Christianity and The Indigenous Spiritualties of The Igbo People: From Multi-Religiousness to Synculturation

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Abstract: The Igbo people of Nigeria have historically maintained a rich and dynamic spiritual tradition. The advent of Christianity introduced new dimensions to their spiritual landscape, leading to significant shifts in religious beliefs and practices. This study aims to explore the complexities and transformations in the Igbo spiritual landscape following the encounter with Christianity. It seeks to understand how the Igbo people navigate the coexistence of indigenous spirituality and Christian beliefs, and the resultant socio-cultural and religious dynamics. Employing a literature review and historical analysis, this study systematically examines scholarly works and historical records to unravel the complex interplay between Igbo indigenous spirituality and Christianity. The study found that the Igbo's flexibility in spiritual choices facilitated their rapid conversion to Christianity, influenced by practical advantages such as effective medicine, economic benefits, and efficient foreign social structures. However, this transition also entailed a mental shift, marked by the perception of the Christian God's superiority following military defeats against foreigners. The study highlights the intricate interplay between indigenous spiritualities and Christianity within the Igbo context. It underscores the role of practical factors, cultural adaptation, and perceived spiritual efficacy in shaping religious transformations. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of religious syncretism and the evolving nature of spiritual beliefs in multi-religious societies.

Keywords: Christianity; cultural adaptation; Igbo spirituality; religious syncretism.

Abstrak: Masyarakat Igbo di Nigeria secara historis telah memelihara tradisi spiritual yang kaya dan dinamis. Kedatangan Kekristenan memperkenalkan dimensi baru dalam lanskap spiritual mereka, yang mengakibatkan pergeseran signifikan dalam kepercayaan dan praktik keagamaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi kompleksitas dan transformasi dalam lanskap spiritual Igbo menyusul pertemuan dengan Kekristenan. Ini berusaha memahami bagaimana masyarakat Igbo menavigasi koeksistensi spiritualitas asli dan kepercayaan Kristen, serta dinamika sosial-budaya dan keagamaan yang dihasilkan. Dengan menggunakan tinjauan literatur dan analisis historis, penelitian ini secara sistematis meneliti karya-karya ilmiah dan catatan sejarah untuk mengungkap interaksi kompleks antara spiritualitas asli Igbo dan Kekristenan. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa keluwesan masyarakat Igbo dalam memilih spiritualitas memudahkan konversi cepat mereka ke Kekristenan, dipengaruhi oleh keuntungan praktis seperti obat yang efektif, manfaat ekonomi, dan struktur sosial asing yang efisien. Namun, transisi ini juga melibatkan pergeseran mental, ditandai dengan persepsi tentang keunggulan Tuhan Kristen setelah kekalahan militer melawan orang asing. Penelitian ini menyoroti interaksi rumit antara spiritualitas asli dan Kekristenan dalam konteks Igbo. Ini menekankan peran faktor-faktor praktis, adaptasi budaya, dan efikasi spiritual yang dirasakan dalam membentuk transformasi keagamaan. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang sinkretisme agama dan sifat evolusi kepercayaan spiritual dalam masyarakat multi-agama.

Kata Kunci: Kekristenan; adaptasi budaya; spiritualitas Igbo; sinkretisme agama

1. Introduction

There is an interesting relationship between Christianity and the indigenous spiritualities in Igboland. In this relationship, various factors cause and affect each other to the confusion and helplessness of the average Igbo person. Some of the factors include indigenous inclusivity vs Christian exclusivity, power and wealth vs social ethics and community values, Christian identity or/and multi-religiousness, etc. Is the Igbo a Christian if he/she indulges the indigenous spiritualties? Is it multi-religiousness if religious differences are appreciated and the equality tenet is not prioritized?

Do Igbo people practice multi-religiousness? Multi-religiousness is the concept of asserting that all religions are true and equal (Riegel, 2011). It is a phenomenon of religious pluralism that enables belongingness or cooperation with many religions, but it does not necessarily imply adherence to any or all religions (Heim, 2015). As such, one can identify with a particular religion in certain aspects, for particular interests, in particular times and places. Principally, the individual determines which religion, at what time, under what conditions, and in what places, to identify with. It transposes the decisiveness of religiosity from the religions to the individual, enabling the diffusion of religious institutionalism and authority. The theological developments have shifted their focus from exclusivism to inclusivism, and from inclusivism to pluralism (Wiebe, 2007). Now multi-religiousness seems to be the future of pluralism and interreligious dialogue (Kenneth, 2013).

What then is multi-religiousness in the context of African spiritualties, specifically in the relationality between Christianity and the Igbo indigenous spiritualties? The question of religion/spirituality (relationship with God) is for the Igbo people more practical than theoretical, more existential than transcendental. This is why the cult of Chukwu, the Supreme God, was/is not popular in Igboland. There are no temples, priests, or feast days, as with other deities and spirits (Okeke, 2020). For the Igbo, it does not make any practical sense to have such services when Chukwu is all good and loving and in need of nothing. Religiosity or spirituality is not about cerebral theological concepts. The theologoumena that do warrant absolutism are interpreted in practical terms. Truth, sanctity, peace, etc., are interpreted in their practical social relevance. The Igbo does not seek the one absolute truth in their spiritual consciousness, but rather the truth that is expedient to the existential reality in their lives. If he is sick or she feels unfairly treated, etc., she is wont on seeking a solution from the spirituality that can solve the problem. Thus an Igbo person can be an active church member and at the same time be involved with indigenous spirituality. Echema calls it the "attitudinal ambivalence" of the Igbo people (Chigbo, 2011).

For the Igbo, Christianity means belongingness to a church community. Beyond the rights and responsibilities that this entails, the Igbo has a sociocultural mindset that seems too practical to resign its religious fate to theoretical religious absolutism. In their consciousness, religion or spirituality has foremost the responsibility of affording them a secured life, protection from adversaries and adversities, and progress in this life on earth. 'Religion is a practical problem solver' (Echema, 2010; Marak & Sharma, 2023). Other aims, even those of the life beyond, can only be added. What this implies is that the Igbo recognizes the differences in styles and status in the spiritualties, but instead of considering it a factor for inter-religious conflicts and tensions, he/she considers the options these differences provide. This religious mindset enables them to indulge in different spiritualties, including Christianity, with no sense of wrongdoing or betrayal of another spirituality (Ndukaihe, 2006).

However, even though the Igbo relate to a religion or spirituality based more on its relevance to their existential realities, there is still a peculiar dissonance to multi-religiousness, different from those of the institutional religions. For one, in Igbo spiritualties, the uniqueness of any religion/spirituality is neither negated nor contested, rather it is considered an advantageous difference. Secondly, indulgement in other religion/spirituality does not have the objective of weakening primary allegiance to a particular religion, or promoting the idea of religious equality or sameness. Religious difference is not a spiritual threat. Religions are not to be fought over but to be practiced in peace. The Igbo people call it biri ka m biri – live and let me live (Ekenta, 2021). It would, therefore, be a simplification to portray the spiritual-religious relationality of the Igbo people as multi-religiousness.

Christianity has fundamental problems with multi-religiousness because of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the expectation of allegiance. Igbo indigenous spiritualties conflict with multi-religiousness on the religious equality/sameness theory. Both are parts of the socio-cultural and religious fabrics of the Igbo people and Igboland. What kind of inter-religiousness is practiced in Igboland then? Let us explicate both Christianity and Igbo spiritualties to discover their relationality in Igboland.

2. The Case of Christianity

Christianity is arguably no longer principally lived towards an evangelization – conversion – salvation religiosity. It has massively changed. Since the Vatican Council II, the theological developments seem to have deviated the focus from the spirituality of repentance and eschatological salvation into the theology of pluralism and interreligiousness. This extent of outcome was not the development intended by the council fathers, but the magisterial attempts to deal with the confusion did little to effectively address it (Martin, 2017). Despite regular mentions of "salvation," the teaching of Vatican II that it is possible to be saved without hearing the Gospel or explicitly joining the Church (LG 16; AG 7; GS 22), raised a cloud of doubt about the urgency of evangelization (Martin, 2017).

Notable thinkers in religion identify and recognize religious pluralism as the future of religion. It is evident in Johnson and Rennick's *The Future of Religion*, in Cohen, Knitter, and Rosenhagen's *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue*, in Alan Race's *My Journey as a Religious Pluralist*, in Schmidt-Leukel's *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, and so on. Backed by the authority of the academia, any work in the field of religion is expected to toe the line of this group for credibility or validity. But it is not just about being the popular theological trend. It is also about various inner discords in Christianity and their consequences; a discord between academic Christianity and religious Christianity, between progressives and conservatives. Yancey and Quosigk submit 'that progressive and conservative Christianities have diverged so much in their core values that they ought at this point to be thought of as practitioners of two separate religions' (Yancey & Quosigk, 2021).

In the same clime, academic Christianity deviates from religious Christianity with its pluralistic theology devoid of soteriological spirituality. As such, it would seem incompatible to be a devout Christian and an academic, multi-religious Christian, since devotional Christianity essentializes the salvific characteristic of Jesus Christ as unique. Pluralistic theology leaps over the unique necessity of Jesus to construe a Christianity away from Jesus and 'toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways' (Hick & Knitter, 2005). In all good intentions and convictions, a compatibility within Christianity at this stage, between pluralistic theology and fundamental soteriology, needs a convincing process towards clarifying what the pivot of Christianity is, what Schleiermacher identifies as the essence of a religion (Capetz, 2011).

For now, the pluralistic wave is the popular wave in Christianity, and many Christians, it appears, have comfortably accepted this paradigm shift Wiebe (2007) as expediently right. 'Affirmations of the need to respect the values of existing cultures and the discovery and affirmations of the "seeds of truth" that already existed in them took the focus off the enduring need for conversion' (Martin, 2017). Knitter replaces repentance and faith-induced personal openness to Jesus Christ with a dialogic truth. For him, conversion should rather lead to this dialogic truth, not repentance (Knitter, 1985). The Christian has only to care about living peacefully and respectfully in this multi-dimensional world, and not necessarily according to the doctrinal and moral dictates of Christianity, but rather toward the pluralistic multi-religiousness.

In Igboland, the disposition towards other religions or spiritualties can be considered very open. But whether this disposition equals multi-religiousness, especially within the conceptual definition of it, is a different issue. The relationship of the Igbo person to Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties is too complex to fit into the multi-religiousness narrative (Okeke, 2020). Then while the mainstream concept of multi-religiousness influences Christianity away from a conversion-salvation orientation, the Igbo still hope on and hold as important the eternal salvific promises in Jesus Christ (Burgess, 2008), even when his physical existence is as much a priority. 'The Igbo believe that salvation should be

integral, personal, and holistic to be formative and transformative' (Onyekwe, 2015). Beyond this culturally inclined anthropocentric perspective, they equally relish the Christian eschatological perspective of salvation in Jesus Christ (Chigere, 2001).

So, Christianity has shifted from christocentric salvific orientation to pluralistic multi-religiousness. The Igbo Christian appreciates the christocentric salvation of the soul. Still, they are disposed to other religions/spiritualties for social-human salvation. 'To the Igbo salvation is lived, rather than talked about; practiced, rather than a theoretical concept' (Onyekwe, 2015).

3.   The Case of the Indigenous Spirituality

Ndi Igbo are a heterogeneous group of people inhabiting the hinterlands and coastal territories of the gulf of Biafra, now in the present southern part of Nigeria, West Africa. With a population estimated at 40 million, they are a populous ethnic group in Africa but with a popularity for their penchant for migration.

Christianity is the most popular religion in Igboland (Anokwulu, 2013). It could be argued that it has already reached its socio-religious apex and is on a diminishing return (Ukpong, 2015). But that Christianity has achieved so much in Igbo land within a short space of time reflects the specialness of its relationship with the Igbo people, and it is worth studying.

The first contact of Christianity with the Igbo people dated back to the mid-fifteenth century. It was initiated first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and the English, all racing to and fro West Africa for grabs (Chukwu, 2011). Though this initial contact with the Igbo people was not missionary-orientated, it was the first time the Igbo people must have been confronted with Christianity. The Europeans who arrived at the Gulf of Biafra bought whatever they could, and what they could not buy they traded by barter, and what they could not trade they robbed and carted away, and things they could not carter away, they laid territorial claims to; humans, lands, seas, and commodities. They did these with the full authority of the papacy behind them. On January 6, 1886, Pope Leo XIII wrote in his Encyclical to the German church, titled Iampridem:

> No less serious or useful is the work which Catholic missionaries, animated by the spirit which the Church inspires in them, bring to distant, uncivilized countries. Several European rulers have in our time begun to establish colonies there. The German government also seeks to establish colonies, increase its possessions, and open new avenues to commerce and industry. What will make its reputation among the nations is its effort to civilize the savage tribes (Art 14).

Amidst all these vigorous appropriations of the African territories, their Christian religious identity was not hidden. In the stead, Christianity was involved to assuage the conscience or even to extol the prideful specialness of the white Christian over the black non-Christian (Ukpong, 2015). The Europeans carried Christianity with them to Africa. It was in the cross necklace they wore, written on their merchant ships, or represented in the books they carried, etc. But especially, it was in the mentality of the so-called Padroado. So, the first association of the Igbo with Christianity was under such a sordid historical context.

When the slave trade was abolished, a new engagement was necessary to maintain a productive relationship with Africa. In the 19th century, the second phase of Christian contact emerged (Okoh, 2012). This was more missionary than the initial contact. First was the Anglican Church, through the CMS (Church Missionary Society), and then the Catholic Church through the Holy Ghost priests. After initial resistance by the Igbo people, the missionaries refocused their missionary strategy to emphasize the existential benefits of becoming a Christian (Okoh, 2012). They invested in education and training, provided hospital apostolates, infrastructures, etc. They wittingly attached the benefits of such provisions to bearing a Christian identity. Then they infused these institutions into the fabric of the society by being the providers of the necessary social services (Okeke, 2020). Thus it became a privilege to become a Christian or be associated with church institutions. Even more, the denominations competed with each other in their appealing and attractive services for the Igbo people (O. Ogbonna, 2016).

All these infusions occurred in a socio-cultural setting that was militarily incapable of long territorial resistance, and ideologically docile to new positive developments. Christianity might have initiated the socio-religious mentality among the Igbo people that one of its principal functions was to provide social services for their comfort and bless their endeavors for wealth. It could also be that by concentrating on existential benefits Christianity struck an innate socio-cultural chord already in the Igbo people, which then prompted their embrace of Christianity. It could also be a combination of both scenarios. What is clear is that Igbo people want their religion/spirituality to provide existential relevance to their needs. In Igboland now, a resurgence of interest and devotion to the indigenous spiritualties has progressively continued within the last decade. This is partly because Christianity no longer has exclusivity in providing their needs, and partly because Christianity can no longer sustain the growing desires of the Igbo people for influence and affluence (Ndukaihe, 2006).

Another factor in the increased interest in the indigenous spiritualties is linked to the new anti-western clamor for indigenousness, promising better social conditions with the indigenous spiritualties. To the increased interests is also an increase in the spiritualties, both in new and altered forms, all modified to fit the recurring needs of the people. In whatever new form the indigenous spiritualties have been revitalized, it is obvious that they have rediscovered their relevance in the existential questions and realities of ndi Igbo.

There are three main areas of the existential realities of ndi Igbo where the relevance of the indigenous spiritualties has been especially pronounced.

Pro-Igbo Ideological Interest

The struggle for identity for the average African, in Africa or across the diaspora, is as complex as it is real. For the Igbo people, it is especially the case. In Igboland, the challenges of sustaining the Igbo identity in the socio-cultural and existential realities are enormous. The overwhelming and imposing influence of foreign cultures, the attractiveness of modern social engineering, the tremendous lobbying from foreign interests, the systematic dissipation of indigenous structures, and the overpowering ideological defeatism which supposes indigenousness as of lower value and foreignness as of higher value; all these encumber the promotion of an authentic Igbo identity. At this time, for example, it is common to find Igbo people who are born and live in Nigeria, but have no command of their indigenous language. Worse still, they are completely oblivious to the implications of this (O. Ogbonna, 2016). They are defensive of it, and from their perspective, rightly so, because they have had no use of the language. If there is no relevance of the language to their daily realities, even on a socially interactive level, then they cannot be aware of the socio-cultural peculiarity of their indigenousness embedded in their language (Agha & Obianika, 2019).

In the diaspora, it is no less complex. Worsened by the political struggles and social predicaments of being a territorial part of Nigeria, the relationship of many Igbo people to their land of origin is one of distant cautiousness and resignation (Onuigbo, 2009). They have been severed from their indigenousness, not just by physical distance, but also through a psychological disconnection that dismisses any serious interest in their homeland. The Igbo has no Igbo country that could politically posit and present his/her identity in official parlance. There is no socio-political identity by which they can officially introduce themselves in the diaspora. With the younger generations and their even lesser interests in Igboness, the Igbo thinker is aware of an imminent irreparable loss of Igboness in all its facets (O. Ogbonna, 2016).

There have been different responses to address and reinstate the Igbo consciousness and promote Igbo identity. Very popular are the political struggles to liberate Igboland from the entanglement with Nigeria, in all its shades of political territory as Biafra. This struggle, led by different people in different times, with its military and genocidal contours, is still very much alive today, sometimes active and other times latent. This political aspect of the struggle believes that it is impossible to re-establish the Igbo identity, or even to reinvigorate an authentic sense of Igboness if there is no official recognized socio-political parlance that bears this identity (Ligtvoet & Oudenhuijsen, 2019). This reflects the wider understanding that people of African origin cannot relish the human benefits or entitlements equal to

Europeans unless the continent of Africa creates a politico-economic reputation that cannot be ignored; the price of African identity. If there are no sovereign social, political, and economic settings that enable, support, or even demand the prioritization of Igboness in their existential realities, then the Igbo people do not have the necessary conditions to pursue their indigenous interests. This makes Nigeria, therefore, a major factor against the realization of Igboness from the socio-political perspective.

More pertinent for us, however, is the religious-spiritual aspect of this struggle, intended to reinvigorate the ideological interest for the re-establishment of Igboness. Some consider that more than in Christianity, the pragmatic piety of the indigenous spiritualties resonates a deeper sense of identity with the Igbo consciousness. The decadence in the authentic sense of identity for an Igbo is a consequence of the decadence in the consciousness of indigenous spiritualties among the Igbos (Burgess, 2008). As such, the revival of indigenous spiritualties is also the revival of indigenous consciousness in Igbo identity.

This revival has been understood for a long time as a struggle against Christianity and its religious and social institutions. Although the indigenous spiritualties remained latent in the hearts, Christianity prevails over them in Igboland, and in the lives of the people (Ejizu, 2014). Igbo people accepted Christianity energetically and within decades construed their societies according to their Christian religious consciousness. The obviousness of this shows when a financially struggling community would task themselves to erect a big church building. It shows in the acceptable temerity of someone preaching, singing, and praying inside a commercial vehicle, and demanding that everyone joins him/her in the hullabaloo. In such a clime, promoting alternative spiritualties would be perceived as an affront against the reign of Christianity, confronting the Igbo with an either-or religious atmosphere.

Firstly, this either-or atmosphere is confusing to the Igbo person, because the traditional worldview did not limit his/her religious options to exclusiveness. Secondly, this atmosphere sharpens the disparity between Christianity and indigenous spiritualties, creating a religious-spirituality tension in Igboland. So, while Christianity demands allegiance to its faith, the pro-indigenous ideologists demand allegiance to indigenous spirituality; both vying for exclusivity or at least priority. Thus, there is a religion-against-spirituality mindset, instead of a Christianity-and-indigenous spirituality mindset. The possibility of dialogue and synergy, even in the interest of the Igbo people, seems slim (Chukwu, 2011).

With all their involvement in the wins and woes of the Igbo people, Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties would have to engage in practical dialogic encounters to afford the Igbo what he/she needs to realize the authentic self in the globalized world.

Imperfections in Christian Institutions

Another area of life for the Igbo people that has reignited the interest in their indigenous spiritualties is the failures of Christianity, on institutional and human levels. At this stage and with all its successes, it could be asked whether Christianity has failed in Igboland; whether it has exhausted its fascination (Ndukaihe, 2006).

At the institutional level, Christianity is responsible for major developments and exposure of the Igbo people. The basic structures for a civilized social system have been pioneered by Christian institutions. In the fields of health, education and training, infrastructures and hospitalities, Christianity has provided the structures and enabled the accretions of resources, human and otherwise, of the Igbo people. To date, mission schools, hospitals, etc., still offer preferable services to many Igbo people. However, there have also been abuses in and through Christian institutions. Mismanagements and managerial incompetence seriously erode the confidence people use to have in these institutions. The abuses which are either occasioned in or enabled by these institutions, in the schools, hospitals, and churches, appear more grievous given the reputation and expectations reposed on the institutions. They corrode the goodness of these institutions and render ineffective honest efforts to serve the Igbo people. As a result of such institutional shortcomings, a scandalous image of Christianity and the churches has been created, distorting people's interests and discouraging them away from Christianity.

Besides the institutional level, there is a more flagitious human level. Whether sexual, psychological, or physical abuse, it ruins Christianity in Igboland. When church leaders lead lives contrary to the message of Christianity, or different from the lifestyles identifiable with church leaders of the past, or in competition with the pleasures and pursuits of the lay people, then the people lose the reliance and trust reposed on them (Pikaza & Silva, 2016). The more it is exposed that churches condone spiritual abuses of their ministers who use manipulations, deceits, lies, and fears to defraud and encaptivate the people, the more the animosity and loss of interest from the people (Ndukaihe, 2006). The more the leaders and ministers do not command authentic spiritual recourse, the more the people seek alternatives to their spiritual needs away from Christianity.

To worsen this, the Igbo people have a peculiar propensity of subsuming individual identities into the community identity. In their republican mindset, they still understand human beings as members of a unit. It could be a family unit or community unit, but each person is perceived through the lens of the unit or units the person belongs (Okeke, 2020). In Igboland, by introduction, one would be asked of one's family first before oneself. By any form of distinction, positive or negative, the family and community assumes the fame or shame. What this implies is that with every single case of a scandal involving a Christian personality many others who are identifiable with the same church unit would have to bear the shame and losses relating to that scandal. And since there is no reason to expect that the human beings who are church leaders in Igboland would all become perfect in characters and competent in services, the possibility of an increasing disinterest in Christianity among the Igbo people is high.

There is still another factor to consider, besides the human inaptness of church personalities. There is an increasing decadence in the culture of respect and courteousness among the younger generations of Igbo people. The sense of regard for authority, of respect for distinctive personality, of service to elderly persons, of courteousness to elderly opinions and insights, of esteem to teachers, of pride in community values and morality, etc., is dwindling very fast and producing half-cultured people. While some accuse squarely the Christian missionary activities as responsible for the breakdown of social ethics and violation of values (Chuku, 2016), others argue that the influence of the modern Western culture of indiscipline and disrespect, propagated with effective sensationalism through the media is the major cause (Mucherera, 2017). I consider another factor complicit to it; the porosity in the religio-spiritual base in Igboland. In its hay days, Christianity profited from the cultural values the indigenous spiritualties created, but it could not sustain or protect them, just like in the West. It did not support the indigenous spiritualties to sustain the community values and morals. Instead, both fought and weakened each other to the detriment of the Igbo people (M. Ogbonna, 2014). Now the decline in these values enables an over-ambitiousness in dealing with the imperfections of Christianity. Verbal abuses and aggressive confrontations towards church leaders and personalities are normal. Physical threats, kidnappings, and murders occur indiscriminately. Social media platforms have become even more unsafe for church figures. All these disturbing developments are accompanied by a loss of appeal from the battered Christianity and attractiveness to the respected or feared indigenous spirituality.

Alternative Socio-cultural Consciousness on Values

There have been serious social changes in Igboland engineered by diverse factors and interests. Financial wealth, power, and influence are high social values now in Igboland. Academic achievements, moral uprightness, commendable upbringing, and other values which supported and sustained Igbo societies are being replaced by a different consciousness now; the rich today – die tomorrow or the end justifies the means (O. Ogbonna, 2016). And the church leaders' lifestyles have 'promoted the mentality that wealth is better than all' (Ndukaihe, 2006). They 'turn the painful predicament of the sick into an avenue to make quick and easy money as well as cheap fam (Chigbo, 2011). Whatever does not produce immediate cash is relegated as a waste of time. For some, the desire to extricate themselves from the worsening living conditions in Nigeria enables this consciousness (Onuigbo, 2009). For others, academic, moral, or developmental excellence cannot be interpreted into any relevant value in Nigeria. So, Agang boldly accuses that 'corruption is not what some people do,

rather it is who we are' (Agang, 2020). Hence, if there is no benefit to academic or moral standpoints within the existential realities of the Igbo, then these values have no relevance in their lives.

This is directly related to the growing interest in indigenous spiritualties. The increasing practices of different spiritualties are serving majorly the interests of wealth and power. Across different age groups and genders, the interests of many Igbo people who indulge in the practices of emerging spiritualties are related to wealth. Surely there are other interests like protection, charms for evil purposes, fertility, etc (Ndukaihe, 2006). However, there is usually a connection to power and wealth. It is important to understand that this clamor for power and wealth is but a renewed interest already innate in the Igbo socio-cultural consciousness. Power, especially, has always been an essential phenomenon among the Igbo people. 'Igbo traditional spirituality is power orientated' (Burgess, 2008). There are intertwined social and spiritual angles to it.

The Igbo people, in their pragmatic mentality, developed a peculiar exclusive-inclusive system that enables them to involve and benefit from the different spiritualties while still identifying with their community deity. An individual cannot disavow the community deity, because that would imply disconnecting from the community, both in the physical and the spiritual realm. But the individual can indulge in other spiritualties for justice, protection, fertility, or other interests. The more efficient and fierce a spirit/god is the more the proponents for the spirituality. 'Any god that becomes useless has no right to expect the Igbo to continue to serve him since the essence of godhead is power' (Nwoga, 1984). The more powerful a deity is, the more popular it is.

This flexibility to choose also empowers the Igbo to be very decisive in the fate of their spiritual journey. It was this consciousness that enabled the massive swift conversion of the Igbo people when the Christian missionaries introduced efficient practical allurements. The new religion was producing practical results; medicines seemed more effective, trade and merchandise with the foreigners gave an economic advantage, the foreign social structures like court system and schools were efficient, infrastructures seemed better, and strange technical equipments were more effective for work or war. So the Igbo people did not have any spiritual or cultural hedge indulging in this new efficient religion (Echema, 2010).

Also, the devastating losses the Igbo people recorded in the wars with the foreigners resulted in a mental defeat and a submission that the god of the new religion is more powerful than their gods (Okoh, 2012). This was exemplified in the capitulation of the feared Aro Kingdom and the obliteration of the cult of the great God – Chukwu in 1902. In the end, one can argue, power and wealth swayed the Igbo people to Christianity.

As long as Christianity maintained this influence – affluence dominance in Igboland, it remained unopposed. But with the decline in the efficiency of the Christian social systems and institutions to provide services and remain relevant in morality, social ethics, wealth, power, security, etc., a gradual reconsideration of more practical solutions is swelling up for the indigenous spiritualties. It would appear that the Igbo now recourses to alternatives for influence and affluence, power and wealth.

Therefore, until there is a convincing social engineering, reconditioning the indigenous consciousness of the Igbo people to appreciate social ethics and community values against the charms of wealth and power; and until Christianity rediscovers ways of rejuvenating its social services and institutional systems more efficiently, then the involvement of some Igbo people in spiritualties for wealth and power will continue. And so would their disinterest in Christianity.

> It is not uncommon to see the Igboman revert to his traditional religious practices in times of crisis such as prolonged illnesses…or when one is in dire need of wealth, success or security. At such moments, the desired patience and resignation to God's will as often required by Christian faith, remain just a matter of "Sunday Homily" … He believes in the Christian God on Sundays and times of convenience, and in his charms for wealth, security, success, etc (Ndukaihe, 2006).

4. Synculturation between Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties in Igbo land

Ndi Igbo are a heterogeneous group of people inhabiting the hinterlands and coastal territories of the gulf of Biafra, now in the present southern part of Nigeria, West Africa. With a population estimated

at 40 million, they are a populous ethnic group in Africa but with a popularity for their penchant for migration.

Having considered the cases of Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties, I wish to propose a concept that I think would enable both sides to rediscover their positive relevance to the Igbo person and work together towards creating a religio-social condition necessary for this. This concept is Synculturation.

Since the Vatican Council II, the leading concept in the interreligious endeavors of Christianity, especially with non-Western cultures, has been inculturation. This means that 'the gospel is intended for every people and nation; it finds a home in every culture…so that they might be open to the gospel and live in harmony with Christian values (NDC, 2020, #17A).' Inculturation teaches that Christianity illumines cultures; that Christianity can and should use the compatible cultural channels of the people for effective propagation (Chukwu, 2011); that people should be able to identify their cultures in Christianity. Inculturation functions with the concept of adaptation which enable a process of substitution and assimilation by which pagan cultic elements are replaced with Christian ones (Chukwu, 2011); Inculturation absorbs cultures into Christianity.

Among the Igbo people, the inculturation project can be considered successful, since it enabled Christianity to absorb many Igbo cultures, Christianizing some and expiring others. In many Igbo societies, only Christian festivities are now obtainable. Indigenous spiritual occasions like masquerade festivals and socio-cultural events like traditional marital procedures have been at the discretion of Christianity. In some cases, the cultural festivities have been Christianized. Anuka testified that 'a masquerade at the 2014 Mmanwu Festival in Enugu ended his ode with N'aha Jesu Christi Onyenwanyi – meaning – in the name of Jesus Christ our lord' (Anuka, 2019). Nonetheless, there is the zealous school of Christianity which considers everything cultural as diabolic and fetish and would not subscribe to any inculturation process, but rather would deride such endeavors (Uzukwu, 2014). This zealousness also exists in some people who are protective of the remaining cultural elements from the overwhelming influence of Christianity (Kalu, 2011). On the other hand, there is the school that considers it a necessity that indigenous cultural elements are expressively involved in Christianity (Kalu, 2011). Yet, even with these diverging schools, Christianity is decisive in the socio-cultural obtainability in Igbo land.

However, I fear that with inculturation, there has not been a proper assimilation of Christianity by the Igbo people. In its efforts to make Christianity the religion for the Igbo people, no longer to be practiced as a foreign religion, inculturation promotes cultural conformity. Cultural conformity entails that when a culture encounters another, then the less superior culture or ideology conforms to the more superior culture or ideology. One culture submits to the decisiveness of the other culture. Cultural conformity concentrates on integrating the different cultural elements into oneness. Christianity, in this context, assumes those elements of the Igbo people it considers compatible with its tenets, and attacks the incompatible cultural elements, and with them, the identity consciousness of the owners of the culture. The Igbo is very conscious and serious about his/her distinctiveness, not just the Igbo identity but as a person and part of a family or village community (Carretta, 2016). While Christian inculturation disregards this identity consciousness, the indigenous spiritualties tickle it, and therefore, gain appealingness. Hence, in addition to inculturation, there is also the need for synculturation.

I define synculturation as a process by which two or more cultures relate to each other in equity for mutual benefit. It enables cultures to engage and involve each other in mutual enrichment. It recognizes that cultures represent the differences in people, in their orientation, historicity, mentality, and spirituality. These are unique irreplaceable experiences of people carrying their identity and cannot be devalued. As such, any encounter between cultures must be based on the respect and recognition of the uniqueness of people represented in their cultural elements. In this way, there is no more superior – less superior imbalance where one culture dominates the other. On elements where both cultures contradict each other, then synculturation ensures a respectful process of divergence, which clarifies the incompatibilities and enable informed decision from the people.

What does this practically imply in the Christianity – indigenous spiritualties relationship in Igbo land? It means that a dialogic forum to enable a process of synculturation between both parties needs to be initiated. This process of synculturation aims at balancing Christianity with the indigenous spiritualties for the benefit of the Igbo people. I would like to suggest a three-stage format for such a dialogic forum.

Identifying the Problem

We have addressed the cases of Christianity and indigenous spiritualties. To deliberate on the issues surrounding the resurgence of interests in the indigenous spiritualties, the superficial motivations for wealth and power as higher values, and the shortcomings of Christianity is a necessity for achieving a balanced society. To do this, I agree with Udoye that dialogue is needed; the dialogue that would prevent siding one's member interest against justice and truth (Udoye, 2011). Creating a dialogic forum is the first and conceptual step in synculturation

It is a new era in Igboland; an era of new consciousness and mindset. The Igbo people, bruised by the economic and political unfortunateness of being in Nigeria, suffocating under military occupation and militant reprisals, disorientated and incapable of defining their identity or harnessing themselves, still have to reflect and address the religious and spiritual aspects of being an Igbo. I consider the religious and spiritual aspects of being an Igbo the pivot of all other existential challenges to be clarified. The crisis between indigenousness and Christian identity affects the totality of the Igbo person. On the political side, the disunity for which the Igbo people are mocked in Nigeria reflects the disunity in their spiritualties/religiousness (Ogbonnaya, 2011). On the social side, the invading decadence on ethics and morals exposes the loss of moral authority by Christianity and the ineffectiveness of its teachings (Chigere, 2001). On the economic side, the detrimental clamor for immediate wealth and power unmasks the abuse and misappropriation of the indigenous spiritualties, and the unchecked disregard for culture and tradition (Anuka, 2019). It is as such understandable to argue that thematizing seriously the religious and spiritual aspects of being an Igbo is one of the most essential issues towards realizing an authentic and balanced ndi Igbo.

Therefore, it falls on Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties to create a dialogic forum where the religious/spiritual–affiliated crisis of the Igbo people can be addressed properly as mutual concerns. Such a forum does not yet exist. There are occasions, like seminars, workshops, and lectures where Igbo cultures and traditions, and the challenges of these on the Igbo people, are discussed. An example is the Odenigbo Lectures instituted by the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri, Anthony Obinna, with which he works towards the abolishment of the Osu caste system in Igboland (Nwachukwu, 2022). Nevertheless, there is no dialogic forum yet in which the indigenous traditionalists and the Christian thinkers can work together for or against a common issue plaguing the Igbo people. Since both sides have become conditioned to consider each other as enemies, it would be a tedious task to create such a forum. Still, it is cogent, because for example, the inability to address why religious identity and its crisis have become normalized in Igboland; why many people are into fetish spiritualties for wealth and power; or why Igbo societies are now bereft of community values and ethical standards but wealth and power, spells woes for the Igbo people.

Deliberations in Synculturation

When the dialogic forum has been created, and the religious/spiritual issues of the Igbo people can be thematized, then finding an appropriate way of deliberating the issues and applying the results become the next important step. For synculturation to be effectively realized there are three necessary factors in its deliberations.

1.   Informed participation: Synculturation requires the participants, at least the active and decisive ones, to be well-informed on two things. The participant must have a good knowledge of the standpoint he/she represents and the standpoint of the other side. It does not mean accepting or concurring with the other's stand. But a good knowledge of one's stand and an understanding of

the other's views make it possible to articulate the similarities and differences on the issue being deliberated.

2. Mutual Respect: What this means is that the two sides on the synculturation process must have respect for each other and the unique elements of the other's culture. Respect entails not mocking, abusing, deriding, or belittling the other's views.

3. Concatenation: The aim of synculturation is that the two cultures work together for mutual benefits. Syncultural deliberations are dialogic encounters to discover common ways to alleviate particular issues. They are not forums to evaluate other's cultures. By concentrating on the aspects of the cultures that need to be supported and engaged to realize a particular aim, both cultures are putting the interests of the people before their tendency for domination. And on cultural elements that oppose each other, a respectful digression is needed. Religion should serve the human interest of conviviality. Besides and beyond it, religion becomes irrelevant, or even detrimental (Sosa, 2004, p. 35).

Through these factors, a proper syncultural deliberation can occur, and the practicability of the results from the deliberation would be easier to effect. Without proper deliberations, jumping into the phase of praxis would be almost impossible.

Practicality in Synculturation

Let us use a standard example to enunciate how practical synculturation can be. Wedding/marriage has been a topic of concern for a lot of Igbo people, inside and outside Igboland. The traditionalists want traditional weddings to expel or at least have priority over church weddings. They consider the church wedding as foreign and an unnecessary burden, not only financially (Okonkwo, 2003). The churches, on the other hand, have not been able to convince the people of a wedding structure that would incorporate both church and cultural elements. So on the issue of wedding, a synculturation between Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties is necessary, to augment the efforts of inculturation.

A syncultural process on this would create a dialogic forum to: i) identify and analyze the problems with the issue of marriage, ii) then deliberate on these challenges and proffer results, iii) then ensure the practicality of these results. An example of practicality is:

1. A rite of marriage is to be produced, which would be binding to all members of a church. This rite of marriage creates a balanced wedding structure where the challenging factors from both the Christian and the cultural sides are carefully resolved (Udoye, 2011).

2. The exact details of responsibilities for this have to be stated. Who is responsible for it? A commission of delegates from both sides? What is the time for the rite? What financial resources are needed and how would they be provided? What authorities empower and promote this rite? It is important that at this stage the plans and thoughts are as practical and practicable as possible.

3. Another example of practicality on weddings would be to develop a suitable strategy of informing the people on their roles in enabling the problems and their roles in alleviating them. If both Christianity and the indigenous spiritualties use all their channels and platforms to transmit the same information and propagate the same message, then the people will succumb to the positive conditioning and perhaps reconsider their unethical and flamboyant habits. Again, both sides must have the same plan, thought through in detail, and agreed upon on how to be applied.

5. Conclusion

This study's exploration into the intricate relationship between Christianity and the indigenous spiritualities of the Igbo people in Nigeria has revealed a complex tapestry of cultural and religious interplay. The Igbo experience underscores a significant transition, not only in religious beliefs but also in socio-cultural identities, as a result of the encounter with Christianity. It has highlighted the challenges and nuances of navigating between indigenous inclusivity and Christian exclusivity, the interplay of power, wealth, and social ethics, as well as the dilemmas of maintaining Christian identity in a multi-religious environment. These findings point to the resilience and adaptability of the Igbo

spiritual tradition, which has not only withstood the test of time and external influences but also incorporated new elements into its fold. Ultimately, this study contributes to our understanding of religious syncretism and the evolving nature of faith in multi-religious societies, offering insights into the broader dynamics of cultural and religious change in the global context.

This study, despite providing deep insights into the interaction between Christianity and the indigenous spiritualities of the Igbo people, has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relies on literature and historical records, which may not fully encompass the diversity of experiences and perspectives among the Igbo community. Secondly, it does not include surveys or direct interviews with individuals from the Igbo community, which could offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of how they experience and interpret these changes. Thirdly, the study primarily focuses on religious and cultural aspects, while potentially overlooking the economic, political, and social aspects that also influence these dynamics. Lastly, due to its limited geographical and temporal scope, the findings may not be generalizable to all Igbo communities or to similar contexts elsewhere. These limitations highlight the importance of further, more inclusive and comprehensive research to fully understand the complex dynamics between religion and identity in multicultural and multi-religious contexts.

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