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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: A REVIEW OF FUNERAL RITES CONFLICTS IN THE OLD CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF AWKA, 1990 – 2017.

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ABSTRACT
This study focused on the burial and funeral rites conflicts and their resolutions in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka, Anambra state. The misunderstandings between the Church and the autochthonous people of Old Awka Diocese over a fu-a-fughi funeral rite (seeing the corpse of the deceased husband) and Ikponye aja n'ini funeral rite (pouring sand into the grave of the deceased husband's grave) have been issues of serious conflicts in the diocese for about three decades. This paper, through the multi-disciplinary approach, highlights the origin, nature, patterns and rational of the conflicts. It critically evaluates the various attempts made towards the resolution of the conflicts. The paper observes and recommends that a win-win resolution in the conflicts between the diocese and her constituent communities will only be possible through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms.

Keywords: Funeral Rites, Tradition, Catholic Church, Religion, Culture and Conflict Resolution.

Introduction
Death remains inevitable since all mortals must pass on. Therefore all have their experiences of death and how they deal with their dead. Death, as an important milestone in the life of any human, marks one's exit from life. When death occurs, it is accompanied in all cultures by elaborate rituals; farewell rituals or rites of passage (Okafor, 1996 & Davies, 2019). These rituals abound in what we know today as burial and funeral rites. All traditions and groups have their rituals which may or may not differ from that of others. Most often, as it happens with culture, conflicts arise when various traditions on the same subject matter clash. Our study here centers on the conflict between the Catholic Church in Old Awka Diocese and the autochthonous people of Old Awka Diocese with respect to the burial and funeral rites of the dead.

Old Catholic Diocese of Awka is a term for the current Catholic Dioceses of Awka and Ekwulobia in Anambra state of Nigeria. It covers eight Local Government Areas and seventy-nine communities/towns in Anambra state and beyond, with 182 parishes and chaplaincies. The Diocesan Bishop is Most Rev. Paulinus C. Ezeokafor. The diocese has over 620 priests as well as a great number of religious men and women and the lay faithful. (Cf. Awka Diocesan 2018/2019 Diary/Directory). The crisis under discussion

here is predominant in only five out of the eight Local Government Areas of the Diocese. This however does not imply that all the towns within the said Local Government areas were involved in the conflict. The Bishop of Awka has described the funeral crisis in the Diocese as a headache for the Diocese (Ekwunife, 2016).

The crisis under discussion here is two-winged: *a fu-a-fughi* (seeing the corpse of the deceased husband) and *Ikponye aja n'ini* (pouring sand into the grave of the deceased husband) funeral controversies. These disturbed the peace within the diocese at various times. This work, through multi-disciplinary approach, studies the origin and nature of the problems, the pattern of the controversies and the rationals behind them. It also critically evaluates the various attempts made towards the resolution of the controversies. This paper aims at providing aids to finding the best approach of resolving conflicts of similar nature. The findings will be of assistance to future researchers on similar conflicts.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research whose data were sourced through primary and secondary sources. Data from the primary sources were majorly gathered through face to face interviews and participant observation. The secondary sources comprised mainly of journal articles, books and internet materials. The multi-disciplinary approach was employed in discussion and analysis of data.

Findings and Discussions

This study shall first of all make an overview of the basics of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in order to establish the grounds upon which this study is made. This exposition will enhance the understanding of the conflict resolution in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka. Discussions and findings in the conflict cases under discussion in this work shall follow the discussion of the basics of conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution/Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)

Conflict Resolution is a broad concept used in the description of activities which go beyond shallow probes into conflict backgrounds. It comprises of the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict. It engages the root causes of conflict with the aim to treat them. In conflict resolution, the aim is not to avoid conflict but rather to deal with it in a way which minimizes the negative impact and maximizes the positive potential inherent in conflict within the framework of the values of peace. It is a conflict solving approach where causes of conflict are probed and addressed so as to build new and lasting relationship between aggressive parties. It was the inadequacies discovered in the formal process of resolution, i.e. litigation, which led to the search for Alternative Dispute Resolution, Appropriate Dispute Resolution or Amicable Dispute Resolution, which covers the whole range of alternatives to litigation or arbitration.

Jeong (2010) made a list of successful conditions for conflict resolution which are: commitment of parties to problem-solving, openness to a win-win solution and readiness to shift grounds/negotiation of material based interests. While taking note of the above, one

must understand that conflict resolution needs to be assessed in terms of an outcome as well as a process which can enhance a prospect for warning parties to abide by their agreements. The following spectrum of Conflict Resolution describes various processes of addressing conflicts in a bid to arrive at a win-win outcome.

Spectrum of Conflict Resolution refers to the different strategies and mechanisms available for the resolution of disputes outside of litigation. These can be considered as different tools in a dispute resolution tool box. Ogunyannwo (2005) presented 12 variants or spectrum of ADR thus: Judicial Appraisal, High-Low Arbitration, Adjudication, Expert Determination, Ombudsman, Med-Arb, Arb-Med, Mediation, Executive Tribunal, Neutral Fact Finder, Early Neutral Evaluation ('ENE'), Conciliation. Other processes included in the spectrum are: Negotiation, Peer Mediation, Multi-Door Court, Community Conferencing, Collaborative Law, and Negotiated Legislation. A few of these variants are discussed here for the purposes of evaluation in this work.

Mediation: This is a voluntary non-binding private dispute resolution process in which a neutral person, acceptable to all disputants, facilitates communication that enables parties to reach a negotiated settlement. It is a process widely known for neutral third party assistance in reaching agreement (Jeong, 2010).

Neutral Fact Finder: Neutral fact finding is a process where a neutral third party, selected either by the disputing parties or by the court, investigates an issue and reports or testifies in court. The process is particularly useful for resolving complex scientific and factual disputes. It is loosely defined as a fact-finding endeavour in which those conducting the investigation are neutral with respect to the conflict at hand (Schultz, 2003). While employing this process, it must be ensured that the fact finders are actually neutral. In other words, they are to be transparent and have no stakes in the outcome of the resolution. They are also to ensure that ground rules are established as to how the fact-finding efforts will correspond with the conflict management processes. Neutral fact-finding is restricted to clarification of particular issues and is non-binding since the neutral does not normally make an award (Ogunyannwo,).

Early Neutral Evaluation (ENE): This is generally used to access the likely outcome of a legal action. It provides a quick method of obtaining a neutral advisory opinion which may assist the parties in their negotiations. Here, a court attorney, usually a retired judge or an experienced lawyer is appointed by the parties to review a case before it is formally presented for trial. The essence of the practice is to review the merits of the case and encourage the parties to come to an agreed resolution instead of going on with litigation. When settlement fails with this process, the attorney enlightens the parties on how to proceed to litigation and his opinion on the possible outcome.

Conciliation: This is a third party non-adversarial intervention process, where an intervener conducts a form of shuttle-diplomacy between disputing parties in a bid

to achieve a mutually acceptable terms of conflict resolution for them. In this process, the conciliator takes messages to and fro the disputants who probably are not in talking terms, or who may resort to violence if given the opportunity to meet one-on-one. The process is usually employed to restore communication where such has broken down. Conciliation, at its best, can lead to resolution of conflict. On the other hand, it can just restore communication and prepare the disputants for a later mediation session.

Negotiation/Bargaining: This is a joint problem solving process where two or more persons hold a discussion with the view of arriving at a mutual agreement over an issue of common disagreement. Bargaining or negotiation is an everyday exercise that involves back and forth trading of compromise and concession of needs and interests on the issue of disagreement. Negotiation is positional when the negotiator insists on his literal or outward demand rather than his real interest. It is interest-based when the bargainer realistically bases his bargaining on his interest or need. While a soft bargainer is always ready to accept most terms and conditions, a hard bargainer hardly accepts any condition except on his own terms. Both approaches make negotiation difficult. However, the best approach to negotiation is that by a principled negotiator, who agrees on fair, just and merit grounds, thus realizing a creative and win-win negotiation outcome.

Community Conferencing: This is a sort of planned or structured dialogue involving all members of a community (perpetrators/offenders and victims, etc) who have been in one way or another affected by a conflict or crime led by a facilitator and aimed at restoring peace and making amends.

The above highlights of the spectrum of conflict resolution is to direct our attention to the standards of ADR, which every professional conflict resolution exercise follows. However, our findings in this paper shall reveal that these were lacking in the resolution of conflicts in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka either in parts or in whole.

The Conflicts:

The *Afu-A-Fughi* Conflict (Seeing the Corpse of The Dead Husband By Her Widow)

The epi-centre of this controversy was Nanka, a town in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra state, in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka. The problem arose from a traditional culture and belief that prohibited a married woman from seeing the corpse of her dead husband from the time of death till the burial was completed (Okwueze, 2017). Nwankwor (2021) opines that the culture was intended to prevent a widow from gaining access to the husband's property after his death. In other words, the culture would deprive the widow of the rights of inheritance. Whatever be the case, this practice eventually became a tradition.

With the coming of Christianity, this practice was challenged, (first by the Anglicans, although, efforts of the Anglicans did not appear to have reached a crisis proportion). It was the efforts of the Catholic Church to put an end to the anachronistic practice that triggered a serious conflict with those who wished to continue the practice. This crisis

raged between 1987 and 1993 (Ekwunife, 2016). It became known in the Igbo parlance as the *Afu-a-fughi* controversy literally meaning "seeing or not seeing" controversy (in relation to seeing or not seeing the corpse of the deceased husband by the widow). According to Okoli (2021), in the late 1980s, some members of the community approached the then Parish Priest of St. Anthony's Parish Nanka, Ambrose Ojiakor (now late), explained this traditional practice to him and expressed their desire to have the practice abolished. The priest, Ojiakor, in response to the request started an enquiry into the practice. He went round the entire villages of the town and held meetings with all stakeholders of the villages. He observed first that this tradition was only practiced in Nanka; secondly, that the people were also divided into camps of those for and those against the abolition of the practice (Okoli, 2021). However, those who were in support of the abolition of the practice were in the majority (Ugochukwu, 2021).

An incidence that brought the controversy to the limelight happened in 1993. This had to do with the funeral of one Reuben Ikeanibe. Before his death, Reuben Ikeanibe of Agbiligba village, Nanka, a Christian, left instructions that his wife should not be bound by the pre-Christian taboos connected to the widowhood practices. His wife, Mrs. Marcellina Ikeanibe, a Christian herself and a member of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, was prepared to obey the wishes of her husband to the letter, and to give him a proper Catholic burial. She was supported by a group of equally committed Catholics. However, those who preferred the old order (traditionalists and some Christians identifying with them) would not allow this seeming 'abomination' to happen in their land. They were poised to interrupt the funeral should the widow of the said Ikeanibe insist on seeing her late husband's corpse (Ugochukwu, 2021). The Catholics, especially the members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal came in from every part of the Diocese and beyond and were ready to defend their faith and bury the Late Reuben according to the Christian tradition. On 23rd February, 1993, as the procession was moving to the Church for the funeral rites of the deceased, some youths in favour of the Nanka tradition attacked the procession, shooting sporadically in the air. The procession ended in a fiasco claiming two lives of two young Catholics, namely; Augustine Eze and Scholastica Nnolim. Many others were seriously injured. This incidence did not go down well with the Catholic Church in Awka Diocese. The Church sought redress through several means. Obiefuna (2019) said that the Church went to court in order to seek redress for the lives that were lost, and for the restriction of those who were attacking Church members in the villages as a result of the crisis. Okoli (2021) and Ugochukwu (2021) explained that the Police at Ekwulobia who were brought into the matter were complicit, and sided the other party who they referred to as the dissidents. Meanwhile, the crisis raged-on despite these moves. Okongwu (2021) explained that the Church was not fair to the Community by trying to abolish their age long tradition, and that was the reason some of their elders mobilized their youths to fight the Church people. This conflict unsettled the Nanka Community for a while, until the

resolution approaches began to have positive results.

***Ikponye-Aja-N'ini* (Dust-to-Dust Rite) Funeral Conflict**

In the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka, the *Ikponye aja n'ini* (pouring sand into the grave) controversy was known as the "dust-to-dust" (*Aja naalu aja*) rite controversy. The crisis was predominant in four out of the eight Local Government Areas covered by the Old Awka Diocese: Awka North, Awka South, Njikoka and Dunukofia. Here, we shall examine the origin of *I kponye aja n' ini* controversy and the rationale behind the practice of forbidding women to perform this rite. There are, at least, three major hypotheses of the origins of this crisis.

Adunchezor (no date), a Catholic priest of Awka Diocese, traces the origin of the controversy to one Edward Okeke (Eddy Nawgu) of Nawgu town, who was a self-styled Prophet. According to him, the crisis began in the late 1980s or early 1990s when Fr. Onwuasoanya was still at Nimo parish. The bone of contention was the widowhood (*ajadu*) rituals which involved nocturnal practices whereby the widow visits the stream naked, and after a ritual bathe aimed at breaking all bonds with the deceased husband, a kinsman is brought in to have carnal knowledge of the widow there and then (Adunchezor, 2021). Adunchezor (no date) explains that "the rational behind the *ajadu* ritual lies in the belief that the intimate relationship between the deceased man and his wife remained intact, with the result that any man who dared have sexual intercourse with this widow was altogether doomed. The function of the *ajadu ritual* was in effect to once and for all severe the obstructive bond, thereby freeing the widow and rendering her accessible to men for carnal relationships… as long as this ritual was not performed, hardly would any man have the courage to disturb the particular widow's moral peace and freedom—no sexual advances of any kind".

The Catholic Church advised Catholic women to resist this widowhood ritual since it encouraged loose life and immorality (Adunchezor, 2021). Some were bold enough to resist the tradition, and suffered untold persecutions from their townsmen. Adunchezor narrated the case of one Angela Ozugha of Nawgu town, who was ostracized by the community and persecuted till her death. According to him, Eddy Nawgu came into the picture because he was campaigning against the efforts of the Catholic Church to salvage widows from the obnoxious widowhood practices. His Anioma Healing Home championed *Ukaomenani* (the traditional Church) – a form of syncretism that is a blend of Christian practices with traditional religious tenets and practices. Eddy Nawgu championed the persecution of the Catholic Church because the Church condemned his movement, and in addition overtly supported widows who refused to perform the nocturnal *ajadu* rites. Eddy was known as the oracle of Nawgu, and people consulted him from all parts of the nation. His people believed in him. He was the one who through propaganda, changed the topic of *ajadu* rites to that of *I kponye aja n'ini* (pouring sand into the grave), in his bid to spite the Church. When he succeeded, he spread his gospel to other towns around Nawgu through his *Otuojiofor* group.

Otuojiofor group was a group of notable men promoting traditional religious worship and practices all around Awka North and South, Njikoka and Dunukofia Local Government Areas under the inspiration and patronage of Prophet Eddy Nawgu.

According to Adunchezor (no date), events were to play out to Eddy's advantage when in 1994, four young Nawgu men fell down from a lorry and died. The Nawgu people approached Eddy Nawgu to inquire about the circumstances of the tragedy. Eddy found the opportunity he had long sought. He told them that the incident was because of abominations being committed in the town, which "stemmed from widows who refused to perform the *ajadu* rite". He added that "some evil women after taking part in killing their own husbands, poured sand upon the deceased husbands' graves and matched their feet upon the grave". Eddy Nawgu equally regretted that this abomination is done under the supervising and encouraging eyes of a foreign religion known as the Catholic Church.

Adunchezor (no date) submits that it was this very proclamation by the Oracle that became the unfortunate instance that gave rise to the *I kponye aja n' ini*; that Eddy Nawgu capitalized on the vulnerability and gullibility of the local community seeking explanations to the tragedy that struck them, and marketed not only the *ajadu* rites but also defamed altogether the innocent practice of *I kponye aja n'ini* which he presented as the widow's final assault on a husband whose death she might have had a hand in. He shifted the attention from the widowhood practice to the rite of pouring sand into the grave. Adunchezor insists that although the crisis started in the 1990s in Nawgu and other surrounding towns, it did not start in Awka until the early 2000s. Before then, the dust-to-dust rite was performed in Awka by all and sundry and did not raise any conflict.

Another version of the origin of the dust-to-dust rites in Awka appears to be at variance with that offered by Adunchezor. Ekeh (2014) asserts that it has been a tradition in Awka since time immemorial that husbands and wives do not perform the dust-to-dust rite for each other. The reason, according to Ekeh, is that the man and wife remained one body even after death; therefore the performance of the rite by any of them meant that the person was burying himself or herself. However, Ekeh seems to agree with Adunchezor that the crisis with the rite started in Awka in the early 2000s when some zealous Catholic priests decided to implement the outcome of the 2001 Awka Diocesan synod that suggested that the rite should be optional, and not forced on anyone who would not want to do it. Those priests, however, decided to impose the rite on all against Awka customs and traditions. Hear him: "at the turn of this century, the authorities of the Catholic Church in Awka started insisting that a widow must also perform the dust-to-dust rite for her deceased spouse, contrary to the Awka way of life, which we believe does not offend any religion and the doctrine of any faith, and this resulted in the dust-to-dust controversy in Awka today" (Ekeh, 2014).

The crisis led to some maneuvers both by the Catholic Church and Awka people in order to assert authority. Such maneuvers included

coercing widows to perform the right, beating up and forcefully stopping priests from conducting funeral Masses, digging up graves and exhuming bodies, and the willful upturning of the time-honoured tradition of the Church by holding a funeral service for the deceased first before internment (Ekeh, 2014).

Anthony Nwoye Ekwunife, a Catholic Priest from Abba in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra state and a Professor of African Traditional Religion, debunked Adunchezor's Nawgu origin theory of the dust-to-dust controversy and suggested that the crisis started around 1994 in Ifitedunu when B. K. Nwazorjie was the Parish Priest at Ifitedunu (Ekwunife, 2014). According to Ekwunife, the controversy was first witnessed at the burial of one Clement Nweke, a native of Igbuala village in Ifite-Dunu, whose wife, Beatrice Ilochi, was alleged to have abandoned him while he was sick. But during the man's funeral, the wife attended, and as the custom demands, was ready to mourn her husband. When it was time to pour sand into the grave, the lady took a handful of sand to perform the rite, but the majority of the kinsmen, especially the non-Catholics objected. However, the woman insisted that she must perform the rite. The Parish Priest, B. K. Nwazojie, was the officiating minister at the funeral. He supported the woman who performed the act. Those kinsmen who objected gave the reason that the woman abandoned the husband while alive, and had poured sand into the grave to scorn him. After the burial, this widow was ostracized from the community for daring a tradition in the community that forbade widows from perfoming the dust to dust rite for their deceased (Ekwunife, 2014).

For Ekwunife (2014), this was the origin of the crisis; because when the Igbuala kindred of Ifitedunu sanctioned Mrs Beatrice for committing the "abomination" of pouring sand into the grave of the deceased husband, the Parish Priest in retaliation sanctioned all Ifitedunu indigenes that supported the Igbuala people in their bid to discipline their 'insubordinate' wife. He went further to make it mandatory that all widows in Ifitedunu must pour sand into the graves of their deceased husbands under the pain of the Church's boycott of the burial ceremony in question. According to Ekwunife, this declaration threw the entire Ifitedunu into confusion; hence, the origin of dust-to-dust controversy in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Awka. Ekwunife expressed his disappointment with the Church's interference in a people's culture and questioned the rationale behind such interference. He saw the object of the controversy as a non-issue. He highlighted the various steps already taken by Awka Diocese to assuage the crisis, and preferred the statement on the issue by the 2001 synod that advised that the practice be made optional. He wondered why the current administration of the diocese up-turned the 2001 resolution to adopt a new stand that the practice should be compulsory for all Catholic widows and widowers (Ekwunife, 2014).

While narrating the incident to this researcher in an interview session, Beatrice Ilochi debunked the above narrative of Ekwunife. Ilochi (2020) accepted, however, that she was

the index case of *I kponye aja n'ini* crisis. She narrated that she was permitted by her sick husband (late Clement Nweke) to attend the burial at Nanka (the same burial where two people were killed as a result of *a fu a fughi* conflict). Unfortunately, her husband died on the same day she attended the Nanka burial. She came home that evening from Nanka only to meet a crowd of mourners in her compound. And to her greatest chagrin, her daughter broke the unpleasant news of this death that occurred while she was away. In contrast to Ekwunife's submission, Ilochi narrated that the Parish Priest, B. K. Nwazojie was not present at the funeral. The funeral was rather conducted by the Assistant Parish Priest (now late), and who she could not recall his name. On what transpired, during the funeral, Ilochi narrated that she was accused of abandoning her critically sick husband who eventually died in her absence. Therefore, she had no business paying him last respects. She also said the allegation was championed by one of her husband's kinsman, Vincent Maduka (now late). She was, therefore, advised to stay away from the graveside by the kinsmen. However, she defied their admonition and remained at the graveside during the burial rites. Ilochi (2020) stated categorically; "Truth be told [*sic*], I did not pour sand into the grave of my husband. I only stayed and watched the burial rites go on. Vin and others who aggravated the issue added that I poured sand just to make the matter worse; claiming that I did not only disobey them by remaining at the graveside, but also snubbed them by pouring sand into the grave. Meanwhile, before the burial of my husband, it has never been an issue in our community for a woman to perform dust to dust for her husband. They started it here [*sic*]".

According to Ilochi (2020) and Nwazojie (2020), it later became clear that the issues that arose at the burial of Clement Nweke were orchestrated by the followers of one Edward Okeke (now late) of Nawgu, a self-styled Prophet popularly known as Eddy Nawgu. Eddy had already started a campaign to bar widows from perfoming dust to dust rites for their late husbands. This campaign started in Dunukofia and Njikoka areas of Anambra state, and was led by *Otu Ojiofor* group formed by Eddy Nawgu. It was members of this group that tried to enforce this practice at Clement Nweke's funeral. When the widow, Ilochi, resisted them, they tagged her actions an abomination (Nwazojie, 2020). Adunchezor, who also attributed the uprising about *I kponye Aja n'ini* as having originated from Ifitedunu with the Clement Nweke saga, equally confirmed to this researcher in an interview that it was all the machinations of Eddy Nawgu and his *Otu Ojiofor* group (Adunchezor, 2021). The above submissions of Ilochi, Nwazojie and Adunchezor were also confirmed by Samuel Chukwu (2020) and Uche Nwoye (2020).

Meanwhile, at a funeral held at Ifite village in Nibo, Awka South LGA of Anambra State on 24th November, 2011, this researcher, as a participant observer, in the company of three other priests witnessed a fracas that broke out at the burial of John Mgbenegbo. Before his demise, John who was a zonal leader in the Church, left oral instructions that Catholic burial rites should be performed for him, and that his wife should perform the dust to dust

rite for him (Okafor, 2011). While inviting the Church for the funeral, the family confirmed this oral will of the deceased and agreed to abide by it. However, during the said burial, controversy broke out at the graveside, led by one Vincent Obidike, who insisted that it was a taboo for the widow to perform the dust to dust rite for her deceased husband. While, this confusion raged, a Police Officer who was working with Vincent and his cohorts dispersed the congregation with tear gas. All the Catholics and their priests scampered for safety, left the scene and abandoned the funeral (Okafo, 2011).

In Awka town, between 2010 and 2013, Obiorah compiled nine cases, three of which will be highlighted here. In these cases, there were incidents where both Priests and worshippers were beaten-up; funeral ceremonies interrupted and the corpse carried away by the non-Christians; dead bodies buried by Catholics were exhumed and re-buried after traditional rites of *ikpualu* (cleansing) by non-Christians; altars prepared for funeral Masses in deceased homes were desecrated, broken into pieces and buried along with the sacred objects on the altar; priests and Catholics who gathered for funerals have also abandoned the ceremonies half way and left in protest because of the interference by the non-Catholics (Obiorah, 2013). One of such cases was at the funeral of Daniel O. Ata of Umuzocha village in Awka on 30th July 2010. According to Obiorah (2013); "The hooligans invaded the venue of Christian worship, caused a massive destruction of property and assaulted about twenty worshipping Catholics, including family members of the deceased person and disrupted the funeral ceremony on the ground that the deceased person's wife who is a Catholic, should not participate in the Catholic rite of dust to dust for her deceased Catholic husband".

A similar occurrence equally took place on 3rd May 2011 at the funeral of Raphael Nwakor of Umudioka village Awka. Obiorah (2013) reports: "during the Catholic burial ceremony, some uninvited criminals sponsored by ACP Celestine Okoye rushed into the compound and scattered the Holy Altar of Sacrifice, assaulted about 30 Catholic members and Priests".

Another incident, in which this researcher was a participant observer, took place on 24th July 2013 during the burial of Samuel Nebolisa of Umudioka village Awka. Obiorah (2013) writes: "After the Holy mass at the house of the deceased, 19 criminals/thugs hired by ACP Celestine Okoye and one Ejike Nwude, Emmanuel Nwanmadu Nwonwu and others ambushed and waylaid the innocent Catholic faithful as they were reciting their Holy Rosary. The criminals were fully armed with guns, machetes and weapons of various degrees of lethality. They cut 36 innocent Catholics, inflicting various degrees of injuries on them. They slashed the throats of 3 persons, cut through the skulls of 2 persons and broke the heads of about 10 others".

How did such a seemingly innocuous rite graduate to a crisis level in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka? From the majority of persons interviewed on the dust-to-dust rites for this research, one can say with certainty

that it was purely sheer misunderstanding that made the matter to reach the crisis proportions it assumed. The rite was not, ipso facto, a scriptural matter, neither was it at any time considered a taboo among the people in pre-Christian Igboland. What the Peace and Conflict Resolution scholar can infer from the causes is that both the Catholic Church and the communities where the crisis raged in the Diocese did not take due diligence to understand the grey areas and flashpoints in the saga. The next section examines the conflict resolution mechanisms contrived to remediate the crisis in the Old Catholic Diocese of Awka.

Towards The Resolution of the Conflicts

Resolution of *A fu-a-fughi* Funeral Rite Conflict

The resolution of the crisis can be broadly grouped into two categories: the traditional and the formal approaches. The traditional approach involved using the people's traditional religion to propitiate the forces that energized the society. The chief priest of Nanka, Nze Nwaduru Nwanoli Nwankwo, as the mediator of the traditional religion which instituted the tradition *ab initio* was the only authority that had the competence to abolish obnoxious customs in the traditional setting (Onuegbu, 2021; Okeke-Ogene, 2021). He was said to have first enumerated items that should be brought for the abolition of the practice. When all the required materials were brought by the Nze Nanka Society, he demanded that each village should bring one *Nze na Ozo* titled man who would cross the legs of a widow who had seen her husband's corpse. The spiritual implication of crossing the legs of a woman who had seen her husband's corpse was dreadful for the titled men. None of the people dared to perform the ritual of crossing their legs. Among other things, the men felt that the gods might visit their wrath on them should something go wrong with the propitiation. Thus, the first attempt to abolish the A*fu Afughi* funeral controversy through traditional religion flopped.

It was at this time that the Nanka Progressive Union (NPU) took it upon itself to champion the cause of abolishing the practice. Chief Eleazer Ezeofo, President General of the NPU (1982-1983), toured all villages and called for a meeting of all titled men and women. However, this move like the one before it flopped too (Okeke, 2021). This owed much to the chokehold of superstition and fear of what might happen to them. A few years afterward, Chief SNC Ezeugwa took over the mantle of leadership of the Town Union, and he called the Chief Priest once again and requested him to state what should be given to him to enable him abolish the custom, and he made an estimate of Six hundred Naira. This sum, which was a substantial sum by 1985, was given to him. However, those who supported the practice, and perhaps were gaining from the state of things in the community, opposed this second move to abolish the custom and discouraged the Chief Priest from doing so (Olisakwe, 2021).

When it became clear to all and sundry that the traditional method of abolishing this practice would not subsist, the Anglican community at Nanka, which, as the records show, was the first Christian organization to speak loudly against this obnoxious custom took it upon itself to drive the cause of the

abolition of the custom. Between 1982 and 1985 the Anglican Church led by Rev. C.M. Ndubisi fought seriously against it and mobilized his flock to challenge the continued practice of the A*fu Afughi* custom. After him, the Rev. Canon B.O. Nwosu of St. James Anglican Church Nanka between 1989 and 1993 also mounted a spirited campaign against the custom (Eze, 2021).

It should be noted that the efforts to abolish the *Afu Afughi* custom was for many years undertaken by Anglican priests until a sagacious and indefatigable Roman Catholic priest, in the person of Rev. Fr. Ambrose Ojiako was posted to Saint Anthony's Roman Catholic Church Nanka. He preached against the custom everywhere and condemned the unfaithfulness of those who called themselves Christians and still went ahead to champion the continued practice of the custom. Rev. Fr. Ojiakor invited the renowned charismatic priest, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Ede to come and abolish the custom, and this was done on 29 June 1991, but Rev Fr. Ede's abolition was not acceptable to most Nanka people (Okafor, 2021).

It has to be observed that this resolution of the crisis was viewed by some Nanka indigenes as a unilateral imposition of the church without taking time to listen to the other side or to engage them in a meaningful dialogue (Okeke-Ogene, 2021). This approach was to add a dangerous twist to the Nanka conflict. For example, the Rev. Fr. Ojiako and the Catholic Church unilaterally abolished the custom through the instrumentality of the prayer offered by the Rev. Fr. Ede. This top-to-bottom approach to peace was to exacerbate the crisis rather than abate it. On 13th February 1993 when Mr Reuben Ikeanibe of Umudunu Agbiligba village died (Okafor, 2021), the wife Mrs. Mercilina Ikeanibe determined to see her husband's corpse, but some influential members of her husband's family refused. The deceased was a staunch member of St Anthony's Roman Catholic Church Nanka. The adherents of the two divergent faiths – Christian faith and pagan faith could not compromise and consequently, there was a conflict on 23rd February 1993 during the burial of Reuben, resulting in the death of two persons, and not ten, as reported in the Daily Stars newspaper of 25th February 1993. The victims of this religious conflict were; one girl Miss Scholastica E. Nnolim from Oko and one boy Brother Augustine Eze from Nsukka. The Catholic Church did not take this gruesome and cold-blooded murder of her faithfuls lightly. The Church involved the Nigerian Police who, on their arrival stayed at Afor Udo market for peacekeeping, but first showed indifference to the crisis at hand and were alleged to have been compromised (Okeke-Ogene, 2021; Okoli, 2021). However, when insecurity grew as a result of the crisis, they arrested some of the suspects of these dastardly acts. These suspects were later charged to court and imprisoned. The tragic but avoidable death of two promising youths became the defining point of the afu afughi funeral controversy at Nanka (Okafor, 2021).

This development attracted the attention of the then Executive Governor of Anambra State, Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, who gave an ultimatum for this custom to be abolished. The unanimous resolution of the Nanka

Community for the abolition of this custom was handed over to Nze Nanka on 28th February 1993 and the 14th March was the deadline. The President-General of N.P.U as at that time was Chief G.N Okoli, who provided the Chief Priest, Nze Nwaduru Nwankwo all the needed items including money and materials for abolition, and Nze Nwaduru and all concerned *Isi Nze* (heads of titled men) and *Umuada* (daughters of the land) did all required rituals. On 14th March 1993, in the presence of all Nanka people, men and women, old and young, and in the presence of the Executive Governor of Anambra State, Dr. C.P. Ezeife, all the *Isi Nze* beginning from head village to the last village, openly declared that the custom had been abolished (Okoli, 1993). In his address to the people, on the day of the formal abolition of the custom, the President-General of Nanka Progressive Union, Ozoamama G. Nwagbo Okoli addressed the Governor thus: "It is with great pains in our hearts that we the entire Nanka Community welcome you today after the tragedy that struck at Umudunu in Agbiligba Village Nanka, three weeks ago. Lives were lost and many were wounded and hospitalized. Accept our apology for this show of shame over an outdated and obnoxious taboo that does not exist in any part of Igboland in Nigeria except Nanka town… Your visit today is to mark the end of the custom called *afuafughi*…."(Okoli, 1993)

Against this background, the abolition of this tradition brought much relief to Nanka community. Consequently, the wife of the late Reuben Ikeanibe returned from exile and repossessed her husband's homestead, and many former Catholics returned to the Church too (Olisakwe, 2021). Some others however rejected this as interference and clung firmly to the traditional religion.

Resolution of *Ikponye Aja n'ini* Funeral Rite Conflict

Efforts at the resolution of this crisis was a long journey that involved not only litigations but synods, all in attempt to lay the matter to rest. Here are some moves made to restore peace in the diocese.

The 1996 Guidelines and Directives for Burials, Funerals and Widowhood Practices in the Catholic Diocese of Awka: This is contained in a work titled *Death, Burial, Funeral and Widowhood in the Catholic Diocese of Awka, Guideline and Directives* authored by Most Rev. Simon Okafor (An Emeritus Bishop of Awka) in 1996. The work is a result of an inquiry initiated by Awka Diocese into the theological, anthropological and socio-cultural dimensions of death, burial, funeral and widowhood in the Diocese (Okafor, 1996). This was necessary because of the conflict already in place within the diocese between the Christian and traditional burial practices. The work came as a trial document which was expected to be put into practice by all Catholics in the diocese for a period of three years from the moment of its publication. It was aimed at marrying the Christian understanding and celebration of death with the best in Igbo belief and celebration of same reality, so that an Igbo Christian can bury the dead according to his or her cultural traditions without compromising his or her Christian faith (Okafor, 1996).

The document has five chapters. The first understudied the pre-Christian Igbo beliefs and understanding about death, burial funeral and widowhood. The second handled the Christian view of same reality. The third chapter brought the discourse down to Awka diocese, establishing what should be the right attitude and practice. The fourth chapter outlines unchristian practices that Catholics should avoid in relation to the burial of the death. The final chapter gave exhortations and sanctions.

In this guideline, the document exhorts that after the burial Mass whether in the Church or at the home of the deceased, the body is buried according to Church rite (Okafor, 1996). It went further to prescribe that a representative body of Christian faithful shall perform the dust-to-dust rite at the graveside of the deceased but putting sand in the grave. It mentioned the principal actors in this rite to include: the parish priest or his delegate with a representative body of priests present, the catechist, the ward or zonal leader, the husband, wife, parents, eldest son and daughter, brother and sister of the deceased, as the case may be, and any other person allowed by the priest at his own description. Meanwhile the parish priest or his delegate presides over the burial.

This document distinguishes between burial rites and funeral rites. Burial rites involve all the activities before the burial including the Mass. The funeral rites are those performed after the burial. It explains that burial rites are religious and liturgical rites, while funeral rites are principally social functions though with a religious dimension; because if the dead had been earlier buried, the Holy Mass and other prayers can still be part of his funeral ceremonies. This is to help understand whose prerogative it is to direct and control activities during burials. Since it is a religious rite, the prerogative belongs to the religious leaders of the religion in question.

On widowhood practices (p. 40-43), the document upheld the right and dignity of the widow. It expressed that no sort of deprivation should be given to the widow especially deprivation of property jointly owned by the widow and the late partner. It spoke against all obnoxious practices against widows and directs that Christian love and charity should prevail in handling of widows, and all practices and rituals against the Catholic faith should be discarded.

Practices against and offensive to Christian beliefs were prohibited such as; the practice of prohibiting a husband or wife from seeing the corpse of his or her life partner, institutionalizing of adultery for the widow, belief that a widow or widower commits an abomination if he or she throws earth or sand into the grave of his or her partner, and practices that dehumanizes and restricts the widow unnecessarily, among others (p. 46-52). The document then ends with the assertion that the practice of any practice prohibited in the guideline is tantamount to a public denial of the Christian faith, which attracts certain sanctions, among which are: suspension from the sacraments, denial of Catholic burial and funeral, unless there is public evidence of repentance before death, expulsion from communion with the Church, and other acts of reparation involving public physical appearance (pp. 54-55). For

effective implementation and monitoring of these guidelines and directives, burial and funeral committees were created in each of the parishes in the Diocese for the purpose.

This document helped a great deal to douse tension in certain places where the funeral crises were raging. However, pockets of conflicts were still experienced in some other communities in clashes between the Catholic Church and traditional religious practitioners in burial and funeral matters. Hence, in 2001, the Diocese convoked its first Synod, in order to evaluate and appraise the activities, prospects, progress and challenges of the diocese since its creation. The funeral crisis took a significant dimension in the discussion of the Synod.

The Awka Diocesan Synod of 2001:

The first Awka Diocesan Synod was held from the 5th to 10th November, 2001 as one of the preparatory moves towards the upcoming silver jubilee celebration of the creation of the Diocese that held in 2002. It was an opportunity to evaluate how the Diocese has fared in all ramifications since its creation. The evaluation tore across all aspects and sectors of the life of the Diocese. The conflict with indigenous cultural practices took a significant position among matters that were discussed. The theme of the Synod was: "Awka Diocese in the Third Millenium: Renewal and Mission". Resolutions of the Synod on funeral matters in the Diocese are found on paragraphs 149 to 152 of the *Synod Acta*. The outcome of the deliberations guided the final decision of the Bishop (Most Rev. S. A. Okafor) in the following words; "On the controversial dust-to-dust rite, I have taken serious note of the heated and prolonged discussion during the Synod Assembly on the matter. Guided by the discussion, I reiterate the position contained in my message to priests on September 2, 1998. I call for caution in the administration of the dust-to-dust ceremony. The issue does not involve a dogma of faith such that the performance of the rite is required of anyone unwilling to comply. Nor is the practice an "abomination" either, but an act of love, mercy and care towards the dead. Therefore, performance of the rite is recommended to true believers. Anybody who does not perform should not be sanctioned. It is rather a matter of intensified catechesis than force. With the above clarification, I urge the funeral document to be accepted and continue to be practiced by all in Awka Diocese". (Synod Acta, 2002)

With the above words, the Bishop approved the 1996 funeral document (which enjoyed a three-year trial period from 1996 to 1999), in line with the Synod Acta as the working document of the Diocese on funeral matter. Hence, in marrying the two documents when it comes to practice, caution and prudence should be the watchword. However, the final words of the Synod became a flashing point for those who criticize the present stand of the Awka Diocese (all must perform dust-to-dust rite). They see a relief in the resolution of 2001 which they believe made the practice optional, and cannot understand why the status quo changed now. Ekwunife and Ekeh, whose works have been espoused above, are among this group.

Litigations:

After this Synod, there was a little calm though the crisis continued. The cloud began

to gather more around Awka town more than other parts of the diocese that experienced the conflict. In March 2011, the youths of Awka disrupted the burial of late Raphael Nwako, and took away the shovel from Rev. Fr. Patrick Chukwuma who was handing the shovel over to the widow of the deceased to perform the dust-to-dust rite. They assaulted flogged and beat the Rev. Fr. About 9 of these youths were arrested and charged to court. They were first arraigned on 29th July 2011 (Ujummadu, 2011). There were other arraignments and prosecutions for similar cases. Another clash between the Catholic Church and the traditionalist youths took place in July 2013 during the burial of Late Samuel Nwana Nebolisa of Umudioka, Awka. The crisis that ensued left over 30 persons seriously injured (Ujummadu, 2013). The Church went to Court for this, challenging the assault and the infringement on their rights and freedom of worship and religious expression. The judgement was given in favour of Awka Catholic Diocese by Hon. Justice H. O. Ozoh of the Awka High Court on 28th January 2014. While these were on, so many youths of Awka were arrested, and later released on bail with huge sums of money.

These litigations and arrests, however, have not given the right resolution to the conflict. Thus, the matter has not rested, and Awka Community have appealed the case. However, the attacks on Catholics during their burial ceremonies reduced. This paper observes that alternative dispute resolution techniques should be favoured instead of litigations.

The 2012 Lenten Pastoral of Most Rev. P. C. Ezeokafor:

Crisis continued between the Church and some indigenous cultures within Awka diocese on burial matters. The conflict of March 2011 which led to the flogging of the Cathedral Administrator and others, as well as the increasing violence noticed around Awka axis led the Diocesan Bishop to effect some changes in the way the Church approached the dust-to-dust crisis. Therefore, the Bishop reviewed the 2001 Synod declaration on the dust-to-dust crisis. The essence of the review was to remove any ambiguity from people's interpretation of the Synod resolution. He therefore outlined his pastoral directive on the dust-to-dust crisis in the following words: "…after prayerful reflection and consultation, I hereby review the provision of the Awka Diocesan Synod Acta 2001 with regard to the dust-to-dust rite (nn. 149-152). I therefore direct all the faithful in the Catholic Diocese of Awka to perform the dust-to-dust ceremony as an act of love, mercy and care towards the dead". (Ezeokafor, 2012)

With this declaration, the stand of the Church on the ravaging crisis changed. Those standing on the 2001 resolution and using it to back-up their arguments against the practice were greatly worried. However, this was far from being the solution, because as we have seen previously before this section, the crisis continued with violence and litigations.

The 2nd Awka Diocesan Synod:

Prior to the second Synod of the Catholic Diocese of Awka which was held from 5th – 11th November, 2017, the current Bishop of

Awka Diocese, Most Rev. P. C. Ezeokafor, judging from the recent violent confrontations and litigations between the Church and the communities affected by the funeral crisis (especially Awka community), retracted the "non-mandatory" clause of the 2001 Synod resolution which suggested that the rite should not be compulsory for believers and that no one should be punished for failure to perform it. The rite was therefore made compulsory by the Bishop, on the ground that people should be bold enough to stand for their belief. The practice, since the escalation of the crisis around Awka town since 2011, and after the 2012 review of the 2001 Synod resolution, has always been that those who declare their interest to follow the Church in her teachings on burials and actually do so, get Catholic burials and funerals done for their deceased. This may seem an extreme measure, but that became the system the Church started using to avoid further conflicting situation.

So in the 2017 Synod held as part of the Awka Diocesan 40th anniversary, Bishop Ezeokafor, while acknowledging that the current position of the Diocese on the dust-to-dust crisis is derogation from the disposition of the first Awka Diocesan Synod re-emphasized thus; "The dust-to-dust rite is compulsory. Nonetheless, there is still need for continued catechesis. In the case of the deceased who, before death, declared for the dust-to-dust rite and it is being obstructed by the surviving partner/relatives, the Church is obliged to perform his or her burial rites with the celebration of the Eucharist without the subsequent funeral ceremonies and outing Mass". (Synod Acta, 2018,)

As it is, this is the final resolution of the dust-to-dust controversy in Awka Catholic Diocese at the moment. The decision communicated by the Bishop was the fruit of the 2017 Synod of the diocese. A critical evaluation of this declaration reveals that the current stand of the Church leaves options for people to practice their faith and beliefs as they deem fit. The statement means that the performance of the rite is compulsory for all Catholics; this is a way of setting standard to show that this is how it is done in the particular Church of Awka diocese. Again, it means that those who conform to the guideline get Catholic burials, those who do not, will not get Catholic burials. Moreso, the declaration gave consideration to those who made a wish that the rite be performed for them, but their survivors do not want to comply. Such persons would still get their due of Catholic burial as true Catholics (through burial Mass and other prayers), only that they will not participate in the funeral ceremonies and there will be no outing Mass for such persons. What this declaration failed to point out is whether the deceased remains should be brought to the Church for such burial Masses, or should the Mass be done without the corpse since the dust-to-dust rite will not be performed. This point leaves a lacuna in the final judgment of the latest Synod, which interpretation may result in further crisis and confusion.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The *a fu a fughi* funeral rites conflict provides a clear indication of what happens where a conflict is not properly resolved with the protection of the interests of the parties as its major goal. The various litigations and arrests notwithstanding, the conflict still persisted

between the community and the church. While it may be said to have been resolved through abolishing the funeral rites, the members of the community who were interviewed still expressed their dissatisfaction with the solution given. This implies that the chances of the conflict rearing its ugly head again are high.

The ugly outcome of victory won through the lengthy processes of litigation was demonstrated in the *I kponye aja n'ini* conflict where the stand of the Church is based on the judgment received from the court. Thus, the negligence of the ADR avenues towards the resolution of the conflicts by the parties led to divisions within the community. The refusal of both parties to shift grounds in order to achieve lasting peace is a great obstacle to the attainment of a win win resolution. These inadequacies resulted in the hard bargaining stances taken by both parties without working towards reaching a win-win situation in which the interests and needs of both parties are secure.

The research investigated the origin, nature and resolution of the above mentioned conflicts in the Diocese. The study observed that these conflicts and the failure to properly arrest them really disturbed the peace in the region. The findings show that the resolution strategies employed by parties to the conflict seriously fell short of the demands of Adequate/Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) spectrum. Hence, the problems necessitated by the conflicts keep recurring even after several attempts at resolution owing to the fact that those attempts were insufficient and inadequate.

This study recommends that positive peace resulting from a win-win resolution can be restored in the Old Awka Diocese between the Church and the society (the traditionalists) through appeal to ADR in handling the conflicting issues. In the cases reviewed in this work, the strategies that would restore lasting peace would include the involvement of Initial Fact Finders whose neutrality and independence would have produced a better report of the real situation on ground; the employment of a conciliation process that would bring the conflicting parties to the table to seek solutions; appeal to community conferencing and a properly arranged mediation or arbitration processes among others. It is the belief of this study, that the issues of funeral conflict in the Diocese would be arrested through one or more of these measures.

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