

**CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN DIALOGUE****By**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the religious Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. African Religion is the strongest element in traditional African culture which exerts great influence on the people. Religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life. Therefore, religion has shaped the lives of the Africans and at the same time, life has shaped religion as well. Whenever two or three cultures meet, there is potential juxtapositions. African Traditional religion which is part of the African's ethos is quite misunderstood and misinterpreted by the European missionaries as idolatrous and fetish which was manifested in the style of the 19th century Christian evangelization of Africa and Igbo land in particular. The outright ignorance of these obvious facts has further strengthened syncretism in Africa. The derogatory misinterpretation of African traditional religion as 'idolatry' has brought about the resurgence of traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices especially among the youths which is a testament of the lack of understanding of African behavior and problems. The study to a large extent adopted the secondary sources of data collection with historical method of data analysis. The study discovered that there are still many areas of misunderstandings and doctrinal conflicts between these two religious systems and therefore called for dialogue and open-mindedness for the proper integration areas of shared values.

Keywords: African traditional religion, Christianity, Idolatry, Igbo land, Africans, Culture, beliefs, God, gods, Idol, animism, paganism

**Introduction**

Research has shown that the syncretic nature of African people has been there from time immemorial. For example, Archdeacon Henry Dobinson Hughes (one of the earliest white missionaries), wrote a report letter to his home church, St James Hartlepool on April 8, 1890, about the situation at Onitsha his mission site as in (McMaster, 1899, p. 46) says: "Almost all the communicants here since last Easter have been part in idolatrous sacrifice and are therefore prohibited from attending communion... and we ask you all, therefore to pray God our creator to create new life by the Holy Spirit." In the same manner, Rev. H. H. Robinson, also wrote, as cited in Nwabara (1977, p. 53), "I am very sorry to say that there is very little separation from

heathen evil customs by our church people.” The above are true of African/Igbo people. The Igbos are religious people in nature. Igbo like every other African People, are notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1969). A lot of literatures have flooded everywhere both from the western and native authors on Igbo religiosity. Principal among them are: Major Arthur G. Leonard in his book, *The Lower Niger and Its Peoples*, in early 1900 cited by Onwu (2000) remarks that:

They (Igbos) are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and a deeply religious people, of whom it can be said that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these... is their existence and their existence is their religion.

However, the thrust of this research boils down on the questions about integration and separation of African Traditional Religion and Christianity which always arise, even as African Traditional Religion and Christian values can and do co-exist in Africa.

### **African/Igbo Religious Worldview**

The Igbo worldviews are predominately religious in orientation. The implication of this spiritualized worldview is that the gap between the profane and the religious in human is attenuated. Moral order is sacralised and humans’ affairs in journey from birth to death and incarnation are infused with religious meaning. For example the *Diokpala* (head of the family or elders) become quasi-priests, who hold the *ofonaogu*, (religious symbols of blessing) and pour libation to the ‘living- dead’ ancestors. (Insertions mine).

Igbo religion is neither codified nor formulated into system or dogmas. It is an intrinsic part of culture (Onwu, 2002). There is no dividing line between the sacred and secular; religion and philosophy. All are related both in the belief and practice centred on ‘Chukwu’, the supreme God. This is contrary to the early missionaries and early western writers’ assumption of Igbo, as the people without history, and religion (Mbiti, 1969). Derogatory names like ‘heathen’ and ‘primitive’ were used to describe Igbo people and their religion (Mbiti, 1969, Onwu, 2000, Nwabara, 1977). Heathen is the derogatory word used by the early missionaries to describe Igbo Indigenous religion with intension that Igbo had no concept of God. Crowther’s letter to the Reverend H. Venn, the secretary of C.M.S. on 29<sup>th</sup> may 1857 as cited in (Yates, 1978), supports the above fact and read

thus "...many a heart burns to see the day when the gospel of liberty to the captives of Satan shall be proclaimed on the banks of the Niger" Similarly, on 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1885, the Reverend Father Lutz was commissioned by the Holy Ghost Fathers specially dedicated to abandoned souls of the black race, to convert to catholic faith, the lower Niger tribes who knew no god.

Ekechi (1971, p. 22) describes the complexity of Igbo religiosity thus, "visitors to the Igbo country, whether missionaries, colonial administrators or merchants, were often impressed by and at times surprised at the sophistication of Igbo religion." The term 'sophistication' implies the undefined 'monotheistic–polytheistic' religious system. They believe in Supreme Being known as '*Chukwu*', '*Chineke*', or '*Osebuluwa*' and they also believe in the existence of other spirits or divinities who act, to some extent, as intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being.

They looked upon the Supreme Being with awe and unapproachable, and therefore confined themselves mostly with spirits from their ancestors, which must be kept from injuring them by offering of various gifts (Onwu, 2002). '*Ala*' (earth) becomes also the closest goddess responsible for fertility and moral decorum.

According to Igbo cosmology and creation myth, "religion originated as a direct revelation of '*Chukwu*' or '*Chineke*' to the Igbo earliest ancestor, *Eri*, *Eri* is believed to be first man created by *Chukwu*, equivalent to Adam of the Bible ( Onwu , 2002). '*Chukwu*' and '*Chineke*' become central to Igbo traditional belief, though characterized by sort of polytheism where supreme God presides over the lesser gods, often perceived as intermediaries in the cosmic hierarchy.

It is important to note that it has been shown that the Igbo did not accept Christianity because they thought it was superior to their own religion. In fact, the Igbo clung to their traditional belief very tenaciously. Ekechi, (1972, p. 22) substantiates that "Their own religious beliefs deeply ingrained in their minds and lives provided them with social and psychological security, and they made it abundantly clear to the Christian missionaries that they had no need of any alien religion." (22). However, one must point out that though the Christian influence is not the origin of Igbo belief in a supreme God, Christianity has contributed most significantly to clarification, development and enrichment of this belief.

Igbo are probably so jealous about their religion because their lives are their religion, and their religion is their lives, and any attempt to touch or destroy such stronghold attracted hostility. The experience of Archdeacon Henry Dobinson in 1891 in (McMaster, 1899, p. 66) bears this out: “I could see the people were impatient... as we spoke folly of idols and of juju worship, and I could not help feeling sure that Christianity would provoke much opposition in the Igbo land.”

### **Romance between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion**

A substantial body of literature has been directed to the Western missionaries as cultural imperialists and ethnocentric, incapable of or unwilling to fairly evaluate and respect the cultures of the peoples with whom they came in contact (Kaplan, 1995). The missionaries were accused of coming with their own worldview, which was completely different from the recipients' (Igbo) worldview. They came with a degree of confidence in the supremacy of their religion, as well as their social and economic order, over that of Igbo's worldview with the intention of fulfilling the 'great commission' of Matt.28:16-20.

The deforestation of indigenous religion and worldview and afforestation of Christian Religion with the European worldview was their mandate since the indigenous religion to them was animist and primitive. John Mbiti (1969, 2) for example, stated:

That in spite of the growth of church in Africa, the missionary effort in Africa has largely been a failure. Missionaries have been unable to contextualize the gospel with an understanding of and appreciation for African thought and religion, as a result the gospel has not yet been made relevant to Africans. In a sense Christians must begin all over again. Their starting point is to develop theology for the African church that accommodates African culture better than the western theology communicated by the missionaries of the past.

Kalu (1979, p. 18), in the same view asserted: “Christianity has spread enormously in Africa, but the resultant church is basically weak. Christianity must be traditionalized in African culture so that the dead wood in both will be destroyed and a new form can emerge....” Onwu (2002) describes the missionary social, religious and cultural supremacy as thus:

The early missionaries saw themselves as social and religious reformers. However, while they tried in their own way to achieve their mission goal, which was the conversion of Africans into Christianity, their approach and attitude did not produce a wholesome result. They thought that by condemning African religious beliefs and practices, social and political means of control, they would produce a new man born in a new faith; but this 'Newman' product became a spilt of personality who could neither totally return to the old nor firmly be rooted in the new.

Achebe (1958, p. 123) described the unhealthy impart of Christianity to indigenous Religion and culture and their determinant factor upon Christianize Igbo in Oberika's statement in his popular novel, *Things Fall Apart*, thus:

White man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

This described how the Christian religion, instead of uniting the Igbo, divides them. The members of the clan and things were never same again for the Igbo. The western missionaries were unable to separate Christian religion from their European culture, thus they imposed an all-inclusive package upon Igbo population. The line of debate is that Igbo, the recipients, saw the missionaries' culture as an integral part of their gospel. Missionaries however saw a syncretistic inclusion of elements from recipients' culture which would alter or eliminate aspects of the message upon which the integrity of the gospel depend, as they react to and live by this new religion in their own world.

To Igbo, to accept Christianity automatically means to lose their cherished culture and identity, the fabric of what made them what they are. However, they welcomed it as addition to their religion. It is an equivalent to what St Paul met in Athens, when he said "...I see how extremely religious you are in every way...what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17.23). The situation can be diagnosed by the argument of one protestant minister in (Ndiokwere, p. 22) stated thus:

Since the impact of western civilization on this continent, and since the advent of the missionary, the real spirit of Africa has been suppressed...whatever there was in Africa was stamped down as heathen ...

the real question has been: If one accepts Christianity, does it mean that everything in one's former culture has to die out...?

By mid-twentieth century, the impact of African revolution on the emergence and development of contextualized theology in Africa was tremendous as it pressed upon the African churches and its leaders the need to respond and relate their gospel faith to the African search for a fuller human life in new societies. As Kalu (p. 18 ) asserts“Africans joined the battle in three fronts. Custodians of traditional attempt to protect the traditional culture that bound the community together, on another front, the educated elite sought power within the church and a third group founded their own independent churches.”

African theologians like John Mbiti, Ogbu U. Kalu, Kwesi A. Dickson, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Bolaji Idowu, arose for formulation of theology that would be authentic in African culture. But the evangelical theologians were reluctant to welcome the African theology. Some opposed it out rightly. Kato (1975) for example criticized the position of African theologians. In one of his writings, he termed it a pitfall and rise of “universalism” in Africa. To Kato, the African theologians are sowing the dangerous weed that encourages syncretism and warned that the weed should be uprooted before it will outgrow the main seed of Christianity in Africa. His position is sounded alarm against syncretism and universalism. He opposed African theologians like Mbiti and Idowu on their positions.

Nevertheless, African theology continued to gather momentum, with the conviction that the “Bible is playing a major role in African theology”(Mbiti 1981). From December 17 to 23, 1977, the Pan–African conference of third world theologians was held in Ghana. The communiqué issued at this conference as cited in Kofi (1979, p. 11) summarizes their aims and objectives.

.... The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the west. Africa theology must reject, therefore, the prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African People.

To them there is no pure Christian identity. Christianity has gone through several contextualization across many cultures. That is to say that the modern syncretism can be accepted as modern way of Christianity.

Factors that have been attributed to low contextualization of the early missionaries were: Ignorance, lack of proper education and lack of proper understanding of the anthropology, sociology and religiosity of Igbo. The indigenous among them were liberated slaves who had little or no knowledge of organized civilization.

Contrary to the rather one-sided picture which dominates much of the literatures expressing that early western missionaries played an insignificant role in the Africanization process, Klepan (1995, p. 14) argues:

Inasmuch as the extreme ethnocentricity and cultural arrogance of many western missionaries cannot be denied, yet there are numerous foreign evangelists that sincerely come to terms with the African setting in which they worked. Indeed the contributions of western missionaries in Africanization were far more numerous than is generally acknowledged.

He further maintains that these missionaries played major roles for the adaptation of Christian religion to African culture through “toleration” (those cases in church missionaries agreed to accept the continued existence of certain African social customs, while at the same time maintaining that they were essentially incompatible with a true Christian life. Such acceptance usually defended on grounds of expediency that such customs ,like polygamy, would eventually wither away.), “transportation” (Locating proper indigenous terms to be used in producing a vernacular Bible and Hymn book; and identification of useful comparisons and analogies for explaining the essential elements of Christian belief), “assimilation” (the missionary sought to make the message of the Christian ritual more comprehensible and acceptable to his congregants), “Christianization” (those cases in which missionaries sought to create Christian versions of traditional African rites and Practices) , “acculturation” (attempts used by the western missionaries to preserve features of traditional culture which they felt to be valuable and compatible with the development of Christian spirituality).and “incorporation.” Attempts to introduce the African Concepts into the body of normative Christianity, that is, incorporation of African elements into the church.

### **The Christian Misconception of African Traditional Religion as Idolatrous**

The misconception is amply evident from the missionaries' misunderstanding of the tenacity with which African traditionalists practice their religion. Many wrong names were given to the African traditional religion. African Traditional Religion is misrepresented more than other religions. According to Quarcoopome (1987, pp. 12-13), possibly there is no religion that has been misconceived, misrepresented and misunderstood more than African Traditional Religion. He says that educated Africans have been known to refer to the Traditional Religion as animism, paganism, and fetishism amongst others and also refer to the traditional priest as fetish priest. He concludes: But it appears that in this regard, such educated Africans are merely echoing the ignorance and prejudice of some West investigators and Christian missionaries, who is in abject ignorance and false sense of academic security callously used derogatory terminologies to designate the Traditional Religion. He says that all things considered, paganism is a term which had been derogatory and imposed on Africans from the outside and as such is "obnoxious": With particular reference to West African Traditional Religion, any time the word pagan is used it has the undertone of racial or social discrimination. Even though the discrimination is loaded with religious overtones the basic implication is sociological. (p.17). This may have consequences because Christians may reject some African traditions that go against their Christian faith. Wisdom should be applied to separate African traditions that go against Christian beliefs. Otherwise, Africans may rapidly lose some of their cultural heritage. However, according Kwabena-Essem (1982, p. 1), "African religions had their biggest boost (February, 1982] when Pope John Paul II, on a visit to Benin, apologized for centuries of ridiculing African cultural beliefs by the Western world."

Aya (2000) also notes, "A modern African has been brain-washed into disowning his own culture and embracing alien cultures and values, some of which he does not claim to understand" (p.12). Africans have been enculturated to at least two cultures, which are African and Western; as a result, they lose the richness of their culture and casually pass it on to next generation. This resonates in his paper, where Ogundele (2002) states that Duro Ladipo, who was an Anglican church choirmaster and also taught in its primary school, was very much appreciated as a choirmaster until he composed a Christmas cantata in which introduced bata and dundun drums. The church

was scandalized: how could their choirmaster bring “pagan” elements into the celebration of the birth of Christ? Indeed, bata is the beloved music of Sango (the Nigerian tribe Yoruba god of lightning and thunder) while the dundun ensemble belongs to the masquerade cults. The profanity led to Duro Ladipo leaving the church and his teaching position to become a full-time actor, composer of plays and songs, director, and producer. This is an act of juxtaposition between the two cultures.

Knitter (1988) acknowledged that many theologians are passionate in their desire to recover the profound traditional integration of religion and life, and the meaningful ancient beliefs, symbols, and rites of their peoples which they feel were needlessly, sometimes ruthlessly, suppressed by the missionaries of the last century and a quarter. For example, the poem “Piano and Drums” according to Okara (1966) explains the confusion they face when they are confronted with two different cultures. The poem shows that those Africans who learn about the Western ways of life (school, church, music, language, dress, etc.) behave in two different ways. Sometimes they act as true Africans, and sometimes like Westerners. For example, the Yoruba, Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv and Ijaw in Nigeria do not know which music to absorb.

Knitter (1988) calls for an in depth indigenization process, he says that there has been a misdirected desire of African churches to dress in African clothes, without giving thought to the European soul with which Christ came to Africa. Knitter says that unless Christ is presented to Africans in a manner acceptable to the African mentality, Christianity will remain alien and irrelevant and he notes:

Christ must have an African soul, a soul that understands the realities of the African cosmos before he can respond to our lyrics, and dances. He must lose grip of Europeanism before he can be embraced by Africans in their quest for self-realization and liberation (p.33).

The authors who express these sentiments come from the mainline Christian churches, but they are being prodded constantly by the large, steadily increasing number of independent Christian churches all over the continent of Africa (p.33). These churches have never lost touch with the integration of religion with African traditional life. Knitter states that according to the Holy Bible, the first commandment is not to have any other god besides God. Contemporary Christianity in

Nigeria, especially its Pentecostal brands, appears to have a point of intersection with indigenous religious systems in the idea of the potency and operation of evil spiritual forces, even though Christianity still regards the African Traditional Religion as the site and domain of demonic operations. Kwabena-Essem (2006) claims that people do not understand and appreciate the complex interplay of religion, medicine and psychology in African beliefs. He says that the facts that Africans have largely reduced religious thought and practice to everyday life and that African religions seek to link the supernatural with the natural and the mundane continue to the Western world.

### **Bible Tradition and Idol Worship**

We will remember that the issue of idol is limited in ancient Jewish tradition. For them anything that is not God or of God is idol. In Greek the word Idol has in it the sense of unreality, counterfeit or as opposed to the one true God, false devotion. In other hands, idol is anything in this life which men worship instead of God and allow to take the place of God. A man may make an idol of his money, of his carrier, of his safety, of his pleasure (Barclay, 1971). In John 5.21, John likely means something more definite than either of the two. Knowing fully well that he was writing in Ephesus and it was of conditions in Ephesus that he was thinking. It is likely that he means simply and directly, “keep yourselves from pollutions of heathen worship. Many things were known of Ephesus in the time of John, the wealthiest and greatest city in all Asia. It is not surprise if those who associate themselves with idols are rich and great. It was a free city, self-governing, centre of worship of; Diana notorious centre of pagan superstition: Ephesian letters, amulets, and charms which supposed to be infallible remedies for sickness, to bring children to the childless parents, success in any undertaking.

Idols is associated with temples or shrines and sacrifices (1Cor. 10.14). In every sacrifice, part of the meat was given back to the worshippers to hold a feast. At such a feast it was always held that the god himself was a guest. After the meat had been sacrificed, the god himself was in it and that at the banquet he entered into very bodies and spirits of those who ate (Barclay 1971). A sacrificed meal therefore formed a real communion between the god and his worshippers, a mystic communion with the good.

Secondly, at the time of Paul and John, the whole world believed in demons. These demons might be good or bad but more often they were bad. For the Greek, every spring, grove, mountain, tree, stream, pool, rock had its demon or spirit. Therefore there were gods in every fountain, mountain summit, breath in the wind and flashing of the lightning, gods in the ray of the sun and star, earthquake and storm. Likewise for Jews, there were evil spirits who haunted empty houses, who lurked the crumbs on the floor, in the oil in the vessels, in the air, in the room, by day and by night. These may be real. Paul for example believed in principalities and powers. The naked truth is this, idol worship brings a man into contact with demons, and anything to do with idol has the demonic trait on it.

### **Contextualizing Christianity in African/Igbo Culture**

We have earlier argued that Christianity has done a great deal in social reconstruction and development in contemporary Igbo society. The overwhelming majority of Igbo have been converted to Christianity since its first contact in 1857. We have also argued that the romance between Christianity and independent Igbo religion has given birth to, three levels of Christianity:

1. Those who accepted Christianity as originally western and should be taken like that without Africanising it. They believe that African culture should not interfere at all with Christianity.

2. Those who believe in Christian religion, yet secretly maintain the practices of indigenous religion. These people normally act like Nicodemus. They usually seek for divination, sacrifice to idols, and strongly maintain their belief in the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds.

3. Others sorted the religious and spiritual problems by incarnating those indigenous elements like divination to Christian elements, and also using the Christian Bible to interpret the Igbo culture.

No one can deny the need to contextualize Christianity to the Igbo culture and worldview to make it more authentic. But there are some indications of syncretized practices among many Igbo Christians which show that the Igbo indigenous religion is still alive. I will explore some examples: Reincarnation, belief in a kind of re-embodied existence after having lived and died in the world. It is understood in two concepts, 'iluauwa and Ogbanje.' This belief persists despite the influence

of Christianity and westernization. It is a problematic one in the thought and life of Igbo. Most of the time, it appeals to many Christians, since the biblical resurrection does not make sense to them. Though this belief has some positive motivation to moral and decent living, it contradicts the Christian understanding of resurrection, and encourages divination.

Divination, the strong believe in the relationship with the spiritual world, is still fresh in many Igbo Christians. Thus diviners are consulted in times sickness, death, disputes and failure. For example, one diviner once said that the indigenous worshippers consult him in the day and Christians consult him in the night. Other theological factors with hermeneutical problems are: polygamy, taking as many wives as possible, exorcism, spiritual manifestations and title taking.

As Igbo engage in contemporary thinking on African theology and appreciation of Igbo's culture, we must bear in mind that no one can deny that where we are today has been the fruit of Christianity and western education. Contextualization must go along with aggressive sound understanding of Christian God, man and society, and let the culture be judged and transformed, rather than being static. Points where culture and Christianity did or did not agree should be spelled out. "You change man and his environment when you succeed in the mind"

No man can read the history of Christendom as it was five hundred years ago, and not see that darkness covered the whole professing Church of Christ, even a darkness that could be felt. So great was the change which had come over Christianity that if an apostle had risen from the dead he would not have recognized it, and would have thought that heathenism had revived again. The doctrines of the Gospel lay buried under a dense mass of human traditions. Penances, and pilgrimages, and indulgences, relic-worship, and image-worship, and saint-worship, and worship of the Virgin Mary, formed the sum and substance of most people's religion. The Church was made an idol. The priests and ministers of the Church usurped the place of Christ. And by what means was all this miserable darkness cleared away? By simply bringing forth once more the Bible.

## Conclusion

Africans are notoriously religious and each group has its own religious system of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. As a result, clashes of faiths occur between Christianity and African religion. African Traditional Religion, therefore, is integral in the shaping of the African's future. We have to know the past in order to understand the present and be better equipped to plan the future. We cannot know the past of the African if we neglect his or her religion. Traditional Religion is part of the African's philosophy. Therefore, one cannot understand the African heritage without understanding its religious part. Africa's different cultures have been influenced very strongly by religion as it is been in found in each group. Up to this contemporary time, Africans who live based on traditional ways of life are also regarded to be very religious. Finally, the spiritual, cultural, doctrinal, and contradictions between African Traditional Religion and Christianity are obvious due to several practical factors, most importantly, that Africans are very religious. The misconception of African Traditional Religion has led it to be called derogatory names such as idolatrous, animism, paganism, and fetish amongst others. Africans are at a crossroads. Due to the fact that culture and religion is embedded in African culture, it is difficult for Africans to be fully devoted to Christianity without partaking in some African Traditional Religious activities. African Christians oppose the integration of the two faiths because they believed that African Traditional Religion is a Satan driven faith. Majority of contemporary Nigeria's churches promotes this ideology such that spiritual warfare have constantly existed between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. To overcome this clash of African traditional religion and Christianity, there is the need for an integration of these two belief systems, especially on areas of morality where they tend to share a number of things in common.

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