

THE EMMAUS NARRATIVE AND ENDURING IGBO VALUES THAT SHAPE IGBO IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper explores the Emmaus narrative in Luke 24:13-35, highlighting its theological themes of divine initiative, communal journey, and transformative revelation. It draws compelling parallels between this post-resurrection encounter and enduring Igbo cultural values that shape identity and foster communal cohesion. Using participant observation and literature analysis, the study demonstrates how core elements of the Emmaus story resonate with traditional Igbo practices and beliefs. The narrative's emphasis on companionship, gradual enlightenment, and mission following encounter mirrors the Igbo worldview, where life is viewed as a collective journey guided by ancestral wisdom and communal solidarity. By aligning the Emmaus experience with Igbo moral and social values, the paper presents a culturally contextualized theological framework that underscores the relevance of Christian discipleship within indigenous African settings. It concludes that the Emmaus story provides a powerful spiritual lens through which to affirm, preserve, and renew Igbo identity in a rapidly modernizing world.

Keywords: Emmaus, Eucharist, Communalism, Hospitality, Igbo

Introduction

The Emmaus journey and experience of Lk 24:13-35 was a post-resurrection event involving a disciple of Jesus, Cleopas, and another unnamed disciple, whom some biblical scholars, such as Gillman (2002), suggest was his wife. Gillman notes, too, that the two disciples were a subgroup of “the eleven and all the rest” mentioned in Lk 24:9 to whom the women reported the empty tomb. In contemporary biblical scholarship, the precise location of Emmaus, which Scripture states was 7 miles from Jerusalem, remains a topic of debate, despite tradition identifying it with Emmaus Nicopolis. No other Gospel writer recorded this experience of the risen Lord with the two disciples, but Luke. Moessner (1989) refers to it as “the most exquisite achievement” (p.184) of Luke. The journey was one undertaken by the two amidst doubts and confusion following the crucifixion of their master and teacher, Jesus. Little wonder their faces were downcast (Lk 24:17). The journey involved a movement from Jerusalem, etymologically related to “peace,” to Emmaus. This name bears some relation to “hotness” and, derivatively, “pain” (Kassler, 2022). Their movement away from Jerusalem is like walking away from their newly found faith. As they began the journey, it was entirely unknown to them that it would eventually lead to a discovery and a deeper understanding of who Jesus really was, as well as a stronger faith in Him, the faith that would prompt their swift return to Jerusalem. Indeed, the experience not only revealed something about Jesus and the way to know Him better to the disciples, but also something about themselves.

Although the story recounts a journey by two disciples, it also represents a spiritual journey that every disciple should undertake to encounter Jesus, both in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist. Discipleship is fundamentally about the journey, moving away from oneself towards the Lord, and from one’s weaknesses to God’s strength. This journey occurred when the disciples were, as it were, at the lowest ebb of their faith journey as can be gleaned from Jesus’ rebuke of the duo for their ignorance and “slow of heart to believe” (Lk 24:25). However, they emerged from this experience with firm faith in the risen Lord and joined to bear witness to it. In his homilies on the Gospels, Gregory the Great (Hom. 23) notes that, although the two disciples did not actually possess the requisite faith in Jesus as they journeyed, they were still talking about Jesus. Every faithful Christian should make this experience and journey their own in order to come to terms with the reality before them, because in this process, Jesus becomes a companion.

This biblical account, characterized by divine initiative, gradual revelation, and communal fellowship, offers a rich allegorical framework that resonates deeply with the enduring values central to Igbo identity and communal life. Just as Jesus proactively invites individuals into fellowship, journeying with them from doubt to recognition, Igbo society similarly emphasizes a continuous process of learning, communal support, and the profound significance of shared experiences. By employing a critical-hermeneutical methodology to analyze existing literature and conduct participant observation, this paper explores the remarkable parallels between the core values of the Emmaus

narrative, which have historically shaped and continue to define their distinct cultural identity and robust communal structures. Through these intersections, we aim to demonstrate how the Emmaus story provides a compelling spiritual lens for understanding and appreciating the enduring strength of Igbo traditional values in contemporary society.

Jesus Takes the Initiative

In the journey of faith, it is always Jesus who takes the initiative to invite his followers to fellowship with him. He calls every one of his followers not from a distance but from unimaginable proximity. It is necessary to respond positively to this divine initiative. God's call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-9) followed the same pattern. When Abraham was called, he left the comfort of his home for an unknown territory simply because he had confidence in the caller and knew he could never deceive him. The response paid off, as he is today acclaimed as the Father of Faith. Moses responded to God's call with a resounding acclamation, "Here am I" (Ex 3:4). Similarly, He called all the prophets of the Old Testament. In the Gospels, Jesus went about searching for and calling His disciples. Andrew, Peter, James, John, and other Apostles responded positively to the invitation. He takes the initiative to call us to Himself, to be close to us and shower us with His love, allowing us to share in His divinity.

It is in this light that it is easy to understand the closeness of Jesus to these two disciples on their way to Emmaus. As they began their journey, they initially thought of Him as a defeated hero who would deliver Israel from her enemies. In their own words: "We had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). They thought of Him as gone, not knowing that He was very much present, wanting to accompany them, to be with them, and to enrich them with His gracious presence. He still invited them into a relationship with Him, even when they thought all hope was dashed. He is never tired of us, even when we are tired of ourselves. They were probably moving away from Jerusalem, believing that there was no need to continue fighting for the Gospel since the Master had gone and been so humiliated.

Jesus came into their midst uninvited. He took the initiative to call them back into fellowship, friendship, and communion. On his arrival, they could not recognize Him: "their eyes were kept from recognizing Him" (Lk 24:16). Their eyes were closed, probably because they had made up their mind already that Jesus was completely dead. When Jesus asked them what they were discussing together as they walked along, they regarded the question as bizarre, such that Cleopas rhetorically responded to Jesus, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem that does not know what has happened" (Lk 24:18). Knowledge of the Greek word used here will enable us know the extent of their assessment of Jesus. In Greek, the word for stranger is *paroikos*. It is derived from a combination of two words: *oikos*, meaning "house," and *para*, meaning "around" or "outside." So literally, *par-oikos* means "outside the house." This is the same word that is used for someone who lives in a country without citizenship. In this sense, therefore, Cleopas referred to Jesus as an "immigrant," a "foreigner." They belonged, whereas Jesus did not. However, Jesus was not deterred by that. He stayed and journeyed along with them.

From Ignorance to Knowledge and Transformation; from Stranger to Host

Though the identity of Jesus was hidden from the duo, their own identity was never hidden from Jesus. He knew who they were and the ongoing struggle within them between their love for Jesus and doubt occasioned by His death and the empty tomb. Although Jesus knew all this, he did not force the issue. The revelation of His identity to them was gradual and progressive. He guided them patiently from a state of hopelessness, amidst being a "stranger," an "immigrant," and a "foreigner," to eventual celebration with a friend, with Jesus, their Lord and Master.

This is in tandem with the dynamics of a faith journey, for God is such a great mystery that knowledge of Him is a continuous one until He is finally seen face-to-face after this earthly sojourn. He could not be comprehended at a glance. He keeps prompting and enlightening the faithful once they are ready to cooperate with Him. The two disciples proved themselves worthy disciples who were eager to learn. Jesus Himself, being a loving master and friend, listened to their sorrows and pains, doubts and fears, and relieved them of all these by expounding the Scriptures to them patiently

and progressively. He accompanied them until there was inner healing and transformation of heart “from a ‘slow heart’ to a burning one” (Bhakou, 2011).

Just as the hearts of the two disciples were kindled with love as they listened to the Scriptures, so also are his faithful invited to relate to the Scriptures that they read daily in the liturgy, in their homes, and at their places of work. They encounter the Lord through the Scriptures. When they read, pray, and meditate on the Scriptures, Jesus reveals Himself to them, and with faith they can actually know Him better, hence St. Jerome’s (PL 24, 17B) words, “Ignorance of the Scripture is ignorance of Christ”. The Church believes and teaches that Jesus is present in the Scriptures because it is He who speaks when it is read in the Church. Hence, every sacrifice of the Mass contains at least two readings from the Scriptures. Therefore, in and through the Scriptures, believers encounter Him, who is not only the mediator but also the fullness of divine revelation (Vatican Council II, 1965; 1963).

The revelation of Jesus to the two disciples reached its climax at supper, when Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. Their eyes were opened and they recognized who He was. The expounding of the Scriptures to them on the road became a preparation for the encounter at the table of the Eucharist. The Word of God in the Scriptures prepared their hearts for the reception of the Word of God, which is truly present in the Eucharist. The events on the road and in the house represent the two segments of the sacrifice of the altar, the holy mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. According to Pope Benedict XVI (2007), “The privileged place for reading and listening to the Word of God is the liturgy, in which, celebrating the Word and making Christ’s Body present in the Sacrament, we actualize the Word in our lives and make it present among us”. The liturgy of the word with which the holy mass begins continues till the Prayers of the Faithful, after which comes the Liturgy of the Eucharist that begins with the offertory.

Stay with us for It Is Nearly Evening (Lk 24:29)

The events in the home were preceded by the openness and hospitality of the disciples to the stranger, who acted as if he were going farther as they reached their destination. They urged him, “Stay with us for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over” (Lk 24:29). Jesus agreed to stay. Through the offer of hospitality, the two disciples transcended their self-interest and their slowness to understand. They were prepared for the transformation that would occur when their eyes would eventually be opened at the table fellowship. According to Gillman (2022), as they sat at the table, “Jesus the stranger quickly changes roles and becomes the host as he breaks bread and distributes it to the two companions” (p. 178)

Faith as a Journey of Companions

Faith in Jesus Christ is a spiritual journey undertaken not in isolation, but within a community of those who share the same belief. This community is the Church, the body of Christ, the people of God. The two disciples were not walking alone; they were walking together. Walking together involved sharing emotions and ideas. So, as they walked, they talked and shared their faith experiences: the disillusionment they were experiencing due to the recent happenings in Jerusalem, culminating in the death of Jesus, whom they hoped would deliver Israel from the hands of their enemies. Viewing him as a political messiah, they perceived his mission in material terms. Their preconceived notions of who Jesus was, what He had come to do, and how He would achieve it were far removed from reality. Consequently, when events did not unfold as they had expected, they dismissed the entire situation as a mere failure, as misplaced hope and trust. Even the testimony about His resurrection from those who had previously visited the tomb did not resonate with them. They did not believe the story, indicating they had yet to grasp how the power of God operates.

The community of faith embarking on this journey is not, and should not be, a closed group. The door must be open for newcomers. Jesus seized such an open door and joined the walking group of two, thus making them a group of three. His entrance brought a new and refreshing dimension to the discussion, for He did not remain silent. He shared His ideas with them and corrected their misunderstanding of the Scriptures. This illustrates the importance of walking together along the way. Once believers are together, Jesus will make His appearance and join them. Did He not say that wherever two or three are gathered in His name, He is there (Matt 18:20)? The journey of faith is often one with ups and downs, successes and failures, hopes and despairs, joys and sorrows, peace

and conflict. It is never a smooth ride. The disciples need the comforting companionship of one another.

Sometimes, the believers' expectations, as reasonable as they may seem, can stand in opposition to God's excellent plan for us, which may be entirely hidden from them. An encouraging aspect is that while they may appear to have given up on Jesus, He does not give up on them. He continues to seek his own, and in the case of the two disciples, He encountered them on their way from Jerusalem, tired, confused, and disillusioned. Jesus specifically pointed out their lack of faith with these words, "You men of little faith." He then journeyed with them, restoring their hope and reviving their faith. It was Jesus who noted their lack of faith, but in another instance, when He taught His Apostles about the necessity of always forgiving their offenders, it was they who realized their little faith and had to ask the Lord to increase it (Lk 17:5).

The night provided an opportunity for them to reflect on Jesus' identity. The disciples recognized who Jesus truly was only at the table of the Eucharist, where His presence par excellence is realized. In addition to the Masses celebrated by priests in various churches and oratories, efforts must be made in the diocese to celebrate the normative Eucharistic sacrifice, in which the bishop is surrounded by his priests, deacons, and lay ministers, with the holy people of God taking full and active part. This is the preeminent expression of the Church, as stated by Vatican II (Vatican Council II, 1963)

Encounter for Mission

When the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized who Jesus was, they were deeply moved, unable to keep the experience to themselves. They returned to Jerusalem to share with other disciples what they had witnessed. Their immediate return to Jerusalem that same night, despite all possible dangers, aimed to spread the news of the resurrection to other believers and to encourage them in their struggle for survival amidst the hostile Jewish environment. The belief that Jesus was alive was sufficient to counter all forces of darkness that kept them indoors.

As a community of faith, Christians are called to share the message of the resurrection of Jesus with their darkened society, which is filled with rancour, hatred of all kinds, oppression, injustice, conflict, and a lack of respect for human life. Christianity is a message of life for a lifeless world, a message delivered through both words and actions. Christians must be infused with the same zeal for the gospel. They cannot keep it to themselves. The Church should be a community of evangelizers; those on a journey of witnessing the truth experienced in the risen Lord.

The Emmaus Story and Igbo Traditional Values

The Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35) offers several parallels and insights that can be used to strengthen Igbo traditional values, particularly in a contemporary context where some traditional practices may be waning or conflicting with modern influences. Such values include hospitality, communalism, shared meals, respect for elders and wisdom, the journey as a metaphor for life and revelation, and the importance of storytelling and oral traditions.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a cornerstone of Igbo culture. Welcoming strangers, offering food and shelter, and ensuring their comfort is a highly esteemed practice. Igbo hospitality embodies other values such as respect, community spirit, humility, generosity, and kindness. They are willing to share their resources and wealth with strangers they have not known, embracing them with open arms. Just as the Emmaus disciples did not know the stranger's identity, an Igbo person would still extend warmth and care to a visitor, reflecting the belief that every guest is a blessing and could even be an "ancestor," or a messenger from the divine.

The offering of kola nuts, which Uchendu (2007) describes as the "ubiquitous symbol of Igbo hospitality" (p.180), and the serving of drinks to guests are typical examples of this ingrained value. It is the first sign that a stranger is warmly welcomed in any home (Dioka et. al., 2021). Umeasiegbu (1977) observes that "If an Ibo [sic] man visits a fellow Ibo [sic], he does not feel he is a welcome visitor until his host offers him kola" (p. 3). However, the Igbo also expect the stranger to reciprocate such gestures by not being hostile to their host. Hence, the Igbo proverb, *Ojara be onye a biagbula*

ya; o p̄ba mkp̄kp̄u a p̄la ya (May a visitor not be hostile to his host so as not to develop hunchback on his way home).

Just as Igbo culture demands hospitality even to strangers, the two followers of Jesus on their way to Emmaus were moved to show hospitality to a stranger, who, unknown to them, was their master, Jesus Christ. Their hospitality brought them divine favours.

Communalism and Shared Meals

Igbo society is fundamentally communal. This value acts as a cornerstone of traditional Igbo society, being deeply ingrained in their worldview, social structures, and cultural practices. It emphasizes the collective well-being over individual interests, fostering a strong sense of belonging, mutual responsibility, and solidarity. Uchendu (2007) rightly observes that Igbo people value mutual dependence, especially within their kin group and community, with whom one remains connected throughout one's life. The Igbo philosophy, often summarized as "I am because we are" (or "Igwebuikwe" - strength in numbers/togetherness), along with the Igbo proverb, "*otu osisi a naghị emebe ọhịa*" (a tree does not make a forest), "*onye aghana nwanne ya*" (let no one forsake their brother or sister), perfectly captures this communal spirit. Individuals view themselves as integral parts of a larger collective (family, kindred, village, clan) rather than as isolated entities. Their identity and well-being are closely tied to the community.

The *umunna* (kindred) and *ogbe* (village) are essential units of Igbo communalism. These groups comprise individuals who share a common descent and ancestral lineage, fostering a profound sense of collective history and destiny. Communalism in Igbo society involves living together, sharing resources, and collectively shouldering responsibilities. It also extends to both the living and the dead—the ancestors—who are believed to be concerned with the affairs of their living relatives (Egwutuorah, 2013).

In many cultures, shared meals, or commensality, are highly valued and help promote community bonding, social cohesion, and reciprocity. According to Bhargav (2024), communal eating also enhances mental health by reducing stress and increasing happiness and well-being. Among the Igbo people, commensality is not just about sustenance; it is a vital social gathering that strengthens bonds, fosters unity, and facilitates dialogue. Family meals provide an opportunity for parents and elders to teach children about appropriate social behaviour, etiquette, and the importance of sharing (Brannen et al., 2013). They are so essential that it is considered unethical for an Igbo person not to invite anyone present during a meal to join. The act of sharing food, especially within a family or kindred group (*umunna*), signifies belonging, peace, and mutual support.

The Eucharist is also a meal. As Okonkwo (2011) rightly notes, "Seen as *koinonia*, the Eucharist connoted fellowship, sharing, and communion" (p. 431). It suggests union with Christ and among believers. According to Okonkwo, just as shared meals in Africa incorporate the living and the dead, so also does the Eucharist, as a mystery that re-enacts Christ's presence among the people as the Bread of life.

Respect for Elders and Wisdom

Elders are highly respected in Igbo culture as custodians of wisdom, tradition, and history. Just as the two disciples listened attentively to the risen Lord as He explained the scriptures to them, the Igbo people pay attention to the words of the elders. Profound respect for elders and their accumulated wisdom is a deeply ingrained value that underpins social order and communal harmony. This reverence is not merely a courtesy but a fundamental aspect of their worldview, where age is often equated with experience, knowledge, and a closer connection to ancestral wisdom (Echeta & Eze, 2017). Their counsel is sought, and their words are given significant weight. An Igbo proverb says, "*ọnu okenye bu ọnu muo*" (the mouth of an elder is an oracle). This means it is a source of wisdom and should be heeded. The way Jesus "opened the Scriptures" to the two disciples, demonstrating profound understanding, would resonate with the Igbo appreciation for those who possess deep knowledge and can interpret ancient wisdom.

The Journey as a Metaphor for Life and Revelation

Life itself is often seen as a journey with its challenges, lessons, and moments of revelation. The concept of "Chi" (personal destiny or guardian spirit) guides an individual's journey (Muonwe, 2018).

Just as the disciples' journey led them to a transformative encounter, Igbo people often view life's path as a continuous process of learning, growth, and encountering destiny. The narrative of the journey itself holds significance in Igbo oral traditions and storytelling.

Storytelling and Oral Tradition

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of Igbo culture, serving as a primary means of education, entertainment, and the transmission of cultural values, history, and moral lessons from one generation to the next (Ifeakor & Udeagwu, 2024). The way Jesus unfolds the narrative of salvation for the disciples mirrors the Igbo tradition of elders using proverbs, folktales (*akụkọ ifo*), and historical accounts to convey profound truths.

Conclusion

The Emmaus narrative, with its profound journey of recognition and transformation, offers a compelling spiritual allegory that resonates deeply with the enduring Igbo values shaping their identity and communal life. Just as Jesus initiated the encounter with the doubting disciples, guiding them from ignorance to enlightenment through the Scriptures and the Eucharist, the Igbo worldview similarly emphasizes continuous learning, growth, and the pursuit of wisdom. The narrative's core themes—companionship, hospitality, communal meals, respect for wisdom, and the transformative power of shared experience—mirror the fundamental tenets of Igbo society.

The disciples' invitation to the "stranger" to "stay with us" perfectly encapsulates the quintessential Igbo hospitality (*Inabata Onye Ọbịa*), where welcoming both known and unknown individuals is paramount, reflecting a spiritual openness. Their subsequent recognition of Jesus at the breaking of bread underscores the significance of shared meals (commensality) in fostering unity and deepening connections, a practice central to Igbo communalism that strengthens familial and community bonds. Moreover, Jesus' exposition of the Scriptures to the disciples, unlocking profound truths, parallels the profound respect for elders and their wisdom within Igbo culture, where insights from the past guide the present and future.

Ultimately, the Emmaus story serves as a potent reminder that both individual and communal journeys are enriched by companionship, open dialogue, and a willingness to embrace revelation. For the Igbo people, these values are not static relics of the past but dynamic principles that guide their interactions, resolve conflicts, and foster a society marked by mutual support and collective well-being. By embracing the spirit of the Emmaus journey—one of humble openness, shared discovery, and transformative encounter—the Igbo can continue to cultivate a future rooted in their rich cultural heritage, ensuring that their identity and community flourish amid contemporary challenges.

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