

## **AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: A MATRIX FOR EVOLVING AN AUTHENTIC IGBO CHRISTIANITY**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the potential of African Christian theology as a foundation for authentic Igbo Christianity by critiquing early missionaries' limited understanding of African societies. Examining the historical interaction of Christianity with Igbo culture, the study utilizes primary and secondary sources for data collection. Employing a qualitative methodology with cosmological, theological, and sociological approaches, the research emphasizes the need for inculturation to preserve the gospel's potency within Igbo sensibilities. Addressing theological questions, dual allegiance among the Igbo, erasure of cultural identity, and the perceived shallowness of the Christian gospel, the study draws on African theology to advocate for an authentic theology aligned with core Igbo beliefs. The research concludes by proposing a collaborative, dialogical approach that respects Igbo cultural autonomy and aligns with the Church's transformative mission in Igboland.

### **I. Introduction**

Christianity has been likened by many scholars as a ship moving from port to port, picking and borrowing ideas and values from various cultures that it came across with. It is truism that Christianity started in Palestine among the Jews, mingled with Jewish culture, moved to Rome, deposited what it collected and mixed with some Roman culture and left to Greece, deposited and mixed again with some of the Greek cultures and moved to Asia and borrowed some of their cultures and finally landed in Africa and dumped everything in the African land with little or nothing borrowed (Madu, personal communication, 2018).

Ukpong (1984) also corroborates the above, thus; "European communicators of the Christian message to Africans were very selective in their use of the resources of African culture in their task, for only certain elements of Christian expression were thought to be compatible with local resources". (p.503). Okure (1990) also affirms this fact when she stated; "The Church is European-like in almost everything – way of worship, belief, architecture, choir, vestments, robes, prayers, structures, and so forth" (p.106).

Therefore, one can make bold to say that the Christianity brought to Africans was already a hybridized Christianity, blended with different cultures. This is because, the white men that

brought the gospel erroneously believed that Africans did not know God and thus have to introduce their own God to them, an indication that they were ignorant of the people and their way of life. Ukpong (1984) reiterates this when he states;

They knew practically nothing about the societies to be evangelized... they picked out only what seems to be “strange, superstitious, weird, abhorrent, obscene, wicked and intolerable”, they tended practically to describe the African as being lower in intelligence than dogs, with a bizarre sense of religion’, stocked in superstition or iniquity, without any sense of morality. (p.107).

Those were unfortunately the ideas the missionaries were presented with on the African before they set their foot on the so-called Dark Continent. To make vivid this impression of the white missionaries on the African man and his culture, Madu (2004) observes that; “All kinds of derogatory remarks were made about Africa. For instance, the Africans were referred to as barbaric, heathenish, fetish and paganish and nothing good could come out of her” (p.viii). With this thought, they saw Africans as illiterates that cannot conceive God, hence the popular saying; “for how can an untutored African know God since God is abstract Being” (Ludwig, 1979, p.9). Nyamekwe (2012) puts it thus:

There is no doubt about the fact that Africa has suffered abuses in the hands of the people who claimed to be scholars, the religion of a decent race has been described in highly objectionable, obnoxious, derogatory, and pejorative terms such as paganism, fetishism, animism, polytheism, juju, heathenism, native religion etc. (p.76).

In order to foster an Igbo Christianity, it is imperative to reinterpret the message of Christ in a manner that aligns with African and specifically Igbo sensibilities, customs, expressions, and frameworks. This ensures that the potency and relevance of the gospel are preserved without dilution.

This approach acknowledges the importance of cultural resonance, as adapting the Christian message to fit within the framework of Igbo thoughts and expressions makes the teachings more accessible and meaningful to the local community. By reframing the gospel in a way that harmonizes with Igbo cultural identity, the spiritual connection becomes more profound, fostering a genuine and authentic experience of Christianity within the Igbo context. This intentional alignment not only respects the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people but also facilitates a more inclusive and relatable expression of the Christian faith in the local community (Madu, 2004).

This research aims at presenting African Christian theology as a basis for any meaningful Igbo (African) Christianity. It hopes to achieve this by attempting the following pertinent questions: What was the theological matrix on which the early missionaries anchored their evangelization of the people? Why double allegiance to both Christianity and Traditional faiths among Igbo? Does the Christian message eradicate the cultural identity of the people? Why is it that the Christian gospel is still skin-deep among the Igbo after over 160 years of Christianity?

## **Methodology**

This research endeavor constitutes an exploratory investigation into the realm of African Christian theology and its role as a foundational framework for constructing an authentic Igbo Christianity. The researchers adopted a combination of primary and secondary sources for data

collection. Primary sources encompassed personal observations and oral interview, chosen due to the intricate nature of the study. The inclusion of interviews with many illiterate villagers served to validate the selection of this method.

Secondary sources encompassed a broad range of published and unpublished written materials, including journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, dictionaries, and various library materials. This comprehensive approach to data collection aimed to provide the researchers with a profound understanding of the subject matter.

The qualitative method of data analysis was employed, utilizing cosmological, theological, and sociological approaches for interpreting data. This approach facilitated a contextual understanding of the extent to which African Christian theology could serve as a matrix for the development of an authentic Igbo Christianity.

### **African Theology: Bridging Cultures, Grounding Faith**

African theology is a theology that emerged from a new African, addressing questions that are African and its answers speak to the African situation in the light of the word of God (Van-Eck, 2008). Hence, it is not and should not be seen as a foreign theology or a means of propounding a new doctrine contrary to Biblical Christian teachings but a deliberate move to make the teachings of Christ more understandable, simple and more grounded. Okure (1966) on quoting Hayward puts it this way;

African theology does not consist in merely translating the idea of western theologians into African terms; it must, if it is to be worthy of the name, make an original contribution of their own to Christian thinking at the level of the universal church. The aim is not to fabricate a new doctrine, but rather, it is to help in the normal and healthy development of doctrine (p.113).

This theology implores an explanation of the African culture, taking away that which may be contradicting to the Biblical teaching of Christ and incorporating those African core values and heritage that are not opposing to the Christian teachings. Pauline (1967) puts it thus: “African traditions were but stepping stones, that is. cultural, religious, symbolic and ritual elements that are compatible with the data of the Christian faith. There exists a cultural value capable of preparing African society to welcome the Gospel” (p.16).

### **Igbo Cultural and Religious Background**

The Igbo culture is deeply connected to spiritual beliefs that influence how they see the world. These beliefs are like a strong foundation, shaping how Igbo people view life and guiding their everyday actions. It's not just a set of ideas; it's a living part of their identity that affects everything they do. These include:

**Chukwu: The Supreme Being:** The core of the Igbo belief system revolves around *Chukwu*, also known as *Chineke* or *Chiukwu* (Egboh, 1972). *Chukwu* is acknowledged as the source of life, sustenance, and blessings, influencing various aspects of Igbo life, and plays vital role in sustaining livelihoods and maintaining harmony within natural and supernatural realms (Madu, 2004).

**Spirits (Deities) in Igbo Cosmology:** The Igbo's reverence for *Chukwu* leads them to approach the Supreme Being through intermediaries, the deities (Opoku, 1978). Key deities like *Anyanwu*, *Ala*, *Amadioha*, and *Igwe* are seen as representatives of *Chukwu* on earth, acting as

messengers facilitating communication with the Supreme God. Spirits, including Arobunagu, Nnemili, and *Akwali Omumu*, are considered lesser than deities but showcase *Chukwu's* power (Opoku, 1978, p.9).

Madu (2003) emphasizes the Igbo cosmological base, highlighting the belief in the Supreme Being, deities, spirit forces, and ancestors. He notes that individuals relate and communicate with these spiritual beings in cults or ritual actions, acknowledging human dependence on these forces.

**Chi (Angel) in Igbo Cosmology:** "Chi" is introduced as a unique spiritual force endowed upon each individual by God from birth (Ilogu, 1974). Achebe (1986) describes "Chi" as a divine element connecting individuals with the Supreme Being, forming the basis for immortality and communion with ancestors. The individualization principle is explored, emphasizing the uniqueness of each person's.

**Ancestors (Ndichie) in Igbo Cosmology:** The Igbo belief in the protective role of ancestors is detailed, viewing death not as an end but a transition to the afterlife (Madu, 1996). Deceased spirits serve as guides and guardians, influencing positive outcomes and offering protection (Madu, 1996). Ancestral veneration practices, guided by diviners like *dibia-afa*, are discussed in relation to upholding family traditions and ethics. Inclusion in the ancestral cult post-death is contingent on a virtuous life, old age, a "good death," and proper burial by the *Umunna* clan (Mbaegbu, 1997).

**Universe in Igbo Cosmology:** The Igbo worldview of the universe comprises two interconnected realms: the human world (*Elu uwa*) and the spirit world (*Ala Muo*) (Mbaegbu, 1997). The boundaries between these realms are fluid, allowing for mutual influence and blending. The material and spiritual realms are intricately woven together, forming a cohesive unit where the material world serves as a conduit for the spiritual. The spiritual realm includes heaven (*Eligwe*) and the underworld, inhabited by deities, spirits, and ancestors (Mbaegbu, 1997).

### **Inculturation: The Matrix for an Authentic Igbo Christianity**

Magesa and Schustack (1990) emphasizes Jesus Christ's entrusted task to the church of making His accomplishments subjectively present for every culture. The subjective restoration of cultures to Christ, integral to the church's mission, is highlighted alongside the universal redemption of every human being. John (1972) affirms the "church's commitment to incarnate itself in various civilizations, emphasizing the need to translate the gospel into forms suited to diverse cultures for better understanding" (P.51).

In inculturation, theological universality is emphasized, recognizing the church as embracing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, turning this universality into a physical reality through the embrace of diverse cultures. Inculturation is depicted as a duty enjoined upon the church by God, not a betrayal of Christian faith but an active effort to bring about universality, showcasing the richness of Christ and the church (Stinton, 2010).

The history of world Christianity is seen through the lens of either successful or failed inculturation, with examples like the transformation of pagan festivities in England (Stinton, 2010). Pope Gregory the Great's directive to missionaries emphasized purification rather than destruction of pagan temples, encouraging the incorporation of local traditions into Christian

celebrations hence, to develop authentic Igbo Christianity, inculturation is essential. It involves presenting the gospel in configurations familiar to Igbo culture, fostering a genuine interaction between Christian faith and Igbo cultural realities (Stinton, 2010). Inculturation's main concern is not just preserving the Igbo cultural past but proclaiming the gospel in ways relevant to Igbo society, aiming to transform lives and culture (Okure, 1966). The Igbo Christian identity emerges through the blending of Christian faith with Igbo cultural awareness.

Efficient development of genuine Igbo Christianity suggests articulating basic African cultural awareness as a framework for developing authentic Igbo Christianity. The Christian faith should be interpreted within the context of Igbo cultural experience, ensuring deeper evangelization of the African without losing cultural identity. Igbo cultural heritage forms the theological base for Igbo Christianity, addressing contemporary challenges such as poverty, bad governance, and syncretism (Okure, 1966).

### **Inculturation: the need for Dialogue of Equals**

In the context of interreligious dialogue, no religion can claim superiority over other cultures and religious confessions. Rather, those involved establish mutual respect, peace, and a mutual understanding of what each religion holds supreme.

Interreligious dialogue does not always imply conversion, but if one is convinced about the truth in another religion, conversion and correction of certain biases is possible. This implies that, encounter with traditional religion, therefore, means Christianity permeating the culture and allowing itself, thereby, to be enriched in its attempt to evangelize it. This enrichment can take on many forms. Given these circumstances, African Traditional Religious practitioners would be emboldened to discuss their religious beliefs in the external forum through dialogue and the process of inculturation. In this sense, the Church in Igboland today, if it fully embraces inculturation through dialogue, would not be a house divided against itself. Rather, it would be a unique local Church in communion with the universal Church (Anyanwu, 2019).

One might be inclined to ask major questions concerning the possibility of interreligious dialogue between the Church and African Traditional Religion in Igboland in the face of their persistent differences. However, these differences should constitute the major points for genuine interreligious dialogue. The mistake made by the early European missionaries who arrived Igboland, was that they did not study Igbo language and cultural values properly. They omitted having dialogue with the people about their culture (Anozie, 1999).

Hence, the projected outcomes of inculturation through interreligious dialogue must include the preservation of relevant ancestral traditions passed on from one generation to the next among the Igbo people. For example, respect for elders, observation of taboos associated with incest, homosexuality, shading of innocent blood, and settling of disputes through *Igba ndu* (covenant) ritual. Such calls for dialogue aimed at reshaping certain dogmas, rites and rules of Christian liturgy that are foreign to the Igbo person (Anyanwu, 2019).

The blending of foreign Euro-Christian values with African traditional values requires proper discernment through dialogue for mutual understanding and possible inculturation. Chupungco (1992) sees this blending as a process of inculturation that culminates in integrating Christian values with specific cultural elements. He argues that:

Applying this concept of inculturation to the liturgy, one may define liturgical inculturation as the process where-by pertinent elements of a local culture are

integrated into the texts, rites, symbols and institutions employed by a local church for its worship. When this is done through dialogue, the two religions will have learned something new from each other to inaugurate the reshaping process. (p.93)

An Igbo proverb says, *Nku di na mba na esiri ha nri*: (the firewood available in a particular locality is enough to cook the people's food). This implies that a people should feel a sense of belonging within the Church in their locality, thus one result of inculturation is that the people are able to identify with the liturgy and claim it as their own. This is because, the liturgical texts, symbols, gestures, and feasts evoke something from the people's history, traditions, cultural patterns, and artistic genius, hence power of the liturgy to evoke local culture is a sign that inculturation has taken place. (Bujo, 2014) By this the people can now say, "this is our church" in reality, unlike when it was called the white man's church (Uka Ndiocha), CMS Church (Uka Sileme) or the catholic church (*Uka fada*)

Another projected outcome of inculturation through interreligious dialogue in the Igbo Church is that Christianity will be enriched with the Igbo traditional past, which was filled with beautiful songs, folklores, proverbs, signs, gestures, and symbols. Hence, the liturgy not only uses symbols and is composed of various symbols; it is a symbol in itself. Its components, whether they are words, actions, or material elements, reveal through the veil of signs the presence of God, the mystery of Christ, and the community of the Church (Cole, 2015). On the other hand, Igbo culture, like dancing during certain festivals, will be illumined with Christian malleable values, since in the liturgy signs or symbols consist of words like sacramental formulas, gestures like hand laying, and material elements like water, bread, wine and oil (Chibuko, 2001). All these, like the use of Igbo material elements such as, the white chalk (*nzu*), kola nut (*oji*) and palm wine (*mmanya nkwu*) during certain festivals, reveal the mystery of the hidden presence of the ancestors and the divinities who are invoked during such ceremonies.

### **Conclusion**

The primary objective of this endeavour is to enhance the efficiency of evangelization in Igboland, fostering a deeper understanding of the gospel of Christ among the Igbo people. This can be achieved through a deliberate integration of the cultural values and heritages of the community into the broader scope of evangelization efforts by the Church. The approach to this task should be regarded as a collective undertaking, involving active participation from the Christian community in Igboland, both in formal and informal capacities. As aptly express by Nwoye (2011):

"Today, the Church has consciously become a morally relevant social agent of change and transformation of the world. The Church is sent out to proclaim in God's name the Good News of the total liberation of humankind from the evil of all oppressive situations." (p.58)

Effectively accomplishing this mission in Igboland necessitates a genuine dialogue with the cultural heritages of the people and a commitment to cultural emancipation from Euro-Christian hegemony. Thus, a dialogue of equals and a pursuit of self-determination emerge as essential tools for incarnating the gospel and establishing an authentic Igbo Christianity.

To elaborate further, the Church in Igboland must engage in meaningful conversations that recognize the inherent value of Igbo cultural expressions. This dialogue should go beyond mere acknowledgment and actively seek to integrate these cultural elements into the fabric of the

Christian message. It is essential for the Church to move beyond a unilateral approach and embrace a collaborative effort with the Igbo community, where both church and the communities contribute to the enrichment of the gospel message with the richness of Igbo traditions.

Moreover, the call for self-determination in the context of cultural emancipation emphasizes the need for the Igbo people to actively shape their Christian identity. This involves reclaiming agency in interpreting and expressing their faith, freeing it from any form of external domination. By empowering the Igbo community to actively participate in shaping their Christianity, the Church can foster a more authentic and deeply rooted connection between the gospel and the cultural ethos of the people.

Therefore, a collaborative, dialogical approach that respects the cultural autonomy of the Igbo people is crucial for making evangelization more impactful and the gospel more resonant in Igboland. It is through such concerted efforts that the Church can truly embody its role as a transformative social agent, working towards the total liberation of humankind in the context of the unique cultural landscape of Igboland.

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