

## **Oriko Ritual Meal Among the Mbaise People of Igboland, Nigeria**

Paul Okoro Ashiegbu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*(Ph.D Nwafor Orizu College of Education Nsugbe)*

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**ABSTRACT :** *The research focused on oriko ritual meal among the Mbaise people of Igboland, Nigeria. Many years ago, concerned Nigerians considered what was happening in the Nigerian society and the level of moral decay, and declared that evil had done its worst and that things have spoilt. Authors even expressed this sentiment in writing. Till today, the situation continues unabated. In the families, one sees high level of mistrust among siblings, spouses and persons who were once in an unbreakable bond. This is the reality that provoked this research. The author used the phenomenological or the inductive method of observing events without intervention. It was found that, in real life experience and in a healthy social relationship, only people with like minds share meal. The oriko ritual meal practised among the Mbaise people of Igboland is recommended as the effective remedy for resolving societal conflict, in Mbaise in particular and in Igboland in general.*

**KEYWORDS -** *Oriko, Covenant, Ritual, Meal, Mbaise, Igboland*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

It is a generally known fact that there is no society in this world that is free from crime. As long as it is a place where more than one person lives, there is the tendency of experiencing crimes. Criminal acts are of various forms, such as vandalization, violence, terrorism, robbery, and, banditry. In Igboland of Nigeria it includes ritual killings, get-rich – quick syndrome, vandalization of public utilities, internet fraud, illegal mining and oil bunkering. However, the spate of evil that happens in families and among persons related by blood cannot be emphasized. This is the social reality that provoked the interest in this research. More than forty years ago, Iwe (1979) ruminating on the level of social decay and the erosion of morality in Nigeria in general and in Igboland in particular, asserted that things have spoilt. By religious confession, the Igbo people of Nigeria are mostly Christians. However, adherents of other religions can be found today, for instance, Moslems and members of African Traditional Religion (ATR). It is unfortunate, however, that despite the collective efforts of those religious groups working in synergy with the government to curb crime in the Igbo society, today, it is still on the rise. There is mistrust everywhere, from family members to the community, and from community to the ethnic nationality. Whereas in Mbaise traditional society, the forebears left the practice of oriko ritual meal, as a ceremony for resolving conflicts in families, in kindreds and in the community, the ceremony serves to restore peace, trust and harmony among siblings, spouses, friends and business partners. This research is therefore, making the case that the rediscovery of the Mbaise oriko ritual meal is a panacea to resolving conflict in Igboland of Nigeria. The purpose of the study is to foster cohesion among the Igbo people, and so, to enhance development in the area, because, development can only come where there is unity and harmony. This research is significant for some reasons. First, in the age of pluralism and in a society where people are free to practice any religion of their choice, in order to avoid the feeling that one was coerced to practice a religion against one's choice, the cultural ethos into which everyone was born becomes salutary. Second, in the age of inverted spirituality where many people, especially, the young people accept easily the so called 'modern way of life', many see Christianity and Islam as expatriate religions. Such people claim to revert to the traditional religion but fail to practise the tenets of that religion as it was practised by the ancestors. They still inflict evil on their neighbours, on the pretext that they are adhering to the ways of the ancestors. Furthermore, the research will serve as a debut in seeking a meeting point between Christianity and the Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR). This research is therefore an invitation to everybody to synergize so as to find a lasting solution to conflicts in the society. The type of research to be done here is qualitative as the use of numbers is not needed. There are also no theories to explain behaviour. The methodology is the phenomenological or inductive approach of observing events with neither intervention nor participation. Sources were collected basically, from books, journals and interview. The strategy of writing is purely descriptive and hermeneutical as items from the interview will be interpreted. The strategy is also developmental because, inductively, the import of the Mbaise oriko ritual meal will be recommended for the entirety of Igboland as the way to go, when it comes to conflict resolution. By ritual this researcher accepts the meaning as is given in Webster's New World ,College 4 Dictionary. It presents ritual as "the observance of set forms of rite, as in

public worship” (p. 1238). Oriko is a meal. However, it is not an ordinary meal. It takes place as if in a setting of public worship. For this reason, it is a ritual.

## **II. MBAISE**

It is a large inhabited region and part of Igboland, located in Imo State, southeast of Nigeria. Politically, it is made up of three Local Government Areas. The name Mbaise is derived from the five big clans that make up the region. These are Ezinihitte, Oke – Ovororo, Agbaja, Ekwereazu and Ahiara. The land mass of the area covers 160 square kilometres, with a population of about three million people. The majority of the people is Catholic Christians. Protestants and adherents of other religions are in the minority. The Mbaise people hold their African culture in high esteem. They have many cultural festivals of which the most pronounced is Iri Ji Mbaise (New Yam Festival) which is celebrated on August 15, every year. By occupation, their ancestors were agriculturalists and the most important crop is yam. With this background knowledge, it becomes easy to understand the setting of the study.

## **III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Notwithstanding that this research is basically not done from a religious point of view, studies that have been done by Christian scholars offer great insight to the subject matter, oriko ritual meal. Pallil (2004) described the Eucharist as a sacrifice and a sacred meal. Like every sacrifice, the Eucharist is offered by a priest. As a sacrifice, the priest who officiates it makes present again the one, unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross. What gives the Eucharist its meaning is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and abiding by the mandate given by Jesus when said: “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19). Pallil informs that the Eucharist as a religious sacrifice “is made up of immolation and oblation” (p.154). Immolation is the act of destroying the victim or the animal used for the sacrifice and oblation is the act of offering the victim to God. In the sacrifice of the Eucharist, the immolation has been done once and for all, when Jesus died on the cross. On the contrary, the oblation is done again by the priest who officiates the Eucharist. It is important to note that the Eucharist is a meal. As meal, Pallil echoes the words of John Paul II (2003, p. 111) that “the Eucharist is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful with Christ through communion”. Communion is a ritual meal shared by people who participate in the same sacrifice. The participants are bound by the same belief and have one mind. They are bonded in a covenant.

This notion of covenant is spelled out by Okonkwo in his work, *Igba Oriko – Ndu: The Transformational Mission of the Eucharistic Meal*. Okonkwo locates the context and objective of his work as a swift response to the call made by John Paul II when the latter, as Pope, visited Nigeria in 1982. The Pope made the call to Catholic bishops and priests and pronounced the urgency of “a new era of evangelization.” Responding to the mandate given by the Pope, the author understood that a veritable way of launching a new era of evangelization has to be by inculturation. Inculturation is the process of making the gospel take root in every culture. For Okonkwo, the mandate has to be realized “by building on a cultural reality of human beings.” The reality in question means to see “God – in culture and God – above culture” (p.6). By saying this, Okonkwo established that God is present in every culture but also, God is above every culture. For the teachings of the Christian religion to make its home in the adherents, the teachings of the religion have to take root in the culture of the people.

Having established that, Okonkwo brought into his thought the Igbo concepts of *Igba Ndu* and *Igba Oriko*. Both concepts are traditional covenant practices among the Igbo people of Nigeria. Okonkwo differentiates between the two practices. While in *igba ndu*, “the gods and the spirit world are mere witnesses and not covenantors (sic), *igba oriko* is, most times, a ceremonial reunion of the living and the dead, the gods of the land and the people” (p. 7-8). In both ceremonies, there are solemn words of agreement between the parties that enter into the pact. Local deities are involved because the covenanters are convinced or believe that the judgment of the gods is instant, prompt, decisive and vindictive. They do not spare defaulters. In this case, it is not really easy to say where lies the difference between *igba oriko* and *igba ndu* as Okonkwo was asserting. He was probably caught up in a web of confusion concerning the two Igbo covenant practices, because of his reference to the ancient practice of *igba oriko* and *igba ndu*, as is described in the legendary story of *Omenuko* written by Nwanna (1981). It is better to say, just as Okonkwo later realized that, the two Igbo covenant practices “are interwoven and that the real differences between *igba ndu* and *igba oriko* is a matter of degree than of kind” (p. 9-10). In both rituals, there is the sharing of meal, there are witnesses both humans and deities, and there is a solemn agreement. The import of the pact is so vehement and lasting, such that it is not advisable for any of the covenanters to go against what was agreed upon. The notion of having like mind is a salient character of covenants in general and that of *oriko* sacred meal in particular. This is

the reason Okonkwo relates orikọ with the Christian ritual meal, the Eucharist. What is core in the ritual meal is to make people to be in good relationship with others. This is the idea of communion.

Reflecting on the situation of his Indian people, Dabre (2005) sees the Eucharist as a world meal. The goal of what the Church celebrates in the Eucharist “is for the salvation and wellbeing of all humanity, without discrimination” (p. 895). Dabre speaks of the dearth of social transformation and renewal as lacking among Indians. He attributes the problem to the failure of Indian regions in sharing their religions with others. They felt the religions defined them and that they were specifically for them. Their faith made them individualistic and closed in. Seeking for a source of unity, Dabre only saw it in the Eucharist. If the Eucharist can unify the people, it means it is an agent of social transformation, restructuring and renewal. Being an agent of social transformation, it means the Eucharist is an agent of mission. For this reason, Dabre highlights the Eucharist as “standing for something unique among Indian religions” and asserts that the Eucharist “is a source of unity not only for Christians but for all humanity” (p. 896). Applying inductive reasoning, that is, moving from specifics to generals, what Dabre says of the Eucharist with reference to the Indian people can be said of the whole world. It is a global meal, even for those who do not believe in it. It means Jesus Christ, celebrated in the Eucharist, is for the whole of humanity. The Eucharist cannot unify the world if first and foremost there is no action toward reconciliation. In the world, reconciliation is needed, between individuals and individuals, between groups and groups and between nations and nations.

Speaking about reconciliation, Onyema, in his article, “A Moral theological Study of John Paul iis Dives in Misericordia No.14 in the light of Reconciliation in Igbo Culture” brings out the outstanding fact that there is moral evil or sin in the world. People, groups and nations carry baggage of hurts. The author, looking at society at large, sees that there is broken relationship everywhere, in families and in societies. Broken relationship means being far away from each other and eventually, being far away from God. The author therefore, calls for reconciliation at all levels of human relationship. This call is relevant for the study of orikọ ritual meal. Ritual or covenant meals have the feature of reconciliation. Orikọ, being a covenant meal, is equally a reconciliatory meal. In a world characterized by broken relationship, reconciliation becomes an important issue. This is one of the imports of the orikọ ritual meal.

To buttress the point on the relevance of reconciliation, Anioke (2009) on his own part, took up the theme of reconciliation again. According to him, while on the one hand reconciliation is used in the New Testament “to describe the restoration of human beings and the world both with God and with fellow human beings, on the other hand, in the secular sense, “reconciliation shows a change of relationship between individuals or groups of persons . A change from anger, hatred or hostility to love, friendship and intimacy” (p. 241). In a society like the Nigerian society, characterized by broken relationship, mistrust, betrayal and mutual suspicion in families, groups and ethnic nationalities, a constant call for reconciliation and mutual trust becomes imperative. With reference to the Nigerian case, the author gave seven basic elements that have to be present in any sincere act of reconciliation. The elements are, a sincere acknowledgement of the injury inflicted by the offending party; a sincere sense of remorse from the party; preparedness to tender an apology; readiness to let go of anger and bitterness from the offended party; commitment from all parties never to repeat such injuries; adequate compensation to the injured party according to the measure of the injury and contraction of a solemn agreement by all parties concerned (p. 247). The solemn agreement is another way of talking about covenant or pact. That is what the orikọ ritual meal portends. This is also what the Christian Eucharistic meal portrays.

Two decades ago, Obiaga (2006) did a comparative study between the Christian Eucharist as a covenant meal and the Igba ndụ ritual meal in Igbo culture of Nigeria. The aim of his thesis was “to expose the concept and value of igba ndu as a covenant of Igboland with the goal of unifying Christians more if they discover in the Eucharist a common blood of the new covenant which Christ poured out for the world” (p. 4). He urged the people who receive Communion, otherwise called communicants, “to learn from the significance of the Igbo traditional sacred meal, igba ndụ, as a way of trying to inculcate the message of the Eucharist as a meal shared at the table of the Lord which has a binding and unifying effect” (p. 4). The words “binding” and “unifying” are relevant in discussing ritual meals in general and the Eucharist in particular. The Igbo expression igba ndụ means “to bind life,” “to unify life,” or “to contract life.” The relationship in question implies a relationship of peace; it is a lasting relationship characterized by trust, justice and peace.

The renewal of peace in a relationship or in a covenant is a fundamental theme in the work of Arazu (1994). He took time to discuss the Igbo ritual of contracting life, known as *igba ndu*. As Arazu informed, the concept literarily means “joining life.” He said that the Igbo ritual of 7 *igba ndu* has a lot in common with the ancient oriental forms of covenant. By “oriental”, he referred to the Asian peoples, especially, Indians. Concerning the affinity between the practice as performed among the Igbo people of West Africa and Asian people, Arazu informs that: The parties cut into their flesh and extract some blood which is collected in a small container. The kola nut is broken and the parties take the lobes, dip them in the blood and eat. They thus become blood relations by ritual contact (p. 10).

From what is mentioned above, Arazu brought out four things, namely, the use of kola nut, cutting into the flesh, dipping the kola nut into blood, and eating the kola nut dipped into blood. Arazu, however, did not mention if there are words of agreement pronounced by the parties that contract the covenant. Second, the use of kola nut is common among the Igbo people. It is not known if the oriental (Asian) people use kola nut the same way it is used in rituals among the Igbo people. From the foregoing, it is unclear the similarity or the difference Arazu wanted to bring out. The aim of the Igbo ritual is not to make people become blood relations if they were not one previously. It is observable nowadays though, that in some circles in Igboland, young people, especially, persons desiring to enter into a lasting relationship cut into their body and lick their blood, and by so doing enter into covenant. The *igba ndu* as practised by the Igbo people is basically performed to allay mutual fears, to restore mutual trust, to reconcile and to reenact peace that was there originally before there came an infringement that caused fear, suspicion and loss of trust. The *igba ndu* of Mbaise people involves oath taking. It is important to note that in the ritual as practised among the Mbaise people, individuals can enter into oath – taking without really involving *oriko*, as *oriko* strictly speaking, means, eating together. Whether it is *igba ndu* or *oriko*, a bilateral contract is involved.

As Arazu (1994) pointed out, the stipulations in *igba ndu* “have legal consequence” (p.10). The consequences, even though they are said to be legal, are more customary than juridical. In its customary outlook, “the legal consequences can involve curse and penalty when one party infringes on the terms of the *igbandu*” (p.10). The essence of the ritual meal of *igbandu*, *oriko* or *nriko* comes from the fact that Mbaise is a society where humans live. In African societies, “traditional life is profoundly communal and characterized by sharing with neighbours, family, lineage, clan and tribe. This indicates that the individual does not and cannot exist alone” (p.19). Given the fact that people live together, activities are often done together. This is what it means to say that their life is corporate and that for them meal is a social act, since it is shared together.

For this reason, eating together incapacitates every member of the community. As Arazu indicated, “anyone who shares in such communal meal is rendered powerless and is incapable of inflicting evil or corporal punishment to his people without inflicting such punishment to himself” (p.20). However, it is better to say “harm” than “punishment”. In the case of suspicion or tensed relationship, it is also common among the Mbaise people to have a herbal chalk called *ogwu nso oriko*. It is a preventive preparation individuals trace on their throats a few times or touch it on their tongues while spitting out simultaneously. The purpose is to prevent illnesses or even death in case one eats with someone the person should not eat with. The preparation is therefore a proactive measure, or technically speaking, it is a preventive, antidote or therapeutic measure. An individual who eats alone, and only alone cannot begin to conceive of being poisoned or of poisoning oneself. Social hygiene is therefore taken seriously among the Mbaise people. The fact that there is communal life and communal meal makes social hygiene an imperative. The practice of ritual meal in African communities can throw light to the understanding of the Christian Eucharistic meal.

Akusu (1985) in his study of the Eucharistic banquet tried to do a comparison between how communal meal among his Urhobo people resembles and differs from the Eucharistic meal. He talked about values and disvalues in Urhobo meals. Considering the values, he mentions that among the Urhobo people of Nigeria, communal meals “are usually for people who are related but strangers are most welcome” (p.28). In this case, meal is seen as having the character of marking boundaries. It is for people who are into a certain relationship. Strangers can be welcome. This becomes a concession to the rule. The disvalue he isolated from the cultural practice is that, it leads to sectionalism or “a situation of being “closed in” and inability to have relation with the outsider” (p.26). What Akusu described is simply what meal is among his Urhobo people. It is simply a social act, for the fact that other people are involved. However, it just relates with the *Oriko* ritual meal of the Mbaise people, by being a social act. As opposed to the *oriko* meal, it does not have the character of a covenant. The reason is that, even though it is meal, it requires neither witnesses, nor deities, nor solemn agreements. It is however, basically, for family relatives.

The notion of relationship is also outstanding in the study Edet (2003) did on “The Eucharist and the unity of the Family of God in Uyo Diocese. He argued that “ritual ceremonies are not often communal because it has an accultic undertone and is restricted to a selected group of initiates” (p.17). Specific elements in his opinion of meals are that, first, they can be communal meals; second, they are not necessarily ritual, as ritual connotes religion or worship; third, such meals are reserved for groups, especially, initiated members of such groups. The expression “accultic” implies that the setting of the meal is neither worship nor religious. However, there is an inner contradiction in what he said, because, he mentioned that such meals are restricted to selected group of initiates. The reason is, the word “initiates” or “initiation” already connotes ritual or worship, magic or religion. His opinion however, has something in common with the orikọ ritual meal in Mbaise: It is relational. It relates the living with the living. This idea of relation cuts across individuals. In this case, one talks of interrelatedness.

Hawley (1950) more than a century ago wrote on “human ecology” in a work in which he tried to give a theory of community structure. He presented the concept of ecology “as based upon the perception of the world of life as a system of dynamic interdependences” (p.3). He talked about “the interrelatedness of Life” (p. 33 – 65), and the “web of life.” In the expression “web of life,” he underlined the idea of “relationship among living creatures” (p. 33). This is where the notion of symbiosis comes in. Symbiosis or mutualism denotes a mutual dependence between organisms, whether they are like or unlike. Humans live within this same web with other living beings. The situation whereby organisms “relate themselves to one another on the basis of their likeness and their differences,” is defined as commensalism by Hawley (p. 39 – 42). The special feature of commensalism is that it involves organisms that live together. The idea is that as long as organisms live together in a specific area, they have no choices as to relate or not to relate. This is also the reality of human beings who live in a family or a community. One has to relate. Something similar to this happens in the orikọ ritual meal. It imposes choice on the individuals who live in the same human ecological environment, whether it is family or village. In so far as one lives in society, one cannot be in isolation with the other people.

This is a truth communicated by Hobbs and Blank (1978). They echoed the words of the English poet, John Donne, that “no man is an island, entire of itself” (p. 25). It is a given that there is no society without tensions that make some people to stay away from others. However, Hobbs and Blank made the affirmation that: “From birth to death every person is a part participant in society, and neither the individual nor any human experience can be understood independently of that involvement” (p.25). No matter what individuals decide to do on their own, society is bigger than the individual; a group is bigger than an individual member; and, a family is bigger than an individual member. Hobbs and Blank (1978) gave a sociological response and support to this notion. They affirmed that “every individual is a part of society and that society is composed of interacting individuals, each having an influence on others and each being influenced by others” (p.26 – 27). This is simply called social interaction. When two people enter into a pact, the idea that is being communicated is that the individuals acknowledge they need each other and that one cannot exist without the other. As Hobbs and Blank asserted, “it is not mere sentimentality to say that people need people” (p. 27). In life, people enter into relationship. When the relationship wanes and even breaks up completely, the way of repairing it is through the covenant meal, orikọ. In every meal, the relationship of the participants is primary.

Delling (1985) communicated in a theological word study he did on the Greek word trapeza. The word means “table” and in an extended sense, it means “meal” or food. He informed that in the ancient world tables were not fabricated in the same form. People took different postures while eating. The posture taken by individuals determined the form of the table. He said that in Palestine in particular, the Jewish rabbis prefer to recline, and even make the posture mandatory. Delling underscores that even when the word is not mentioned, the expression “recline” implies a table is present. The expression is used for “a table fellowship.” A fellowship is not made for a single individual. It was made for people of like minds and not for outsiders. This indicates that meals have restrictions and boundaries. Delling pointed out that when the word “fellowship” is used in the gospel (Lk 22:21), it shows that “the traitor belongs to the inner circle” (p. 1187). This makes the point being made about meals in general and ritual meals in particular resounding. It is about the power of relationship. Participation and commitment are features of a table fellowship as Delling asserted (p. 1187). They are equally defining features of orikọ meal.

Anigbo (1987) about forty years ago, from the standpoint of social anthropology, explored the concept commensality as a process of sharing the same table, with reference to the Igbo people in general and the Ibagwa

Aka people of Nsukka in particular. He underscored that people do not appear at the same table haphazardly to share meal. In Igboland of Nigeria, “commensality is essentially eating with a purpose (p. 7). It is an intentional act. The expression “same table” is laden with some unsaid things. To have or to be “commensal partners,” does not simply mean people who sit at the same furniture called table to eat, or people who share the same meal, at the same time and at the same place. In this case, strangers can find themselves at the same table and in the same restaurants. It does not make them commensal partners. Such people might have different aims and different interests. Likewise, in ritual meals, the aim is intentional; the interest is also intended. This is why there are boundary markers. Such markers are social indicators for inclusion and exclusion from the meal. Without making speeches, the act of sharing food is a significant expression. It is a bold statement that the participants are in good relationship. Anigbo affirms that commensality can have a religious import or it can simple be ordinary. When people of the same family or group of friends come together and share meal, it is commensality in the ordinary or secular sense of it. However, if it is a meal taken in an environment of religion or magic, it becomes a sacred or ritual meal. Anigbo does not accept the notion of creating differences between religious and secular food, as was done by the sociologist, Emile Durkheim. Perhaps the dichotomy served its purpose, at a time when it was necessary to make difference between the sacred and the profane. For Anigbo, “commensality is not a casual affair. The implication being that food in the service of commensality has a special meaning, that is, ordinary food assumes a new dimension in a particular set of social relationship” (p. 14). It has to be noted that Anigbo’s study on commensality is from the anthropological point of view: Meal is a social act. It happens among humans in society. On the contrary, orikọ meal has features that are not attested in Anigbo’s study: solemn agreement, deities, and human witnesses. These constitute salient differences between the orikọ ritual meal and the “same table” experience as portrayed in Anigbo’s idea of commensality.

#### **IV. SUMMARY OF REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Pallil (2004) from a religious point of view presented the Eucharist as a sacrifice and a meal which unites people. For Okonkwo (1994), for the transformational mission of the Eucharist to be realized the church must borrow something from the Igbo ritual meal of igba orikọ - ndụ. Onyema (2009) and Anioke (2009) made their own intervention to the importance of the Eucharistic meal to the world by emphasizing reconciliation. Earlier, Obiaga (2006) discussed the traditional Igbo ritual, igba ndụ, and proposed it as a fundamental element that should help Christians understand better the Eucharistic meal and the unity it claims to bring about. Much earlier, Arazu (1994) did a study on broken relationship and showed that igba ndụ in Igboland has legal consequences of which parties who participate in it must take the stipulations serious. Akusu (1985), though not of Igbo ethnic nationality indicated how a good understanding of communal meal among his Urhobo ethnic nationality could help for a better understanding of the Christian Eucharistic meal. Edet (2003) also made the same point about his Catholic Diocese of Uyo: That the Eucharist can help toward the unity of the family of God. Hawley (1950) wrote on commensalism and highlighted how organisms, including humans, live in perpetual interrelationship. This reality implies an attitude of ‘live and let live’ for humans. In relation with this, Hobbs and Blank (1978), in their sociological view underscored that human beings live in society. No one can live alone. For this reason, humans should be not just social but sociable, that is relational. Delling (1985) did a theological presentation of the Greek word trapeza, and showed that it means “table” or “meal”. Special feature of tables or meals is that they are discriminatory. Not everyone is invited. Meal chooses partners and participants. Anigbo (1987) did a study on commensality and presented it as the process of sharing table or meal. His overarching point is that people share table or meal with a purpose.

All of the thoughts mentioned above have something relevant to say about meal, whether it is ordinary meal or ritual. Ritual meal carries the vestige of covenant, reconciliation and unity. It sets boundaries. Not everyone is invited. Those who eat together are considered as being of the same mind. In Mbaise area of Igboland, orikọ was a procedure for allaying fear, suspicion, and restoring relationship and trust. This research is therefore making the statement that the recovery of the orikọ meal is important for national cohesion in Igboland. At this point, it is good to present what orikọ is and what constitute it.

#### **V. ORIKO**

From the oral interview done with Marcellinus Ashiegbu Onunekwu (Nov. 12, 2012), he informed that the concept orikọ is different from the concept igba ndụ. What makes them similar is the fact that solemn agreement is involved in both of the rituals. In traditional Mbaise society, stealing is abhorred. Any person who steals from a neighbour is thereby creating an unhealthy social environment. The social environment is said to be dirty or unhygienic. The

relationship is strained. The one offended in particular, is not supposed to eat with the perpetrator of the offence. By stealing a neighbour's property, a situation of fear has been created. The one offended does not pronounce invective on the one who stole his or her property. Properties could be domestic animals such as fowls or goats. It could also be agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables or cassava on the farm. Often the offender may not be far from the offended. If the offended person pronounces bad words against the offender, such offenders are mischievous. They would at times sell the stolen article surreptitiously, and bring the money to the offended who is also the owner of the good. If the victim accepts the money and uses it without knowing, this attracts incurable sicknesses. In Mbaise land in particular and in Igboland in general, it is believed that sicknesses do not only come from bacteria or viruses as medicine teaches. Sicknesses can have physical causes. However, they are also socially and culturally diagnosed and treated. Similarly, if a married woman has extra marital affairs with another man, that is to say, she cheats on her husband and continues to prepare meals for the husband, such a situation could trigger mortal ill health for the partner. It is better the man refrain from consuming meals prepared by the woman. Such a situation could amount to social uncleanness. There is need for social distancing of self. If two friends, business partners or siblings begin to suspect each other of evil acts, it is better to take a social distance. The aim of taking a social distance is to avoid becoming sick or eating one's own poison.

Often people fall sick either because of what they ate or because of the fear of what they ate. In Mbaise traditional society, risk is always associated with eating unclean food or eating with unclean person, with unclean vessels or in an unclean environment. Uncleanness does not depend on physical uncleanness. In life, sickness can be biological – physical, psychological – mental, social, spiritual or moral. The degree to which sickness becomes serious is contingent on the leaning, context or cause. In Igbo traditional society in general, sicknesses are associated with social life and social life is in turn associated with culture. Before particular illnesses are treated inquiries are conducted, from diviners concerning the cause. Most of the time it is discovered that some sicknesses come as a result of social or relational uncleanness.

Society takes social hygiene seriously. You do not just begin to eat with anybody you see. The fact that one looks neat outwardly, with clean clothes and clean hands does not immediately translate that the person is clean to share table or meal with. Likewise, in Mbaise society, eating together is done for a purpose. It goes beyond the dictates of biology or physical outlook. It goes beyond the intellectual. It has a lot to do with the social: Can we eat with such and such person (s)? Can we continue to eat with such and such person(s)? This is a whole world of reality. When there is a rupture in relationship, to restore it, the Mbaise people would do orikọ.

## **VI. OGWU ORIKO**

The term orikọ or nriọ, as it is called in some parts of Igboland literally means the act of eating together. However, in Mbaise, it means something more than merely sharing the same table or the same meal with somebody. It refers to the consequence of eating together with someone one was not supposed to share meal with. So, orikọ strictly speaking means the situation of ill health contacted as a result of having eaten with a socially unclean person. The person could be a brother, a sister, a relative, a spouse, a business partner or a friend that has betrayed trust. When such a malaise or suspicion is registered and the people concerned want to restore the relationship, a ceremony of isọ nsọ orikọ is necessarily conducted. This ceremony is both a reactionary and proactive act performed to check the menace of impending or sicknesses or death that could come as a result of eating with somebody one was not supposed to eat with. It is reactionary in the sense that when someone has become a victim of social poisoning, that is, has eaten with someone he or she was not supposed to eat with, the ceremony serves as reassurance and restorer of trust. As a proactive act, it is a preventive or an antidote measure to prevent someone from becoming a victim, either of another person's mischief or one's own self-infliction or self-infection.

In this case, a bar of pounded and mixed herbs is prepared. It is basically made of oji Igbo, the Igbo native kola nut, ose oji (alligator pepper), palm wine, water, nzu (white chalk), roots, a cock and a hen, fresh pepper an akwụ ojukwu (oil palm nut called okebe in Mbaise). At this point, an attempt will be made to give a hermeneutics of the items used in the herbal remedy, oḡwụ orikọ.

## **VII. INTERPRETATION**

Oji is a nut that comes from the pod of the kola nut tree. It is popular among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Among the Igbo people, it occupies an all - important place. It is the first gesture of welcome offered to a guest, to show acceptance and hospitality. Among the Igbo people, both at casual visits and at occasions, it is the first thing that is offered to announce that one is welcomed. As was informed by the Nigeria National Commission for Museums and Monuments at the fiftieth independence anniversary of Nigeria in 2010, concerning the Igbo people and the use of kola nut, "it is shared to assure the guest of his safety and to remove any sign of ill-will" (p. 79). In view of this fact, in a ritual meal such as oriko, it is the first item to be prescribed. Eating it already signifies communion.

Ose oji (alligator pepper): In Igbo pharmacopoeia and medicine, it is believed to make the medicine potent.

Nzu (White chalk): This element signifies purity and innocence. In a ritual meal, the appearance of nzu is an invitation of the parties to aspire to be blameless.

Palm wine and water are drinks that give life. It is said that water has no enemy. Just as the two elements give life, it is believed that they in turn restore life to the parties. They are also used in molding the pounded or ground mixture. In Igboland, the elders also use palm wine to wake up the ancestors and to invite them to draw near during ceremonies.

Roots: These are not chosen arbitrarily. The roots are taken from life plants that the Igbo people believe enhance longevity and health. They are pounded together

A cock and a hen: The two represent man and woman. The parties are made up of men and women. As the birds walk on the earth or ground, Ala, so also humans walk on the ground. As Kalu, Inyama and Onunwa (1989) pointed out, "the numerous divinities in Igboland are the manifestations of Chukwu, the Supreme Being. In Mbaise, of all the divinities in Igboland, "the earth deity is ranked first. This is why it receives special care and attention both in belief and practices" (p. 21). As Iluogu (1974) pointed out many years ago, "Ala, the earth goddess, is the guardian of morality" in Igboland (p. 35). In this vein, "many social offences become aru or pollution or abominations because they infringe the laws of the earth goddess" (p. 35). The toes nails of the cock and the hen are cut off and their blood is made to drip into the preparation. The dibia (native doctor or herbalist) cuts off their toe nails and use the blood to make the preparation potent. The blood that flows from the birds represents the blood that flows in human vein. Okolie (1989) acknowledged that "blood is life". He asserted that "blood spilling in sacrifice is a symbolic act of rededication and acceptance of one's humility in respect of the omnipotence of the gods" (p. 6). As the parties contracting the covenant are beings that have blood, they are by so doing bound to protect life. The last item is the ofo. This is a sacred wooden stave or staff in which, as was remarked by Iluogu (1974), "the spirit of the ancestors is believed to live" (p. 109). As Edeh (1985) informed, the ofo is "the greatest treasure that the okpara of the family guards" (p. 62). The okpara is the oldest man in the family, kindred or community. He is the one who pronounces the words of solemn agreement that would henceforward bind the parties contracting the covenant. In Igboland in general and in Mbaise in particular, the okpara is believed to be the closest person to the ancestors. His words are highly revered and are believed to be powerful. This agrees with what Jahn said (cited in Aja, 1989) "the word is the physical – spiritual life force which awakens all sleeping forces and gives physical and spiritual life" (p. 105). Expatiating the power of word, Aja pointed out that it includes "all forms of language, both spoken and symbolic" (p. 3). Human beings are able to conquer their environment

through the power of word. This why the word of the oldest person in the family is important, to pronounce the words of the covenant.

The presence of fresh pepper is to serve as a stimulant, just as it does in food. Apart from helping to sharpen the appetite, it can also serve as an antioxidant in the body. The akwụ Ojukwu, is the oil palm fruit (called okebe in Mbaise). It is believed to be potent in neutralizing ingested poison. All the items used are things that prove antidote to ailments. They are pounded together to form a mold or a bar or a stick. The herbal preparation is portable. People put it in their bags when they attend occasions. If they anticipate they might eat something unclean or sit with unclean people at occasion, they use the herbal chalk to scroll along their throat a few times and spit out a few times or use the chalk to touch their tongue a few times. After that, they could eat or drink with confidence, without fearing any danger. And coming back from an outing, if they start to have malaise and suspect they have eaten something unclean, they also use the herbal chalk called, ọgwu orikọ. The native doctor prepares the herbal mixture, but the eldest of the family pronounces the ọfọ upon it for it to become portent and efficacious. This conforms to what Aja (1989) affirmed that, "in traditional Igbo society, no medicine, not even poisons are effective without the word" (p.13). Abanuka (2014) gave a good insight for the understanding of ọfọ. "It is a symbol fashioned from the ogirisi tree" (p. 102). In Igbo worldview, ọfọ is a god and it "is believed to operate naturally to regulate right order in the universe." One of the areas its impact is felt is "in human relationship and exchange" (p.102). And this happens in the family, in the community, and in society at large. The crowning of the ritual is the sharing of the ritual meal by those that contracted the covenant.

From that day henceforward, a relationship has been renewed. Reconciliation has taken place. There is no litigation, no judgment. All those must have taken place before the ritual. In all, orikọ is preparation or an event used to restore a broken covenant or relationship. Considering the fact that it is an effective remedy in social living and interpersonal relationship in Mbaise, it is being proposed as a panacea to national cohesion in Igboland of Nigeria.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The research examined the situation of life in Nigeria in general and in Igboland in particular. It is unsettling to think of how the society has degraded and morality collapsed. This a situation that keeps challenging the efforts of the teachers of morality, namely, the major religious groups, to the extent that it is said that evil has taken the upper hand. The level of decay experienced in families and among people related by blood cannot be overexaggerated. It was found that the religions that show themselves as the harbingers of unity have not done enough or their efforts are not pragmatic enough. The general outlook shows there is mistrust everywhere. This is the situation that gave rise to this study. Related literatures were reviewed. Some Christians authors expressed the opinion that a proper understanding of the Christian Eucharistic meal would help toward a better understanding of unity, reconciliation and covenant. Some other authors expressed that eating together is part of what makes humans social beings. However, none of the opinions was helpful enough in the quest for the proper remedy for the decay in morality, and the high level mistrust, experienced in Nigeria in general and in Igboland in particular. The researcher argued that a rediscovery of the orikọ ritual meal done in Mbaise will serve as a better remedy for conflicts in the Igbo nation. This finding will help to chart a new course in conversations between religions like Christianity with the Igbo culture, with reference to inter-religious dialogue.

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#### ORAL INTERVIEW

Name of interviewee	Occupation	Place of interview	Age	Date	Interviewer
Marcellinus Ashiegbu Onunekwu	Pensioner	Village	83 years	2012	Researcher