



CHRISTIAN DIVINERS: INCULTURATION FROM BELOW?

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Abstract

The Igbo traditional practice of seeking information from diviners is very much alive in the Church in Igboland. Diviners who identify with the Igbo ancestral religion exist side by side with Christian diviners. The latter claim being gifted by God with insights into future events. Can the prevalence of this phenomenon of Christian diviners be accounted for as inculturation from below? This is the problematic of this write-up. Using a hermeneutical approach, effort is made to situate the divination by Christians within the socio-historical and cultural development in the Bible of the understanding and practice of prophecy and to explore the circumstances that reckon this practice in the 21st century life-context of Igbo Christians. The recommendation is to live by faith rather than by sight where faith implies trust in God while exercising due diligence in judgement and decision-making rather than relying on private revelation.

Keywords: Inculturation, Divination, Prophecy, Private Revelation.

Introduction

Divination is a common practice in Igbo traditional religion, as it is in many other religions. In times of crisis, ‘*i je ju ase*’ – which literally means – to go and make inquiries from the diviner, is the culturally sanctioned approach to take. The diviner is expected to find out the deity or spirit that is behind the crises and possibly also what it would take to rectify things. The appeasement of such an interfering deity or spirit is believed to restore the cosmic balance that would end the crisis.

A practice analogous to divination has become prevalent in popular Christianity in south-eastern Nigeria. Consultation is prominent in the programme of activities of those who, for ease of reference, I have called ‘Christian diviners.’ Those undergoing crisis due to downturn in business, career challenges, ill health, fertility problems, etc. consult these men or women of God for supernatural insight into the source of their problem. In some cases, the consultation aims at finding out not just the spiritual beings behind the misfortune but also the human beings working in consort with the spirit forces. This angle comes out clearly in *ọlụ ezinaụlọ* – family ministry – where kindreds engage the services of the ‘Christian diviner’ to find out who among them is or are purportedly holding the others down through ‘occult’ means.¹ As in the traditional setting, such consultations are also made on behalf of another. A mother was worried that her daughter was not yet married. She went to one of the Christian diviners for a prayer session. The message given to her was that another man whom the daughter had refused to marry had tied her up in the spirit

¹ Lawrence Nwankwo, “Ọlụ Ezinaụlọ and Neo-Christianity: A Critical Reflection on a Practice in Igboland,” *The Return of the Gods*, Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Jude Emeka Madu, eds. B.A.C Obiefuna, et al., (Onitsha: Coskan, 2018) 401-409.



world such that unless this ‘spiritual chain’ is broken, the girl would be experiencing what is called ‘promise and fail.’ This means that suitors would come, promise to marry her but along the line would fail her by absconding without any reason. Some of these ‘Christian diviners’ peddle messages purportedly from God without any solicitation from the supposed beneficiary. There are cases of strangers walking up to people and delivering to them what they claim to be messages from God.

Indeed, the services of the ‘Christian diviners’ have even enlarged beyond those of their counterparts in the traditional Igbo setting. They are not only consulted in moments of crisis understood as moments of difficulty but also in moments of crisis understood as moments of important and life-changing decisions. Thus, people take the names of their prospective wives and husbands from men and women of God to ascertain the one approved by God.²

In the face of the widespread nature of this phenomenon, can one term what is taking place as inculturation from below? That is, recognition that divination, albeit in the Christian context, has become *de facto* an important feature of Christianity in Igboland. Are all the cases of purported messages from God actually from God? Even if, some of the messages are from God, is it right for one to build one’s life around such ‘extraordinary’ insights into the sequence of events? In other words, is this widespread phenomenon an aberration or a bold step towards assimilating a genuine value and practice in Igbo traditional religion into Christianity? The first step in our reflection would therefore be an exploration of the demands of inculturation in order to gain a template for the reflection on the phenomenon of ‘Christian divination.’

Inculturation And The Vatican Ii Document *Ad Gentes Divinitus*

Pope Francis, in line with the magisterium of his predecessor, Pope St. John Paul II, notes that “through inculturation, the Church ‘introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her community,’ for ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived.’ In this way, the Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornate monilibus suis*, ‘the bride bedecked with her jewels’ (cf. *Is* 61:10).”³

Although the evangelization of China by St. Francis Xavier and his Jesuit companions showed sensitivity and respect for the Chinese culture, the Church in the period of missionary expansion

²I wonder if in the traditional Igbo setting people felt the need to consult the diviner before marriage. The current prevalence of this particular form of consultation shows the socio-cultural changes with regard to the institution of marriage. People, especially women, no longer marry so early and most marriages are no longer arranged marriages. On the one hand, with many suitors coming for marriage and many prospective wives jostling to secure that position and on the other hand, the difficulties associated with failed marriages staring them in the face, the burden of making the choice of a life-partner has become so high for young men and women. This leads many to make recourse to Christian divination as a means of overcoming the uncertainty of the outcome of the choice of partner and to have a divine seal of approval for their eventual choice.

³ Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *EvangeliiGaudium*, no. 116
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html accessed on January 4, 2014.



to Africa was ensconced in a Eurocentric vision. European culture was seen as normative. Christianization was synonymous with westernization. It took World War II, the decolonization struggle, and the shift from the normative to the anthropological understanding of culture to move the Church to a rediscovery of the vision of Justin Martyr with regard to the relationship of the Christian faith and other cultures. This rediscovered vision shines through in the documents of the Vatican II Council.

Faced with the challenge of articulating the relationship between Christianity and the ‘pagan’ culture of his time which had produced the great philosophical tradition in which he was trained before he converted to Christianity, Justin Martyr proposed a framework of relationship in which Christianity is in continuity with ‘pagan’ cultures while also in discontinuity. He spoke of the seed of the *Logos* (*logos spermatikos*) scattered in all cultures and religions.⁴ This is the principle of continuity. Every culture has seeds of the *Logos* – who is Jesus Christ – planted in it. But the fullness of this *Logos* is to be found in Christianity. In this bold move, he unfolded a common ground between Christianity and other cultures and religions. Unlike Tertullian, whose rhetorical question, “what has Athens in common with Jerusalem?”⁵ indicated that Christianity has no common grounds with the Greek culture, Justin Martyr not only advocated for such a common ground but also sketched a hierarchical scheme in which Christianity represented the highest and the best while acknowledging that ‘pagan’ philosophy and cultures have some value.

As already noted, the vision of Justin Martyr was taken up in the Vatican II Council documents. While rejecting the exclusivism of Tertullian, the Council Fathers affirmed in *Nostra Aetate* no. 2 that the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in non-Christian religions. “She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.” This positive valuation of other religions and cultures based on a view of them as reflecting rays of that truth or containing seeds of that *Logos*, (to use the formulation of Justin Martyr) gave rise to an emphasis on mission in terms of the incarnation of the Gospel in the cultures of the different peoples. Thus, in *Ad gentes* 22, mission was seen no longer in terms of transplanting the Church in Europe or elsewhere to other places but in terms of inculturation. Deploying an organic metaphor, the Council Father affirmed that “the seed which is the word of God grows out of good soil watered by the divine dew, it absorbs moisture, transforms it, and makes it part of itself, so that eventually it bears much fruit. So too indeed, just as happened in the economy of the incarnation, the young churches, which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundation of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance (cf Ps 2:8). They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the creator, manifest the grace of the savior, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life.”

⁴Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.iv.iii.html> accessed on February 20, 2012. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Bk 1, ch.5, see <http://www.ccel.org/schaff/anf02.vi.iv.i.ix.html> accessed December 15, 2011.

⁵Tertullian, *De Prescr. Adv. Haer.* 7, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.iii.vii.html> accessed February 10, 2012.



As already noted, inculturation is proposed by the Council Fathers as the way to mission. The seed of the Gospel has to grow in the native soil of the different peoples in which it is preached. It is to be nourished by that soil, transforming these nutrients and making them part of itself. As the Church does this, it shows forth her catholicity, which does not only mean universality in terms of geographical spread but also universality in terms of embracing and preserving all truths and values from different cultural backgrounds as long as these are not bound up with superstition and error (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 37). In sum, it is taken that just as in the incarnation, the Word took flesh without absorbing or annihilating human nature, in the same way, elements of a culture which reflect the light of Jesus can be taken up and brought into the Church.⁶ As communities strive to introduce elements of their culture into the Church, Jesus Christ, the *Logos* of God, remains the touchstone and measure of what is to be admitted. Inculturation, therefore, is not the haphazard adaptation of any cultural element, however cherished or widespread, in a community. There has to be a process of discernment, which has to start with an in-depth understanding of the word revealed by God within the tradition of the Church. This grounding in the teachings of the Church would then aid the search for how the “faith can be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people and how their customs, concept of life and social structures can be reconciled with the standard proposed by divine revelation” (*Ad gentes* 22).

In the light of the above, it can be said that what I have called ‘inculturation from below’ – that is, the canonization of any practice in popular religiosity as genuine inculturation – is not accurate. Acculturation, that is, the assimilation of cultural elements into Christianity, has to be accompanied by theological discernment. In this discernment process, Jesus Christ, the Word of God, remains the touchstone. As regards divination, a lot more has to be done apart from the widespread nature of the practice to speak of its inculturation or lack thereof.

Divination: Another Face of the Phenomenon

The Bible is clear on its injunction against divination, fortune-telling, sorcery, interpretation of omens, inquiry from the dead and other ritual practices of the peoples among whom the Israelites settled. In Deut 18:9-12, it is stated, “when you have entered the country given you by Yahweh your God, you must not learn to imitate the detestable practices of the nations there already. There must never be anyone among you who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire of sacrifice, who practices divination, who is a soothsayer, augur or sorcerer, weaver of spells, consulter of ghosts or mediums, or necromancer. For anyone who does these things is detestable to Yahweh your God; it is because of these detestable practices that Yahweh your God is driving out these nations before you.” (See also Micah 5:12) As king of Israel, Saul proscribed such practices. But before the battle with the Philistines in which he lost his life, he went in disguise and consulted the witch at Endor (1 Sam 28:7).

Divination often evokes the image of an exotic ritual: the throwing of shells or any other ritual object and attending to the pattern made by these objects, the reading of palms, reading of the configuration of the intestines of an animal. The Nigerian film industry, *Nollywood*, has

⁶ See Lawrence Nwankwo, “Religion, Culture and Social Regeneration,” *A Bountiful Harvest: Festschrift in Honour of Very Rev. Msgr. Prof. J.P.C. Nzomiwu*, ed. Chiegboka A.B.C et al (Nimo: Rex Charles, 2012) 354-364.



popularized divination in terms of internal audition and visions granted exclusively to the diviner by spirit beings in virtue of his or her *charisma* as a diviner. Whatever the means employed, the ultimate aim is to access and provide information that is not ordinarily available to human beings. In the light of this distinction between means and end, divination or fortune-telling is essentially about accessing information which is ordinarily not available to human beings. For example, information about the outcome of a choice of a marriage partner, whether the marriage would be successful or unsuccessful, is ordinarily not available at the time the marriage is being contracted.⁷ Similarly, the famous line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which states that there is no art to find the mind's construction on the face, makes it clear that people's deepest motives and their life histories are not written on their faces for others to read off. To read people's minds or motives for action borders on divination or fortune-telling. If we go back to the Old Testament, we see the prophets being consulted in times of war. These prophets were requested to inquire from Yahweh whether the Israelites would be victorious or not. Would such services provided by the prophets be seen as analogous to divination or fortune-telling despite the Old Testament ban on such practices?

Divination and the Institution of Prophecy in the Old Testament

The prophets played significant roles both religiously and politically in the history of Israel. Following God's directive, Samuel anointed Saul king of Israel. The ascension of David to the throne is presented as a consequence of divine election, as attested to by the anointing by Samuel, even when David was still a lad and the working out of this divine choice through David's successful military exploits. Similarly, Ahijah the prophet had symbolically confirmed to Jeroboam, son of Nebat his leadership of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel before the political schism occasioned by Rehoboam's insensitivity to his people's request (1 Kings 11:29-31; 12:1-20). Elijah the prophet was sent to anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi king of Israel and Hazael as king of Aram (1 King 19:16-17). It may be argued that it was such endorsement by the prophets that emboldened the individuals (Saul, David, Jeroboam, Jehu, Hazael etc.) to play the roles they did, but the sense of the narrative is that Yahweh is the Lord of history and was directing history in line with His will. The prophets are presented as recipients of the information about the future turn of events as willed by God.

There are other, more mundane presentations about the activities of the prophets that present them as those in possession of extraordinary knowledge and sources of information that are not otherwise available to other human beings. Some stories about the prophet Elisha credit him with parapsychic abilities such as clairvoyance. In 2 Kings 6:12, it is reported that Elisha divulged to the king of Israel the secret war plans made by the king of Aram in his bedchamber, and in v. 32, he is presented as having the power to know of the plan to kill him hatched by the king. As Gehazi, his servant, was denying his meeting with Naaman, Elisha informed him that he was present, although not physically, at the meeting (2 Kings 5:26). Such extraordinary knowledge is also credited to Ahijah the prophet. King Jeroboam sent his wife to him to find out what would happen to Abijah, his sick son. The wife was to disguise herself. Notwithstanding the disguise and the fact

⁷ What may be available is a reasoned calculation based on evidence as regards the outcome of the marriage relationship. Even then, one can only speak of the probable turn of events in the future.



that Ahijah could not see because of age, “Yahweh told him, ‘Jeroboam’s wife is now on her way to ask you for a prophecy about her son, as he is sick. You will tell her such and such. When she comes she will pretend to be some other woman’” (1 Kings 14:5). Prophets were also consulted to know the outcome of wars. Before the siege of Ramoth in Gilead, King Jehoshaphat insisted that the prophets be consulted to find out whether Yahweh would guarantee them victory. Not convinced about the endorsement of the military campaign against Ramoth in Gilead by the band of four hundred prophets provided by King Ahab, Jehoshaphat asked, “is there no other prophet of Yahweh here, so that we can enquire through him?” At this request, Micaiah son of Imlah was brought and he told Ahab and Jehoshaphat that Ahab would be killed in the campaign against Ramoth in Gilead and Israel would be defeated. He even explained how a deceptive spirit was put in the mouths of all the prophets of Ahab to entice him to go to battle and die. With prophets pitched against each other, Ahab chose to go to war and indeed died there (1 Kings 22:5-38).

One can raise questions about Micaiah’s response. If Yahweh had wanted Ahab to be deceived into going up to Ramoth in Gilead to die and had put deceptive spirits in the mouths of the other prophets, why would Micaiah blow the whistle? That is why he would thwart God’s plan by warning Ahab. Would God be working at cross purposes with Himself? Or is this a warning about an uncritical adoption of the way the prophets and their activities are presented? Be that as it may, it is easy to show the complexity of the use of the term prophet (*nabi*) in the Old Testament and of the evolution of the institution of prophecy in ancient Israel from a period of close mirroring of the practices prevalent among their neighbors to a period when such ‘extraordinary’ powers were not associated with prophets. This corresponds to a shift from oral proclamation about prophets to written records credited to the prophets.

With regard to the complexity of use of the term, it is noteworthy as Gerhard von Rad observed that “our general use of the term ‘prophets’ gives the impression of a uniformity which did not in fact exist.”⁸ It is interesting to note that the designation ‘prophet’ and ‘prophetess’ as the case may be was used for Abraham (Gen 20:7), Moses (Deut 34:10), Aaron (Ex 7:1) Miriam (Ex 15:20). It is hard to see the commonality between these figures and Elijah or Micaiah son of Imlah to warrant the application of the same term ‘prophet’ to them. But this shows the great range of meanings that the term prophet has.

It is also easy to see that there is a development of the institution of prophecy in Israel. There were the ecstatic and mantic groups that used music to work themselves into frenzy (1 Sam 10:9-14). As Gerhard von Rad put it, the prophets were children of their milieu. Their prophetic utterances

⁸ “In the sources Nathan is everywhere designated as prophet ... but on the other hand, Gad sometimes functions as ‘David’s seer’ (2 Sam 24:11) and sometimes as prophet (1 Sam. 22:5; 2 Sam 24:11). Amaziah addresses Amos as ‘seer’... whereupon the latter retorts that he is no ‘prophet’ (Amos 7:12, 14). In 1 Sam 9:9, prophet and seer are designated as synonymous terms, though it is said that the use of the terms had changed with the passage of time.” He concludes that “this remarkable fluctuation in the terms employed warns us against regarding any specific text as an altogether direct reflexion of what the actual usage was. The narrators’ own preconceptions always play a part; and, more particularly, the terms used in the various text-groups are those current in the places where the texts originated.” Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, vol II: The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Tradition*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 6.



and comportment were not simply out of their personal experience of Yahweh. “Research has ... clearly shown that the prophets were much more directly involved in concepts common to the ancient east, in cult, and in myth, and even in what were termed primitive ‘magical’ ideas.”⁹ However, the transition from oral proclamation of prophecy, that is, from a narrative form of report to written records or *logia* of the prophet, marked an important step in the development of the institution. The narratives about Elisha, for example, celebrated him as possessing a *charisma* that gave him the power to perform miracles and display supernatural knowledge. In Jeremiah, the weeping prophet who suffered greatly in the hands of his people, one sees a different picture of a prophet as someone who spoke, suffered rejection, and felt abandoned as he strove to call the Israelites back to covenant faithfulness as the basis for their wellbeing. In sum, there is a shift in narratives about prophets being possessors of supernatural power and knowledge about events to prophets being bearers and interpreters of God’s word to the people. In the later stages of its development, the messages of the prophets were rarely addressed to single persons,¹⁰ much less were the prophets consulted like Ahijah was (1 Kings 14:1-5), to find out the cause of people’s illness and misfortune. In other words, there was a gradual purification of elements of divination understood as a manifestation of supernatural knowledge about people and events from the prophetic ministry.

Divination in the New Testament

The central figure of the New Testament is Jesus Christ. In him, God walked the streets of Palestine as a true human being. In his life and ministry, he showed individual Christians and the Church the path to follow. One sees little of what we have called divination in his life and ministry. More precisely, there are many accounts, especially in the Gospel of John, of Jesus’ supernatural knowledge of persons and things, but these are presented more as a way of drawing attention to the person of Jesus than as legitimization for the practice of what we have called divination. For example, in his first meeting with Nathaniel, Jesus commented that “there truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deception.” This prompted Nathaniel to ask, “How do you know me?” (Jn 1:47). Similarly, at Jacob’s well, the woman gave a technically correct answer. Only the supernatural knowledge of Jesus supplied the detail about the woman’s marital history, which prompted her to remark, “I see you are a prophet, sir” (Jn 4:16-20). After his discourse at Capernaum on giving his followers his body and many of his followers were complaining, the gospel writer noted that “Jesus knew from the outset who did not believe and who was to betray him” (Jn 6:64). The celebration of his last Passover was set within the context of an awareness on the part of Jesus that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father (Jn 13:1,11,27,28). Before his arrest at the garden across the Kidron valley, it is reported that “knowing everything that was to happen to him, Jesus came forward and said, ‘Who are you looking for?’” (Jn 18:4).

⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ “These exceptions apart, what distinguishes the great prophets whose works have been preserved to us from their predecessors in Israel and analogous figures in the Middle East, is that their message is addressed to the whole nation.” See Henry Wansbrough, (ed.) “Introduction to the Prophets,” *Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985) 1159.



Despite Jesus' supernatural knowledge, his attitude and conduct are markedly different from that of the slave-girl variously described as the 'soothsayer' or the 'fortune-teller' of Philippi. This girl was said to make a lot of money for her master by foretelling the future (Acts 16:16). The issue at stake here is not the money-making or the fact that she was doing this through the power of an evil spirit.¹¹ Rather, by foretelling the future and availing people of her supernatural knowledge of events and of the future, the slave-girl was promoting a way of life that dispensed with the uncertainty of the future. In Jesus' life and ministry and the life and ministry of the early Christians, there was no preoccupation with unveiling the future through supernatural knowledge.

The conclusion that one can draw from the above exploration is that there is a need for caution with regard to the desire to know the hidden things about events, persons and the future. The caution is not only because of the need to test the spirit that is providing the information, but above all, *because we are invited to live by faith and not by sight.*

Living by Faith and not by Sight (2 Cor 5:7)

According to Aristotle, "all men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness, they are loved for themselves, and above all others, the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." These are the opening words of Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*.¹² While Aristotle contrasts the human desire-to-know to the instinctive behavior in animals, I want to use his remark to draw attention to the constant struggle between the human desire-to-know, the tendency to walk by sight, that is, in the clarity of knowledge and the reality that human life in some significant areas has to be lived in the dim light offered by faith. The attraction of divination down the ages has been that it promises to provide more information and light over areas of life that are otherwise gray if not opaque; areas which God invites people to walk in faith but not by sight.

The lure of walking by sight illumined by the extra information that divination provides can be compared to the attraction of the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' in the Genesis account of the Fall. One way of interpreting this story of paradise is that there was one important matter on which God wanted human beings to trust him on. Trust is supposed to maintain the boundary between creator and creature and this need for trust is symbolized by and focused on by the tree of knowledge of good and evil.¹³ While this is most likely not a physical tree, its description as tree of knowledge of good and evil gives a clue as to what is at stake. Knowledge in the Semitic way of thinking is primarily experiential and not intellectual knowing. The title of the tree therefore

¹¹ See the story about Carl, a psychic who was under the influence of demonic forces and could read people's thoughts and states of mind in Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans* (New York: Quality Paperback Book, 1976, 2000) 321-381.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html> accessed on January 8, 2014.

¹³ See Heinrich Spaemann, "Die angebissene Frucht," *Die Sache mit dem Apfel: eine modern Wissenschaft von Sündenfall*, ed. Joachim Illies (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Publication, 1972) 90-102.



connotes that God did not want the first human beings to come to knowledge of good and evil through their own experience but to trust God to be their guide and father. The fall consists in the fact that Adam and Eve insisted on knowing, on experiencing and deciding for themselves as regards good and evil. Analogously, there are things left concealed by God – the future, the direction of divine providence, etc – and with regard to which God invites human beings to exercise trust. With regard to the future, for example, human beings are invited to do their best and leave the rest to God by exercising faith. But there is a permanent lure to uncover the future and, with the knowledge thus gained, to make decisions in the present. This attraction is what constitutes the drive to harness supernatural knowledge for the benefit of living in the present. As in the case of Adam and Eve, this drive often leads to brokenness.

An exaggerated but true story of someone's commitment to walking by sight and not by faith will illustrate my point. Long before the popularization of 'Christian diviners' in the mainline Churches, an uncle of mine decamped to one of the Christian groups with strong attachment to Igbo traditional religion. That step began his gradual alienation from the rest of the family and his dependency on 'dreams and revelations' and on his 'pastor.' He relocated to the Church while his family lived in his family house. One day, his mother became critically ill. He was informed. Initially, he agreed to come down the next day. But he did not show up. Later, he explained that he had a nightmare and his pastor interpreted it as revelation that his proposed trip to attend to his sick mother should be canceled. What has happened is that his dream was interpreted rightly or wrongly as revelation of the future. This added information formed the basis of his decision not to come to attend to the sick mother who had a hard time forgiving him for this neglect. In contrast, a person who walks by faith would trust in divine providence and would rush back home to show filial love to the sick mother without thinking twice about coming to any harm himself.

Another true story is about a prospective couple who had to call off their engagement because four out of the five 'Christian diviners' visited by themselves and by proxy, counseled against the marriage on the basis that they had revelation that both were not meant to be couples. Yet, these young people had known and related closely with each other since their childhood. From the human point of view, they possess the requisite qualities that would make their marriage successful. But in the glare of the excess light shed by the 'Christian diviners' and the supposedly supernatural information supplied, they called off their engagement with bitterness and brokenness. There is no way of knowing whether theirs was the best decision or not. But ordinarily, one would expect that God would want them to make decisions based on the information available to them and trust Him to lead them on in life instead of seeking through the 'Christian diviners' to unveil the future and on that basis make decisions in the present.

Living by Faith and Private Revelation

As can be seen from the above, our question is not about the possibility of supernatural knowledge or put differently, it is not about whether there can be 'revelation' through dreams or otherwise. Rather, this possibility notwithstanding, should one hang on them or live by them?



Christianity is a revealed religion. This means that at the heart of it is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Christianity is not the outcome of a human search for God but the gift of God to humanity in Jesus Christ. This gradual uncovering of God took different forms in times past but climaxed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, true God and true human being. Revelation is closed yet open. It is closed in the sense that it is definitive. Nothing would supersede what has been revealed in Jesus Christ. But it is still open in the sense that through the ages, the Holy Spirit leads the Church to new insights into the one revelation in Jesus Christ. Besides the revelation in Jesus Christ, which is accounted for as public revelation, there are private revelations. These do not belong to the deposit of faith and every Christian is free to accept them or not because these are not necessary for salvation.

It is easy to see why one is not under any obligation to accept private revelation. First, there is the challenge of discernment. As St. Paul put it, the existence of counterfeit apostles and dishonest workers disguising themselves as apostles of Christ should not astonish anyone because even Satan disguises himself as angel of light (2 Cor 11:14-15). This discernment is a complex and delicate matter. The second reason is that God's will is also revealed in the natural laws through which God governs the universe. If God had wanted, He would have made knowledge of the future accessible to human beings. But God chose otherwise and invites all to exercise judgment and to trust His lead.

Inculturate Divination? Concluding Reflection

From the above, I hope that it has become pretty clear that notwithstanding the widespread practice of Christian divination in the Church in Igboland, that it is not a development in the right direction. It is as if some elements of the traditional worldview have surreptitiously taken up a commanding position in the Christian consciousness and become the hermeneutical key to the understanding and interpretation of other elements of the Christian faith. The result is that a phase in the development of the institution of prophecy in the Old Testament, when people consulted prophets as channels of supernatural knowledge about the future and about hidden causes of events, is now highlighted as the norm of Christian living. Our exploration however has shown that at the heart of the Christian faith is an invitation to live by faith and trust in the guiding hand of God rather than in the frenzied search for 'hidden' information about events and the future, in order to live by sight.

The element of the traditional Igbo worldview that is responsible for the widespread practice of Christian divination has been analyzed by Ogbu U. Kalu, in an article aptly titled '*Precarious Vision*.'¹⁴ This vision is based on the division of reality into the spirit world and the human world and the heavy traffic between the two. Human beings can influence events in the spirit world and vice versa. Events are not therefore seen as manifestations of at least the permissive will of God much less as an outcome of a chain of inner worldly causes. Rather, events are resultants of the interaction between the denizens of the spirit world and the human world. Against this background, it is important to have information about the configuration of forces at work in the shaping of

¹⁴Ogbu U.Kalu, "Precarious Vision: The African Perception of His World," *Readings in African Traditional Religion: Structure, Meaning, Relevance, Future*, ed. E.M Uka (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991) 11-18.



IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities

Vol. 11. No. 3, (2025)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

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Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

history both individual and collective in order to find ways and means of influencing them to one's benefit. This makes the work of the diviner indispensable for life in the traditional Igbo set up. It is this indispensability that has been imported into Christianity and has given rise to the widespread practice of consultation of 'Christian diviners.' But this is coming at a cost of undermining the Christian understanding of divine guidance of the world, diminishing the role of divine providence and diverting attention from the Christian vocation of living by faith rather than by sight. Most importantly, this practice has robbed people of their God-given intelligence and will with which to evaluate events and situations in order to make choices. The result is a constant abdication of personal responsibility in one's life, since, at one point or another it is either a spirit or another person who is responsible for what goes on in people's lives. In psychological terms, this is actually a regression towards a more primitive way of understanding and dealing with life's challenges rather than a progression towards a more differentiated consciousness that is increasingly realistic in understanding, evaluating and dealing with life issues.



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