

IGWEBUIKE THEOLOGY OF OMENANI AND THE CRISIS OF THE MISSIONARY BIFURCATION OF HORIZONS

Ikechukwu Anthony KANU

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Tansian University Umunya, Anambra State

ikee_mario@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.30563.78888

Abstract

African theology points to the fact that every particular situation or context calls for a particular theological reflection, that is, if the theological reflection is to make meaning within that unique circumstance. It is within this context that the Igwebuiké theology of Omenani emerges in relation to the understanding of culture as the seed of the Word of God, which already pre-existed in Africa even before the emergence of the Western missionaries. The purpose of adopting this idea of culture as the seed of the Word of God is to enhance the reconciliation between the African and Christian/Western 'worldhoods'. This piece presented the African culture as an important element in evangelization in Africa, as it is the spirit that animates the African people. It further emphasized the indispensability of integrating the African worldview in the communication of the gospel to the people of African. It, therefore, located the seed of the Word of God in the Omenani (the law of the land) of the African people through which they were able to achieve holiness, even before the advent of the gospel. It observed that the failures of the missionary enterprise were majorly because of missionaries' lack of openness to the African religion and culture. The identification of Omenani as the seed of the Word of God showed that culture is not an enemy of the gospel, but an instrument for its transmission.. The purpose of this study is to bridge the bifurcation created by the missionaries between the Christian and African 'worldhoods'. The theoretical framework employed in this research is the Igwebuiké sympathetic and non-derogatory framework, which emphasizes evangelization with a sense of understanding. It is a polite and humane approach, and excludes the influences of bias in the process of knowing and relationship.

Keywords: *Omenani, Logos Spermatikos, Culture, African, Igbo, Evangelization, Igwebuiké*

Introduction

African theologians are agreed that the religious invasions in Africa, among other experiences, have made the African homeless at home. Even the theologians, who had the privilege of going to Europe to study theology at the feet of European theologians during the missionary era, have discovered that to make a distinctive meditation upon faith in Christ in such a way that it does justice to the life circumstances of the African Christian would not be possible without executing a dismantling and an appropriate reconstruction; in this way, making theology fit into the African reality and Christianity at home in Africa. This notwithstanding, the question looming at the horizon is: how can the Church be more and more at home in Africa and Africa more and more at home in the Church? Pope Paul VI (cited in Mbefo 1989) asks:

Does the church in Africa retain a certain Christian religious form that was brought in from outside and which makes her, as it were, a stranger and pilgrim among her people? Should new and more suitable means be sought in theology and in pastoral practice? (p. 9)

These questions, among others, led to the emergence of African theology in the twentieth century. As it is with the emergence of new concepts, with the introduction of the concept "African theology", there arose the question of the limits of its content and meaning. The need for conceptualization was necessary, not because of the need to give the rightful place to African culture and worldview, but to what extent this should be included in relation to the substance of the faith. In the midst of these discussions, Dickson (1984) defines African theology thus:

The expression 'African theology' is not a slogan of vindication and whatever its popular use might connote, it is not meant to be simply an amalgamation of Christian and traditional belief elements; the aim of those involved in the quest is to arrive at a distinctive meditation upon faith in Christ that does justice to the life circumstances of the African (p. 122).

This concept of African theology points to the fact that every particular situation or context calls for a particular theological reflection, that is, if the theological reflection is to make meaning within that unique circumstance or environment. It is within this context that the *Igwebuike* theology of *Omenani* emerges, in relation to the understanding of culture as the seed of the Word of God, which already pre-existed in Africa, even before the emergence of Western missionaries. The

purpose of adopting this idea of culture as the seed of the Word of God is to enhance the reconciliation between the African and the Western perspectives. It presents the African culture as an important element in evangelization in Africa, as it is the spirit that animates the African. It emphasizes the indispensability of integrating the African worldview in the communication of the gospel to the African people. This paper further locates the seed of the Word of God in the *Omenani* (the law of the land) of the African people through which they were able to achieve holiness, even before the advent of the gospel.

Defining *Igwebuike* Theology

The concept, *Igwebuike*, began first as a methodology and philosophy. Gradually, its philosophical elements began to have serious implications for theological discourse, especially with the increasing need to do theology that arises from the philosophy of the African people. Such a theology would always have an inescapable element of philosophy, speaking to people in their own native context, because it is expressed in categories of thought that arise out of the philosophy of the African people. This affirms the reality of the link between philosophy and theology, especially regarding the links between the great philosophical questions and the mysteries of salvation which are studied in theology under the guidance of the higher light of faith (Kanu, 2010). Pope Lee XIII makes a connection between philosophy and theology:

Philosophy if rightly made use of by the wise, in a certain way tends to smooth and fortify the road to true faith, and to prepare the souls of its disciples for the fit reception of revelation; for which reason is well called by ancient writers sometimes a stepping stone to the Christian faith; sometimes the help and prelude of Christianity, sometimes the Gospel teacher (p. 1).

In *Igwebuike* theology, theology takes on the form of a bridge that connects the human person who lives within the context of a changing culture to God, who is beyond the law of change. While this bridge is the message, for it to reach the human person, it requires the agency of revelation and culture. Revelation without culture would be a message that is not understood. Culture is the symbolic network of meanings through which the human person interprets the world. As such, any message from God must come through cultural symbols. Theology, therefore, becomes a dialogue between revelation and culture; the level of this

dialogue would determine the level of absorption of the Christian message. Below is a bridge illustration of theology to help convey this point.

The Bridge of Theology

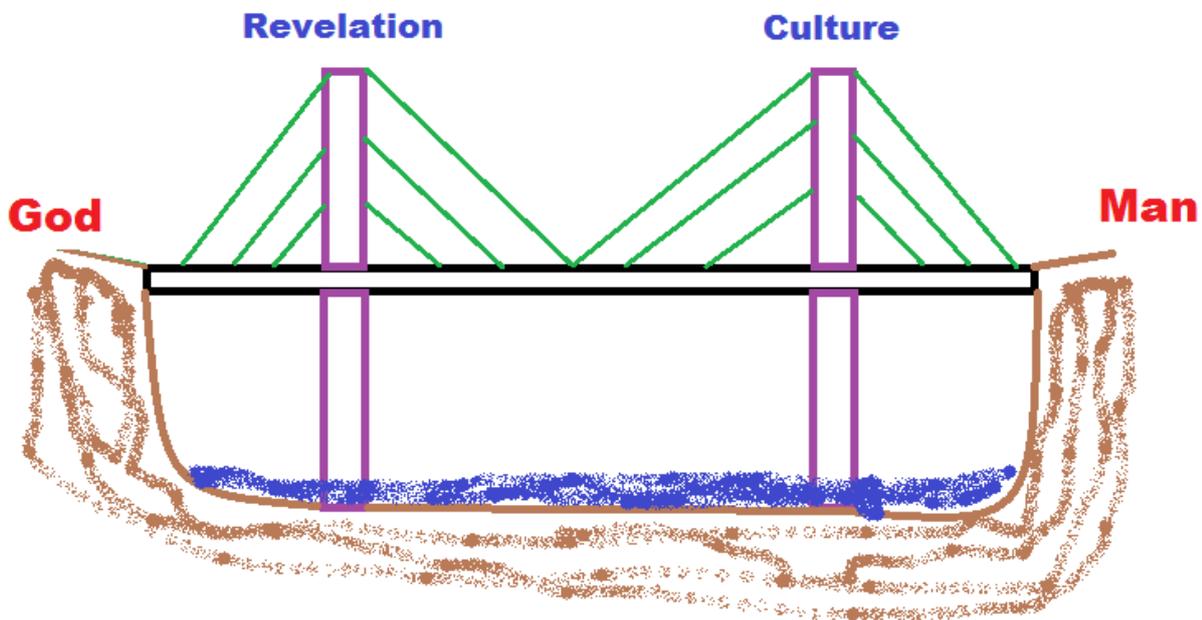


Figure 1- Source: Missionmusings (2017)

This notwithstanding, *Igwebuike* is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Literally, *Igwe* is a noun, which means 'number' or 'multitude', usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances; however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu, 2016a&b). *Igwe, bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu, 2017f). However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike*, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. It refers to the relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu, 2017g). The closest words to it in English

are complementarity, solidarity and harmony. In this way, *Igwebuike* conceptualizes or captures the nature of the African universe.

Thus, what *Igwebuike* does is that it captures the nature of the African universe and uses it as a framework for discussions within the enterprise of theology. The value that it brings to the table of theological discussions is its emphasis on the African worldview as an indispensable element in any successful African theological discussion and missionary enterprise. This makes theological discussions relevant to the African and his/her environment.

Igwebuike theology is a quest to arrive at a unique understanding of faith in Christ in such a way that it captures the African worldview and the African's life circumstances. Only thus will evangelization respond to the inadequacies of the missionary enterprise, give birth to a new African personality and be in accord with the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the African people. *Igwebuike* theology does not in any way imply a change in the Church's theology- it is the same theology, a systematic and scientific discourse on God, presented in such a way that it fits into the African religious, social, anthropological and philosophical realities, mentality and needs. The focus on Christ, the Scripture and tradition is not altered in any way. They remain the inevitable revelatory agents.

As a result of the uniqueness of *Igwebuike* theology, it has peculiar approaches, which include: understanding theology as contextual, that is, a theology of life and culture that is accountable to the context in which the African people live; understanding reality as complementary and interconnected; understanding African traditional religion and culture as preparation for the gospel message; understanding theology as an enterprise that provides answers to the African person's innermost and deepest longings, that is, the search for happiness (God). Its sources include: the Bible, Church tradition, African philosophy, religion and culture, African anthropology and African experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this research is the *Igwebuike* sympathetic and non-derogatory framework in evangelization. It emphasizes evangelization with a sense of understanding. It is polite and humane, and excludes the influences of bias in the process of knowing. It is sympathetic and non-derogatory to that which is within the circumference of the other. Okonkwo

(1998 & 2019), taking from the encounter between Paul and the Athenians in Acts of the Apostles, describes the sympathetic and non-derogatory approach.

Paul, the missionary per excellence, though he was so exasperated at the sight of Athens, an idol-ridden pantheistic city and people, did not, *prima facie*, condemn neither the idols nor the people. Rather, he adopted a secular wisdom and intellection and called the 'idol-ridden-pantheistic Athenians' - "a God-fearing and extremely scrupulous people in religious matters" (Act, 17:23). Paul did not gloss-over their religious and cultural values; rather, he showered understanding on them. St. Paul, after his polite and humane method of meeting with foreigners - the Gentiles, he still was vehement and firm in his solemn proclamations in the condemnation of false gods and idolatry.

This same sympathetic and non-derogatory approach we find in Jesus, the apostles and the Church fathers. In sowing the seed of the gospel, they had respect for other peoples' cultures. Jesus and His apostles came from the Jewish background whose religiosity, prayers and practices of worship were well-defined. However, Jesus' attitudes toward the Jewish cult were represented in two categories: fidelity and autonomy. In fidelity, Jesus had respect for the traditions of his time. He came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). He was faithful in observing the offering of sacrifices in the temple (Matthew 21:12), the service of words in the synagogue (Matthew 6:6), observing the day of the Sabbath, the feasts of Passover, Tabernacle, and Dedication (Matthew 26:17-19). However, his fidelity did not lie in passivity, but represented that of a "critical yes", a reforming fidelity that placed a demand of purification on the worship of its time. His autonomy found expression in His challenge to fellow Jews to spiritualize and interiorize the Jewish religion, and in this process, He was giving birth to the era of Christian worship.

When Jesus preached the gospel, he used categories familiar to his audience. We hear of absentee Lords and Tenant revolts (Matthew 21:31-45), small family-run farms (Matthew 21:28-30), debts and debtors (Matthew 18:25-35), extortion and corruption (Luke 16:1-9), uncaring rich (Luke 12:18), day labourers paid merely subsistent wages (Matthew 20:1-6). These graphically reflect the detail of the picture of Palestinian countryside during His time. St Paul wrote, "To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews... I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some" (Philippians 9:20 & 22). In the opinion of Metuh (1996), St Paul was talking about missiology, and at the same time using the

language of contextual theology in which lies the theology of inculturation: bringing the Christian experience into the culture of the people, a process that makes alive the dynamic and eternal motion of the incarnation. Freyne (1980) observes how St Paul criss-crossed the Mediterranean world on sea and land with the Good News of Christ vying for the souls of the masses with religious leaders and philosophers. Any contemporary missionary will testify to the value of Paul's acquaintance with the language of the people and his ability to share many of their assumptions with them.

After Jesus, Dulles (1983) observes that His Apostles continued to employ the same model in their attempt to bring the Good News to the peoples of their time. With the conversion and subsequent mission of St Paul to the Gentiles, so many of them were converted to Christianity and there now arose the question as to whether to allow the Gentiles to become Christians without imposing on them the law of circumcision held in high esteem by the Jews. This called for the Council of Jerusalem between 49- 50AD. The Judaizers held that circumcision, as contained in the Old Testament, was necessary for salvation, while St Paul and his followers maintained that all that was needed for salvation was faith in Jesus and baptism in His name (Acts 15). According to Schineller (1991),

Peter's position which agreed with Paul's, prevailed, and it was decided not to lay extra burdens on the Gentile converts. Because of this liberating decision, the mission of Paul continued with great success, and the Church expanded far beyond the borders of Palestine. One did not first have to become Jewish before becoming a Christian. (p. 30).

This sympathetic and non-derogatory approach points to the importance of beginning from where the people are and what they know to where they need to be or need to know. Jesus began with worshipping the Jewish way, and taught the people within the contexts of the Jewish categories. He did not begin with condemnation or looking down on the people. In the same way, Saint Paul began with addressing the Athenians as religious people. In relation to the missionary enterprise in Africa, this framework would advocate the missionary first discovering the seed of the Word of God within a particular culture, rather than condemnation of the culture of the people.

African Culture as the Seed of God's Word

During the 2nd century, Christianity had moved beyond the walls of Jerusalem to the Greek and Roman territories, with the challenge of Christianity coming face

to face with other religious and cultural traditions outside of Judaism. This required a more dynamic method of evangelisation that does not in any way compromise the gospel message. Rather than a radical rejection of Greek culture, they indulged in a great appreciation and partial acceptance of the Greek culture as a starting point for their sowing of the seed of the gospel. Although they were primarily Christian theologians, they employed Greek culture and philosophy for the service of the gospel. They found philosophical themes and concepts useful for developing and clarifying the Christian message.

At the time that these Christian thinkers brought the message to the Greeks, Neo-Platonism, a revival of Platonic philosophy, was at its peak. These Christian thinkers found Neo-Platonism a useful tool for the explanation of Christian doctrines. Prominent among these Christian writers were: Justine Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, Augustine, among others. According to Omoregbe (1997):

These men Christianized Neoplatonism by giving Christian interpretation to certain theme and concepts in Neoplatonic philosophy, such as Logos, the divine mind, creation, the soul, the problem of evil, the problem of the universal and the particular, the problem of man's freedom and God's foreknowledge, etc. (p. 93)

They were, therefore, the first, outside of the apostles, to raise the problem of the relationship between the doctrinal tradition of the Church and other cultures outside of Jerusalem. However, more interesting is the position taken by Justine Martyr on this matter, when he tried to engraft Stoic concept of the logos into Christian revelation. Justine, in his analysis of natural law, linked it to his concept of man. He saw man as composed of three distinct parts: body (σῶμα, *soma*), soul (ψυχή, *psyche*), and spirit (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*). He used the term ζωτικὸν πνεῦμα (*zotikon pneuma*), in Latin (*spiritus vitalis*) to describe the spiritual dimension of the human person. The ζωτικὸν πνεῦμα, he understands as the divine principle in human beings, the distinguishing feature of his nature, his unique dignity and as a participation in the very life of the *Logos*, and so he calls it the "seed of the word" or "reason in man", in Greek, the σπερματικός λόγος (*spermaticos logos*) and in Latin, the *ratio seminalis*.

Through the σπερματικός λόγος, the divine principle in the human person, humanity was able to govern itself and pursued virtue, even before the coming

of Christianity. This divine principle, he argues, has an intimate connection with the Divine *Logos*, the Word of God. In every human being, St. Justin Martyr believed, "there is a divine particle, his reason, which at least before Christ's coming was human person's best guide in life" (*Ap. II* 10.8). This created a burden in human beings to live in accordance with reason and not against or without reason. By this, the human person participated in divine reason, which formed his fundamental law. Through this reason, human beings, without express faith in Christ, already experienced Christ the *Logos* at work in them (*Lex Christianorum* 2010). He writes:

We have been taught that Christ is the First-born of God, and we have declared . . . that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partaken, and those who lived reasonable are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists." (*Apol. I*, 46.1-4)

He writes further that:

All right principles that philosophers and lawgivers have discovered and expressed, they owe to whatever of the Word they have found and contemplated in part. The reason why they have contradicted each other is that they have not known the entire Word, which is Christ. (*Apol. II*, 10.1-3)

In his use of the concept 'Logos', St. Justin Martyr was certainly not viewing these *Logoi Spermatokoi*, these divine sparks in human beings, as being of the same substance (*homoousios*), as the divine *Logos* itself, though they clearly share in His mind, in some insubstantial, created, and relatively distant sense, in the divinity of the *Logos* (*homoiousios*).

An image which scholars have used to explain St. Justin Martyr's concept of *Logos Sparmatikos* is Plato's chariot allegory of the soul. In his dialogue, *Phaedrus* (sections 246a - 254e), Plato uses the allegory of a chariot to explain his view of the human soul. Plato describes the inner workings of the human being as a charioteer governing a chariot pulled by two horses, one white and one black. The white horse is long-necked, well-bred, well-behaved, and runs without a whip. The black horse is short-necked, poorly bred, and undisciplined, requiring constant guidance. St. Justin Martyr would make his *Logos Sparmatikos* the charioteer charged with the task of using intellect and reason, that is, *logos*, to guide the white horse of the soul (*psyche*), and its rational moral impulses, and

the black horse of the body (*soma*), with its irrational and concupiscent nature, to the true and the good.

To St. Justin, the governing principle in us, the *spermatikos logos* or *zotikon pneuma*, is the source of the faculty of the natural moral law, the law that God has placed in the heart of every human being and which distinguishes him/her from beasts. It is what makes him/her a child of the one only God, and makes him/her brother and sister with all those of his/her. It is the ruler, the pilot, of the lesser natures, part rebellious, part docile (Lex Christianorum 2010).

Igwebuike Theology of *Omenani* as the Seed of God's Word

Justin the Martyr holds that different cultures were inspired by God and should be appropriate for His service. He saw culture as a prefiguration of Christ: a *Logos Spermatikos* (seed bearing word). He taught that the *Spermatik Logos* has been implanted in the heart of every human culture, since all things were created through Christ, with Him and for Him. Thus, Christ was already present in local cultures in an imperfect way, even before the Word of God was preached to these cultures. This understanding he connects with the scriptural parable of the sower (Mtt 13:3-9), as grace sowed already in the hearts of men, or in terms of creation, where men, even before the coming of Christ, were already created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27).

This work, within the context of Justin the Martyr's argument, situates the prefiguration of the seed of the Word of God in African culture in the *Omenani* of the African people. *Omenani*, also called *omenala* (translated as the tradition of the land), is the system of unwritten moral principles or rules of conduct taught by *Chukwu* to the first Igbo ancestor and handed down from one ancestor to another, which includes provisions, prohibitions, traditional beliefs and practices, that guide the day-to-day life of the Igbo-African, with a view to preserving order and maintaining the community bond. After *Chukwu* created the human person, as it is in the book of Genesis, there was need for a moral standard that would guide the relationship between human persons and *Chukwu*, and just as God gave Adam and Eve the command to eat only of the fruit of a particular tree, Igbo traditional religious thought has it that *Chukwu* also gave laws to humanity.

Traditionally, the goddess *Ala* or *Ani* is considered the custodian of Igbo morality. *Ala* is a merciful mother and no deity takes action against the Igbo

without first asking her to warn her children. However, if she decides to strike, no deity can stop her. As the custodian of Igbo morality, when the law is broken, it is called *nso-ala*, that is 'Taboo', she takes action to save the community, and thus, its individuals.

The connection that *Omenani* has with *Chukwu, Ala* deity and the college of the ancestors, is what makes the community to hold these laws in high esteem, and to see them as a way of preserving the community, maintaining solidarity with *Chukwu*, the deities, the living dead and preserving their individual destinies. It is by keeping these laws and regulations that individual members of the community are able to arrive at the world of the ancestors. Examples of *omenani* include:

- a. Prohibition of claim of equality with God and the spirits
- b. Prohibition of homicide
- c. Prohibition of suicide
- d. Prohibition of a man marrying another man
- e. Prohibition of incest
- f. Prohibition of adultery
- g. Prohibition of fornication
- h. Prohibition of theft
- i. Prohibition of the alteration of land boundaries

The coloring that *omenani* brings to the table in theological discussions, regarding African culture and evangelization, is that it points to the fact that:

1. The laws in question are from God
2. The laws are the laws of the land that has been in existence from the first ancestor(s) created by God

The fact that the *Omenani* came from God, transmitted from one generation to another, makes African culture a preparation for the gospel. Its divine origin is what made it possible for the Igbo to attain salvation through it, even though it did not contain the fullness of revelation. As imperfect as it was, it pointed to the fullness of revelation in Christ. Below is a table showing the relationship between *Omenani* and Christian morality, and that the African moral principles already contained the Christian morality, even before the advent of the gospel.

Table 1: A table showing the relationship between *Omenani* and Christian Morality

No. *Omenani*

Christian Morality and Belief

1. An Igbo man's ancestral heritage, called "Ana Obi," is not sellable, elders will not permit this. If this is somehow done due to the influence of the West, the person is considered a fool and is ostracized by the community. **1 King 21:3:** When Ahab asked Naboth for his vineyard, he said to him: "I inherited this vineyard from my ancestors, and the Lord forbid that I should sell it, said Naboth".
2. In Igbo land, it's a tradition that the male children are circumcised on the 8th day. **Leviticus 12:3:** Scripture says: "On the eighth day, the child shall be circumcised"
3. The seventh commandment (v. 14) treats the family as a sacred social unit, and thus sees adultery as a desecration of the marriage bond. Adultery has never been tolerated among African people. Both the elders of the land and the gods forbid it.
4. Among the Igbo, the spilling of blood is something that is avoided under normal circumstance, except during warfare. Once you spill blood, it was believed that the blood would go into the land as a testimony and Ala deity will avenge such a death. The sixth commandment (v.13) is concerned with the protection of human life within the community of Israel, against destruction by fellow Israelites.

The fact of this possible connection between *omenani* and Christian morality shows that, in spite of the fact that it was not a Christian era, it carried within it the seed of the Word of God awaiting full revelation in the New Testament. The missionaries would have made more impact if they began from what they people knew to what they did not know. Discarding as evil or condemning the African culture, religion and morality outright by most missionaries was a move in the wrong direction, and the basis for crisis in the Christian faith in Africa.

Conclusion

Christianity came into existence in a Greco-Roman world, with Judaism as its first encounter. These two worlds played significant parts in shaping its character and influencing its history, in the sense that Greek philosophy and culture shaped early Christian theological formulations, and the Roman world, with its rich organizational structures, shaped the organizational and practical dimensions of the life of the Christian church, and its religious impulses from the rich Jewish tradition. As Christianity moved to the shores of Africa, its encounter with African traditional religion and culture, its sympathetic, non-derogatory and non-dominant touch was not felt in relation to its encounter with the Greek, Roman and Jewish cultures. There was a smugness toward African traditional religion and culture, which generated barrage of names like primitive, pagan, heathen, magic, ancestor worshippers, juju, animists, fetish, animism, etc (Kanu, 2015a).

This smugness towards the African religion and culture shaped the missionaries' conception of the African religion and culture and limited the African personality (Kanu, 2019). The early missionaries, therefore, saw the African culture in the negative light. The first strategy employed was that of disassemblage. They made no appraisal of African languages enriched with traditions of centuries or the African parables, many of them the quintessence of family and national histories; the African modes of thought, influenced more or less by local circumstances our poetry which reveals the profundity of African literary wizardry. The drums were banned from sounding in most churches. African names for baptism were rejected, and as a replacement, they encouraged the adoption of not only Christian names, but also European family names like De Santos (Kanu, 2015b).

It is from this background that this piece, beginning with the understanding of *Igwebuiké* theology, and adopting the *Igwebuiké* theoretical framework of the sympathetic and non-derogatory approach, interpreted culture as the seed of the Word of God, using *Omenani* as a context. It argued that the failures of the missionary enterprise were majorly because of their lack of openness to the African religion and culture. The understanding of *Omenani* of the Igbo-African people as the seed of the Word of God, even before the advent of the missionaries to the African soil, shows that culture is not an enemy of the gospel,

but could be employed as an instrument for the transmission of the gospel message.

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