

## Christianity And Ndoshumili Culture, 1841-1940: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

When Christianity comes into a community the patterns of their responses constitute the gist of Church history. Such a history is the people's story and memory of their life-changing encounters. It is not what missionaries did or did not do but how the people experienced the power of the gospel. This paper has therefore presented an objective history of Christianity among the *Ndoshumili* people, their earlier reaction to the new religion and the initiative of indigenous Christian converts in evangelizing the area with the view to bringing the gospel message to suit their cultural environment. Suggestions were also made towards effective indigenization of Christianity in the area.

### Introduction

The *Ndoshumili* people did not experience the Portuguese Roman Catholic faith which flourished in Benin and old Warri between the 14th and 16th centuries; though there were indications that some of their coastal towns like Ase and Aboh definitely participated in the general European Atlantic trade which accompanied that Christianity. The *Ndoshumili* did not also benefit much from the wave of the missionary activities on the banks of the Niger during the 19th century expeditions. Though Samuel Ajayi Crowther who was the leader of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) missionary team that accompanied these expeditions was a Yoruba man, yet he was a stranger in *Ndoshumili*-land which accounts for why he felt discouraged in 1854 when he discovered a great flood at Aboh and concluded that the place was unhealthy for his mission station. Nevertheless, the first attempt to plant Christianity in *Ndoshumili*-land came as a result of the Niger expedition of 1841. Between 1841 and 1857, the C.M.S. endeavoured to establish a mission station at Aboh, the headquarters of *Ndoshumili*, but the project was abruptly abandoned owing partly to the *Ndoshumili* difficult terrain which posed a great threat to the kind of mission station that Crowther was attempting to found, and owing partly also to the fact that there was no single *Ndoshumili* indigene, as far as available evidence is concern, among the missionaries of the C.M.S. Niger Igbo mission. It should be noted that the fact that one was an African or bore a black face, in itself alone should not be taken to mean that anywhere and everywhere on the large and heterogeneous continent of Africa one could equally feel at home. Hence, J.C. Taylor would recommend that, whenever possible, an African should be

deployed to serve in his native area in order to eliminate unnecessary language, psychological and emotional problems (Tasie, 1996).

The early missionaries did not realize their goal of establishing a credible mission station in *Ndoshumili*-land in the 19th century; this made the active involvement of local indigenous evangelists inevitable in the evangelization of the area in the 20th century. Christianity therefore did not take a tap root in *Ndoshumili* soil until the local people took the initiative. The impetus for introducing the new and evidently more successful forms of evangelism lay in their interest to relate the gospel to the religion and culture of *Ndoshumili* people. The study of this great encounter between two world views in *Ndoshumili*-land and the synthesis of this encounter therefore forms our focus in this paper.

### **Ndoshumili: Traditions of Origin**

In a sense the name *Ndoshumili* is apt for the riverine people of the western delta of the Niger. They essentially live along the River Niger and its tributaries, in Ndokwa East local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It is by and large the lower delta area. The distinguishing features of the area is the dense mangrove vegetation through which meanders a network of creeks and the evergreen forest belt dominated by the oil palm trees. The people of *Ndoshumili* were and continue to be fishermen, makers of canoes and, where the situation permitted, middlemen traders. A major part of the *Ndoshumili* inhabitants also took to agriculture and the exploitation of the oil palm tree. According to Ikime (1999). "The exchange of the products of their various occupations thus constituted an early determinant of inter-group relations; the 'water people' had fish, crayfish and salt to offer the 'land people' while the latter offered in return yams, plantains, pepper, and various products of the cassava plant" (p. 89).

*Ndoshumili* people have linguistic and other affinities, however, the heterogeneity of the clan composition of the area together with the fragmented nature of each clan group, makes it difficult to go into details of traditions of origin in a work of this nature. Yet a few words must be said about the origins of these people.

Recent studies of *Ndoshumili* people show that various clans which make up the *Ndoshumili* are a mixture of people of Igbo and Benin origin. It can be argued with considerable force that the *Ndoshumili* province was founded as a result of a Benin incursion into an area in which Igbo-speaking people were already established in little groups. According to Afigbo (1981), population expansion led to the migration of land hungry Igbo peasants to the regions lying west. It is unlikely that the migrants left in one massive wave. Bearing in mind the fragmented character of Igbo political systems and the fact that the pressure could not have built up overnight we have to postulate that the settlers left in little groups of closely related kin, with the region adjoining already existing settlements being occupied before the

one just beyond it. This process would take a very long time to carry Igbo population as far west as it had got before it was checked by the rise and expansion of the Benin Empire. These immigrants carried with them the basic culture already elaborated on the northern Igbo plateau. The first and probably the most important impact on the Igbo of the rise of the Benin Empire and its subsequent expansion eastwards was to stop Igbo migration westward. One result was that some of this population curved southwards to settle in the region now known as *Ndoshumili*.

The Benin group succeeded in imposing their political systems through conquest but they were conquered linguistically by the Igbo, indicating that the Igbo elements were probably much stronger numerically. The kingship of most *Ndoshumili* clans would thus be explicable in terms of the influence of the political and social institutions of Benin. Okolugbo, (cited in Ikime, 1999) reveals that many of the *Ndoshumili* clans trace their origin to Benin. The first wave of migration into the *Ndoshumili* area is represented by the Akarai and Ase clans and their offshoots. The second wave brought the clans of Aballa, Uto-Uku, Oballa-Utchi, Okpai, Ndoni, Onya and Adiai. Finally came a third wave which led to the establishment of Obetim, Ossissa, Ashaka and the rise of Aboh kingdom. All these waves are seen as coming from Benin. Nevertheless, the names of the clans have a distinct Igbo ring. If indeed these names are Igbo, then it would be fair to conclude that among the *Ndoshumili* there was a mixture of people of Igbo and Benin origins and that in this case the Benin elements failed to impose their language. Ikime (1999) expressed that *Ndoshumili* obviously received Benin migrations at some point but whether the Igbo-speaking elements in these areas were themselves originally of Igbo origin is a mute question. Some authorities have placed the migration in the 15th and others in the 16th century. Benin immigrants, however, would appear to have met other groups who had lived in the area for some time before the arrival of the Benin. The core of the *Ndoshumili* people would obviously be of greater antiquity than these dates indicate. For Isichei (1976), the antiquity of their settlement on the Niger is reflected in the name given them by other Igbo groups, ‘people of the Niger’ *Ndoshumili*.

### **The Early Missionary Enterprise in Ndoshumili-Land**

The first wave of missionary endeavour in *Ndoshumili* was occasioned by the Niger expedition of 1841. During the ascent of the Niger, a treaty for the abolition of the slave trade was negotiated with the Obi of Aboh, who granted permission for the entry of missionaries. According to Isichei (1973), “Simon Jonas was a veteran of the 1841 and 1854 expeditions, whose missionary work at Aboh in 1841 entitles him to be called the first apostle of the Ibo” (p. 92). Simon Jonas indeed played a great role in introducing the gospel to *Ndoshumili* people. In 1841, as the expedition team approached Aboh, J.F. Schon, the German linguist and missionary in the team had had a lurking suspicion that the slave traders could attack them in Aboh. However, Simon Jonas assured them that they would be welcomed, and to this,

Ferguson (1978) submitted that “they were welcomed for what they were” (p. 345). This led to a long discussion on the evils of the slave-trade, in which Simon Jonas, who was naturally interpreting, took a vigorous part on his own account. On the following day Simon Jonas went ashore and spent the night among the people, and in this way he was able to allay a number of suspicions about the new religion. Ferguson (1978) noted that the local people had happened to see an anatomical skull in the medical officer’s cabin, and had concluded that the British were head-hunters. Others had noticed the pictures of Queen Victoria and the prince Consort (they were unable to distinguish male from female in European faces and European clothes) and decided that all those in the expedition were hypocrites, trying to make the Ndoshumili give up their idols, while keeping their own. Simon Jonas put right these understandable misunderstandings and was able to secure the Obi’s proclamation of the end of the slave trade. Subsequently a treaty for the abolition of the slave trade was signed by the Obi who then was Obi Ossai and the Christians took the chance of witnessing to their faith before the Obi and his people. They gave the Obi two copies of the Bible, one in English and the other in Arabic. Simon took the opportunity to read and explain to the Obi and his people in Igbo the Beatitudes of our Saviour from St. Matthew’s gospel. Obi and his people were uncommonly taken with Simon’s ability to interpret English. Ekechi (1972) submitted that “it was indeed at the Obi’s insistence that Simon Jonas was left at Aboh and expounded the mysteries of the written word, while the rest of the members of the expedition proceeded to Idah” (p. 8). Kalu (1978) also maintained that “Obi Ossai was so impressed with Simon’s ability to interpret English that he requested he should be left behind; this was the first contact of the Christian mission with the Igbo” (p. 309). Simon Jonas thus had the honour of becoming the first missionary worker to labour in Ndoshumili-land. The lessons from this journey laid the foundations for the future. It became obvious that indigenous agency would be essential for Christianizing the hinterland as Crowther prayed that this may be the beginning of a rapid overspread of Christianity in the countries of Africa through native agents.

Unfortunately, however, when the expedition returned sadly, for there was great loss of life, they found Simon Jonas well and in good spirit, having been kindly treated by the Obi and his people. He was there for only three weeks but the people were fully employed. He taught some English and needle work, his “school” had an enrolment of two hundred children. He himself made clothes for the Obi, and he preached. But the team took Simon Jonas along as they went back to Fernando Po.

This was however, not the end of Simon Jonas missionary work on Ndoshumili soil. In 1854 when Macgregor Laird planned another expedition for exploration and trade, Simon Jonas who has then become a catechist, accompanied them. This time, he spent three months at Aboh preaching and securing the friendship and good will of the people. Crowther paid him a notable tribute in his report as recorded in Kalu (1978) thus:

Had not Simon Jonas been with us, who was well known to the Obi and his sons, we would have had some difficulty in gaining the confidence of the people of Aboh. It takes great effect when a returning liberated Christian sits down with his heathen countrymen and invites them, in his own language, with refined Christian feelings and sympathy, not to be expressed in words but evidenced in exemplary life. (p. 356).

A site was offered for the mission station and marked out. But Crowther saw that Aboh, with its flooded and unhealthy streets, was not the best place to start. He moved cautiously promising no more than to send resident teachers as soon as possible. An oral tradition credited to B.P. Apena also confirms that Simon Jonas laboured for three months in Aboh and made tremendous progress and the people appreciated him and his gospel message. He concluded that it was with a heavy heart that Simon Jonas parted with the people of Aboh when, as a result of the failure of the 1841 expedition, he was withdrawn. Apart from the spasmodic activities of Simon Jonas at Aboh which ended in 1854 in a most abrupt and disheartening manner, the *Ndoshumili* people did not benefit further from the influence of ex-slaves returnees, especially from Sierra-Leone who had become the major influence for Christianizing their homelands.

By some accident of history also, *Ndoshumili* was not to be considered in the early 19th century European missionary strategy for it was notable for its difficult terrain that threatened the survival of the European missionaries. Besides, at the inception of the missionary movements, especially those from Britain, part of the objectives, as Tasie (1978) opined, was to reach the hinterlands to convert the slave dealers in the hope that converting them to Christianity, in addition to introducing “civilization” and commerce, would deal a devastating blow to the slave trade. Since the *Ndoshumili* people were largely exporters rather than producers of the slaves, the area became ignored.

#### **The Emergence of *Ndoshumili* local missionaries in the twentieth century**

In 1879, an event occurred which brought Christianity nearer to *Ndoshumili* country. Onitsha inhabitants had looted the British factory and in retaliation, the forces of the Royal Niger Company shelled the town and removed the factory to Asaba where the company stationed their troops. The C.M.S. headquarters was also removed from Onitsha to Asaba. Soon mission schools were opened at Asaba and chiefs and people from the surrounding villages were advised to send their children to Asaba in order to receive western education. Asaba soon became the centre of attraction and many river side people of *Ndoshumili* moved there for education. According to Okolugbo (1984) Among the earliest citizens of *Ndoshumili* to benefit from this missionary and educational venture in Asaba were Isaiah Edemenya, Ossai Ottoi and Obunseli Eligbedi, all of Ase, one of the most important commercial parts of the Royal Niger company in the delta in the 19th century. On the completion of their education, Ossai Ottoi and Obunseli Eligbedi were

employed by the Royal Niger Company and posted to Lokoja where they were converted to the Roman Catholic faith. Isaiah Edemenya, on the other hand, was converted by the missionaries of the Niger mission. Ayandele (1966) noted that “he was so devoted that in 1896 he was selected for training at the first Divinity school established at Asaba in 1895 for the education of African clergy” (p. 288). He joined the Royal Niger Company for a short period before returning to his home town Ase in 1899. In 1900 he established an Anglican Church at Ase and opened a school alongside the Church (Okolugbo, 1984). Meanwhile, Obunseli Eligbedi had retired from the Royal Niger Company’s service and became an active evangelist in Edemenya’s new Church. Evidently the Church was made up of some people who had embraced Anglican and Roman Catholic Christianity while they were abroad’. It was therefore functioning as an interdenominational Church at the initial stage. For five years Edemenya’s Church and school flourished unhampered in *Ndoshumili*-land. In 1906, following the successful British pacification of *Ndoshumili*-land, The Rev. Father George Ollier visited the area and caused a rift in the interdenominational Church. Some of the former Roman Catholic members welcomed Father George Ollier and Edemenya consequently expelled them from his Church. Obunseli Eligbedi headed a faction and founded the Roman Catholic Church at Ase in 1906. Thus, by 1906 two different Christian groups had been established at Ase. Meanwhile, Ottoi, who was still working at Lokoja took the responsibility of attracting the Roman Catholic mission to take keen interest in the affairs of the new Catholic converts at Ase. Okolugbo confirmed that the two denominations continued until 1911 and 1917 respectively when they were properly reinforced and backed by their parent missionary bodies.

### **The Renewed Attempt by the Niger Diocese to Evangelize Ndoshumili, 1932-1937**

In 1932, there was a move by the Niger Diocesan board at Onitsha to revive missionary activities in *Ndoshumili*. V. Umunna who was a native of Onitsha was deeply interested in *Ndoshumili* area and as a zealot evangelist; he championed the move to revive the missionary activities in Aboh. Earlier in 1931 the then Obi of Aboh (Obi Oputa II) had written a passionate letter to the Niger Diocese requesting the C.M.S. to come to Aboh to revive their work. The Obi had in the letter insisted that since the C.M.S. missionaries were the first people to establish a mission station at Aboh, the people preferred the Anglican Church to any other mission. The Board was so moved that Bishop Lasbery sent a delegation of clergymen (V. Umunna, Nwajei, and Ibeneme, who were all Anglican clergy men) to visit Aboh and interview Obi Oputa II. The delegation took a catechist, named Ofuma and after interviewing the Obi, they left the catechist to start missionary operation at Aboh according to Obi’s request (Okolugbo, 1984). However, the Obi was not pleased with the missionary method of the Niger mission, so he cleverly sent out catechist Ofuma from Aboh to Ashaka, another *Ndoshumili* community. The Obi had claimed that Ashaka was still under his dominion. It is on record that catechist Ofuma

opened the Igbo section of the Anglican Church in Ashaka which was eventually placed under the superintendence of the O.N. Garrad, then superintendent of Isoko District.

Effective missionary work in *Ndoshumili* in the 20th century was begun by B.P. Apena who was then in charge of Ugheli station. However, the Christianity that is thriving in *Ndoshumili*-land today is the instrumentality of a zealot evangelist and retired C.M.S. agent, Paul Jector Ossai. In 1937, Paul Jector Ossai, a native of Adiai Obi-Aka near Umuolu, went to the then catechist Apena at Ugheli, claiming that he had a call to establish missionary centres in *Ndoshumili* area and requesting Apena to dedicate him prayerfully to God for this mission. The catechist did as he requested and he began entirely on his own. He took as his attendants, Francis Nwaguzo and Paul Ojogu in his new evangelistic campaign. His missionary endeavours proved a huge success that large parts of *Ndoshumili* area embraced the Christian faith. They preached from Aboh to Aballa; and in less than three years, they were able, under a self-supporting scheme, to open stations at Aboh, Isala, Ndoni, Ase-Monite, Ase-Azaga, Odugili, Ogu, Ogu camp, Ise-Onokpo, Okpai-Oluchi, Okpai-Umu Agulu, Obi-Ofu, Ogbe Ogene, Odo-Ata, Inyi, Onuaboh, Utchi, Utchi-Umuochi, Utu, Ugbaja, Asaba-Utchi, Aballa-Uno, Aballa-Obodo and Aballa-Oshumili (Okolugbo, 1984).

In 1939, evangelist Paul Jector Ossai and his team came to Gerbort, the superintendent of Isoko District residing at Oleh, and reported the progress of their missionary endeavours in *Ndoshumili* area. Garbort, in order to intensify their zeal, transferred Israel Loho to Aballa station as a group leader of that area. He then recognized Paul Ojogu and Francis Nwaguzo, associates of evangelist Ossai, as Church agents with small remuneration. In 1942, B.P. Apena was then posted to Umuolu as the first resident pastor of *Ndoshumili* area and was there until 1960. During his tenure many converts were made. Schools and Churches were founded and eventually Francis Nwaguzo was ordained in 1962 to follow up the work of B.P. Apena.

The success of this endeavour could be measured by the numerical strength of the young Churches or the extent of physical expansion. It made such a deep impact on the culture of the people that several villages within and outside *Ndoshumili*-land extended invitations to Jector Ossai and his evangelical team to come and establish Churches in their localities. With this missionary zeal, the *Ndoshumili* people had fully embraced the Christian faith.

### **The Christian Negative Impact on *Ndoshumili* Culture**

Missionaries of all denominations despised most of the existing religious institutions and cultural heritage of the *Ndoshumili* during the initial stage of their encounter. The most affecting incident took place in 1841 when Samuel Crowther

and his team arrived at Aboh with many sick and dying aboard. According to Mckenzie (1970):

The Obi of Aboh tried to help them as well as he could. He assisted with the burial arrangements for one who had just died. Above all he brought to his sick “friends” the emblem of one of his divinities to help them to recover. Crowther describes how this kindly act was rejected. Captain Troter gave the Obi a Bible instead and told him that his god was of no use. How hard it was to recognize an act of human solidarity if that were clothed in the forms of an alien faith. (p. 32).

The *Ndoshumili* people hold the belief that a supreme God called *Chukwu* existed, but they also venerate spirit powers; some benevolent, others, malevolent. To this, almost all the Christian groups condemned these powers, and even denied them as non existence. Traditional priests or doctors were described as “fetish doctors” and tricksters while their divinities were regarded as “idol” or playthings. Belief in witchcraft was regarded as a figment of the imagination while ancestral veneration was regarded as having stemmed from primitive thinking and ignorance. Charms and magic were the consequence of the superstitious beliefs which controlled all backward peoples. In fact, the entire realm of *Ndoshumili* traditional religion and culture was called into question as animism (Okolugbo, 1984). Christians were therefore taught to look down with disgust and contempt on certain aspects of the traditional religion, culture and social institutions. Christians were discouraged from participating in traditional festivals or to fulfill filial duties towards their ancestors. They were also discouraged from taking local chieftaincy titles, since the reception of these titles seems to the missionaries, the involvement in the service of the traditional divinities or paying homage to them.

The Christian missions emphasized monogamy as the Christian standard of marriage. Okolugbo (1984) noted that “as early as 1896, Isaiah Edemenya, the first *Ndoshumili* man who attempted to be trained as a priest in the first Anglican Divinity school, Asaba was excommunicated and dismissed from the school by the missionaries of the Niger mission on account of “wrong marriage” (p. 69). The issue of polygamy did plague the Church very adversely not only in *Ndoshumili* but throughout Nigeria since the idea of monogamy appears to conflict with the economic and socio-religious set-up of the African people. The Christian missions also despised *Nso-ani*, the traditional religious sanctions which were established for the preservation of the society. For instance, *Nso* prohibits women under their menstrual periods from visiting the streams or the house of a titled man. All the missionary bodies encouraged their converts to defy these religious sanctions which they regarded as taboos emanating from primitive superstitious beliefs.

Masquerade is a social control institution in *Ndoshumili*, employed during special communal sacrifices which involved warding off any evil spirit tormenting the

society. It is believed that women defile or nullify the efficacy of the masquerade, and are therefore strictly prohibited from seeing or touching the paraphernalia of masquerade. But all the Christian missions encouraged their women to despise the masquerade institution, because they were ordinary men, not the embodiment of the divinity or spirits they claimed to lead out. This attitude was regarded not only as anti-social but also a calculated attempt on the part of the Christians to invite the wrath of the divinities on *Ndoshumili*.

Priests and holy men, especially those connected with *Ufejioku* (divinity of agriculture) forbid the eating of cassava and its by-products. But some missionaries regarded this as economic setback and encouraged their converts who formally forbid cassava to defy their *Nso* and eat cassava because the *Nso* had no power over Christians. Consequently, many people discarded the *Nso ani* and began to plant cassava side by side with yam in places where there were traditionally not supposed to be cultivated in public farms. To the elders, this action was a deliberate attempt to desecrate *Ufejioku*, which would only result in poor production of yams with resultant starvation of the entire community.

Christians were also accused of inviting the wrath of the divinities on the citizens by encouraging women under menstruation and women who had just given birth to defy religious sanctions which forbade them from entering certain traditional holy spots, passing by the groves of certain divinities, entering the houses of traditional priests and other people holding public religious offices. Besides, Christians indiscriminately ate totem animals, birds, fish, and crops which the citizens forbade for spiritual well-being of the individual as well as the entire community. On the whole, Christian missions encouraged their members to have negative attitudes to the existence of witches or evil spirits. To the Christian missions, such a conception was borne out of superstition and a primitive worldview.

It is to be noted that the Church would have recorded more substantial achievement in *Ndoshumili* if, while maintaining its own position it had paid more attention to the *Ndoshumili* religious institutions and worldview. The denial by her missionaries of the *Ndoshumili* traditional values and aspirations without satisfactory substitute or explanation left much to be desired and sparked off criticism not only from the non-believing population but also from *Ndoshumili* Christians themselves. To this, Okolugbo (1984) noted that “Christianity has of course largely over thrown African moral tabus and sanctions but Christianity while destroying them has put nothing in their place” (p. 74). It is therefore firmly established as a social and missionary institution but it is foreign in character and alien to the life and institutions of *Ndoshumili*. *Ndoshumili* people thus view this failure to integrate with the people, their society and institution as a major weakness of the Church, responsible for the inability of the Church to meet the spiritual needs of the indigenous converts. Thus instead of displacing the traditional religion in the lives of its adherents Christianity

became an appendix of the indigenous beliefs and practices; the Christian God being worshiped on Sundays while recourse was freely made to traditional divinities on week days. During life crises such as birth, marriage, sickness, poverty and death, customs matters more than Christianity and it is during these crises that the Church significantly becomes an alien institution in *Ndoshumili*. Therefore for the two religions to co-exist they must enter into a relation of give and take by means of interaction and adaptation.

### **Towards a More Effective Christianity in *Ndoshumili***

There is no doubt that Christianity has made a number of genuine converts and it is firmly established as an institution in *Ndoshumili*. Through its native agents – pastors, catechists and school masters, the Church had close contact with the people, entering their villages and their homes, educating their children and burying their dead. Christianity was linked with enlightenment and civilization and economic advancement. Christianity must therefore take a realistic approach to *Ndoshumili* spiritual, moral, political and social conditions and needs in order to ensure its continuity among the people. The Christian Churches should endeavour to relate the gospel to the social and spiritual conditions of the *Ndoshumili*. Christianity should not detach itself from everything traditional simply because it wants to assert its unique position. Crowther's instruction to his clergy, as cited by Page (1910) is instructive:

When we first introduce the gospel to any people we should take advantage of any principles which they themselves admit. Thus, though the heathens in this part of Africa possess no written legends, yet wherever we turn our eyes, we find among them in their animal sacrifices a text which is the mainspring of Christian faith. Without shedding of blood there is no remission. Therefore we may with propriety say that that which ye ignorantly practice declare we unto you. (p. 277).

This does not however mean a total exhumation of everything traditional. Besides, the *Ndoshumili* religion is indissolubly connected with culture and permeates the whole of life. The celebration of ritual ceremonies takes place in common and the existence of the individual cannot be conceived outside the framework of his integration in society.

A few indigenous Churches are now taking bold steps in this direction. For instance, Okolugbo (1984) noted that the traditional seventh day out dooring ceremony among the *Ndoshumili* people has been Christianized by a few Anglican women prayer groups. These prayer bands have assimilated the traditional practices of *Igo Ani Ezi* and transformed it to suit the Christian faith. *Igo Ani Ezi* is the traditional dedication of a newly-born baby to *Olise Ezi*, the arch-divinity of the people. As the chief agent of *Chukwu* on earth, *Olise Ezi* is believed to be the custodian of life. Consequently a newly-born baby must not see the world until homage is paid to this

divinity in form of ceremonial service on the seventh day. While absorbing this ceremony into their religious practice, Christians of *Ndoshumili* has clothed the custom with Christian norm. Christian mothers and their new born babies are advised to keep in doors for seven days. At the end of the seventh day, instead of rendering service to *Olise Ezi*, they are instructed to offer prayers and praises to *Chukwu*. Usually members of *Otu Ekpele* Eke, the women's Eke prayer band, help Christian mothers in this ceremony. On the seventh day, the head of the women prayer band leads her group to the house of a person performing the outdoor ceremony. Like the traditional priest, the Christian leader orders the parent to bring the baby outside and prayers are offered to *Chukwu* directly instead of the *Olise Ezi*.

*Iwa iji* is another traditional practice that has been taken over by the Christians in *Ndoshumili*. This is the traditional annual offering of the new yams to *Ufejioku* (the agricultural divinity) before the citizens are permitted to eat the new yam. This is because it is believed that *Ufejioku* is responsible for the good harvest of every farm. Some Churches have now assimilated this practice by fixing a day in which every Church member is expected to bring his new yam as thank-offering to *Chukwu* before he tastes it. Christians emphasized that *Chukwu*, rather than *Ufejioku*, should receive such offerings. Thus while the Christian Churches are reluctant to promote indigenous Christianity in *Ndoshumili*, Christians of *Ndoshumili* origin have taken the initiative to interpret Christianity to suit their cultural environment. This is a move in the right direction for without indigenization it is impossible for Christianity to be rooted in and be meaningful to any people.

There are, however, still many traditional practices that attract Christian adherents in *Ndoshumili* because they seem to satisfy their spiritual aspirations. The Church should absorb a number of these practices and furnish them with Christian content and norms. In this regard, the need for more trained clergy and theologians of *Ndoshumili* origin cannot, therefore, be over-emphasized. Chieftaincy title is an institution that calls for such urgent inculturation into the Christian Church in *Ndoshumili*. In the past the Church was very conservative about this issue. Some denominations bluntly rejected the idea of Christians accepting chieftaincy titles on the ground that such titles links the holders with the traditional divinities. But the implication is that it deprived Christians of the opportunity of participating in the civil administration of their clans. It is therefore necessary to work out a number of measures which will enable Christian aspirants to the traditional titles to perform their duties without compromising their faith. In other words, *Ndoshumili* Christians should strive to take their full position as members of their clans who have the right to participate in the civil administration of the clan irrespective of their Christian stands.

In many communities in *Ndoshumili*, chieftaincy titles are mainly hereditary. For instance, the *Odua*, *Akalam* and *Odobor* titles among *Aballa* people are titles conferred to the eldest sons of those who were *Igwe*, *Nnowu* or *Odobor* respectively in the past. Such titles qualifies the holder to be part of the *Igwe* in council and designates them as possible successors to their father's throne and further qualifies them to take part in the decision making process of the community. In this way the gospel will be on its way to taking deep root in *Ndoshumili*-land.

### Conclusion

In the past Christian evangelism in *Ndoshumili* was based on the wrong notion that the people have nothing in their culture or religion to serve as basis for the gospel. Building upon this wrong notion, Christian missionaries made no appreciable efforts to relate the Christian message to the traditional beliefs and practices of the people. However, from the second half of the 20th century, the indigenous *Ndoshumili* Christians and zealots evangelists took the initiative to evangelize the area and to relate the gospel message to the culture and traditional belief of the people.

However, the *Ndoshumili* Church should take the issue of inculturation very seriously. By this we mean a further adaptation of the gospel message and Christian practice to the indigenous culture of the people, so as to ensure its relevance and appreciation. This is important so as not to continue the promotion of the 'skin deep' Christianity alleged to be prevalent among Christians of various extractions in Nigeria. This way, honest traditional and socio-cultural values should be appreciated and commended by the Christian Church, while obnoxious practices should be discouraged. On this note, Nmah (2009) concluded that:

In our attempt to spread the gospel and enrich the lives of many, we need to evangelize not only individuals, but also their cultures. People do not live in a cultural vacuum; their cultural environment conditions their mentality, thought, behaviour, and life. In bringing Christ to the world, we cannot therefore, ignore the culture in which we live. There is the need to keep in mind that there is for instance, a Christian way of being an African and an African way of being a Christian. (p. 82).

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