

DEVELOPING AN IGBO CHRISTIANITY: AN ANALYSIS OF IGBO AND CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS

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Abstract

This scholarly article delves into the intricate task of reconciling Igbo cultural values with Christian doctrines, aims to establish foundational principles for the development of an authentic Igbo Christianity. The study recognizes the contemporary challenges within Igbo communities, marked by a revival of traditional practices alongside Christianity, and addresses the need for a nuanced understanding of both Igbo and Christian worldviews. Employing a multidisciplinary approach encompassing theological, anthropological, and historical perspectives, the research analyzes primary sources, including traditional Igbo narratives and Christian theological texts, alongside ethnographic data from Igbo communities. The goal is to identify points of intersection between Igbo and Christian worldviews, exploring their foundational beliefs, cosmologies, and ethical frameworks. The Igbo worldview is presented as deeply rooted in spirituality, attributing spiritual significance to every aspect of life. The Christian worldview, distinct yet similarly profound, finds its foundation in the Bible and emphasizes a Christocentric perspective. The article highlights key intersections between the two worldviews, including the conceptualization of God, the roles of ancestors and saints, the structure of the universe, and views on life and death. Theological implications for Igbo Christianity are discussed, emphasizing the relevance of certain Christian doctrines to Igbo cultural values and the need for genuine dialogue. The article underscores the importance of recognizing, understanding, and respecting the role of the existing Igbo worldview in presenting the gospel to the people. In conclusion, the study not only contributes to academic discourse but also offers a practical guide for theologians, clergy, and community leaders in fostering a more authentic and deeply rooted expression of Christianity within the Igbo cultural context. The ultimate goal is to provide a theoretical foundation and a practical roadmap for the seamless integration of Igbo identity and Christian faith, addressing contemporary challenges and preserving the essence of Igbo cultural heritage.

Introduction

Over time, African theologians, including those of Igbo descent, have advocated for the emergence of an authentic Igbo-African Christianity, aspiring to create a state where individuals can genuinely embody both their Igbo identity and Christian faith. Recent

developments within Igbo communities, marked by the revival of traditional deities, engagement in sacrificial rituals, and a resurgence of neo-traditional practices, suggest a surface-level integration of Christianity into the lives of many Igbo adherents. This trend resonates with the observations of Obiefuna (1985), who suggested that despite a century of Catholic gospel dissemination in Igboland, the Christian faith remains predominantly superficial among the populace. This inclination calls for careful consideration in the pursuit of developing a genuine Igbo Christianity.

However, the intricate task of balancing Igbo cultural practices with Christian doctrines presents potential challenges, including the risk of syncretism and tensions. Achieving a harmonious integration without compromising the fundamental tenets of Christianity stands as a significant hurdle while resistance to change may emerge concerning deeply rooted traditional practices within Igbo culture, with possible reluctance to adopt new theological perspectives that challenge longstanding cultural norms. (Anizoba & Aande, 2021)

Therefore, to comprehensively address this challenge, there is a pressing need for an in-depth understanding of both the Igbo and Christian worldviews. Such an exploration is integral not only for fostering the development of an authentic Igbo Christianity but also for formulating a genuine theology that can guide the evolution of such an authentic identity. This scholarly pursuit aims to counteract the growing wave of neo-traditionalism, reconcile instances of double allegiance, and confront the issue of superficial faith within the Igbo Christian community.

This article, therefore, endeavours to establish foundational principles for the cultivation of an authentic Igbo Christianity. It seeks to achieve this objective through a rigorous analysis of both Igbo and Christian worldviews, aims to identify points of intersection. By delineating these interjections, the article aspires to articulate a comprehensive basis for the development of a genuine Igbo Christianity. This scholarly inquiry is poised to contribute to the intellectual discourse surrounding the intricate relationship between indigenous cultural beliefs and the tenets of Christianity, with the ultimate goal of providing a robust framework for a more profound and integrated expression of the Christian faith within the Igbo context.

Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on theological, anthropological, and historical perspectives. Primary sources, including traditional Igbo narratives and Christian theological texts, will be analyzed alongside ethnographic data from Igbo communities. The goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics shaping the religious landscape in Igboland.

The analysis will explore the foundational beliefs, cosmologies, and ethical frameworks of both Igbo traditional beliefs and Christianity, while the findings of this study will have significant implications for theological discourse, pastoral practices, and the development of an authentic Igbo Christian Church and theology. By addressing the apparent shallowness of faith and the rise of neo-traditionalism, this research aims to contribute to a more robust and meaningful integration of Igbo cultural identity and Christian principles.

The Igbo Worldview: A Cultural Overview

The Igbo worldview is deeply rooted in spirituality, attributing spiritual undertones to every aspect of life. This perspective leans towards the mythical rather than the scientific or critical,

with myths serving as explanatory tools for understanding reality (Mbaegbu, 1997). However, it is crucial to refrain from the temptation of labelling the Igbo worldview primitive or irrational, considering the shared rationality inherent in all human beings (Okolo, 1993).

Central to the Igbo cosmology is the belief that man (*mmadu*) occupies a pivotal position in the universe. Oguejiofor, as cited by Mbaegbu (1997), emphasizes that “the Igbo place man at the center of their universe, with nature, society, and spiritual beings gaining relevance based on their impact on human existence” (p.137). Various elements in the universe, such as *Igwe* (sky), *Uwa* (earth), *Ukwu-Osisi* (tree), *Ugwu* (mountains), *Mmiri* (rivers), *Anu* (animals), *Ala* (mother earth), *NdiMmuo* (spirits), *Ndichie* (ancestors), *Oge* (time), and *Mmadu* (man), contribute significantly to the Igbo worldview. These elements establish vital connections within economic, political, and religious institutions and kinship systems in Igboland (Weltan, 1989).

According to Ejizu (1987), “Igbo religion and cultural practices find their foundation in the cosmology that underpins their worldview, influencing individual and group religious activities” (p.96). Mbaegbu (1997) defines the Igbo worldview as “the collective uncritical outlook of the Igbo, reflecting their beliefs, attitudes, and life perspective, passed down through generations” (p.132). This is why Igbo beliefs and practices, such as *Igbuwunna* ceremonies and death rites, emanate from and align with their worldview, not only in religious contexts but also in various aspects of sociocultural life (Animalu, 1990). Hence, the Igbo worldview encompasses beliefs, attitudes, and cultural practices, providing a unique lens through which the Igbo perceive and interact with the world.

The Christian Worldview: Foundations and Principles

The Christian worldview, akin to the Igbo worldview, is not merely an intellectual concept but holds profound significance in Christian life. It serves as the framework through which Christians interpret and engage with the world, offering a comprehensive understanding of all facets of life (Njoku, & Uzukwu, 2014). This worldview is not confined to theoretical beliefs but is an all-encompassing way of life, applicable to various spheres, including religion, natural sciences, law, history, healthcare, arts, humanities, and more (Strand, 2013).

Distinct from the Igbo worldview, the Christian worldview finds its foundation in the Bible, emphasizing a Christocentric perspective. Dockery (2006) stresses that the “Christian worldview starts with an immediate acknowledgement of God's presence and actions in history, affirming God's Lordship and Kingship over the world” (p.2). The Christian worldview is centred on the belief in one God, existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Trinity. This view asserts the sovereignty, power, personal nature, justice, love, and other attributes of God (Rausch et al., 1993). It rejects dualism, affirming that God is the source of all things, having created the world out of nothing. It encapsulates the foundational beliefs of the Christian worldview, emphasizing the oneness of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the role of the Holy Spirit. This creed provides a concise summary of the Christian worldview and is widely accepted across Christian denominations (Rausch, 1993).

The Christian worldview underscores the supreme Lordship of God, His role as the creator of the universe, and the intrinsic value of human beings created in His image. Christians believe in the significance of God's revelation in history and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, serving as a mediator between God and humanity. The Christian identity is moulded by this

worldview, influencing how Christians perceive God, the world, and their role in it. It is not an escape from reality but a motivating force for righteous living, offering confidence and hope amid life's challenges (Myers, 2000). The Christian worldview holds that every person has inherent value because they are seen as reflections of God's image. This perspective emphasizes that humans are not merely physical beings but also spiritual, social, and cultural entities. According to this worldview, individuals have a purpose designed by God, and living in harmony with this design is considered meaningful. (Dockery, 2006).

Additionally, the Christian worldview provides a moral framework, recognizing humans as moral beings. This means that individuals are capable of distinguishing between right and wrong based on divine principles. The emphasis lies in understanding and adhering to these principles in daily life. In essence, the Christian worldview underscores the sacredness and dignity of human life, emphasizing the spiritual, social, and moral dimensions within the context of God's design (Ben-Menahem, 2020). It is an evolving process wherein Christian convictions shape cultural participation which offers a unique perspective on life, grounded in Christian principles and values. It sees the world through the lens of Christianity, rooted in worship, spirituality, beliefs, affections, and actions (Naugle, 2003). In the Christian worldview, other spiritual beings, like the Angels, are considered messengers of God. Additionally, the departed Christians' spirits, known as saints, are believed to serve God as messengers in the spiritual realm. This spiritual dimension adds depth to the Christian worldview, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the seen and unseen realms.

The Intersections of Igbo and Christian Worldviews

The quest to develop an authentic Igbo Christianity involves navigating the intersections of Igbo and Christian worldviews in a way that preserves the core values of both while creating a harmonious synthesis. This endeavour is often rooted in a desire to express one's faith in a manner that is culturally relevant and meaningful within the Igbo context. Here are some intersection points for both Christian and Igbo worldviews identified as a basis for the development of a genuine Igbo Christianity.

1. God in Igbo and Christian Worldviews

The convergence of Igbo and Christian worldviews reveals notable parallels in their conceptualization of the Supreme Being, the role of intermediary spiritual entities, and the acknowledgement of divine messengers. In Igbo cosmology, the Supreme Being is denoted as *Chukwu*, embodying attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and transcendence (Egboh, 1972). Similarly, Christianity characterizes God as an infinite, Omnipotent, and Omniscient Being, both transcendent and immanent. The Christian concept of the Trinity aligns with the multifaceted nature of *Chukwu*, as both encompass a singular yet complex divine entity. While Igbo tradition approaches *Chukwu* through intermediary deities like *Anyanwu* and *Ala*, Christianity employs figures such as Christ as a mediator between humans and God (Egboh, 1972). Both belief systems recognize the presence of spiritual forces that act as messengers or representatives of the Supreme Being.

A crucial parallel emerges in the Igbo concept of "*Chi*," a personalized spiritual force assigned to individuals at birth (Ikeogu, 1974). This resonates with the Christian notion of guardian angels, serving as protectors and guides throughout one's life (Metuh, 1981). The idea that each person has a unique spiritual entity linked to the divine reflects a shared understanding in both worldviews. Also, the acknowledgement of spiritual forces in Igbo cosmology, including deities and spirits, finds a counterpart in Christian teachings on angels and their role in

protecting and guiding individuals (Udeani, 2007). The convergence is notable in the belief that these spiritual entities connect humanity to the divine realm and influence the course of human destiny.

Hence, the intersections between Igbo and Christian worldviews showcase commonalities in their perceptions of the Supreme Being, intermediary entities, and spiritual messengers, providing frameworks for understanding the relationship between the divine and the human experience

2. Ancestors (*Ndiichie*) in Igbo Cosmology and Saints in Christian Worldview

In both Igbo cosmology and Christian worldviews, the concepts of Ancestors and Saints exhibit intriguing parallels, particularly in their roles as benevolent spiritual entities connected to the living. The Igbo people perceive death not as the termination of existence but as a transition into another realm, emphasizing a belief in the continuity of life after death (Madu, 1996). Ancestors, in this context, are revered spirits of the deceased who, having once lived as humans, possess superior knowledge of the spiritual world and play a protective and advisory role for their descendants.

The rituals and sacrifices performed by Igbo families to venerate their ancestors mirror the Christian practice of honouring saints. In Christianity, saints are regarded as individuals who lived exemplary lives and are recognized for their holiness and virtue (Foley, 2003). The process of canonization in the Christian tradition, akin to the criteria for ancestral cult inclusion in Igbo culture, involves evidence of a virtuous life and recognition by the community. Ancestral shrines in Igbo homes find a parallel in the veneration of saints in Christian traditions, with churches often dedicated to specific saints. The tangible representations of the spiritual connection, be it ancestral shrines or places of Christian worship, serve as focal points for invoking guidance, protection, and blessings. Both ancestors and saints are perceived as intermediaries between the divine and the living. Ancestors, being closer to the gods and the Supreme Being, act as conduits for spiritual communication in Igbo cosmology. Similarly, saints in Christianity are believed to intercede on behalf of the living, either through direct communion with God or through personal intervention (Bebis and George, 2016).

The idea of emulation is shared between the two concepts. The lives of Ancestors inspire moral living within the *Umunna*, just as Christian saints serve as models of holiness and faith for believers. Both traditions emphasize the continued influence of these revered figures on the conduct and values of the living.

Lastly, the recognition and veneration of ancestors by the *Umunna* draw parallels with the acknowledgement of saints in the Christian community. Local communities or churches identify and venerate these spiritual figures, considering them heroes worthy of inspiration and emulation. The convergence between the Igbo concept of ancestors and the Christian understanding of Saints is evident in their roles as spiritual intermediaries, models of virtue, and sources of inspiration for the living. These parallels underscore the shared human inclination to connect with the transcendent through revered spiritual entities.

3. The Universe in Igbo and Christian Worldviews

In both Igbo and Christian worldviews, the conceptualization of the universe reflects a shared understanding of its dual nature and the interplay between the spiritual and material realms. The Igbo universe is structured into two interconnected parts: *Eluigwe* (sky) and *Elu-uwa*

(earth), with an additional distinction between *Ala Mmuo* (spirit world) and *Ala Mmadu* (human world) (Mbaegbu, 1997; Ekwunife, 1990). The fluid and coherent interaction between the spiritual and material aspects defines the Igbo worldview, where spirits, humans, animals, plants, and elements continuously influence each other (Ekwunife, 1990).

Christianity, rooted in biblical teachings, also divides the universe into two major parts: heaven and earth. The Bible asserts that God created the heavens and the earth, emphasizing the divine origin of the entire cosmos (Genesis 1:1). The Psalms and Pauline writings affirm the glory of God reflected in the heavens and acknowledge that the earth belongs to the Lord, emphasizing God's role as the Creator and proprietor (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:20).

The parallels between Igbo and Christian worldviews regarding the universe are striking:

1. Both acknowledge the Supreme God (*Chukwu* in Igbo and God in Christianity) as the creator of the universe.
2. Both divide the universe into two major realms: the spiritual (*Ala Mmuo* or Heaven) and the material (*Elu-uwa* or earth).
3. The spiritual realm is further categorized, with the Igbo worldview distinguishing between heaven and the underworld, and Christian theology emphasizing heaven as the abode of God and angels.
4. Both emphasize the continuous interaction and interpenetration of the spiritual and material realms, shaping the shared life experiences of beings within the universe.

Thus, the universe, as perceived in the Igbo and Christian worldviews, showcases a harmonious blend of spiritual and material realities, emphasizing the interconnectedness and mutual influence of these two dimensions of existence.

4. Life and Death in Igbo and Christian Worldviews

The Igbo people exhibit a distinctive religious ontology, where life and death intertwine with spiritual beliefs (Mbiti, 1969). This religious essence in Igbo ontology profoundly influences their perception of human existence. Metuh (1981) reinforces this, emphasizing the inseparable connection between Igbo life and God, suggesting a linked approach to the study of God, man, and worship. In the Igbo worldview, life is considered a unique gift from God, viewed as sacred and the highest good (*Summum Bonum*). Names like "*Ndubuisi*" reflect the supremacy of life in Igbo cosmology. The Igbo community is, therefore, bound by a divine duty to preserve, conserve, and enhance human life, whether one's own or that of others. (Madu, 2004)

Fundamentally, sickness is perceived as a threat to life in Igbo culture. The diagnosis of its cause involves divination and the application of appropriate measures to restore life. The fear of childlessness is deeply ingrained in Igbo society, with the prospect of extinction of a lineage considered the worst tragedy of life. Marrying a second wife is often seen as a safeguard against this, ensuring the continuation of one's lineage (Madu, 1996).

Similarly, Christian beliefs, rooted in Genesis and John, align with Igbo views by considering life as a divine gift from God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1973) underscores the sacredness of human life and the moral imperative to respect and sanctify it. However, Christianity, unlike Igbo beliefs in reincarnation, emphasizes faith in Jesus Christ for the attainment of eternal life. The afterlife is conceptualized in terms of heaven and hell, a departure from the Igbo idea of joining ancestors in the spirit world.

Both the Igbo and Christian worldviews stress the sacredness of life and its divine connection. However, differences arise in their perceptions of the afterlife, with the Igbo culture emphasizing a transition to the spirit world and Christianity introducing the concepts of heaven and hell.

5. Mmadu (man) in Igbo and Christian worldviews

Madu (1996), building on Ejizu (1986), emphasizes the central role of man in the Igbo worldview. Man exists for the community, and the community exists for him, fostering a sense of communal responsibility. Chimakonam (2008) underscores the anthropocentric nature of Igbo cosmology, where human existence is integral to the vibrancy and purpose of the universe. The interconnectedness of human life (*mmadu*) with others (*ndi-mmadu*) and the environment is crucial, emphasizing meaningful existence through community interactions.

In Christian theology, man's creation is attributed to God (Gen. 1:26), positioning him as the steward of the earth. Humans are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for the environment and exercising dominion over creatures (Gen 1:28). Illinois (2007) stresses responsible stewardship of the earth, highlighting the divine delegation of authority to humans. Henry (1997) echoes this, emphasizing that God prepared the earth for human habitation, underlining man's central role in God's creation. Both worldviews emphasize:

1. Man as a creature of the Supreme Being.
2. Man at the centre of creation, tasked with stewardship.
3. Man's religious nature, seeking communion with the Supreme Being.
4. Disobedience disrupting the relationship, necessitating restoration through sacrifice.
- 5.

The theological Implications for Igbo Christianity

The life norms, values, and basic assumptions i.e. the world views of a people should always be pivotal to the development of a genuine Christianity in such a society. Hence, the Igbo worldview remains very pertinent as a vehicle for contributing to the needs of the Igbo society and shaping the church's life through engaging issues from cultural, theological and biblical perspectives.

From the above analogies between the two worldviews, it is observable that some Biblical/Christian worldviews can have immediate relevance to the values and attitudes of Igbo culture, while others, at first, will appear strangely foreign. Hence choosing the most relevant explanations of each aspect of the worldviews should be an essential starting point in developing a genuine Igbo Christianity.

Thus, to effectively incarnate the gospel message in Igbo society, we must discover the heart-beat of Igbo cultural values, to identify the most relevant aspects of their worldview, which will form the scripture-cultural base for the effective development of Igbo Christianity. In this context, the Igbo should continue to identify with their culture, which should be a motivation to grasp an ever-widening range of Biblical truth for themselves and work towards the goal of bringing their cultural worldview and experiences into conformity with the biblical experience of wholeness of life in Christ, to be relevant in the Christian global family.

In Igbo Christianity, the apostolic authority and the teaching of the gospel must be upheld as the unique and unchanging standard for the Christian church but must be expressed in the context of the Igbo worldview. It must, therefore, reflect the local worldview, even as it embraces the new Biblical or even Euro-Christian worldview and all the disruption it might

come with through genuine dialogue. Christianity should therefore always recognize, understand, appreciate, and respect the preparatory role of the Igbo existing worldview, in the quest of presenting the gospel to the people hence, Cragg (cited by Bediako, 2003) highlights the importance of such recognition in these words:

Christianity cannot address men, and ignore their gods: it may not act in the present, and disown the past... In seeking men, for Christ's sake, it is committed to the significance of all they are, in their birth, and tradition, both for good or ill. To obey a world- relevance is to incur a multi-religious world (p.19).

In every culture, there is always the risk of such dialogue leading back into the bondage, or religious legalism, of either the sending or the receiving world views. However, respect for the proper role of the local worldview is not the same as encouraging reversion to it completely without genuine dialogue, for even the dominant Euro-Christian worldview is not to be imposed upon the Igbo worldview in the name of Christianity.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of fostering a genuine Igbo Christianity, Igbo-African theologians are confronted with the intricate task of reconciling Igbo cultural values with Christian doctrines. This article endeavours to establish the foundation for such interaction through a scholarly exploration of the Igbo and Christian worldviews. The objective is to delve into the nuanced complexities of these belief systems, providing a comprehensive understanding that will serve as the bedrock for the development of authentic Igbo Christianity. Through this academic endeavour, contemporary challenges are addressed, ensuring that the synthesis of Igbo cultural identity and Christian principles results in a more profound and culturally resonant expression of the Christian faith within the Igbo community.

Such theological exploration as seen, will involve a meticulous examination of the key tenets of Igbo traditional beliefs and Christian doctrines. By identifying especially the points of convergence, the aim is to elucidate the areas where these two worldviews intersect. This analytical approach will not only contribute to the academic discourse but also serve as a practical guide for theologians, clergy, and community leaders grappling with the task of fostering a more authentic and deeply rooted Christian expression in the Igbo cultural context. In summary, this article seeks to go beyond theoretical considerations by addressing contemporary challenges faced by Igbo Christians. The resurgence of traditional practices, such as deity revivals, sacrificial rituals, and neo-traditionalism, underscores the urgency of developing a robust theological framework that can effectively engage with and respond to these phenomena. Through a thorough examination of Igbo and Christian worldviews, it aspires to offer insights and solutions that guide the Igbo Christian community in navigating these challenges while preserving the essence of their cultural heritage.

Ultimately, the goal is not only to establish the theoretical foundations for authentic Igbo Christianity but also to provide a practical roadmap for its implementation. By fostering a nuanced understanding of the cultural and religious landscape, this exploration aims to facilitate a seamless integration of Igbo identity and Christian faith, fostering a Christianity that is not only genuine but also deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of Igbo culture.

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