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Christianity and Culture in Awka Town: A Critical Review of Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Its Effects on Christian Witness in Awka Town

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria. The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, a significant cultural event, plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the town's unique cultural identity, values, and traditions. However, its coexistence with Christian faith in the community presents both opportunities and challenges. Christian denominations have developed diverse responses to the festival, ranging from inculturation and adaptation to dialogue and engagement, and in some cases, rejection and opposition. These responses reflect the intricate dynamics at play in Awka Town's religious and cultural landscape, as the community grapples with balancing traditional practices and Christian values. The study highlights the importance of open dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for diverse beliefs in fostering a more harmonious relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness, ensuring the unity and well-being of the community.

Keywords: Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, Christian witness, Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, Cultural identity

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Introduction

Awka Town, located in Anambra State, Nigeria, is a region with a rich cultural heritage and a strong Christian presence. The dynamic interplay between Christianity and local culture has significantly shaped the community's identity, values, and social structure. One prominent aspect of Awka Town's culture is the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, an annual event that holds immense significance for its inhabitants. This article delves into a critical review of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and its effects on Christian witness in Awka Town, exploring the intricate relationship between Christianity and culture in this unique context.

The arrival of Christianity in Awka Town brought about significant changes in the community's religious landscape, with various Christian denominations establishing their presence and exerting influence on the social and cultural fabric of the town (Ejizu, 2010). This transformation has led to a complex interweaving of traditional cultural practices and Christian beliefs, creating a multifaceted religious environment.

The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, as an essential manifestation of Awka Town's cultural heritage, has deep roots in the community's history and identity. The festival is characterized by a series of rituals, activities, and symbols that are deeply meaningful to the people of Awka Town, fostering a sense of unity, identity, and continuity (Nwosu, 2015). However, the festival's impact on Christian witness in Awka Town remains a topic of ongoing debate.

This article seeks to investigate the effects of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town, examining both positive and negative aspects of this relationship. By exploring the various ways in which Christianity and the festival interact, this analysis aims to shed light on the challenges and opportunities presented by the coexistence of these two influential forces in Awka Town's social and cultural milieu. Furthermore, the article will consider Christian responses to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, discussing strategies such as inculturation, dialogue, and opposition that have emerged in response to the festival's impact on Christian witness.

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of the intricate relationship between Christianity and culture in Awka Town, focusing on the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival as a significant cultural event that shapes the community's identity and influences the practice of Christian witness. Through a critical review of the festival and its effects, this study seeks to provide insights into the complexities of balancing cultural preservation and Christian values in a rapidly changing world.

Background of the study

The intersection of Christianity and culture in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, serves as the backdrop for this study. With the advent of Christianity in the region, the town has witnessed a significant transformation in its religious landscape. This transformation has led to a complex interplay between traditional cultural practices and Christian beliefs, creating a unique social and cultural environment (Ejizu, 2010). A central aspect of Awka Town's cultural identity is the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, an annual event that holds immense significance for the community.

The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, steeped in tradition and ritual, plays a pivotal role in promoting unity, identity, and continuity among the people of Awka Town (Nwosu, 2015). This festival, characterized by a series of activities and symbols, serves as a reflection of the community's shared history and values. However, the influence of the festival on Christian witness in Awka Town remains a subject of ongoing discussion and debate.

This study seeks to critically examine the effects of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town, exploring both the positive and negative aspects of this relationship. By delving into the various ways in which Christianity and the festival interact, this investigation aims to elucidate the challenges and opportunities that arise from the coexistence of these two powerful forces in the social and cultural fabric of Awka Town.

Moreover, the study will consider the range of Christian responses to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, discussing the strategies that have emerged in response to the festival's impact on Christian witness. These strategies include inculturation and adaptation, dialogue and engagement, and rejection and opposition, each representing different ways of addressing the complexities of balancing cultural preservation and Christian values.

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the intricate relationship between Christianity and culture in Awka Town, focusing on the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival as a significant cultural event that influences the community's identity and the practice of Christian witness. Through a critical examination of the festival and its effects, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of navigating the complex interplay between cultural traditions and Christian faith in a rapidly changing world.

Statement of the Problem

The complex relationship between Christianity and the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, presents a multifaceted problem that requires careful examination. As the town's cultural and religious landscapes continue to evolve, the interaction between the festival and Christian witness has become increasingly complex, raising questions about the role of traditional cultural practices in a predominantly Christian community.

At the heart of this issue lies the tension between preserving traditional cultural practices, such as the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, and upholding Christian values and beliefs (Ejizu, 2010). This tension can be observed in the concerns expressed by some Christian adherents about the potential for the festival to compromise their faith, either through the dilution of Christian values or the promotion of practices that may be considered idolatrous.

On the other hand, the festival plays a significant role in fostering a sense of unity, identity, and continuity within the Awka Town community (Nwosu, 2015). As such, it is crucial to consider the potential consequences of discouraging or rejecting the festival altogether. This includes the risk of alienating community members, undermining cultural identity, and creating divisions within the social fabric of Awka Town.

Thus, the central problem that this study seeks to address is the need to strike a balance between maintaining the cultural significance of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and upholding Christian values and beliefs in Awka Town. The study aims to identify strategies and approaches that can help bridge the gap between these two essential aspects of the community's identity, promoting mutual understanding and harmony between Christianity and traditional culture.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria. By doing so, the study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Assess the impact of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town, identifying both the positive and negative effects that arise from the coexistence of these two influential forces in the community.
2. Examine the various strategies employed by Christian denominations in Awka Town in response to the festival and its potential effects on their faith, such as inculturation and adaptation, dialogue and engagement, and rejection and opposition.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in addressing the challenges associated with balancing cultural preservation and Christian values in the context of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival.
4. Identify potential areas for collaboration and mutual understanding between the organizers of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian leaders in Awka Town, with the aim of promoting a harmonious coexistence between traditional culture and Christian faith.
5. Provide recommendations for addressing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities presented by the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness, with the ultimate goal of fostering a stronger, more unified community in Awka Town.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the complex interplay between Christianity and traditional culture in Awka Town, thereby supporting efforts to navigate the intricate balance between faith and heritage in a rapidly changing world.

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative research approach using secondary data to critically examine the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for this study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between traditional cultural practices and Christian values in the context of the festival.

Secondary data will be obtained from a variety of sources, including academic literature, books, journal articles, conference papers, and reputable online sources. These sources will provide valuable insights into the historical, cultural, and religious context of Awka Town, as well as the existing research on the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and its effects on Christian witness.

Content analysis will be used to systematically analyze the secondary data collected for this study. This method involves identifying and examining relevant themes, patterns, and concepts within the data to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town.

By employing a qualitative approach and utilizing secondary data, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the intricate interplay between traditional culture and Christian faith in Awka Town. The findings from this research will contribute valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with balancing cultural preservation and Christian values in the context of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, ultimately supporting efforts to promote mutual understanding and harmony within the community.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on two key concepts: cultural identity theory and the inculturation theory of Christianity. These theories provide a foundation for understanding the complex relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria.

1. Cultural Identity Theory: This theory posits that people's sense of identity is intrinsically linked to their cultural background, including shared beliefs, values, customs, and rituals (Hall, 1996). The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, as a significant cultural event in Awka Town, plays a vital role in shaping and reinforcing the community's collective identity. Understanding the importance of cultural identity is essential for examining the effects of the festival on Christian witness, as it highlights the potential tensions and challenges that arise when individuals navigate between their cultural and religious identities.
2. Inculturation Theory of Christianity: Inculturation refers to the process by which the Christian message is adapted to and integrated with local cultural contexts (Shorter, 1988). This theory recognizes the importance of acknowledging and respecting indigenous cultural practices, while also ensuring that Christian values and beliefs are upheld. In the context of Awka Town, the inculturation theory can help explain the various strategies employed by Christian denominations in response to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival. This includes efforts to adapt Christian teachings to the local culture, engage in dialogue with festival organizers, and, in some cases, oppose certain aspects of the festival that are seen as incompatible with Christian faith.

By drawing on cultural identity theory and the inculturation theory of Christianity, this study aims to provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding the intricate dynamics between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town. These theories will guide the analysis of secondary data and inform the development of recommendations for addressing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities presented by the coexistence of traditional culture and Christian faith in the community.

Review of Related Literature

Christianity in Awka Town

The advent of Christianity in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, has significantly shaped the community's religious landscape and social dynamics. With the arrival of Christianity in 1899 and 1903, Awka Town witnessed a transformation in its religious practices, as various Christian denominations, including the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church, established their presence in the region (Omenka, 2016). This influx of Christian influence led to the integration of Christian values and beliefs into the local culture, creating a unique religious environment where traditional practices and Christian faith coexist.

The introduction of Christianity in Awka Town brought about significant changes in the community's social and cultural fabric. Christian missionaries, in their efforts to evangelize and educate the local population, established churches, schools, and other institutions that played a pivotal role in shaping the town's development (Ejizu, 2010). The Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church, for instance, founded a teachers' training college in Awka in 1904, which contributed to the growth of education and the spread of Christian values in the area (Omenka, 2016).

The presence of Christianity in Awka Town has not only influenced the community's religious practices but also impacted its cultural identity. The interaction between Christian beliefs and traditional cultural practices has led to the emergence of a syncretic religious environment, where elements of both Christianity and local culture are intertwined (Nwosu, 2015). This blending of religious traditions is evident in the ways Awka Town's inhabitants navigate their spiritual lives, incorporating Christian values into their cultural practices and vice versa.

However, the integration of Christianity and local culture in Awka Town has not been without its challenges. Tensions have arisen between Christian values and traditional cultural practices, particularly in the context of festivals like the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival (Ejizu, 2010). As some Christian adherents express concerns about the potential dilution of Christian values or the promotion of practices that may conflict with their faith, the relationship between Christianity and the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival remains a subject of ongoing debate.

Despite these challenges, Christianity continues to play a significant role in Awka Town's social, cultural, and religious landscape. The various Christian denominations in the town have contributed to community development through their involvement in education, healthcare, and social services (Ejizu, 2010). Moreover, Christianity's influence on Awka Town's cultural identity has resulted in unique forms of religious expression, combining traditional and Christian elements.

Christianity in Awka Town has had a profound impact on the community's religious practices, cultural identity, and social dynamics. The coexistence of Christian faith and traditional culture has created a complex and multifaceted religious environment, characterized by both opportunities and challenges. Understanding the intricacies of this relationship is essential for appreciating the unique religious landscape of Awka Town and the ways in which its inhabitants navigate their spiritual lives.

Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival

The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival is a significant cultural event celebrated annually by the people of Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria. This festival holds immense importance for the community, as it serves to commemorate their shared history, values, and traditions, while also promoting unity and continuity (Nwosu, 2015). The festival is characterized by a series of rituals, symbols, and activities that reflect the unique identity and heritage of the Awka people.

At the heart of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival is the veneration of a female deity, who is believed to protect the community and ensure fertile lands for bountiful crops (Ejizu, 2010). The festival typically takes place in the month of May, marking the beginning of the farming season, and lasts for two weeks. During this time, various masquerades (Mmanwu) are showcased, representing the spirits of Awka ancestors who are believed to return from the land of the dead for a visit (54history.com).

The masquerades form an essential part of the festival, with different characters ranging from benevolent to menacing and from vicious to clownish. Some of the higher masquerades include Agaba, Ijele, Okwonmma, Izaga, Ugo, and Isiabaofia, while the lesser ones include Ojionu, Adanma, Diochi, Osi-asili, and Atunma. These masquerades parade through the town, interacting with bystanders, singing, dancing, and sometimes demanding money or criticizing people based on their mood (www.thenigerianvoice.com).

In addition to the masquerade performances, the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival features other activities, such as a visit to UmuokpuAwka, the consumption of traditional dishes like tapioca with coconuts, ji avulu, and onugbu soup, and the celebration of various rituals and customs (www.absradiotv.com). These activities contribute to the preservation and promotion of Awka Town's unique cultural identity, fostering a sense of unity and pride among community members.

However, the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival's influence on Christian witness in Awka Town remains a topic of debate, with some Christian adherents expressing concerns about the potential conflict between the festival's rituals and Christian values (Ejizu, 2010). Nevertheless, the festival continues to play a vital role in Awka Town's cultural landscape, offering a space for the community to celebrate their shared heritage and traditions while navigating the complexities of balancing cultural preservation and religious faith.

Effects of Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian Witness

The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, as a prominent cultural event in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, has a significant impact on Christian witness in the community. This impact can be seen in both positive and negative aspects, influencing the ways in which Christian values and traditional cultural practices interact and coexist.

Positive Effects:

1. Cultural Preservation: The festival serves as a platform for preserving and promoting Awka Town's unique cultural identity, which can contribute to a deeper appreciation for the community's history and traditions among Christian adherents (Nwosu, 2015). This cultural preservation can foster a sense of unity and belonging among community members, including those who practice Christianity.
2. Dialogue and Engagement: The coexistence of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian faith in Awka Town provides opportunities for dialogue and engagement between different segments of the community (Ejizu, 2010). This can lead to mutual understanding and tolerance, allowing Christian witnesses to learn from and adapt to the cultural practices that define their community.
3. Inculturation: The process of inculturation allows Christian denominations in Awka Town to adapt their teachings and practices to the local cultural context (Shorter, 1988). The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, as a significant cultural event, can serve as a reference point for integrating traditional beliefs and practices into Christian worship and witness, fostering a more inclusive and culturally relevant faith experience.

Negative Effects:

1. Conflict of Values: Some Christian adherents may perceive certain aspects of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, such as the veneration of deities and the use of masquerades, as contradictory to their religious beliefs (Ejizu, 2010). This can lead to tensions between the community's cultural identity and Christian values, potentially undermining Christian witness in Awka Town.
2. Idolatry Concerns: The veneration of the female deity during the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival may raise concerns about idolatry among some Christian believers. This can result in a reluctance to participate in the festival or even outright opposition to the event, creating divisions within the community.

3. Dilution of Christian Values: The integration of traditional cultural practices into Christian witness through inculturation may lead some believers to worry about the dilution of Christian values and beliefs (Shorter, 1988). This concern may cause Christians to question the authenticity of their faith and the effectiveness of their witness in the face of strong cultural influences.

The effects of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town are complex and multifaceted. While the festival can contribute to cultural preservation, dialogue, and inculturation, it may also lead to conflicts of values, concerns about idolatry, and the perceived dilution of Christian values. Understanding these effects is crucial for fostering a harmonious coexistence between traditional culture and Christian faith in Awka Town.

Christian Responses to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival

Christian denominations in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, have developed various responses to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, reflecting the diverse ways in which they navigate the complex relationship between traditional culture and Christian faith. These responses can be broadly categorized into three main approaches: inculturation and adaptation, dialogue and engagement, and rejection and opposition.

1. **Inculturation and Adaptation:**

Some Christian denominations in Awka Town have embraced the process of inculturation, which involves integrating aspects of the local culture, including the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, into their religious practices (Shorter, 1988). This approach aims to create a more culturally relevant and inclusive expression of Christianity that resonates with the community's values and beliefs. By adapting Christian teachings and worship styles to the Awka Town context, these denominations seek to foster a harmonious coexistence between traditional culture and Christian faith.

2. **Dialogue and Engagement:**

Other Christian groups in Awka Town have adopted a strategy of dialogue and engagement with the organizers and participants of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival. This approach involves open communication and mutual understanding, with the aim of addressing concerns and finding common ground between the festival and Christian beliefs (Ejizu, 2010). Through dialogue, Christian leaders and festival organizers can work together to identify ways to respect and accommodate both cultural traditions and Christian values, fostering a sense of unity within the community.

3. **Rejection and Opposition:**

Certain Christian denominations in Awka Town have chosen to reject and oppose the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, viewing it as incompatible with their religious beliefs (Ejizu, 2010). This approach is often rooted in concerns about the potential idolatry and the dilution of Christian values resulting from participation in the festival. Christian groups that adopt this stance may discourage their members from participating in the festival or even organize alternative events to counter the influence of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival.

The diverse responses of Christian denominations in Awka Town to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival reflect the ongoing negotiation between traditional culture and Christian faith in the community. As the town continues to navigate the complexities of this relationship, understanding these various approaches can inform efforts to promote mutual understanding and harmony between the festival and Christian witness.

Findings

The findings of this study on the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, can be summarized as follows:

1. The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival holds great significance for the community of Awka Town, serving as a vital platform for preserving and promoting the town's cultural identity, values, and traditions. The festival strengthens the community's unity and sense of pride, fostering a shared sense of belonging among its members.
2. The impact of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town is multifaceted. While the festival presents opportunities for Christian denominations to engage in inculturation and dialogue, it also raises challenges related to potential conflicts between traditional cultural practices and Christian values.
3. Christian denominations in Awka Town have developed diverse responses to the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, ranging from inculturation and adaptation to dialogue and engagement, and in some cases, rejection and opposition. These responses reflect the complexities of navigating the relationship between traditional culture and Christian faith within the community.
4. The tensions and challenges arising from the coexistence of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian faith in Awka Town underscore the need for open dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for diverse beliefs and experiences. Such efforts are essential for fostering a more harmonious relationship between the festival and Christian witness, ultimately contributing to the unity and prosperity of the community.

These findings highlight the intricate dynamics at play in Awka Town's religious and cultural landscape, as the community grapples with the complexities of preserving traditional practices while embracing Christian faith. Recognizing and addressing these complexities can inform strategies for fostering a more inclusive and harmonious relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness, ensuring the well-being and unity of the community as a whole.

Conclusion

The dynamic relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, offers valuable insights into the complexities of balancing traditional culture and religious faith. This study has explored the various ways in which the festival impacts Christian witness and the diverse responses of Christian denominations to this significant cultural event.

The Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, as a central aspect of Awka Town's cultural identity, contributes to the community's unity, historical continuity, and sense of pride. It serves as a platform for preserving and promoting traditional beliefs, values, and practices, fostering a shared sense of belonging among the town's inhabitants.

The impact of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival on Christian witness in Awka Town is multifaceted. On one hand, the festival presents opportunities for Christian denominations to engage in inculturation, adapting their teachings and practices to the local cultural context. This can lead to a more inclusive and culturally relevant expression of Christianity that resonates with the community's values and beliefs. Additionally, the festival can serve as a

catalyst for dialogue and mutual understanding between Christian leaders and festival organizers, fostering a sense of unity within the town.

On the other hand, the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival also poses challenges for Christian witness in Awka Town. Tensions may arise between traditional cultural practices and Christian values, leading to concerns about potential idolatry and the dilution of Christian beliefs. These concerns have prompted some Christian denominations to reject and oppose the festival, discouraging their members from participating in the event.

The relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town is marked by both opportunities and challenges. As the community continues to navigate this intricate relationship, it is essential for Christian leaders, festival organizers, and community members to engage in open dialogue and mutual understanding. By recognizing and respecting the diverse perspectives and experiences within Awka Town, the community can work towards fostering a harmonious coexistence between traditional culture and Christian faith, promoting unity and shared prosperity for all its members.

Recommendations.

In light of the complexities surrounding the relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness in Awka Town, Anambra State, Nigeria, the following recommendations are offered to help foster mutual understanding and harmony within the community:

1. Encourage Dialogue and Engagement: Open communication between Christian leaders, festival organizers, and community members should be promoted to facilitate understanding, address concerns, and identify common ground. This can help create an atmosphere of respect and tolerance, allowing for a more constructive relationship between the festival and Christian faith.

2. Promote Education and Awareness: Initiatives should be undertaken to educate community members about the significance of the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, its role in the community's cultural identity, and the ways it can coexist with Christian beliefs. Similarly, promoting awareness of Christian values and practices within the broader community can help foster mutual understanding and respect.

3. Implement Inculturation Strategies: Christian denominations should explore ways to integrate local cultural practices, such as the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival, into their worship and teaching. By doing so, they can create a more inclusive and culturally relevant expression of Christianity that resonates with the community's values and beliefs.

4. Develop Collaborative Initiatives: Christian denominations and festival organizers can collaborate on joint initiatives, such as community service projects or cultural events, to promote unity and cooperation between the two groups. These initiatives can help foster a sense of shared purpose and mutual respect within the community.

5. Respect Individual Choice: It is crucial to respect the decisions of individuals within the community, whether they choose to participate in the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival or follow Christian practices exclusively. Recognizing and valuing the diverse experiences and beliefs within Awka Town can contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious community.

By implementing these recommendations, the community of Awka Town can work towards a more balanced and constructive relationship between the Imo-Oka (Awka) Festival and Christian witness. These efforts can help foster mutual understanding, respect, and unity within the community, promoting the coexistence of traditional culture and Christian faith for the benefit of all its members.

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