The Aetiology of an African-initiated Church in Ogali A. Ogali's *The Juju Priest*

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The place of religion has been nearly as pervasive in post-colonial Igbo literature in English as in Igbo culture in general. Indeed, the interaction of missionary Christianity and traditional indigenous beliefs and practices has occupied a prominent place in Igbo fiction since shortly before the attainment of Nigerian national independence in 1960. Internationally acclaimed authors have reconstructed the transplantation to their societies of certain Christian denominational traditions, explored the resistance which defenders of religio-cultural tradition have afforded, and analysed the dilemmas which converts to Christianity and their children have faced in seeking to live their faiths while maintaining cordial relations with non-Christian relatives and remaining partly anchored in their cultural heritage. Reflecting their conspicuous roles in both the history of the evangelisation of the Igbos and their ongoing presence in south-eastern Nigeria, both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic traditions are well represented in this literature, as a reading of novels by such authors as Chinua Achebe, John Munonye, Onuora Nzekwu, and T. Obinkaram Echewa makes clear. To date, however, the numerous African independent churches which have seasoned the multi-course ecclesiastical diet of the Igbos have received little literary attention, although a graphic scene from the cross-cultural worship at the Spiritual Church of God, one of the many local "prayer houses" that arose in Biafran towns in response to the intense spiritual longings of the suffering masses during the 1967-1970 Biafran War, is a highlight of Eddie Iroh's racy novel, *Toads of War* (1979), and elsewhere in Nigeria the Yoruba novelist T.M. Aluko focussed on a separatist local Christian movement in his commendable work of 1966, *Kinsman and Foreman*.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, missiologists and other scholars in the field of West African religious studies can find a cornucopia of little-used source material in popular treatises written for domestic consumption, perhaps most notably in the so-called "Onitsha Market Literature" which has flourished in south-eastern Nigeria since the first half of the twentieth century. In their dearth

of editorial varnish, these rough-hewn booklets expose a wealth of popular attitudes and perceptions of religious life and other dimensions of local culture which cannot be ignored if a comprehensive view of Igbo life is desired (Hale 1998: 113-123).

Among the most prolific creators of Onitsha Market Literature is Ogali Agu Ogali. From the inauguration of his career as a popular author in the 1950s, until he became a more serious novelist two decades later, this Igbo produced dozens of slender volumes of fiction and history. Initially embracing European culture and the Christianity which accompanied it to Nigeria, he became disillusioned with Western ways while a student in England during the 1960s, and wrote more critically about them after the attainment of Nigerian sovereignty. Disillusioned by the alleged corruption of some church officials who were administering relief supplies during the Biafran War, Ogali began, in the 1970s, to write acrimoniously about missionaries and their indigenous wards in the ranks of the clergy. This attitude comes to the fore in his work of 1971, *No Heaven for the Priest* (Hale 1998).

Little in Ogali's pre-war experiences in his homeland indicated that he would become an acerbic critic of Christianity or virulently anti-clerical, although his geographical, vocational, and denominational instability suggests that his fertile mind was receptive to change. He was born into a polygamous family in 1935 at Item in the East Central State, a quarter-century before the termination of formal British dominion over Nigeria. By his own ambiguous testimony, some members of his family of origin were Christians, while others followed traditional Igbo religious practices. Ogali's primary education was at Item Methodist Central School, but he went to Calabar for secondary education at the Hope Waddell Training Institution during the middle and late 1940s. This gifted Igbo teenager did not immediately continue his education at mid-century, choosing instead to work for the United Fruit Company in Calabar, and holding a sequence of positions involving considerable local responsibility during the first half of the 1950s. After marrying in 1955, he spent the second half of that decade working briefly for the Nigerian Railway Corporation at Enugu, then teaching at Methodist schools in the East Central State. In 1959 Ogali went to Accra, the capital of the then recently independent Ghana, to study at the Ghana School of Journalism. The qualification he earned there led to a post at the Eastern Nigerian Information Service in the early 1960s. Ogali subsequently studied cinematography and scriptwriting for two emotionally and spiritually challenging years in London before returning to Nigeria to pursue a successful career in broadcasting.[1] Writing retrospectively in the early 1970s, he recalled that during the first three decades of his life he had been affiliated with, or at least had worshipped in, Methodist, Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, Apostolic, and other congregations, and that he had briefly served as a Methodist Sunday school teacher during the late 1950s (Ogali 1980:

359-60).

In *The Juju Priest*, Ogali creates a hypothetical model of an indigenous church which apparently is intended to serve as a representative of the multiplicity of such bodies which have vastly complicated the religious landscape of Nigeria since the closing years of the nineteenth century. In name at least, the denomination in *The Juju Priest* resembles the United Native African Church, which was formed as an amalgam of various denominations in Lagos in 1891 and soon spread to other parts of the country, including Igboland. By 1925, it reportedly had no fewer than twenty congregations numbering over 4 000 members in the Aba area. The United Native African Church sought to cope with one of the issues which underlay its founding and bedevilled churches in mission fields in many parts of the continent by allowing lay people but not the clergy to engage in polygamy (Isichei 1976: 181). It is conceivable that this denomination inspired Ogali to some extent, although it must be emphasised that both his disaffection from religious life dominated by European missionaries and the phenomenon of locally initiated churches were, in the 1970s, much wider than the example of the United Native African Church.

To date, *The Juju Priest* has neither benefited from nor been the victim of published scholarly analysis. In the present article I shall take steps towards redressing that neglect by dissecting Ogali's description of the United Native African Church and placing its origins, beliefs, and practices into the larger context of colonial Anglicanism as he perceived these dimensions of the evolving religious landscape of Igboland.

Plot Summary and Other Characteristics

The text of *The Juju Priest* spans 142 pages and is divided into thirteen chapters. Ogali has chosen a conventional omniscient narrator point of view, which allows him to pontificate endlessly on the attitudes and beliefs of his African and British colonial characters at the expense of dialogue. When they do speak, they frequently express xenophobia, general narrowmindedness, ignorance of and insensitivity to foreign cultures, an almost total lack of critical perspective on their own beliefs and folkways and, concomitantly, a spirit of censoriousness towards those of other ethnic or religious groups. In this respect, Ogali has created a Manichaean dualism in which most characters, regardless of their race, are painted in morally black and white terms with precious little room for nuances and ambiguities. It seems noteworthy that *The Juju Priest* was published only in Nigeria, as opposed to the works of many of Ogali's counterparts whose works appeared in Heinemann's renowned *African Writers Series* for British and other international consumption.

The principal character, Dimgba, is a youth of ten years when the plot begins to unfold during, apparently, the 1930s or 1940s in his village, Umu

Okpo Irem - a place without a trace of Christian influence at that time. Devotion to Eke, the Goddess of Iyinta, is intense, however. She is described as "a multi-coloured boa constrictor, measuring more than twenty feet long" (*Eke* is the Igbo word for this reptilian species). Ogali establishes in the opening chapter the hold this reptile has on the populace: "It was adored and worshipped by every person in the village, and woe betide any unbeliever in the strength and might of the Goddess." Eke - and her priests - maintain a tight grasp on the local economy: "Sacrifices were made to her through the Chief Priest. Farmers who wanted better harvests brought yams, cocoyams, maize and white chalk to the Chief Priest for sacrifice to the Goddess. In addition, they paid the service fee of ten cowries, the type of money in circulation then. Traders wishing for double profits in their business made similar sacrifices, including a white cock and one male lizard - Alika" (p. 3). Unfortunately for Dimgba, devotion to Eke also demands the sacrifice of at least one human being during the annual New Yam Festival. After his parents and siblings succumb to accidental fungal poisoning, he is adopted by his uncle, Ukpabi, whose teenage fourth wife, Nweresi, is seemingly infertile and thus despised by her husband and co-wives alike. She sympathises with the bereaved youth, however, and after it is decided that he will be sacrificed, succeeds in liberating him from a juju house where he is being held in preparation for his ritual demise. This escape, a severe infraction of local custom, is itself punishable by death, so Nweresi must flee for her life. Independently of each other, she and Dimgba reach Christian missions in other towns. The liberated youth consequently grows up in the custody of Anglicans while his worldly saviour comes under the equally powerful influence of missionaries of unspecified religious identity. The first ones Nweresi encounters bear the surname "Macroy" and hail from Aberdeen, Scotland.

Both of these refugees from the cult of the boa constrictor within Igbo traditional religion become outstanding Christians. Indeed, Ogali's depiction of their spiritual and cultural evolution is at times so extreme as to stretch credibility. Dimgba is adopted by an indigenous Anglican catechist. The youth is "naturally clever and never forgot what he learnt." He also evinces musical and thespian talents within a Christian context. Though apparently less cerebral, Nweresi becomes literate by diligently attending Sunday school and is baptised. She impresses the villagers in Mbato, chiefly with her appealing character, and takes on practical responsibilities at the mission. Nweresi "soon became a darling, loved by all, particularly the younger boys who nicknamed her 'Social.' She was a good dancer and quickly learnt how to kiss, a lesson she learnt from Madam, untaught." Owing chiefly to her extroverted personality, her name soon "became a household word in Mbato" (p. 38).

More than a decade after entering the culturally hybrid world of the Christian mission field, Dimgba and Nweresi meet when the latter participates at a large arts festival at Mbato. He is then in his twenties, although, in Ogali's

imprecise chronological scheme she may be in her early thirties. Initially they do not recognise each other, presumably owing to the fact that under European missionary influence both have changed in various respects. Eventually Nweresi realises who he is. Their reunion is a source of mutual joy. Encouraged by all concerned, they exchange nuptial vows in a wedding which bears a decidedly European stamp.

A week later, Dimgba is commissioned to return to hitherto unevangelised Umu Okpo Irem in an initially unspecified missionary capacity. With Nweresi by his side, he develops into a beloved Sunday school teacher and powerful lay preacher before actually going there. Accompanied by Reverend Stewart, who has been his spiritual mentor, his wife, members of the YMCA and YWCA and other Christians, Dimgba makes an exploratory journey to Umu Okpo Irem, which now shows more British colonial influence than it did in his youth. Their preaching attracts some of the residents but infuriates the Chief Priest of the Eke cult, who orders them to leave. When Dimgba responds by condemning the goddess and her worshippers, Eke slithers into the local square where the evangelisation is taking place. One of the government guards who are protecting the Christian party dispatches it with a sidearm. He also disperses with a warning shot the townspeople, who are enraged by the sacrilegious acts he and Dimgba have committed against their cult. The indebtedness of this pivotal segment of the plot to Achebe's well-known *Things Fall Apart* is unmistakable.

Colonial authorities then issue orders for the clearing of the local "enchanted bush of Njaba" which Eke and innumerable other feared animals have inhabited and into which the bodies of sacrificial victims are thrown. Stiff resistance afforded by traditional guerrillas delays the completion of this task and costs a large number of casualties before the British finally end the matter by incinerating both the area and juju priests who are in it at the time. "Jackson Town," named in honour of the founding British Resident, rises from the ashes as a decidedly colonial location with Dimgba as the headmaster of its school and an eighteen-year-old named MacDonald as the District Clerk. Dimgba eventually holds the title of Local Community Council Chairman. Corruption soon becomes the order of the day, growing proportionately as Western civilisation becomes increasingly entrenched. A cash economy creates social stratification. An Anglican parish is established, and Dimgba allows only its prominent members to serve on his community council. He uses the local government to wage war on traditional religious practices, some of which, including human sacrifice, remain despite the introduction of Christianity.

As a reaction to all this modernisation, a secret society called "Iyi-Okpo" emerges (*Iyi* is one of the Igbo terms for spirit). Its members engage in a campaign of terror which includes murder and dismemberment of victims' heads or genitalia for use by the practitioners Ogali unabashedly terms "Witch Doctors" who "make charms which would drive away the white man from the land of

Umu Okpo Irem." Members also torture and in some cases execute local residents who refuse to join their society. In turn, the colonial administration declares Iyi-Okpo illegal after attributing to it the murder of a white missionary, and the police in Jackson Town employ torture in their efforts to root it out. The leader of the society is put to death as part of the campaign. Thus decapitated, Iyi-Okpo dies out.

Meanwhile, widespread dissatisfaction with Dimgba's governance of the local Anglican church, including his ban on polygamy amongst its members, prompts a disaffected elder named Peter and his followers to secede and form the Native Church of Africa, which they believe will respect their African cultural heritage to a much greater degree than missionary Anglicanism has done and still incorporate the essence of the Christian faith. At a constituent assembly the exclusively black members adopt the "creed" which Peter proclaims and find his explicitly anti-European theology particularly invigorating. The new denomination soon has branches throughout the area, proliferating at a rate which alarms the Anglican establishment sufficiently to cause the local priest, on Dimgba's recommendation, to excommunicate both Peter and some of his elders. Anglican attempts to retain members through "blacknisation," including such measures as encouraging the use of traditional African instruments and dance in worship, are too little and too late to check the haemorrhaging.

The Native Church of Africa takes on a political dimension as Nigeria moves towards independence. Many of its adherents form the Njaba United Party, whose name is inspired by the sacred River Njaba and which promises the restoration of African culture. Meanwhile, local Anglican loyalists establish the National Council of Jackson Town, which favours continuing westernisation of society and promotion of the tourist trade. Peter and Dimgba emerge as pivotal figures in the two contending factions. Their rivalry is violent and reveals how foreign the belligerents are from comprehending fundamental principles of democracy. In the end the Njaba United Party carries the day, and Peter succeeds Dimgba as head of the local government. The Anglican Church suffers internal strife, and Dimgba is accused of favouritism. He is found innocent, however, and on the final page receives the Order of the British Empire for service and loyalty to the Union Jack.

When considering Ogali's critiques of British colonialism and the co-operation of some of his characters with the Anglican and colonial establishments, it should be borne in mind that he was writing primarily for Nigerian readers, as he had done since the 1950s when drafting both fictional and non-fictional works. This fact immediately places *The Juju Priest* into a category of fiction quite different from the more sophisticated literary art by contemporary Igbos like Achebe and Munonye, who used Heinemann's African Writers Series as a vehicle for seeking to enlighten British and non-African readers. As one sea-

soned in the exercise of creating books for indigenes, Ogali was keenly cognisant of the fact that many of his potential readers still remembered the pre-1960 period in which the plot unfolds and may well have harboured ongoing resentment of both heavy-handed British colonial administration and the widespread habit of emulating British manners. These phenomena were easy targets for his satirical rapier. Particularly when read through European eyes, certain aspects of *The Juju Priest* seem not only quite unvarnished but also blatantly propagandistic; it is difficult to imagine any reputable British publishing house issuing this book, regardless of its editors' attitudes towards historic colonisation.

The Depiction of African Traditional Religion

Ogali's representations of the religious groups in question occupy much of the narrative and provide most of the tensions in the conflict-ridden plot. It must be emphasised that although his thrust is essentially one of unveiled hostility to the uncontextualised European Christian practices and teachings of the mission church, his portrayal of indigenous religion is equally severe. Ogali establishes in the first chapter his rejection of both the cult of Eke and certain other dimensions of local indigenous culture. It should be stressed that traditional Igbo spirituality was not a unitary religion but a polytheistic one that varied from village to village and region to region. By no means did all Igbos worship snakes. Other novelists from Igboland have constructed the spiritual dimension of local life before the impact of Christianity was felt by focussing on other currents within the broad stream and, in many cases, commenting favourably on their benefit to the people. Ogali, however, chooses a particularly nefarious brand of indigenous religion which does not appear to serve anyone save its priests. Indeed, he describes the rituals and other practices of Eke worship in undeniably derogatory terms and suggests that it is destructive to the villagers and reeks of sacerdotal exploitation. Nothing underscores this more boldly than the plight of the orphaned Dimgba. When the bodies of his deceased parents and siblings are thrown into the enchanted bush of Njaba to appease Eke, he "cried out and ran after the young men who carried the corpses in a stretcher to the enchanted bush." This normal reaction of a bereaved child is perceived in Umu Okpo Irem as an unprecedented affront to the ritual of sacrifice which might appease Eke. Consequently, Dimgba is literally marked to serve as a human sacrifice at the next New Yam Eve. Fear is a hallmark of local attitudes towards this zenith of celebration. Far from painting indigenes' attitudes in hues of gratitude, Ogali describes the festival as "a day of heart-rending expectations as the common people were not made to know who the sacrificial lamb would be" (p. 5). Furthermore, he suggests that an element of deceit is present in the rituals of the New Yam Feast, particularly in the behaviour of the juju priests who prepare the yams and, apparently, convince the intimidated villagers that

"fairies" rule the night and consume these vegetables (p. 6). Ogali also lambasts the mistreatment Nweresi suffers at the hands of her polygamous husband and his other wives because of her inability to conceive, and the abuse of Dimgba as he is undernourished while waiting to be sacrificed (p. 11). Moreover, in commenting on that youth's flight from incarceration in a juju house, Ogali dwells graphically on the fate of an earlier escapee: "His throat was cut open and the blood collected into a juju pot. He was cut into pieces and thrown into another juju pot. The pieces were half boiled while the blood was poured into a pot of palm wine. Elders, Juju Priests and the Chief Priest ate the meat and drank the bloody wine" (p. 21). In short, there is virtually nothing appealing in Ogali's one-sided caricature of Igbo traditional religion, although as we shall see shortly, cultural conservatives who long for the restoration of pre-colonial ways insist that it fostered high moral standards. Conventional Igbo spirituality remains one of the negative referents in his comparative framework.

It should be emphasised that although Ogali chose a local variant of Igbo spirituality that by the 1970s was apparently almost entirely passé, it was a legitimate representation of certain phenomena which are well attested to in scholarly literature. One such missionary, George Thomas Basden (1873-1944), commented on the veneration of reptiles and human sacrifice in his groundbreaking ethnographic works of 1920 and 1938, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* and *Niger Ibos* respectively. "Over the greater part, if not over the whole, of the Ibo country the python is sacred, especially the smaller species called ekke-ntu," wrote this veteran of two decades in Igboland in 1920. "These likewise are referred to as 'our mother,' and to injure one is a very serious offence" (Basden 1921: 218). Dimgba and Nweresi's brush with death at the hands of their fellow townspeople is also anchored in documented practice. "Using the term in its broad sense, human sacrifice was a generally accepted custom among the Ibos," recorded Basden. "There was a widespread and deeply rooted belief that, in some way, this was more than ordinarily efficacious; at least, it could be affirmed that it was the highest type of sacrifice." This missionary and amateur anthropologist noted that people were put to death by strangling, burial, immolation, or other means for a variety of reasons, e.g. to serve as scapegoats for the infractions of the local populace generally, to accompany wealthy descendants to the hereafter as their servants, and on an *ad hoc* basis to appease angry deities. Perhaps anticipating scepticism on the part of his readers, Basden insisted:

> What is here recorded is no matter of report. The information has been collected on the spot from competent witnesses. In respect of human sacrifices, one of my informants was a man who had himself actually been selected as a victim. He was bound to the sacred tree and all preparations made for observing the last rites. The ceremony of

> transferring the sins to his head was about to be performed when, through the unremitting exertions of a friend, he was released, and another died in his stead, he himself being witness of the tortures and sufferings of his substitute (Basden 1938: 72-5).

As late as 1970, in the published version of his doctoral thesis about sacrificing amongst his fellow Igbos, Francis A. Arinze, then a Roman Catholic archbishop in Nigeria and subsequently a cardinal, declared that the "die-hard practice" of human sacrifice "may not be entirely extinct in every part of Iboland" but adduced no evidence of its survival at that time (Arinze 1970: 90).

The Depiction of European Missionaries and their Church

Ogali's depiction of British missionaries is an amalgam of praise and castigation. It should be remarked at the outset that none of them emerges as a carefully portrayed human being on his canvas; they all remain types whose roles are to represent British colonial attitudes and dimensions of missionary endeavour generally.

The first to appear in the plot is an indigenous Anglican catechist at Mbasa. It may be significant that Dimgba's initial contact with a Christian is with one who serves in an instructional capacity. This man adopts the youthful refugee, thus bringing him directly into a situation in which doctrinal orthodoxy is paramount. Accordingly, it is after Dimgba learns the catechism and is able to pass examinations on it that he is baptised. Subsequently, he continues on the path of grass-roots theological enlightenment by becoming a Sunday school teacher. Orthodoxy in a European sense, not orthopraxis, forms the backbone of Dimgba's Christian faith (pp. 27-32).

Ogali incorporates in his portrait of the principal British missionary at Mbasa – Reverend Stewart – numerous vices and virtues which have long belonged to the stereotype of European missionaries in Africa. On the one hand, Ogali clearly represents this man with the Scottish surname as a firm believer who refuses to compromise his strict moral standards. Arriving at Mbasa not long after Dimgba's baptism, he soon proves his mettle as "a born preacher and a practical Christian." Stewart is "loved by many people in Mbasa," but that town is already in the throes of secularisation at a "time when a greater percentage of the people had embraced some particles of Western civilisation." This modern current has left its mark on the mission field: "Most of the young men and women had no need for church services. This was because those of them who travelled to more civilised places imported most of the 'to hell with you' attitude commonly noticed among civilised people" (pp. 32-33). Stewart can do little to turn back the clock of urbanisation and secularisation, but in rapidly

evolving Nigeria he seeks with unflinching determination not only to proclaim but also to enforce what, from a conventional European perspective, are Christian standards of social and personal ethics. The abuse of bureaucratic power and privilege, which Ogali and many other Nigerian novelists have decried as one of that country's major burdens, Stewart will not tolerate. "He mounted heavy campaigns against bribery and corruption and warned them against the impending doom," reports Ogali in a peculiar amalgamation of Biblical allusions. "He also reminded them that in the event of God's anger becoming uncontrollable, the world would be destroyed with fire and only the righteous ones, as Noah in the Old Testament, would be saved" (pp. 33-34). Turning from the corridors of power to the bedroom, where Ogali emphasises that a decline of moral standards has occurred in local society, adultery "was another thing Reverend Stewart would not tolerate. He reminded the people that adultery was an offence against God, adding, "'Thou shalt not commit adultery' is not meant for the beasts, but human beings like you. You are the children of God and blessed are those who repent and do that which is right before the Lord, for the Kingdom of God shall be their own'" (p. 35). In accordance with conventional missionary practice and as an obvious sign of his unwillingness to tolerate anything which he believes smacks of syncretism, Stewart demands that converts to Christianity burn their idols publicly, and condemns people who seek to invoke them either in lieu of, or to supplement prayers, to God (p. 34).

At the same time, however, Ogali emphasises that hypocrisy and an attitude of superiority to the indigenous population mark Stewart's ministry in Igboland. Notwithstanding his campaign to forbid Christians in his flock to consume alcohol, he maintains a stock of imported alcoholic beverages and cigarettes for use specifically by Europeans. As Ogali states acerbically, "Reverend Stewart was noted for his ability to accommodate! He was a chain smoker and had no rival in drinking." In a transparent example of damning with faint praise, Ogali allows that "one of his good qualities was that he never misbehaved when drunk, excepting one day, just one day, when he used uncomplimentary language on his wife in public, but apologised when he became sober" (p. 53). When this Anglican divine proceeds to Umu Okpo Irem on the initial effort to evangelise the residents of that town with an entourage that includes Dimgba, their wives, and other Christians from Mbasa, eight stalwart African men carry the Stewarts in a hammock (p. 53). The link between evangelisation and colonialism could not be more graphically signified. Once there, Stewart flatters his hearers in the market square and distributes unspecified gifts to those who are sufficiently intrepid to approach him and his fellows. He shows no apprehension in directly challenging the existence of the reigning Eke, whose fifth anniversary the people are celebrating (pp. 54-55).

Meanwhile, Nweresi's evolution in the Christian faith corroborates a similarly foreign version of Christianity at Mbato. She, too, is admitted to ecclesias-

tical membership through baptism only after studying a catechism. Reverend Macroy has preached the fear of hell to her. How Nweresi reacts to this doctrine is not stated, but in any case the worship of an abstract deity is initially difficult for this Igbo woman who has been raised in a local culture where divinity is ostensibly manifested in snakes (pp. 37-38).

Ogali's portrayal of most of the principal missionary characters is generous compared with his acidic treatment of Willy Green, a cardboard type who embodies condescending colonial anthropology at its worst. Having allowed that Reverend Stewart possesses both admirable and damnable traits, Ogali sets up this latter caricature to lambast what he wishes to represent as British attitudes towards and ignorance of Africans but which are not linked to missionary endeavour at all. Before leaving England to pursue his literary aspirations while propagating the Gospel, Green is impressed by pictures of nude African girls "with piercing breasts", and convinces himself that these "bushmen" could benefit from the assistance of people like himself. Upon arrival at Umu Okpo Irem after colonialism and Christianity have broken the hold of Eke on that town, however, he discovers that public nudity is a thing of the past and plans to hire girls to pose unclad and to have their arms tattooed as in previous times for photographs he wishes to take. Green's goal is to produce a sequel to his earlier novel, *The Apes*, which had "sold like hot cakes in Europe and America." His research for *The Apes* had relied on a book titled *Tails Like Monkeys*, whose author "described the Africans as monkeys with long tails" who "lived on tops of trees and held common meetings with monkeys and apes" (pp. 90-91). While strolling through Umu Okpo Irem armed with his camera and hoping to take photographs of bare-breasted girls, however, he is abducted by members of Iyi-Okpo. "And when he was next seen, the head was off, his male organ was missing and his right hand fingers chopped off" (p. 89).

Apart from learning the vernacular, the missionaries at Mbasa and Mbato have apparently made little effort to become acculturated. Signs of their fixed foreignness abound and underscore the cultural chasm separating them and their culturally captive version of Christianity from the people. Ogali uses Dimgba's reaction to their ways at Mbasa to illustrate this crucial point. He initially finds it odd that water is boiled at the mission. By contrast, "in Umu Okpo Irem, the land he had earlier described as 'flowing with milk and honey,' no one ever had time to boil water before drinking as that meant killing the spirit in it. It was generally believed that the great Goddess of Iyinta blessed all the running streams in the area, and any attempt to boil it meant killing the spirit in it. Furthermore, in that town "people did not wash the vegetables for that also washed out the spirit." Dimgba is also amazed that at Mbasa people shun rats and lizards, whereas in Umu Okpo Irem "rats were eaten by every person alike, while lizards were principally used in sacrifices, although the very big ones, with red head and red tail, were roasted and eaten with palm oil and

red pepper." Thirdly, Dimgba finds the keeping of dogs as pets and the catechist's family's habit of kissing them scandalous. In his birthplace, "nobody ever touched the mouth of a dog because of the human waste that it ate. Whenever a child passed excreta, the mother or any other person around shouted 'yoooo! yoooo! yoooo!' and dogs, wherever they were, raced towards the area and the fastest one normally had all." Elsewhere on the canine front, Dimgba is unhappy that dogs are not regarded as edible at Mbasa. "His annoyance was openly registered one morning when a dead dog was buried instead of eating the lot" (pp. 30-31).

The Depictions of Dimgba as Churchman and of Nigerian Anglicanism

Despite his initial misgivings, Dimgba gradually assimilates this amalgam of Christianity and British colonialism. From a rejection of the Anglican insistence on monotheism and denial of the existence of Eke, he moves, within months, to an abandonment of his belief in her and memorises his catechism well enough to qualify for baptism. Ogali depicts the young convert in glowing terms as an extroverted achiever through three chapters of the narrative. After the establishment of Jackson Town adjacent to Umu Okpo Irem and his installation as acting headmaster of the school in the new community, however, Dimgba is presented in a significantly less positive light. He has clearly become part of the imperial power structure and placed himself at odds with his former townspeople. Fearing the indoctrination of their children, many parents refuse to send their children to the new school. Angered by their recalcitrance, Dimgba dispatches ten local Christians to apprehend children and bring them to school. They succeed in capturing twenty boys and girls, but infuriated parents manage to kill two of these "raiders" (p. 76). This incident is an abrupt turning point in the characterisation of Dimgba.

The young protagonist continues to pitch his tent in the colonialist camp and to distance himself from Igbos who remain loyal to their traditional culture. He and his no longer barren wife name their children after Reverend Stewart, Jane Macroy, and Jackson. Dimgba "spoke the white man's language better than his own language and behaved just like they did. His long stay in Jackson Town so westernised him that he lost, very completely, the social behaviour of his own people." His interpretation of hospitality entails a conscious rejection of Igbo traditions; "Dimgba the Catechist would neither offer chalk nor kola. To him, only pagans would do that. He did not dislike kolanut anyway, but what he would not live to see was the offering of kola to the gods, and in his own Christian home!" Certain dimensions of his westernisation border on the absurd: "He presented magazines and tracts to his visitors and this they could not understand as ninety-eight percent of them were illiterates" (p. 81). From the pulpit, Dimgba instils in his flock a love of materialism which even extends to

their rudimentary eschatological expectations. He frequently quotes John 14:2, "In my Father's house are many mansions; every believer who hears him responds by coveting a mansion in the afterlife" (p. 83). There is no mention of Christian social ethics, but Dimgba introduces the concept of monogamy to his congregation and insists that it be obeyed (p. 83). This, as indicated earlier, soon becomes a bone of contention and is one factor prompting the secession of Elder Peter and his followers. Rounding out the portrait, Ogali states that Nweresi "also adopted a cold attitude when it came to the native culture." She and her husband publicly flout time-honoured traditions regarding dress and gender rôles (pp. 81-82).

To his credit, Dimgba eventually evinces some contextual flexibility in adapting the mission of the church to relate it more closely to Igbo culture. While he is its catechist, the Anglican parish in Jackson Town attempts to meet the challenge posed by the rival Native Church of Africa. As a first step, Dimgba is promoted to pastor "in order to have the Anglican Church of Jackson Town blacknised." Readmission of excommunicated members is another, intended "to demonstrate the teaching of Christ which said that a lost sheep should be looked for and not be allowed to go astray." A diocesan synod appoints the Cumberwell Commission of Inquiry "to find ways and means of raising the church to its past standard." In addition to the "blacknisation" of the pastoral office, it recommends liturgical reform, including the use of musical instruments, basing this suggestion on the belief that the injunction in Psalm 150 concerning this matter "was most applicable to black people whose cultural heritage recognised all types of crude musical instruments." Finally, the Cumberwell Commission of Inquiry recommends "house-to-house prayers for members and strongly advised against excommunication" (pp. 116-117). Dimgba promptly implements the proposals as vital components of a "sweeping reformation." He appoints a new choirmaster named Jonathan, who is authorised to employ musical instruments liturgically. This man, in turn, introduces liturgical dance into the services. Dimgba also doubles the numbers of elders in his parish and appoints evangelists who preach in homes, visit sick members, and conduct a programme of outreach to the excommunicated (pp. 117-118). The reforms, in summary, include both changes which are elements of indigenisation and others which were being carried out throughout much of Christendom in the twentieth century.

The Depiction of the Native Church of Africa

The Native Church of Africa continues to grow at the expense of the Anglicans, however, and Ogali emphasises, in his description of the former, why this is the case. He attributes the origins of the separatist faction within the parish to several factors. There is an organic connection (though not necessarily a

cause and effect relationship) between the movements for political and religious independence; one of the leaders of the incipient Native Church of Africa previously played a key rôle in the guerrilla insurgency (pp. 94-95). Furthermore, the vigorous ban on polygamy has disaffected many members, and Dimgba refuses to listen to their arguments against his stance, arguments which are anchored chiefly in tribal tradition but also included appeals to the precedents set by Solomon and Jacob. Not surprisingly, the leader of the secession, Elder Peter, has five wives and fourteen children (pp. 93-95). Thirdly, there is dissatisfaction with the ban on doing "any type of domestic work on Sundays" (p. 95), although Ogali does not elaborate on this matter. At considerably greater length, he details local resistance to the prohibition the missionaries place on the consumption of their time-honoured alcoholic beverage. Indeed, although most converts agree to terminate their practice of making sacrifices to tribal deities, they renounce "completely the decree which banned palm wine drinking." In this matter, the hypocrisy of the missionaries returns to haunt them when Elder Peter points out that "the Parish Priests had been seen on many occasions drinking beer and whisky before and after Sunday services" and argues that accordingly, converts should at least enjoy the freedom to imbibe after worship (p. 96).

A nostalgic perception of the past is a *conditio sine qua non* in the founding of the Native Church of Africa. Elder Peter imagines a virtually sinless society before the advent of Europeans. "Girls who went to their husbands as virgins had all become prostitutes," he generalises, "simply because the new faith which we all embraced has lowered the moral standard of our people." The Anglo-Saxon understanding of due process of law is foreign to this malcontent, which condemns "the idea of giving a thief a fair trial" because "such a treatment had given many people opportunity to steal." In former times Peter insists, "there were relatively no thieves in the whole of Umu Okpo Irem" but, in a curious rhetorical twist, he describes how, before the British arrived "thieves were beaten up by the angry villagers and made to dance naked round the villages with the stolen article tied round their necks." Turning to the realm of religion, he relates how "God Above protected their ancestors long before the arrival of the white man" but conveniently ignores how this guardianship did not extend to people who were victims of human sacrifice. Marriage, moreover, was supposedly more sacred in the past, when "adultery was an unknown thing in Umu Okpo Irem." In a political campaign speech, Peter goes a step further and asserts that because the Goddess of Revenge insisted on the death penalty, "nobody ever stole" in pre-colonial times, when people also lived longer lives than after the intrusion of European civilisation (pp. 98, 102, 122, 135).

The doctrines of the Native Church of Africa reflect, *inter alia*, a desire to reconstruct the supposedly more harmonious days before the advent of Christianity and, apparently, Ogali's commitment to universal human brotherhood and

natural revelation. Underlying all else is an understanding of religion generally as a response "inspired by man's desire to offer thanks to God for His goodness to humanity" in terms of "bright sunshine, bright stars and moon, heavy rainfall, good harvest, fertile women, to mention only a few." There is no mention of sin, perhaps for reasons rooted in the assumed nature of Igbo society cited above, nor of salvation in an eschatological sense as taught by the Christian missionaries. Instead, the Native Church of Africa proclaims a more down-to-earth faith. "We will worship the God of Nature," announces Peter at the constituent assembly. "We will never believe men's doctrines; sun, moon and stars and seasons of the year show us clearly what God is" (p. 102). What room, if any, this leaves for traditional diviners he does not specify. A corollary of this fundamental tenet is religious freedom because, in Peter's words, "any attempt to force man directly or indirectly to accept any particular faith, religious doctrine or method of God-worship, rumples social harmony" (p. 104). In an expression reminiscent of twentieth-century Unitarianism, the Ba'hai faith, and other manifestations of religion, Peter also declares that he believes in "the universal brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of one God" (p. 103). Apparently resentment of colonialism has taken its toll on this expressed commitment to divine love of humanity. Elder Peter explains to his followers that while whites come from a wealthy country, "God hates them and because of their evil ways, He took away the sunshine from them and added it to the one He had already given to the black man" (p. 103).

This seed of ethnocentricity germinates during the early stage of the Native Church of Africa. Ogali describes the ordination, in Umu Okpo Irem, of Baba, "a tall, huge black ebony man with protruding tummy" who has not "visited a barber's shop for the past four years or more, nor had any comb touched his hair either." In his sermon, he condemns most of the world's religions as "imported" and accuses European missionaries of depicting angels as white and devils as black." Baba's Jesus, by contrast, is "more of an African than a white man" because, in an allusion to Matthew 2:13-23 that is rife with eisegesis, in his infancy he was taken to Africa and "did not return to his country until He had become an adult." In harmony with his xenophobic ethnic loyalties, Baba denounces "the white man's policy of using imported drinks and bread for a Communion in black man's own country" and defends polygamy as an indigenous African institution which fulfils the commandment "go and multiply." The ordination service includes glossolalia, a detailed vision, celebration of the Lord's Supper using palm wine and fractured kola nuts (pp. 105, 109-110).

Conclusion

When assayed with the touchstone of international literary standards commonly used to evaluate the conventions which Ogali employs, The *Juju Priest* is a very

rough-hewn work of art. Numerous technical flaws detract from the credibility of the narrative, certain dimensions of the plot seem contrived, and, as many segments of the text quoted in the present article reveal, the level of Ogali's command of English prose suggests that a more demanding editor than he had at Fourth Dimension Publishers in Enugu would have served him well. It is not, therefore, in its literary artistry that one can hope to find any enduring value in this novel, but rather in its author's portrayal of the traditional religious beliefs and practices in one corner of Igboland, missionary endeavours in concert with British colonialism there, and the emergence of an indigenous African church. To be sure, virtually any commentator on Ogali's reconstruction of these intimately linked matters immediately encounters a minefield of problems concerning perspective and prejudices. *The Juju Priest* is, after all, to a considerable degree a study in perspectives of various religious traditions and their unfolding in an increasingly pluralistic society. Several of the British and Igbo characters express strong convictions and attitudes towards Christian orthodoxy or flexibility in doctrinal matters, ethnic sympathies, imperialism, and other matters on which presumably few missiologists and literary scholars can claim neutrality.

That said, what emerges vividly from a consideration of the Native Church of Africa in the context of the other religious dimensions which Ogali includes in his narrative, is the gaping chasm between it and nearly any other manifestation of Christianity on the one hand, and certain similarities linking that indigenous church with aspects of pre-colonial religion and culture on the other. It is hardly too much to conclude that Ogali's version of the Native Church of Africa is immeasurably more African than Christian in anything remotely resembling the historic church universal.

Ogali's indictments of certain missionary beliefs and practices are arguably grossly overdrawn, but to the extent that they are valid, these allegations highlight his perception of the failure of many endeavours to anchor Christianity in Igbo society, and mirror concerns which Achebe and other West African *littérateurs* had raised for many years. For that matter, their calls for vastly greater contextualisation of the Gospel were nothing new when issued between the 1950s and the 1970s. As early as 1908, Bishop James Johnson (ca. 1836-1917), a native of Sierra Leone who had succeeded Bishop Crowther in the Niger diocese, urged the Pan-Anglican Congress to strive for a culturally sensitive and diverse Christianity. "Christianity is intended to be the religion not of one particular race of people only, but of the whole world. But in different countries it will wear different types, if it is to become indigenous to every soil," asserted this African. "It should have in Europe a European type, in Asia an Asiatic type and in Africa an African type—different types of one and the same religion with different formulae of Faith and different ceremonies of worship; for not otherwise can Christianity wear anywhere a national character, not otherwise can its attitude be what it should towards national customs which have much in

them to help to promote indigenousness to it" (Ayandele 1970: 302). It should be borne in mind in this context that Anglican, Roman Catholic, and other kinds of missionaries witnessed rapid growth of their churches amongst the Igbos during the first half of the twentieth century, notwithstanding the distinctly European forms in which Christianity was planted in eastern Nigeria. The reasons for this have been the subject of international scholarly debate since the 1960s, and few of the disputants have argued that there was a direct causal link between increased contextualisation and numerical expansion. Indeed, Professor Ogbu U. Kalu, an eminent church historian at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka in 1990 bravely swam against a swift current of what he termed "nationalist historiography" by stressing the primacy of the white missionary factor in the conversion of the Igbos. Covering the period which encompasses the chronological framework of *The Juju Priest* and bemoaning a perceived tendency of African historians to "suppress awkward facts," Kalu argued that, beginning in the 1950s and especially in the wake of independence in the 1960s, Nigerian and other scholars elsewhere on the continent had overplayed their hands in seeking to reverse the previous domination of "missionary historiography" (i.e. that written by missionaries and their sponsors) with its emphasis on the importance of foreign, and usually European, agents in the successful evangelisation of Igboland early in the twentieth century. Essential pillars of this new nationalist school were, firstly, an emphasis on the rôle of indigenous evangelists and catechists, and secondly, a depiction of foreign missionaries as agents of imperialism whose versions of Christianity had pernicious effects on African culture. As a corollary to the second emphasis, some African historians had glorified indigenes who had resisted the intrusion of missionary Christianity. Kalu contended that in general, those missions which had the largest number of and best equipped white missionaries had been the most effective in converting Igbos to the Christian faith. He enumerated such factors as fascination with the exotic (i.e. white people and their ways), the inveiglements of material goods, missionary ties to colonial governments, popular Igbo demands for mission schools at which they could learn English, and local distrust of black missionary personnel as particularly significant dimensions of this (Kalu 1990). This theory, of course, squarely contradicts the thrust of *The Juju Priest*, although *some* of Ogali's characters clearly fit Kalu's model.

It is enlightening to consider *The Juju Priest* in view of Bethuel A. Kiplagat's treatment of certain African novelists' perceptions of successive stages of Christianity's encounter with traditional sub-Saharan societies. In his overarching model, there are three such stages. In the first, "The Sowing of the Seed," missionaries proclaim the Gospel and are met with varying degrees of resistance and asked many challenging questions about this new religion. They nevertheless succeed in planting churches. The second stage, "The Transition," is marked by "tension and conflict . . . not only between the converts and the non-

Christians, but also within the Christian flock, between those who would have absolutely nothing to do with the ways of the tribe and the second generation Christians who see a value in certain aspects of the way of life of the tribe." The third stage, that of "The Settled Church", has given African novelists opportunities to probe the extent to which religious ideas, practices, and institutions of foreign provenance in well-established churches in mission fields harmonise with equally firmly-entrenched folkways and mindsets (Kiplagat 1972).

Ogali's novel offers many elements which illustrate the first stages of Kiplagat's model. Yet *The Juju Priest* goes significantly beyond it by focussing on one of the most widespread phenomena of African Christianity which was an international response to missionary endeavours, namely the appearance of thousands of independent churches. Kiplagat nowhere addresses this enormous and dynamic theme.

Ogali's plea for indigenisation may have some cogency when read by the Nigerians for whom it was written, and it must be conceded that by the time *The Juju Priest* was published Nigerian churchmen were determining much of what was transpiring on that mission field. The era of exclusively European prerogative had faded decades earlier. When viewed through European eyes, however, and perhaps through those of cosmopolitan Nigerians, Ogali's reconstruction of both the British colonial and African worlds detracts from its own cogency. Through his spokesman, Elder Peter, he presents what might be called – with apologies to Edward Said – "Occidentalism" in a homogenised image of "the white man's country", which stands in stark contrast to the immeasurably more complex reality which many Nigerians could have deduced from watching television or reading pertinent books and magazines. Africa is also homogenised; Peter insists that "Africans had a way of worshipping God long before the arrival of the white man who imposed his own method on the natives" (p. 101) and believes that there is an "African way of doing things" (p. 135). He and his allies in the Native Church of Africa and the Njaba United Party apparently believe they speak for Africans generally. They (and perhaps Ogali) comprehend much about the baleful legacy of colonialism but fail to understand the magnitude of their debt to appropriated British institutions. Ironically enough, for instance, the NUP employs a democratic election process as a forum for denigrating the importation of European institutions (p. 137) while, in a decidedly less democratic spirit, members of that party call for the deaths of their enemies (p. 134). Consumed *cum grano salis*, *The Juju Priest* reveals a good deal about the aetiology of an indigenous church amongst the Igbos, but in the final analysis its greatest nutritional value to the intellect may lie in what it unconsciously says about the perceptions of its disillusioned author in a country whose experiments with democracy have generally been short-lived.

Notes

[1] "A. Ogali Ogali [*sic*]," in Janheinz Jahn, *et al.*, *Who's Who in African Literature* (Tübingen: Horst Erdmann Verlag, 1972), pp. 287-288.

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