

A Nigerian Roman Catholic 'Something'



The author, Uwem Celestine Akpan (far left), with Uche Obisike, Jude Odiaka, Sam Okwuidegbe and Simeon Enemu. All are Nigerian Jesuit scholastics, photographed on the campus of Gonzaga University on Easter Sunday 1996.

By UWEM CELESTINE AKPAN

IN THE MOVIE "Fiddler on the Roof," the villagers of the Jewish enclave Anatevka, which is being overrun by Orthodox Christians, strive to maintain the traditions of their forebears, which have shaped their lives and given meaning to their society. But the new culture is too aggressive, too sophisticated to be ignored or resisted by the ingrained traditions of Anatevka. In the end, the existence of the Jews is "balanced as precariously as a fiddler on the roof."

The protagonist, Tevye, is a man of two cultures. The movie is a classic representation of the tension in the meeting of two very different cultures, in this case a brand of the influential Western civilization and the Jewish culture entrenched in Anatevka.

For years now, the Annang (my ethnic group in Nigeria) and the wider African cultures have been invaded by Western

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norms and values. For good or ill, Africa has been "discovered," and things will not be the same again. My generation was born into this "new" Africa. I am a product, not of the pure Annang or African tradition nor of the Western culture, but of their collision.

I was born in the early 1970's in the small southeastern Nigerian village of Ikot Akpan Eda. My parents ensured that I went to school. I grew up learning to be a proper Annang boy. I drank in the different Annang norms—learning the Ekong dance, accepting the male role of working outdoors, learning the native proverbs, using two hands to shake my elders' hands when greeting them and not looking them in the eye when I was admonished. But I also lapped up the rules of propriety and decorum of an English lad (Nigeria was colonized by the British). For example, I would attend Sunday Masses spruced up in suit and tie, and a siesta always followed lunch. At some point, to increase my proficiency, English became the language of my home, something for which I'm still very thankful to Mom. On some holidays, Mom baked and iced cakes; on others, she pounded and fried akara, the local bean-cake.

By 1979 Uncle George had installed an electric generator and bought a black-and-white television set. The Yamaha generator would roar into life in the late evenings, and all the children in our neighborhood, like moths, would fly into Uncle George's parlor to see the wonders of the tube. Abbot and Costello, BBC's "Mind Your Language" and their local equivalent, "The New Masquerade," were some of the prime time entertainments. At school, along with "Arise, O Compatriots" (the Nigerian national anthem), we sang "Mississippi," and "Aristotle, the Great Teacher Who Taught Alexander." Most of our schools were parochial, and our main diocesan nursery school attracted teachers from India, England, Ireland and, of course, Nigeria.

IN OUR GENERATION, the identity and expectations of a Nigerian had changed. In retrospect, if my parents and grandparents dreaded this shift in sociocultural paradigms, my generation had no problems with this integration of cultures—at least, not then. This collision of two cultures made the elders' lives more complicated, forcing them to push the boundaries of their worlds out to

include the new reality, for, as Rosemary Haughton has written in *The Transformation of Man*, "no relationship can stand still and the only way to avoid a clearer definition would be to withdraw from each other, a course which neither could bear to consider." The real struggle of accepting or integrating the English or Irish way was already being transmitted to us in stories, jokes and proverbs. And my grandpa, Tete, bested everybody in telling these stories. Literature concerning this cultural clash and its attendant difficulties and consequences, e.g., Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, was already sedimenting into a canon.

AS CHILDREN, our chief task was to learn these cross-bred values. We were born into them. This was the only world, the only reality we knew because, "for the children, the parentally transmitted world is not fully transparent. Since they had no part in shaping it, it confronts them as a given reality that, like nature, is opaque in places at least" (Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*). The socialization and expectations of my generation had been objectified and prodded by school, church and family. It was "natural," and we "had no part in shaping it." The family-school-church triangle wielded irresistible influence and sometimes raw force.

The parents, teachers, priests and catechists forged a strong and broad collaborative front that legitimized the new paradigm and discouraged deviance and truancy. These three groups of people accepted and mastered their roles as best they could. To us, they were not just Father Okoro, or Catechist Adamu, or Headmaster Etimudo or Mom or Uncle George. They were always more than individual persons. Through their roles, they tapped into some objective cultural power. These objectifications took hold of our personal identities, and our biographies became individualized versions of these abstractions. We were beginning to participate in the dialectics of our society, simultaneously externalizing our personhood and internalizing the objective reality.

I remember opening my high school entrance examination essay with, "I am a Nigerian Roman Catholic boy from St. Anne's Primary School. I come from Ikot Akpan Eda, and I am fluent in English and Annang." This objectified reality was

inescapable, and growing up in my part of Nigeria in the early 1970's simply meant some form of sociocultural cross-breeding.

This symbolic world was a powerful insulator, or so I thought. Looking back now, it seems to me that my Annang *modus operandi* yielded rather easily to the English or Irish. In religion, this bond was so strong that we could accept the Europeans more readily than we would accept some other Nigerians, like the Muslim

Hausas. Religion was the defining factor here.

I remember that we were cued into seeing the Hausas as outsiders, if not enemies. After all, they were predominantly Muslim. All the good people I knew were always hammering on the "evils" of this northern Nigerian ethnic group. If we accept these Muslims with a "strange" religion, what would happen to our already diluted identity? This was an anxiety-producing ques-

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tion, and nobody wanted anything to do with it. This intruding reality, the Islamic element, was not compatible with our "nature." So we claimed not to understand the Muslims, believing it was not worth trying. We assigned this other symbolic construction, Islam, a negative ontological status.

BUT THE REALIZATION that there existed another set of religious beliefs, for which its adherents were ready to die, kept this question alive. Chaos was already knocking on the door, and the definers and guards of our symbolic world bolted and secured it from the inside. Some Christian sects did not ignore the world of Islam. They sought to break into it and convert its inhabitants to Christian salvation. After all, Christ is the only way. This assertiveness might have been successful in a few cases, but a lot of the time it resulted in very heated and sometimes bloody religious conflicts.

This was our first major awakening to another kind of symbolic universe. Catholicism had cemented our families, church and schools together, with Christ as the savior. The Muslims, simply put, were a nuisance to our "nature." And we thanked God that the predominantly Muslim ethnic groups were not close to our comfortable but delicate bubble!

Probably I could have happily continued living in that bubble, resisting risks and changes. But that protective world was again threatened in 1990 when I began interviewing for the Jesuits. The American Jesuits spoke "weird" English. Father Robert Somebody, my interviewer, sounded very different from Father Paul Forrester, my Irish parish priest. Father Somebody, who (hard for me to believe) preferred to be called Bob, kept calling "schedule" *skedyule*. Obviously, I thought, these were two men divided by the same tongue.

In the novitiate, "inculturation" and "religious dialogue" gained ground. One Jesuit, a professor of Islamic studies, even came to give a one-week seminar on Islam. I began to accept these Muslims. For me, religious changes are the hardest to accept. Once I get comfortable with one idea, I hold on to it for dear life.

All these difficulties, however, were nothing compared to what coming to America three years ago did to and for my symbolic universe. I gripped the handles of my seat in

a silent, tearful prayer as my flight took off into strong winds. What new beating would my symbolic world have to take in my new mission, studies in America? As my plane wrestled and fought its way to stable air that August night, I wondered what was awaiting me. I held God fully responsible. What was he up to this time? What will I need to become in order to find God fully in this new environment? What will I outgrow to enter fully into God in this new world? How will I come into God to get fully out of myself? And at what cost?

My mind tangled itself in this intricate net of questions. Belted to my seat, I felt like a fly caught in a spider's web. I wanted distraction—any distraction—but I couldn't distract myself much. All efforts to break loose failed. The more I pulled, the more it hurt. I once saw a dragonfly fight to free itself from a spider's web. It fought and flapped so hard its wings cracked, then snagged in defeat. The spider quickly wound its silver thread around the unlucky insect. In the next seconds, the poor thing was twisting its limbs in submission to the thickening silver cocoon. The quarry thus disarmed and handcuffed, the spider closed in and brained it. The dragonfly staged a last feeble struggle, stretched and hung still in its new plastered capsule. Carefully the predator reached out and tapped the corpse and, when nothing moved, it ran a quick frisk over it. I saw it maneuver its powerful mandibles, and I couldn't tell whether this was a triumphant smile or its regular warm-up. I wasn't around to witness the slow dismembering of the carcass as the spider settled into a happy dinner.

Will I snag a wing? Will I lose my head to these questions? Worse still, my giant spider, fear, was closing in. Very soon, I knew, it would fret and frisk my body, finding me guilty. As my people say, "A fly is never innocent in the spider's web." I should have fought as bravely as that dragonfly; I shouldn't have gone off to sleep. But I did. And that was a miracle! I hope the dragon-fly feels that way when it wakes in its afterlife.

My flight landed at J.F.K. International Airport on Aug. 11, 1993. Since then, I have lived in New York, studied in Omaha and Spokane and worked with gangs in Chicago. No amount of literature and no amount of stories from American Jesuits in Nigeria did the trick. The old cliché still holds true: Seeing is believing.

Let's forget things like the sun setting at 8:15 P.M. in the Bronx, when I had been

used to 6:00 P.M. in Nigeria. Let's flip over the hundreds of 24-hour television channels, when I had been used to two or three that shut down at midnight. Let's also not talk about the efficiency of the phone and the Internet. And I'd rather not chill you with stories of the big, unrelenting gales that roll off the Nebraska plains and sweep the Omaha landscapes in the winter. I won't bore you with my fumbles in a new culture and with what my friends had to put up with. I prefer not to scare you with my experiences with the gangs in Chicago's Cabrini Green.

The pace of life worried me. It made me feel I was always being left behind, miles behind. On the streets, everybody moved very fast, in pursuit of the evasive quarry called time. Deadlines bothered me. Sometimes, in those days, I would search for time all day—and far into the night—without catching up. If there was a time in my life when I imagined a 30- or 35-hour day, it was in the fall of 1993.

And it wasn't only time that moved faster than I could. I was also being left behind in understanding jokes. The provinciality of humor weighed heavily on me. Sometimes people would be laughing, reacting to a supposedly funny line, but it would mean nothing to me. And sometimes I would say things that would be funny somewhere on the coast of West Africa, but people here would not understand. Worse still, sometimes it would have another connotation. It was no laughing matter. This was painful stuff. I remembered what my grandfather used to say. "When this thing gets past your humor, guard your life!" This thing had already broken the barriers of my humor and was seriously disturbing my life. "Language originates in and has its primary reference to everyday life," Berger and Luckmann say. I was still struggling to break into that everyday life.

IN THE BEGINNING, I was confused by the word "stuff." My friends used it all the time. A very handy word. Anything that had unnecessary details or was too complicated to explain was neatly stuffed into "stuff," as in "We're eating macaroni and stuff," "I went to sleep and stuff," "The class was boring and stuff," "We're preparing turkey and stuffing and stuff."

I swallowed my pride in some instances, slowed down the conversation and forced them to unpack "stuff" so I could know the content for the first time. Most of the time,

they did. And once I caught on, I liked the all-purpose word. So I hope you'll understand when I say there's too much stuff in my experience in America to tell you here.

ANOTHER EXPRESSION I've come to like is "or something." "Are you an African or something?", a man asked me once in a bar after noticing my accent. "Or something?" I silently repeated to myself. First, it was

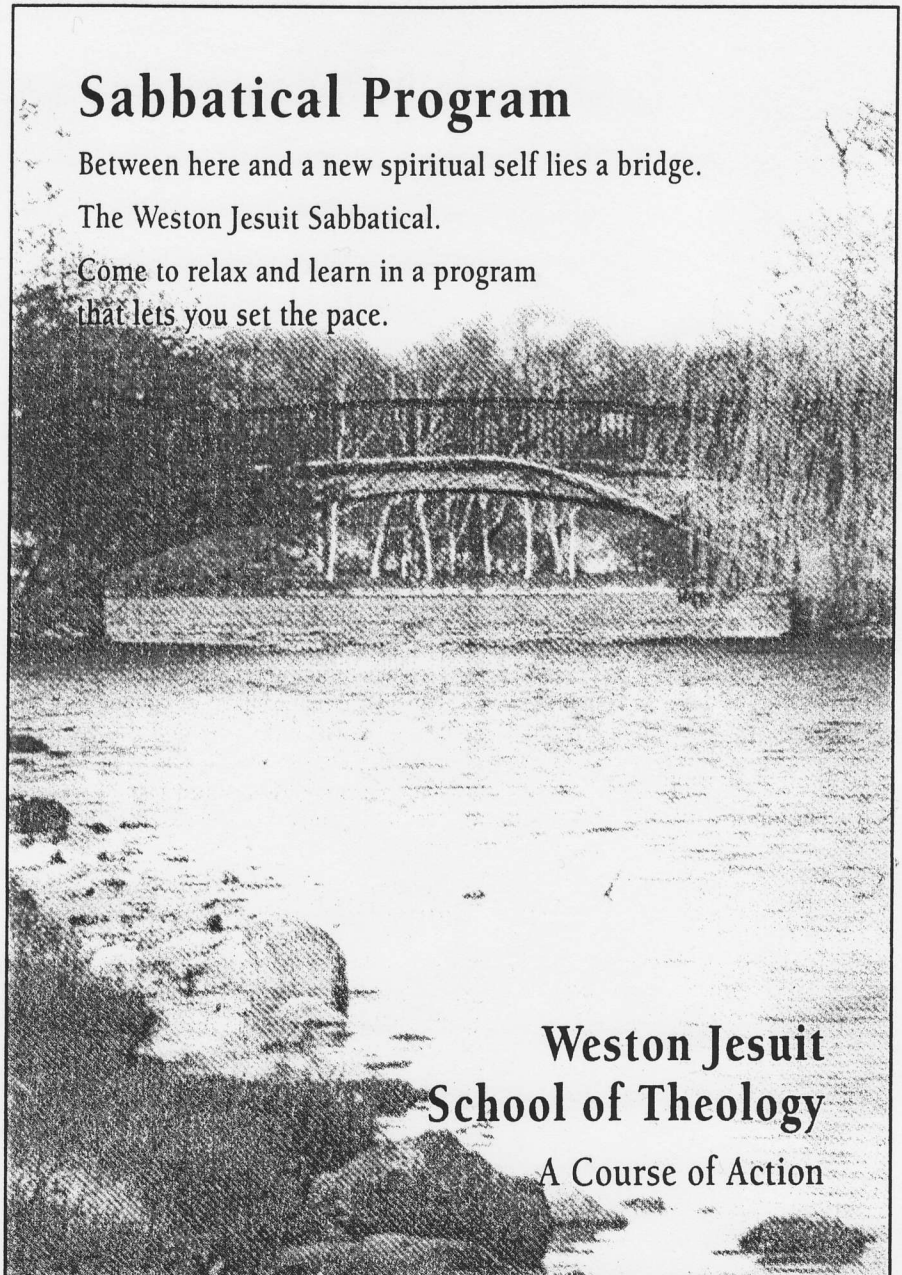
annoying. What else could I be? Then my mind pondered the immense possibilities that dwell in each soul, the great unknown lurking behind every person that is never exhausted by a single definition. We actualize one or just a bunch of these potentials at a time. And sometimes we even move on to assume a new identity or become new things. All of this unknown stuff is nicely wired around by the phrase "or something," I thought. We could be all we are—and know how to be—and

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there would still be something we could become.

Before I could reply to him, he turned to my Jesuit companion, whom he had met before, and asked, "Is he also a Jesuit or something?" At this point, I just began to laugh. And when I explained to our friend why I laughed, he also began to laugh. At the end of the evening, as he pumped my hand, he smiled, slowly shook his head and said, "You're really something!" We all laughed again.

In the subway, in spite of the crowdedness, everyone avoided everyone else's eyes. Once in the train, I forgot this rule and said to my neighbor, "Good morning!" "Y-e-a-h?" He responded with the most suspicious pair of eyes I'd ever seen. He became very uncomfortable, and the next moment, he was fumbling in his bag for a book to read. I felt awful. I wouldn't intentionally frighten anybody, much less an old man.

This was a far richer society—good roads, great facilities and immense accessibility. The malls were crowded most of the time with shoppers and window shoppers. Father Bill Wood [of the Jesuit province staff in New York] took me and other Nigerians shopping once. It wasn't a holiday. And I couldn't resist the temptation to ask why there were so many people in the mall. "Are these people undergoing their first winter, as we are?" "Welcome to America!" Father Wood chuckled.

I had culture shock but denied it. I lived the confusion, anger, disappointment, excitement, discouragement of coming to a new culture. Too much new stuff was coming at me at the same time. At one point, I felt like the Algerian Mohammed Dip: "I was then still sustained by some kind of hope, but hope so enclosed in inaccessible places that I now hesitate to call it hope. A stone had been dropped into an abyss and I listened to its interminable fall. I was that stone, and the hope I clung to was that it would never reach the bottom." As much as my mind wanted to carry on, to pretend that I had it all under control, all was not O.K. This was not Nigeria. I was in a free fall, flailing my hands and hoping I wouldn't hit the bottom. My cultural frontiers were being pushed, and pushed hard.

One day I got into a conversation with a certain Rob. He told me his grandparents were institutionalized. I asked whether they were sick. He said they were O.K. When he saw my puzzled face, he tried to explain to me how they got there. He kept mentioning

culture and how their being there was good for everybody. This worried me. But I tried on an understanding look and it fitted his gaze. So we went into other things. I couldn't fathom why the old would have to move away into an institution. I had heard of orphanages. But I had never heard of old people's homes, while their children were still alive.

The two cultures were tearing me apart. Sometimes I felt I was irretrievably sunk in a whirlpool where two rivers meet. But I learned a lot. Someone had cranked open my mind and heart to other ways.

Before I realized it, I was making friends, many friends. This development eased the tension. Deep down inside, I knew these Americans were working through human motivations, passions, desires, wholeness and brokenness similar to those of my people back in Nigeria. What took time to comprehend was why they reacted so differently compared with my people. I can't remember what else helped me begin to appreciate America apart from fellow Jesuits, friends and a desire to beat my deadlines.

It takes time to know or understand what realities and histories have shaped a people. I've adjusted a great deal. But I'm still struggling. I may never fully understand. And that's O.K. But I remain very thankful to Americans and to God for showing me that my way isn't the only way, even though that knowledge sometimes has come with humiliation.

While living here, I've thought about home. A lot. And it's not just homesickness. Sometimes, people need to be in a new situation to reflect on and celebrate their usual world. New experiences can forcefully trigger this reflection and celebration. I hope this experience will help me do more than tolerate other cultures in the future.

IT IS MY HOPE that I will reconcile my African and Western inheritance, my histories. This, for a while, may require my perching on the precarious angle where these two traditions meet, like the fiddler on the roof. But I hope time and experience and God's grace will soften that angle. Otherwise, with a poor balance, my fiddle will sound horrible or, worse still, I could fall off completely. I hope to remain an African who is steeped in other traditions, if only to be in harmony with my world—my diverse world. ■