

# **Drumbeats for the Divine Ofala Festival: A Folkloric-Musical Analysis of Corpus Christi Procession in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

Festivals are natural to humanity and can be found at various levels of human existence. It has always been part of organized religion. The Catholic liturgy/practice is built around a yearly calendar that features different feasts celebrated at varying levels of solemnity. One of such feasts is the Corpus Christi which centres on the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, that is, the radical transformation of bread and wine into the true body and blood of Christ. This belief gives rise to various manners of devotions, veneration and adoration of the consecrated bread and wine, regarded by Catholics as the Body and Blood of Christ. One of the most distinctive devotions to the Holy Eucharist is the festive procession which follows upon celebration of the Mass of the Corpus Christi. In Nigeria, this procession has acquired much cultural significance that it is now presently viewed as Ofala of Christ, evoking the Igbo concept of perpetual anamnesis of the immortal reign of a traditional ruler. But at a deeper level, over time and in various places, Corpus Christi procession has become such strongly cultural event that it has become a locus of negotiation of multiple cultural identities. A critical observer begins to wonder if the procession is still only or principally about honouring the Body of Christ. The present essay sets out to reconcile such contrarities by advertence to that phenomenological epoch characteristic of genuine participant-observation approach and concludes with the genuine present and urgent need of enrooting Christian beliefs and practices in the African native genius. There is also a recommendation for a deepening of the various modes and manners of African unique expression of Christian religiosity.

*Keywords:* Corpus Christi procession, Ofala of Christ, Catholic, Holy Eucharist, transubstantiation, African, folkloric-musical

## **1. Introduction**

Issues concerning festivals of various peoples have always found a place in the discourse of anthropology and folklore. Festival, in this case, is to be

understood as denoting a day or period of time set aside for religious or other forms of cultural or folkloric commemoration and celebration. On the one hand, festivals, in many religions, are mainly marked by some forms of religious ceremonies and ritual observances, although social feasting and merriments are not thereby precluded. On the other hand, cultural festivals can include activities like processions, carnivals, music, dance and other such (entertaining) activities. The time of festival is therefore that of liveliness, merriment, gaiety and recreation.

Now, festivals understood in strict religious sense have a strong emplacement in the reckoning of the Catholic liturgical year. Within the Roman Catholic calendar, there are usually three grades of liturgical celebrations: memorial, feast and solemnity. Memorials are celebrated as minor commemorations, usually and often involving saints, whereas in the celebration of feasts (usually of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, apostles and few other important saints), a further element of festive emphasis is brought forward as – for example – in the chanting of the liturgical hymns, namely, *Gloria* and *Te Deum*, at the celebration of Holy Mass and Divine Office respectively. But the highest level of celebration is the solemnity. This grade of celebration involves some very exceptionally crucial aspects of Church's belief – for example – the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ (especially his birth, resurrection, ascension, institution of the Eucharist, Kingship etc.), events of the Virgin Mary and some very important saints. In the celebration of a solemnity, which has the coloration of being the Catholic festival per excellence, much more ceremonies, featuring – in addition to what obtains at feasts – ampler chanting, music and ritual observances, have pride of place.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to underscore that solemnities in the Catholic Church can sometimes have lots of cultural and social implications for the wider society. One such solemnity is that of the Corpus Christi, a festival celebrated annually in honour of – and based on the belief in – the real and abiding presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Blessed Eucharist.

### **Literature Review**

According to O'Leary (2008, p. 91), “the [Catholic] doctrine of transubstantiation, the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ through the ritual act of consecration by a priest, lay at the heart of the [Corpus Christi]festival.” The accompanying procession has been defined by Craig (1914, p. 600) as “a march of ecclesiastics and laity, usually the whole body of citizens, through the streets of the city; it was part of a religious service and usually comprehended a return to the place of setting out.” It becomes, therefore, important to note that scholars of religion and ethno-religious folklore have concentrated their inquiry on the medieval

manifestations of the Corpus Christi processions, its social effects and its early modern and contemporary evolution. Indeed, such procession in the Catholic Church has attracted attention of anthropologists and folklorists with regard to its capacity “to express social bonding and to foster social integration” as well as its capacity to serve even “as a lightning rod for political and religious rivalries” (O’Leary 2008, p. 77). In the Hispanic-American traditional arts of Peruvian Andes, it is even noted by Dean (n.d. p. 111) that the Corpus Christi procession could be an avenue for the display of refined cultural behaviours vis-à-vis a manifestation of its lack by the various spheres or strata of the society. Artistic depiction of the uncultured behavior of “misbehaving children [at] the Corpus Christi... serves as an anecdotal acknowledgment of typical festive chaos, [while] their prominent pictorial presence also addresses the desire to control that chaos.” Besides, “the Corpus Christi procession illustrates how, under favourable circumstances, public rituals could provide an avenue for expressing a minority’s distinctiveness while at the same time achieving its integration in urban life” thereby contributing to the “constitution of public space as culturally plural” (O’Leary 2008, pp. 99-100).



Fig. 1: Corpus Christi procession at Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu

With regard to its contemporary celebration in Africa, Gregory Barz, an ethnomusicologist, was able to connect his experience of Corpus Christi procession in Tanzania with the kick off of the *Bulabo* dance festival in Sukumaland. He noted that the procession serves as an arena for open manifestation, reminiscence and strengthening of religious and cultural values (cf. Barz 2004, p. 41). Similarly, Niedźwiedź (2013), a Polish scholar, studied the procession associated with the Corpus Christi solemnity as obtained in the parish of Jemain Ghana, discovering therein a terrain for the manifestation of various layers of ethno-religious identities. For diasporic Nigerians in the city

of Rome, the Corpus Christi procession is an event which in the guise of serving as a “sharing a memory of Nigeria” in a foreign land (Orakwe 2015, p. 370) juxtaposes or even fuses seemingly opposing cultural elements like religious worship and mutual entertainment, or singing of religious songs accompanied by vigorous dancing and stomping. The melding of these disparate aesthetic elements makes it difficult to delineate “the boundary between the sacred and the secular” within the one normatively religious event (Orakwe 2015, p. 243; See Waterman 1990, p. 90).

The present essay is a folkloric-musical analysis and interpretation of the great festival and procession of Corpus Christi as it has manifested annually in many parts of Nigeria where Catholicism exists. Although the feast of Corpus Christi itself is celebrated in May or June, the procession attached to it is – by a formal decision of the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria – shifted to the penultimate or last Sunday in November, being the solemnity of Christ the King. The point of departure of this hermeneutic-analytic study is the Igbo ethno-religious definition or conceptualization of the Corpus Christi procession within the context of the solemn feast of Christ the King as the celebration of ofala of Christ, ofala being a recurring annual commemoration of the office of the king in Igbo culture. However, it is quite arguable that this Igbo “ofala” definition of the event has diffused into many Nigerian cultures and could be at the cultural basis of the present manner of observance of the Christ the King/Corpus Christi festivities and procession in so many parts of Nigeria. The analysis contained in this study is based on live ethnographic evidence garnered from the author’s participant-observation of the celebration of the procession at St. Joseph Parish Odoakpu, Onitsha in 2021 and 2022 as well as a review of online videos abundantly available on the issue at hand.

### **Theoretical Basis for this Study**

It was Titon who indicated that a religious performance can be viewed as object of ethnographic inquiry on the basis of its being characteristically intentional, rule-governed, interpretable, and marked. For Titon (1988, p. 8), religious events characterized by some form of music making are not only definable as performance but, in addition, “the concept of [this] performance carries implications worth exploring.” The word “implications” as used in this context bears a reference to the four characteristics of religious performance listed above. The present essay seeks to demonstrate that the hugely music-making and festive events of Corpus Christi procession, especially as observed in different parts of Nigeria, have these four features and hence deserve an ethnographic reflection.

With regard to the first of the characteristics of performance, let it be said immediately that the concept of intentionality connotes the complementary

ideas of deliberation and deliberateness. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy indicates that the term “intentionality” has root in the Latin word *intentio*, a noun formulated from the verb *intendere*, being a reference to a performance event “being directed towards some goal or thing” (Jacob, 2010). McGann (2004, p. 146) averred that religious performances “are meant to do something, to have an impact on others.” In other words, performers of religious items like chants, prayers and sermons or preaching are motivated by some specific *intentio* while engaged in such performances (Titon 1988, p. 8). In Nigerian Catholic enclaves, the music, the dance, rituals and other performances surrounding the Corpus Christi procession are not purposeless. They are meant to be utterly communicative. They have spiritual, religious, social, political, educational, psychological and aesthetic messages. It can be argued that the musically charged celebration of the procession is intended to serve simultaneously as a quiet but expressive manifestation of the spiritual and religious beliefs of Catholics, a socio-political declaration of the supremacy of Christ’s kingship (over and above the corrupt political regimen in Nigeria) and a psycho-aesthetic erudition in appreciation of the beautiful.

With regard to the Corpus Christi procession being rule governed, it must be asserted that it is in itself a non-chaotic activity. Commenting on “order, chaos and ‘paradox of control’” in an African-American Catholic church, McGann (2004, pp. 201-203) posits an inquiry concerning the principle of organic unity in a religious performance. The answer, according to her finding, is in what she defines as “a cultivated way of being together” or what Jantsch (1980, p. 196) designates as “dynamic connectedness” (quoted in McGann 2004, p. 202). This dynamic connectedness empowers people with the capacity of creating “positive qualities of social being [for example] timing, coordination...” (Rosaldo 1993, p. 102 quoted in McGann 2004, p. 202). Timing and coordination would imply that worship activities and religious events are usually driven or steered by rules, both written and non-written (Titon 1988, p. 8). The Corpus Christi procession, as presently observed in several parts of Nigeria, goes by some specific rules, whether documented in writing or otherwise. Irrespective of the seemingly discordant singing, dancing, wild and exuberant merriment and camaraderie by some of the participants, yet at the basis, the procession still follows the ceremonial rituals indicated in Catholic liturgical books especially with regard to the exposition and reposition of the blessed Eucharist as well as benediction at the end. By convention, it is well known that the more traditional singing is kept in the rear near the Blessed Eucharist while the more varied, gaily and percussive music performances are usually in the front. Similarly, it is nearly always the case that Corpus Christi processions in Nigeria are never complete without beautifully dressed young “flower” girls who precede the Blessed Eucharist. In this case, and to put it in the words of O’Leary (2008, pp. 88-89):



The children's appearance mattered because it signified to participants in the procession, as well as to observers, that the occasion represented a withdrawal from normal types of action and...was governed by rules of behaviour deemed appropriate for ritual actions in public space.

Adorned appropriately as they ought to be, the girls would chant mellifluous devotional songs as well as utter prayers while intermittently spraying confetti on the Blessed Eucharist or along the way, a practice well documented even in the post-medieval Polish history of Corpus Christi celebration (Dąbrowka 2002, p. 250).

Furthermore, another important facet of Corpus Christi procession as a religious performance is seen in its interpretability: "performers interpret their performance as they go along; they understand what goes on, and their continuing performance is based in part upon their interpretation" (Titon 1988, p. 9). The interpretability of Corpus Christi procession as it is celebrated in Nigeria must be situated against the background of Nigerian culture. There is something culturally unique and specific in the way the procession is observed in Nigeria. To understand and interpret adequately the events of the procession as performed in Nigeria, it is important to evoke the African cultural aesthetics of singing, dancing and festive procession. It was the advertence to this specific cultural mode of festive and expressive singing, dancing and general music making among Catholics in Igboland that led to the definition of the Corpus Christi procession among Nigerian Igbo as Christ's or Divine *Ofala*.

Finally, a critical observation of the performance events surrounding the Corpus Christi procession in Catholic communities in Nigeria shows that those events are clearly articulated in distinct sections. This is normal with liturgical celebrations in Christian enclaves given that the conclusion of an item in the event program leads to the commencement of another. In other words, Corpus Christi procession in Nigerian Catholic communities "is keyed or marked" (Titon 1988:9). Ethnographic investigation of the procession is made possible and opportune precisely because it is in itself a highly marked worship event. As such, it is well known to Catholic worshippers that the event starts with exposition of the Blessed Eucharist, then comes the procession which is internally segmented by various stops during which the flower girls throw the confetti on the monstrance encasing the Blessed Eucharist while the altar servers ring the bell and lavishly fill the atmosphere with the smoke of choice incense. The end of the procession is also clearly marked because as soon as the Latin song, *Tantum ergo*, together with the ensuing prayers by the chief celebrant is rendered, it is well known that the next item is blessing and conclusion of the ceremony.

### **Ethnographic Note**

Sunday, 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2021 is a day anyone, within Catholic enclaves in various parts of Nigeria, would not be in a hurry to forget. It was the day of Corpus Christi procession, which usually comes as a follow-up to the celebration of the solemnity of Christ the King. It is a day that usually involves multi-dimensional preparations. This was precisely the case in the parish of residence of the author, namely, St. Joseph's Parish Odoakpu, Onitsha. The priests' robes or vestments for the day's liturgy were made to be in top form in terms of cleanliness and arrangement. The altar knights ensured that their service vests were kept ultra-neat and well-ironed. Their drums for the *Igba-Umuogalanya* dance were well rehearsed and the musical instruments put in optimum status. The flower girls made elaborate arrangements for their new and beautiful white wedding-like costumes. They also procured packs of confetti, perfumed sprays and other accoutrement for the procession. All the songs and choreographic displays belonging to their devotion and displays along the route of the procession were thoroughly rehearsed for many weeks before the day. It would eventually take the older ladies about an hour and half to dress and adorn them beautifully in proximate preparation for the commencement of the festive procession. The youths of St. Joseph's hired a truck (as would be usual) to transport the live gospel band that would be playing all through the procession. Every other needed musical instrument by other groups was secured and activated for the procession. Many of the Church faithful procured 'a noise making' vuvuzela.

On the day itself, the Corpus Christi procession (following the Masses in the morning) began in the mid-afternoon with the exposition and brief adoration of the Blessed Eucharist. There were arrangements for the order and line of the procession which began from the church building, passed through major streets around the parish and ended in the parish square. Children were in front, following the altar servers with the cross and torches, together with the *Igba-Umuogalanya*, a dance ensemble modelled on a pre-existing dance type known as *Igba Eze*, which typically fits and is apposite for an occasion like the "Divine Ofala". Following the children were mainly the youths of the parish together with the youth gospel live band.

At this juncture, it must be critically commented that the section of the youth represents an epicenter of carnivalesque freedom, expressive dance, camaraderie and merriment during the procession. It was like a free-for-all dancing spree with utter freedom employed by the youths in the exhibition of various and varied dancing styles. It was really an extra of mutual entertainment inserted within the sacrality of the sacred procession. Such side attractions or fringe entertainment (which the author observed in the mainly youth section of the procession) is not totally unknown or unprecedented in the

history of Corpus Christi celebration. In pre-modern Poland, Corpus Christi procession featured some form of cultural dance: “the...famous folk-dance of Lajkonik (hobby-horse dance) as part of the Corpus Christi procession was first attested in 1738” (Dąbrówka 2002, p. 248). But there were also even “the mystery play, the miracle/saint play, and the morality play” (Dąbrówka 2002, p. 259) all incorporated as side attractions or interludes within the solemn procession of the Corpus Christi itself.

Following the youths were the women, then the flower girls, the Mass servers and the priests with the Blessed Sacrament carried under the canopy. The flower girls, the Mass servers and the priests form the aesthetic epicenter of the entire procession. The Mass servers were all in their best of serving vestments (cassock and surplice), some carrying torches while others carried the thurificating paraphernalia (thuribles, incense, and charcoals) for uninterrupted working up of a *Weihrauch* (holy smoke) – as Germans would put it – and for incensing the Blessed Sacrament intermittently. The young flower girls were a group to watch, their role being that of sprinkling confetti and spraying perfumed foam-flakes on the Blessed Sacrament and priests carrying it. The deliberately aesthetic adornment accompanying their white garments made them stand out. From the stance of an active participant observer, one would argue – in agreement with O’Leary (2008, p. 87) – that the white garment serves appropriately and symbolically “to denote virginal innocence and purity” of the young girls.



Fig. 2: Young girls in Corpus Christi procession in Germany (Credit: Jens Meyer/AP)

Following immediately after the Blessed Sacrament is the choir with its usually solemn and melodious songs. The solemnity of the choir songs can be explained by the fact that this section represents the soberer segment of the



procession, dominated by members of usually “conservative” societies such as Sacred Heart League, the Precious Blood Sodality, the knights and members of the Catholic Men Organization who are usually more interested in the interior devotional aspect of the event than in the externalized expressive behavior as typically found in the youth section. The above exposition serves to open a critical inquiry into the appropriateness or justification of the designation of the Corpus Christi procession as a “Divine Ofala”.

### **Ofala in Igbo Culture**

As I argued above, it was the manner of celebrating the Corpus Christi procession in Igboland that led to its being defined as an Ofala. But what does the term Ofala signify? Etymologically, it has been argued that “the term *Ofala* is derived from the words, *ofa*, meaning authority, and *ala*, meaning land. A merger of both words therefore means authority of the land” (Ottah 2016, p. 13). In this guise, ofala can then be defined as the recurring annual commemorative celebration of the institution of the kingship as well as the authority of the reigning king. Ofala in Nigerian Igbo culture has to do with remembrance. It is therefore an anamnesis or anniversary of the accession of the king to the throne of his ancestors. Within the celebration of the ofala itself, there is ingrained the belief that the king’s authority is perpetual and undying. In Igbo culture, when a king dies, his funeral is celebrated as his last ofala. As such, his demise is neither mentioned nor projected as having occurred since the king, his kingship and kingly authority are deemed immortal. From the Christian theological perspective, Christ, having died and risen again, reigns forever as an immortal king. Hence, his Ofala has no finale but is everlasting and ever recurring, annually and in perpetuity.

Describing the Ofala festival to an American audience, Nwafor (2019) gave the following account:

In Nigeria, we have a long-standing tradition that once a year the king... domicile will host the Ofala Festival. Our king is sheltered in his palace, no one sees him throughout the year. But on the day of the Ofala Festival, he will come out in public, feed the citizens and visitors, install chiefs, award titles, reward good deeds, break the new yam, pray over the whole community, and dance for the public. It is a whole day event that takes months of preparation.

Ofala in Igbo culture is therefore an important annual feast that is very central to the construction, preservation and perpetuation of a kingdom. In that guise, “it is celebrated annually to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the Igbos and also foster unity and love among them” (Ottah 2016, p. 13).

Further, Ottah (2016, p. 13) gives a description of the 2013 Ofala celebration of

Obi of Onitsha (which, because of the crowd it draws, is usually celebrated in the stadium):

Five days to the Ofala, the Obi goes into seclusion or isolation. The 2013 edition of the festival commenced on Monday 7 and ended on Sunday 13 October. Inferably therefore, the Obi went into seclusion as from Wednesday 2nd October, 2013. Nobody saw the Obi within the period as he did everything strictly alone in “hiding.” In fact, it is believed that the five days of seclusion was the period of intensive communion with the gods on behalf of the people. As he did everything all alone, the subjects ate the new yam. The festival usually begins with twenty-one-gun salute, followed by an all-night Ufie music and other cultural activities such as incantations, prayers, among others. Such was the case as the Obi celebrated the Ofala with the entire Igbo nation. On the fourth day, the Obi was to temporarily and briefly appear for the people to have a glimpse of him and for him to eat the yam.

While emphasizing music making as an important aspect of Ofala celebration, Ottah noted that the fifth day of the Ofala featured the performance of different cultural troupes as well as the royal dance steps performed by the Obi himself, which, as Ujummadu (2017) notes, is an important highlight of the Ofala fiesta itself. Furthermore, the following elaborations are given:

When all the *ndichie* (elders) and other leaders as well as different cultural troupes were gathered, the Obi came into the square taking dancing steps and receiving cheers from the crowd. His emergence was heralded by thunderous rendition of traditional music which he danced to, waving his royal sword (*ada*) in... salute of his subjects who joyously cheered him (Ottah 2016, pp. 13-14).

As part of the Ofala festivities, masquerades are also in abundant display, especially the famous Igbo *Ijele* masquerade. According to Ujummadu (2017), “Ofala festival is an occasion for age grades to showcase their masquerades as a great way of keeping the heritage of the people alive.” In essence, therefore, Ofala in Igboland fits into the category of events characterized by liveliness, merriment, gaiety and recreation. It can be summarily reckoned as one of the arenas in which various strata of Igbo cultural uniqueness “are created, re-created, discovered, revealed, and shaped through social and cultural actions” (Niedźwiedź 2013, p. 8).

### **Understanding the Corpus Christi as a Divine Ofala**

The solemnity of Corpus Christi, being a festival in honour of the abiding presence of Body and Blood of Christ in the Blessed Eucharist, is usually celebrated on the second Thursday or Sunday after the Pentecost. The variation depends on local conditions and the decision of Bishops of a given

ecclesiastical circumscription. Working as an ethnographic researcher in Tanzania, Barz (2004, p. 41) noted that the solemnity of Corpus Christi is “celebrated in the Catholic tradition throughout the world on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost.” Nevertheless, in Nigeria, the second Sunday after Pentecost is the day mandated for the celebration by Nigerian bishops. The Corpus Christi celebration has two major parts, namely, the Mass and the procession.



*Fig. 3: Crowds at Corpus Christi procession in Aguleri, Anambra State.*

In Nigeria, however, the Corpus Christi procession is usually detached from the Mass of Corpus Christi (celebrated on the second Sunday after Pentecost) and transferred to the solemnity of Christ the King which coincides with the last Sunday of the liturgical year, usually towards the end of November. In consequence of this transference, but more precisely because of the new inner connection established between the solemnity of Christ the King and the transferred Eucharistic procession – normally celebrated in Nigeria with a befitting paraphernalia or accoutrement of kingly royalty and majesty – there is the generally established practice of designating the day as that of *Ofala*, that is, a commemoration of the immortal and everlasting kingship of Christ. This Nigerian link of the Eucharist to the concept of Christ the King bears semblance to Niedźwiedz’s (2013, p. 8) finding in his study of Corpus Christi procession in Ghana, where she discovered that “in popular Ghanaian theology, the concept of Christ as king, which recalls a familiar figure of *ɔhene* (king, chief), is more readily comprehensible than the abstract concept of Christ

present in the Eucharist.”

Corpus Christi eucharistic procession – now transferred to the solemnity of Christ the King – has become an annual event in Nigeria and one looked and longed for by Catholics and, perhaps, non-Catholics who are attracted by the trappings of cultural, aesthetic and musical accompaniments of the celebration. From a closer observation and deeper reflection during the November 2021 procession (and its 2022 replication), it became clear to the author that something much more extended in latitude – than the merely liturgical and devotional – is going on in the background. People were really engaged in highly varied manners of singing, dancing, camaraderie and even mutual entertainment that give the impression that a secular and social event is also going on. And yet within this apparent and subtly deceiving social stance is to be located the spiritual depth and seriousness of the event being celebrated – namely, the Ofala of Christ the King. However, it was not too difficult to appreciate the unfolding scenario given that in African and African derived cultural performance “there is... little difference... between sacred and secular usage” (Waterman 1990, p. 90). Therefore, an appropriate appreciation of the musical folklore, together with the elaborate music performance that unfolds at the Corpus Christi celebration in Nigeria, becomes possible within an understanding of the cultural paradigm of “ofala,” celebrated in the Christian context as the festival of the undying kingship of Christ.

### **Corpus Christi Procession vs. Ofala: Towards a Comparative Analysis**

Now, it is possible to argue that parallels exist between the Igbo concept of Ofala and the manner in which it is extrapolated to the understanding of the feast of Christ the King versus Corpus Christi procession as Ofala. For example, Ofala as an Igbo celebration per se is a way of accentuating the immortality of the King. Needless to say, this concept lies at the basis of the Nigerian Catholic understanding of the Corpus Christi procession as Ofala parade in honour of Christ, the immortal King of kings and Lord of lords. This understanding creates the epistemological backdrop against which and on the basis of which there erupts and can erupt an avalanche of wild joyful musical celebration that sometimes seems to traverse the boundary of the sacred. It can be argued that the sheer numerous varieties and styles of dance and other forms of choreographed performances accompanying the procession are not accidental or unintended outbreaks of religious enthusiasm but are encapsulated seminally within the very concept of Ofala of the Divine King. It bears repeating that a symphonic heterophony of varied musical ensembles and sounds is precisely central to the very process of eventuating the Ofala event.

Next, the centrality accorded to the Ijele masquerade in Igbo celebration of royal Ofala can be gleaned in the awesomeness, majesty and sacrality

surrounding the Blessed Sacrament during the Corpus Christi procession. Theologically speaking, of course, no Catholic would dare to equate the Blessed Sacrament to the Ijele masquerade since that would amount to a false analogy. However, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, it is possible to argue on the side of faint semblance or similitude between the majestically awesome aura surrounding the Blessed Sacrament vis-à-vis the pomp and pageantry associated with the Ijele, the king of all Igbo masquerades. Similarly, Ijele masquerade features an abundant display of colours and colourfulness and a critical – even if only banal – observation of the priests carrying the Blessed Sacrament, the Mass servers, the Knights and the flower girls would seem to point to a similar colourful tendency, albeit displayed in a strictly Catholic liturgical context. A visual similarity is arguable, even if only registered in the subconscious of a casual observer or participant.

Aside from the foregoing observations, anthropologists have argued that the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi – especially, as it has been conceived and celebrated in so many parts of Africa – has become a locus of negotiation of multiple identities. According to Barz, Corpus Christi procession in Sukumaland – despite being a fundamentally para-liturgical and spiritual event – is one in “which community values... are displayed, remembered and reinforced” (2004, p. 41). Writing about his observation with the Jema Parish in Ghana, Niedźwiedz (2013, p. 8) indicated that although, the “Corpus Christi is a celebration connected with the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, and, as such... unique to the Catholic Church” yet, the “feast is one of those occasions when members of the Jema parish manifest their Christian identity within the public space of their town in a very spectacular way.” As far as Niedźwiedz is concerned, public religious observances, such as the Corpus Christi procession, serve “to reveal and confirm, first and foremost, denominational identities [even as] these practices very often... reveal a mixture of other identities which might appear in various configurations” (2013, p. 8). From a personal observation, the dance and music-making that is associated with the event of Corpus Christi procession at St. Joseph’s Parish Odoakpu-Onitsha could be a veneer of a deeper striving at negotiation of multiple identities, even if the participants were unaware of their motivations. Such identities could be belongingness to traditional vs. modern religious praxis, old vs. young categories, exuberant vs. quiet worship styles, female vs. male, lay vs. clerical approaches, etc.

But such negotiation of identity is not limited to the African scene. Even in far-away Cardiff UK, the Corpus Christi procession “was more than an expression of the values of the processionists to themselves and to their co-religionists. [Indeed, a] Catholic procession in public in a religiously plural society inevitably implicated onlookers who did not necessarily share the values



expressed by the procession” (O’Leary 2008, p. 89). The implication is that the procession in Cardiff became a means of nonviolent contestation or protest in a religiously plural society that had witnessed “the spate of controversial anti-Catholic lectures by the militant Protestant Alliance and the activities of the Welsh Protestant League in Cardiff in 1898” (O’Leary 2008, p. 93). Further, during the time of Russian occupation of Poland, there was an attempt made by the foreign dominators to suppress the Corpus Christi processions “but this only made them a means of manifesting Catholic, and to some extent Polish national identity” (Dąbrówka 2002, p. 248). In the early 70s, under the leadership of Karol Wojtyła, then Archbishop of Cracow, the Corpus Christi processions clearly became for the Polish people “annual acts of cultural resistance” as well as a tool of retrieving and preserving “their authentic culture and their rights as citizens” (Weigel 2001, p. 192).

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the above exposition, historically and in various cultures, the event of Corpus Christi procession has had lots of cultural accretions and peculiar redefinitions associated with it. In Nigeria, it has been christened the Ofala of Christ, the Universal King. This has become a way of perpetuating the very concept and institution of Ofala that has acquired a perennial collocation within the Igbo, and by extension, other Nigerian, cultures. The identification of Corpus Christi procession with the Igbo concept of Ofala responds to the call – within Catholicism – for inculturation. In the language of anthropology the exigency of inculturation has been defined in terms of Africanization, a term used by Nketia (1958, pp. 265) who had raised the “question of Africanizing Christian worship in Africa” and insisted on “the urgent need of eliminating the European cultural accretions that came with Christianity and re-clothing the Christian message with the garb of African music and culture for a more meaningful and effective contextualization of the gospel among Africans” (Orakwe 2015, pp. 29-30).

In the light of the above exposition, there is an urgent need for a more diligent study of the cultural but subtle manifestation of religiosity by Nigerians in particular and Africans in general, especially in the context of the Corpus Christi Ofala event. A question for future investigation could be on how this manifestation has really gotten or can get deeper in Nigerians’ expression of their Christian faith and practice so that such religiosity does not end up being accused of being a shallow exhibition of momentary exuberance. Such a study will require a deeper immersion of the researcher into the event of the Divine Ofala in the guise of a more active participant-observation approach with an intense program of interviews and interrogations for a more profound on-the-spot unprejudiced understanding of the religious phenomena of the Corpus Christi procession.

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