation opens the stream of spiritual help of the ancestors and deities and introduces one into inter-personal assistance, a mutual support that is fully realized after death. It incorporates one into the solidarity of Umunna as a real channel of all spiritual benefits that lead to final happiness. Man is seen as immersing himself more and more deeply into a helpful mesh of spiritual relationships with other beings, until the moment of definitive incorporation into Chukwu’s company and the company of ancestors. This thought pattern may help in explaining the notion of baptism as a necessary means of salvation.

In Igbo tradition, child initiation opens the way of salvation, and forms a direct link to it but represents only a beginning. The initiate must comply with the norms of omenala (moral code of the people) in order to achieve or gain salvation, whose gate-ways initiation opens.

This is where Igbo cultural life and solidarity play an indispensable role. The entire community helps the child through education, direction and example so that the ultimate aim of the child’s initiation is eventually realized at the end of life. This community concern for an individual’s salvation is worthy of conserving in christian formulation. Igbo initiation may be said to bind an individual together with a covenant-offering deity and with a help-offering community. Bound in this intimate way to a universe of spiritual beings, an individual is supported and strengthened in his arduous path to salvation. The thought of marching in company with others is a precious category, useful for baptismal catechesis.

4) Communion with chukwu as basis of initiation

Igbos also see life as a continuous and, ideally, ever closer link between an individual and his God (Chukwu). God (Chukwu) is the source and giver of man’s life, and also the final judge and rewarder of it. Man’s existence should consist in an ever-growing relation with God. In this context we may appreciate
better why child initiation is so important for Igbos, since it means sharing in the community’s covenant bond with the divinity. This implies both obedience to certain divine mandates and the enjoyment of a special divine protection. Such a thought pattern may be useful for explaining baptism as a sacrament that establishes God’s covenant bond with men.

The Oghu cultural festival, initiation into which culminates the Igbo child initiation, did not originate merely and simply from the Igbo belief in the Supreme Being Chukwu but more specifically from the belief that this divinity wished to establish a covenant relation with man. This covenant forms the basis of Igbo religious observance. The idea may facilitate the christian explanation of christian covenant relationship between God and man, entered into through baptism. Baptism grants man a special relation with God by which man becomes a son in the Son.

It would thus be highly meaningful to the Igbos if christian initiation were presented to them as entering into a personal-covenant-relationship with God (Chukwu), who is the giver and conserver of all life. As Idowu states:

«The basis of all African belief and practice is covenant. It is the heart of all cults in Africa. African counts it a serious evil to break the covenant... If efforts had been directed in making christians, showing clearly to Africans that they are entering into personal-covenant-relationship with the living God and a personal Saviour, we should not have been facing our present embarassment.»

The above statement, with particular reference to the Igbo religious concepts, for the building up of a kind of christian theology of the covenant that would utilize authentic Igbo categories to express their faith in the Supreme Being, Chukwu. This theology would take into account the Igbo terminologies in designating the attributes of God, and the Igbo concept of covenant relationship between God and the individuals in a community.

Apart from the expressed similarities between the christian covenant and the Igbo covenant bonds, there naturally exist some dissimilarities. The christian covenant manifests God in his Son
through the Holy Spirit entering into a covenant communion with man. This is the Trinitarian covenant of one unique God in three Persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendour. The Igbo covenant bond, on the other hand, is with a unique God as one Person. The church, therefore, must catechetically provide the Trinitarian dimension of the God/man covenant relationship to the Igbo concept, to help them grasp the supernatural dimension of the relationship offered by Christ to man.

The church enlightenment of Igbo religion might also take advantage of other elements already existing in Igbo the religiocultural life of the people. Igbos believe that a human person enjoys some relation to God: he is a child of God from creation—Nwachukwu; he is created in the image of God —Oyiyichukwu. Such an Igbo concept of an God/man relationship should form the theological basis for presenting Christ to them as a unique and uncreated Son of God, who through his salvific mystery came to establish a new covenant with humanity which unites all humanity into one single family, a community of Umunna. If therefore all men through the salvific mystery of Christ participate in the Sonship of God, it follows that all men are sons of God through Christ and in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

If this theological explanation of the covenant is given to the Igbos, surely they will accept it following their traditional understanding of man as a child and image of God. It will also open their hearts to accepting Christ as the unique Son, whose death and resurrection transformed a natural relation into the universal and spiritual covenant with the Trinity. It would also make the role of Christ as the Saviour and sole Mediator between God and man easily comprehensible to them and it may be only in this context that the proposal of Schineller of presenting Christ as the ideal ancestor to the Igbos can be really meaningful and understandable to the Igbo people.

VIII. CERTAIN NEGATIVE ASPECTS IN IGBO CHILD INITIATION

It is clear that in spite of the similarities that exist between the christian doctrine and practice of initiation in Igbo religion,
there are some aspects that do not agree. These aspects represent the demerits of Igbo religion and constitute possible obstacles to effective evangelization and could impede true conversion among the Igbos. We must keep in mind that traditional religion has been a part of the people's culture and formed their way of life for a long time and thus has permeated their lives. We shall enumerate the most important of these negative aspects.

The power of priesthood is considered necessary for a valid administration of Oghu initiation rites, and this rule admits of no exception in Igbo belief, in contrast to catholic doctrine, where it is held that due to baptism's necessity for salvation, in exceptional circumstances, like danger of death, any rational being becomes a valid baptizer, as an extraordinary minister, provided he has the intention of ministering in the name of the church and with proper matter and form. This provision is absolutely absent in Igbo initiation, which raises the question as to how Igbos view its real necessity and concern for human salvation.

Every disaster, pain, suffering, death and unpleasant event of life is regarded as a punishment from the spiritual powers for some occult evil or offence committed by the victim; hence a proverb: Qnweghi ihe n'eme na nkiti (a firm belief that nothing happens without a cause). This belief makes death as a result of some abnormal circumstances, (especially, accidental or premature death, death from certain diseases or sickness and child birth death), to be considered as abhorrent.

The victims of such circumstances are excluded from the hope of eternal rest because it is believed that the gods have already started punishing them even in this world for their unvirtuous lives, even though hidden from man's observation. Igbos with this simplistic perspective may carry it into their christian life, by believing that strange deaths impede baptized christians from attaining final salvation. Thus in their mind the saving efficacy of baptism may suffer added exceptions.

There are other superstitious elements that dim the Igbo view of life, like belief in charms, witchcraft, reincarnation, ogbanje, the unloving attitude or hatred towards twins and abnormal children, the ignominy of childlessness and excessive emphasis on offspring.
Igbo emphasis on offspring, though a sign of the high value they attach to life, may be said to be excessive because the Igbo culture and Africa in general view childlessness as a curse from the gods. This curse is manifested in the extinction of the lineage, which is absolutely contrary to an Igboman’s aspiration in life, hence the Igbo name —Amaechi (May the lineage not become extinct); the person who dies without offspring, especially a male child, is thought to be completely lost because he loses his personal immortality by not perpetuating his memory in the family —Ahamefule (May my name be perpetuated). He is lost because in the spirit world he receives neither prayers nor libations nor offering and nobody evokes his name. He may not reincarnate either because, apart from the fact of not having any relations to visit in reincarnation, he does not get an adequate funeral from his descendants, which is a prerequisite for eternal rest and normally is given to parents by their children as a final filial duty. In short, final salvation eludes such a person in the Igbo concept of salvation. Once again, here is an added exception to salvation, which baptized Igbos may conserve in their thought pattern\textsuperscript{113}.

Pope John Paul II in his visit to Nigeria pointed to this excessive emphasis on and the plight of childless couples in Nigeria and called childlessness «a heavy cross to be borne with all courage through life by the unfortunate couples»\textsuperscript{114}.

Another important demerit of Igbo religion as regards child initiation is the belief and practice of reincarnation and ogbanje.

Reincarnation is the doctrine that an ancestor, believed to be in the place of rest, may re-appear in the person of a new born child; and that an ancestor reincarnated in a child may influence the name, attitude, and attention given to the child (this requires turning to divination and fortunetelling for certainty). Some ill-fortunes or maladies that befall a child may often be taken as a sign of the reincarnated ancestor’s anger. In Igbo traditional thought an ancestor continues to reincarnate until he finally joins the company of Ndiche, group of souls whose names are lost to earthly memory which is the terminus ad quem of all the human life process.

The belief in the process of ogbanje is somewhat illogical even in Igbo traditional religion. Ogbanje children are believed to reenter life just to torment the families visited. Their subsequent
visits are believed to originate somewhere between the spirit and human worlds, bound up by the force of the «iyi uwa» covenant and not directly from Chukwu, the Creator. It is supposed that the ogbanje spirits never achieve rest after their initial visit to the earth, and as spirits, they manipulate certain forces to return and perpetuate their evil intentions, influence the name, attitude and attention given to the child.

These and many other beliefs about reincarnation are totally irreconcilable with the christian doctrine on human life, particularly because they reduce life’s dramatic, one-time character. The christian belief holds that a man has only one opportunity, this present life, to gain an eternal prize, and that baptism is a decisive starting point in this dynamic process. A man is born; then baptismally reborn; progresses in holiness and after death achieves the fullness of life. Reincarnation «relativizes» baptism’s value.

Finally, it is important to mention that the culmination of Igbo child initiation, that is, initiation into the cultural masquerade, excludes all female children of the community and all strangers, except in the extraordinary initiation of the extended relations. Thus a serious doubt may be placed on the relationship between Igbo child initiation and human salvation, which should in principle be open to the whole humanity irrespective of nationality or sex.

IX. CONCLUSION

Our field-work investigation reveals that Igbos are not inherently «fetishists» nor intrinsically «superstitious» but, as explained, are simply adherents of the traditional religion, believed to have been founded by the Supreme Being and developed and handed down by the ancestors, as a way of life and a gradual process of growth towards eternal rest. As no human culture is intrinsically supernatural, no human culture possesses the divine revelation of Christ, which manifests the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. Thus, the Igbo culture, together with all other human cultures, beckon to christianity in their diverse suitable ways and means of relating to the divine revelation, hoping that the positive
elements inherent in the culture would be exploited to facilitate the penetration of the gospel message.

The adequacy or inadequacy of the presentation of the substance of the gospel message may debar its acceptance or make it rather difficult. We therefore suggest a well planed and articulated inculturation through adequate and functional catechesis and up-dated training of the agents of inculturation. For inculturation to bear the expected result, a continuous friendly dialogue is required, a charitable relationship and a sincere expression of confidence and trust on the part of the church. With this in mind, we affirm that inculturation is possible in the Igbo culture in general and is particularly yearned for in Igbo child initiation.

The church, as the prolongation of Christ in the world, seeks to redeem men and their culture, purifying what is stained and assuming what has been redeemed. She therefore sees the Igbo child initiation and various other aspects of Igbo cultural life as essentially human and in need of redemption. The solution clearly does not lie in a global condemnation or rejection of the Igbo cultural phenomenon, which most probably would lead to either friction or syncretism, but rather in acting like a good gardener, delving sympathetically into these aspects of human cultural expressions, to detect and elevate authentic elements found in them, healing, re-directing and purifying all the misguided values and conceptions and rejecting all that militates against faith, moral and divine revelation. In this way the light of salvation will, through evangelization, pervade the whole Igboland and ultimately the earth.
NOTES

9. J. MUNONYE, with many other Igbo writers, emphasizes the need of children in marriage as follows; «We have seen the wife you brought home. We were angry with you at the beginning for marrying a stranger, we no longer are, we think she is well-bred. She is beautiful too. But then what use is a kolanut tree if it fails to bear fruit?» (cf. Obi, London, 1975, p. 99) This quotation shows that marriage outside Igbo community is an attitude very well frowned at, but is easily accepted and cherished, if it produces the desired fruit offspring.
12. N. UKA, *Growing up in Nigeria Culture*, Ibadan, 1973, p. 37. The problem of childless couples is so pathetic, and the society attitude towards them so difficult to bear that it has attracted the attention of some Nigerian writers and dramatists. These portray the situation in a colourful manner, seeking a way of solution. In such a pitiful situation, parents are supposed to offer some consolation but the contrary is always the case. They worsen
the situation and are the first to cast the stone of disgrace on their childless couple, as Munonye portrays with the reception given to Joe and Ann by their parents: Keep your cloth, I know what I want. It isn’t cloth... Where are my grandchildren?... I am not a dead body which wants cloth for its burial... I am a living body and therefore want to see my own blood. Spirits of the righteous dead move about looking for where to get reincarnated, and yet two of you stay like that, perhaps you do not want me to be called big mother before I die». (cf. Obi, London, 1975).


17. C. I. AKALONU, op. cit. p. 57.

18. G.T. Basden is of the opinion that there is hardly any preparation for the new child in Igboland; but he forgets that an Igbo husband knows very well what childbirth in Igbo society really entails and gradually prepares himself for it. Just as an Igbo proverb says, onye kwunyere anu-n’o-kan-achii agami ije ntiri (he who is drying some meat does not leave it for a distant journey); he is always in expectancy and is adequately prepared for the sudden surprise, because a man is valued by his ability to cope up with sudden events of life. This preparedness for any sudden event, in Igbo concept, really makes one a man. (Mberede ka eji ama dike.) cf. G.T. Basden, op. cit. p. 174.

19. O-mu-go, which many writers prefer to render as o-mu-gwo, is a composite word, derived from two Igbo words: Omu- meaning plume, as o-mu- nkwu- or o-mu-ngwo; and ogo, meaning in-law. Omu-go therefore means the young plume or fruit spouting from the seed sown into the compound by the in-law. It therefore signifies a special period of nursing and enjoying the presence of the fruit - the new born baby. It is normally characterized by mutual affinity between the two families and peaceful living together. The significance is especially evident if viewed from the role of the mother in-law during omugo period.


21. Traditionally, the Igbos mould and roast their salt into balls and preserve it over the fire place. Salt in traditional Igbo life is rich in symbolism and when made as a gift its meaning and significance become more glaringly clear. It signifies preservation against corruption. It is an ideal seasoning of life, cordial relationship and sweetness. Therefore presenting salt to a nursing mother symbolizes that the child is expected to survive and become a seasoned individual in the family and the society. This explains why Igbo women normally offer their visitors, especially in the early mornings, a ball of salt, either to touch or taste, saying: Otutu bu uru Morning is full of grace. This shows a cordial and loving welcome, and a continued friendship between them. It is never offered to a known enemy. The nursing
mother in turn would return this gesture to her fellow women with the gift of azu omugo.

22. C.I. AKALONU, op. cit. p. 44.
24. It is interesting to note that no child in the community bears this and the preceding names while the grandparents (the parents of the parents) are still alive. This strongly confirms that the belief is still alive and that those children who bear such names are believed to be the-re-incarnations of the grandparents.
25. G. BASDEN, op. cit. p. 94.
26. G. T. Basden is of the opinion that the umbilical cord is placed between the fronds of a young palm tree, while Mbiti holds that in some areas it is dried and respectfully kept for rituals.
28. In these areas also there is a professional union of the women circumcisers, which is lacking in most parts of Igboland. On the Western side, there is a strict professional union among the women circumcisers. They have a special badge of office. The rules of their company are close and trick. In Umuaka, as in many parts of Igboland, such an association does not exist and anybody, both man or woman, may perform the operation, provided one has been trained for it or has acquired the art; hence the operation is also called the nka.
30. Symbolically the child enters the family obi for the first time to be named and incorporated into the family and the community before the family Ikenga. Many communities draw the name of this rite from this symbolic entry: IKUBA NWATA N'OBI; IGBA NWATA OFO.
32. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
38. A. K. OBIEFUNA, op. cit. p. 32.
40. J. S. MBITI, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 121.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid. p. 122.
43. E. G. PARRINDER, African Traditional Religion, p. 94.
44. Cf. J. S. MBITI, op. cit. 122.
For studies on the different ways Igbos liberate themselves from natural
disasters see: C. C. Osuji, op. cit. pp. 68ff; M. I. MOZIE, op. cit. pp
184-194.
48. T. NWALO, *The Youth*, A paper delivered to the Y. C. S. on May 12,
1972, at St. Peter Claver’s Seminary Okpala.
53. K. NWADIKE - T. IHEBINIKE, *Oghu Cultural Festival in General and
54. G. S. MBA, *Oghu, A Male Ritual Festival*, address given during 1989 Oghu
festival, p. 3.
55. P. T. QDUEZE, *Attempts Towards the Reformation of Oghu Umuaka*, un-
ed. parish study, 1990, p. 15.
56. A personal typed interview with Ihionu Emegbulem, from Otura during
my 1973 apostolic work in Orodo Parish.
59. A special interview with N. Osunwa, an oghu chief priest incharge of one
60. Cf. *Brief History of Christianity In Umuaka*, in the parish centenary
bulletin, August 1985, p. 2.
61. The flexibility of Oghu Umuaka, as manifested in the continuous re-
interpretation of the content of the convenant bond, and by the shift of
emphasis from Oghu deity to the Princess Echere as the initiator of the
convenant bond, offers an ample opportunity for inculturation. This re-
interpretation and re-emphasis are a visible and sincere search for the ab-
solute Truth of religion. Inculturation efforts in Igbooland should therefore
delve into this cultural heritage, employ it to the good advantage of
catechesis, by pointing to the person of Christ as the only convenant bond
between God and man, and the gospel as the content of this God/man
convenant of relationship.
64. V. O. OCHENDU, op. cit., p. 102.
65. Here the ancestors are seen playing the role of intercessors, interceding for
their people on earth, as christianity believes the saints in heaven to in-
tercede for the militant church on earth.
ed., *Religion and African Culture, Inculturation Nigerian Prespective*, Enugu,
1988, p. 94.
69. Every initiated member of Oghu is an okorosha but in the strict sense, the
term connotes only the Oghu dancers, just as all the baptized catholics
form the Crist's faaithful but many a time the term signifies only the laity.
70. Cf. Catechis nke Abyq, Owerri Diocese, p. 35.
72. Ibid.
73. S. O. MBAH, Oghu as i see it, A special document submitted to the Umuaka parish priest by the author, one of the pioneer catholics of Umuaka and an oghu priest in 1954. The document is a first hand information on all practical involvement in Oghu initiation.
74. The term vocation is here applied because the Echere is strongly believed to be a divine call or choice by the gods and an election by the ancestors. No one takes this honour by herself but must rather be called through divination or an oracle.
75. A type recorded interview in June 1979 with Mrs. Laetricia Ibe, the only Echere in Isiozi, married as a Echere from the neighbouring town. She narrated her experience before accepting the office.
76. C. ACHEBE, Things Fall Apart, Lagos 1986, p. 77; The Igbo solidarity manifested in such celebrations in very often lacking in Christian celebration of baptism, where practically the whole affair is most often left to the parents and intimate friends.
77. «Ihe Ahia» is a type of tropical food made from breadfruit «Ukwa» and is typical of the Igbos. It is a feature in all oghu initiation ceremonies.
78. Nwadike and Ihebinike are of the opinion that a white fowl is normally hung on the candidate before the Iwu n'ekew and that he dances with the same. This may be true in some forms of oghu, or may have been a very ancient practice, but it is not today observable in Oghu Echere initiation, which is our area of interest. (See Nwadike-Ihebinike, op. cit. p. 20).
81. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. A practical example of what we are considering about the use of Igbo thought pattern in catechesis may be seen in the role of the Earth deity (Ala) in Igbo traditional religion. The earth (ala), an inanimate creature of Chukwu, is accorded such a respect and reverence and extolled as the mother of all the other deities and man and the custodian of Igbo morality. It may not help evangelization to simply reject or condemn outright the cult of the Earth deity, but it can be positively used in catechesis to explain the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the catholic faith. Mary is the Mother of God and our Mother also, the Queen of heaven and earth, the dispenser of all graces, a mediatrix and the compassionate Mother of all the afflicted; she guides all the faithful in their eternal pilgrimage. (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Redemptoris Mater, nos. 44-46).
89. A. E. Effong, op. cit. p. 115.
91. Cf. Offspring as means of salvation, above.
92. The breaking and sharing of the kola nut (oji) to end the rite of initiation and usher in the feasting aspect of the celebration brings out practically the communion solidarity of Igbo child initiation because the breaking and sharing of kola nut in Igboland signify a «sacramental» union of solidarity. In the naming ceremony, it anticipates the culmination of the child’s initiation when the child will fully enter into sacramental union by participating in the sacrificial meal. The rite of washing the child for purity and deliverance from previous bonds is very important in the naming ceremony and can adequately be compared with the effects of baptism as washing original sin and infusing sanctifying grace.
94. One participates in the constant war against evil in the society as Haring, commenting on individual’s role in the church, declares: Baptism makes us conscious of the common battle that must be waged against the forces of darkness, sin and all evil powers. Only by accepting that solidarity, of brotherhood and concern for the freedom of all can we overcome the solidarity of evil. cf. B. Haring, *Sacrament in the Secular Age*, London, 1976, pp. 139-140.
101. Cf. Theological Significance of Igbo Names, above.
103. Theological Commission of Zimbabwe, *Communion between the Living and the Dead*, in AVFER, 29/5(1987)309 This conflict generates a perennial theological question among the Igbos: whether Igbos should shed their traditional gestures on becoming christians even accept a kind of violence to traditional etiquette in the name of conformity with the church discipline. (cf. Nigerian Bishops, seminar on Inculturation, Lagos, 1988, p. 67).
104. The veneration of the ancestors as members of the community who have reached the place of rest spurs the initiates, as the saints spur the Christian, to follow a virtuous life and bear the worthy fruit of the initiation
by being faithful to the demands of the bond of the covenant. Shorter, commenting on this, stresses that ancestral veneration is comparable to the devotion to the saints and emphasizes that exploiting the African attachment to the ancestors in inculturation has usually met with success. (cf. A. Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, London, 1980, p. 126; AFER, 10/10(1968)268f.

105. The necessity of baptism for salvation is attested to by the very life and practice of the church itself. The Igbo catholic catechism emphasizes that baptism is necessary for salvation because without baptism no one can enter the kingdom of heaven. These words are drawn from the emphatic teaching of Christ himself on baptism (Jn. 3:5), and the new Catechism of the Church affirms strongly that the church does not know any other means except baptism for entry into eternal life. Christian baptism, continues the catechism, constitutes birth to new life in Christ and is necessary for salvation just as the church herself, into which baptism introduces an individual. (cf. Doctrine for Adults, Owerri Diocese, p. 48; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1257 and 1277).

106. See the origin of Oghu festival, V.1.


108. AMECEA emphasizes that an inculturated African theology would help solve part of the African Christian problem. It might resolve the problems of religion and historical development in Igbo context, giving expression to some Igbo ideals like hospitality to strangers, mutual help and protection to the weak and the poor in the society, especially the windows, orphans and the less privileged in the community. It might present christian sacraments and God/man relationship in the categories understandable to Igbos. (cf. AMECEA, Documentation Service, 11/74/2, pp. 2-3.


110. Cf. The theological significance of Igbo names, III.2.


112. The negative consequences of the excessive desire for offspring are many and militate greatly against many christian moral norms and divine law. For example, it is one of the prime roots of polygamy in Igbo land, it dissolves marriages among Africans in general and Igbos in particular, irrespective of the christian doctrine of indissolubility of ratified and consummated marriage. It appears to be a difficult problem for African christians because they believe that the quest for offspring is a quest for salvation. The biblical and christian doctrine against divorce (Mt. 19:9) does not appeal much does in the actual situation. A childless marriage often leads to adultery (cf. Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa*, London, 1988, p. 197). It some times also introduces unfaithfulness to the marriage bond and bitterness in family, life mather no longer appreciated as entering into a stable bond of «unity of love» with Christ and his church. SECAM observes the situation with sympathy and calls for in-depth research on the issue. It also proposes the consideration of childlessness in African marriage
as an invalidating factor of Christian marriage among Africans (cf. Note 14, chapter three of this work).

113. JOHN PAUL II, Message to Nigerian Families, Onitsha, 13/2/82, in Insegnamenti, V/1 (1982) 379-384. Fecundity is accepted in Christianity as well as in Igbo religion as a sign and fruit of conjugal love, but in Igbo tradition it is over emphasized as an end to the detriment of marital companionship and indissolubility (cf. Familiaris Consortio, n°. 28).

114. See Initiation into Oghu Community, VI.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .......................................................................................................................... 147
Table of Content of the Thesis ...................................................................................... 149
Bibliography of the Thesis ............................................................................................ 153

CHILD BIRTH CEREMONIES AND INITIATION RITES

I. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 163
II. The Importance of Offspring Among the Igbo s ....................................................... 164
  1. Offspring as means of Salvation ........................................................................... 165
  2. Offspring as the Epicenter of Igbo Marriage ......................................................... 167
     a) The Plight of the Childless Couple .................................................................... 167
     b) Pregnant Women in Igbo Society ...................................................................... 168
III. Childbirth Ceremonies and Rites ............................................................................. 171
  1. Omugwo/Omugo and Rites within the Period ....................................................... 172
     a) Reincarnation Rite (Ilo Uwa) ........................................................................... 174
     b) Umbilical Cord Ceremony (Ili Alo Nwa) ............................................................ 175
     c) Circumcision (Ikwa Ukwu/Ime ihe nka) ......................................................... 176
     d) Naming Ceremony (Iba/Igu Aha/Afa) ............................................................... 177
     e) Outing Ceremony (Ahia Nwa/Omugo) .............................................................. 179
  2. Theological Reflection on Igbo Names ..................................................................... 180
IV. Importance of Initiation in Igboland ......................................................................... 183
  1. Initiation as Entry into Communion with the Deity and the Community .......... 184
  2. Initiation and Economic and Social Security ....................................................... 186
V. The Notion of Oghu in General ................................................................................ 188
  1. Origin, Spread and Kinds of Oghu ....................................................................... 188
  2. The Spread of Oghu .............................................................................................. 189
  3. Kinds of Oghu ...................................................................................................... 191
     a) Oghu Qma ....................................................................................................... 191
     b) Oghu Mmiri ..................................................................................................... 192
     c) Oghu Echere ................................................................................................... 192
  4. The Nature of Oghu in Umuaka ............................................................................ 192
  5. The Essence of Oghu ............................................................................................ 193
  6. Religious Significance .......................................................................................... 195
  7. The Structure of Oghu .......................................................................................... 196
     a) Onye Isi Oghu (the Priest) ............................................................................... 197
     b) Echere ............................................................................................................. 199
VI. Initiation into Oghu Community ........................................... 200
   1. Initiation Rites .......................................................... 200
      a) Ego Ina nti, Icha Ihe Agwu and Ikwa Mmọq ............. 201
      b) Iwọ Ùkwụ n’Ekwe .................................................... 201

VII. The Christian Church in Dialogue with Igbo Child Initiation: Key Elements in Igbo Culture Relevant For Inculturation .......... 203
   1. The Nature of the Dialogue .......................................... 203
   2. The Dimensions of Life in Igbo Thought ......................... 205
      A. Life as a Stepwise, Dynamic and Continuous Process .... 206
      B. Life as a Communion with other Beings ..................... 209
   1. Communion with the Community as the basis of Child Initiation .......................................................... 209
   2. Communion with the Departed as basis of Child Initiation . 214
   3. Igbo Child Initiation and Man’s final Salvation .......... 217
   4. Communion with Chukwu as basis of Initiation .......... 218

VIII. Certain Negative Aspects of Igbo Child Initiation .......... 220

IX. Conclusion ................................................................. 223

Notes .................................................................................... 225