

JESUS THE GREAT ANCESTOR: AN INSIGHT FROM IGBO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Ifeanyi A. Chukwudebelu

chukwudebeluifeanyia88@gmail.com

Department of Religion and Human Relations,

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam Campus

&

Ajakor, Emmanuel PhD

ei.ajakor@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Religion & Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Oguechuo Godfrey Afammede

goddyafam1995@gmail.com

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam Campus

Abstract

This article meticulously examines the assimilation of Christianity into Igbo-Land, specifically focusing on the unique perspective of regarding Jesus as an ancestor within the Igbo Church. Through a comprehensive exploration of religious practices, the study unveils the intricate nature of this cultural amalgamation. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the research investigates the integration of Christianity into Igbo-Land, emphasizing the distinctive view of Jesus as an ancestor within the Igbo Church. The author utilizes qualitative methods, including content analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis, with a data collection mix of primary and secondary sources. The research methodology integrates theological, cultural, and historical analyses, providing a comprehensive understanding. Various research theories, such as Missiological, Psychoanalytical, and Behavioral Theory, enrich the exploration, contributing to a nuanced comprehension of the religious practices associated with the cultural integration of Christianity in the Igbo context. In summary, this research offers a thorough examination of the complex dynamics in the inculturation of Christianity in Igbo-Land, highlighting the unique perspective of Jesus as an ancestor within the Igbo Church. Drawing from interdisciplinary viewpoints, the article provides profound insights into the challenges and nuances of inculturation, contributing significantly to scholarly and practical discussions on the convergence of Christianity and Igbo cultural identity.

Keywords: Inculturation, Christianity, Igbo-Land, Jesus a Great Ancestor, Religious Practices, Praxis, Cultural Integration, Church Community.

Introduction

Historically, two methods have been employed in Africa to introduce Christianity. The first, adaptation, has been widely favored until recent times, seeking commonalities between Christianity and African religion in expression or practice. These shared elements become the foundation for African Christian spirituality, theology, and pastoral practices. However, this approach tends to prioritize the Christian understanding, requiring African viewpoints to conform or adapt, hindering genuine dialogue. Despite its continued use, many African Christian theologians and church leaders find it unhelpful in fostering truly African and Christian communities (Magesa, 2010).

In contrast, the second approach reflects a more open attitude towards genuine dialogue and respect for cultural identity. This method, known as incarnation or inculturation, is deeply rooted in Christian faith. Just as God incarnated in Christ Jesus to liberate humanity, the Christian faith is called to penetrate every culture, becoming an integral part of it through inculturation (p.74).

The significance of adopting the inculturation method lies in its potential to prevent Christianity from remaining superficial in a culture, merely added without positively influencing or being influenced by it. Failure to engage in this deeper process may result in a dual religious consciousness among people, where the gospel remains only skin-deep, either integrated into or alienated from the culture (Magesa, 2010).

In essence, the ongoing debate between adaptation and inculturation methods highlights the critical importance of choosing approaches that facilitate meaningful dialogue, cultural integration, and a truly transformative impact of Christianity within diverse African contexts. The history of world Christianity is one of either successful or failed inculturation. For instance, the first missionaries that entered England discovered that the pagan Saxons there usually celebrate the feast of their goddess, *ostara*, with bonfire in the spring of the year. They transformed that feast to commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, retaining even the burn fires, and the name, from which is derived the English word Easter (Stinton, 2010).

In order to realize this, it is necessary to bear in mind that the main concern of inculturation is not just to dig up and preserve the Igbo cultural past; or to simply promote Igbo culture; but more significantly, to proclaim the gospel of Christ, in a way that would be more relevantly meaningful to Igbo society, and so help to transform the lives and culture of the people (Okure, 1990). Hence, the Igbo Christian identity can only be identified, developed and safeguarded when the Christian faith is construed in line with the Igbo cultural awareness and is blended with the truth of the gospel.

Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to thoroughly investigate the intricate process of assimilating Christianity into Igbo-Land, with a specific emphasis on the distinctive perspective of regarding Jesus as an ancestor within the Igbo Church. Utilizing both primary and secondary sources for data collection, the author employs qualitative methods of analysis such as content analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. The research methodology integrates theological, cultural, and historical analyses to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The study draws on various research theories to enrich its exploration, including Missiological Theory, Psychoanalytical Theory, and Behavioural Theory. These theories contribute to a nuanced comprehension of the religious practices and praxis associated with the cultural integration of Christianity in the Igbo context. Overall, the research provides a comprehensive and insightful examination of the complex dynamics involved in the inculturation of Christianity in Igbo-Land, shedding light on the unique perspective of Jesus as an ancestor within the Igbo Church.

Inculturating Christianity in Igbo Society

The practice and praxis of inculturation in Igboland can only be genuinely assessed through interreligious dialogue from the Igbo cultural perspective. The reason for applying interreligious dialogue for praxis of inculturation in Igboland is because inculturation itself deals with the interaction between faith and culture. However, many theologians may doubt that inculturation has adequately taken place in the Church in Igboland. Such doubts may be

emanating from the reality that the early missionaries to Igboland, mainly from Europe, introduced their own Western culture and manner of worship into the Igbo Church. They appeared oblivious of the fact that the church does not identify herself with any one culture to the exclusion of the rest not even with European and Western culture, with which her history is so closely linked.

The idea of inculturation was not carried out to such an extent that Igbo culture is gradually disappearing, like a mirage from the Church in Igboland today. The missionaries regarded Igbo culture and religion as inferior to European culture. This attitude of branding African religion and culture as “inferior” by the early missionaries led to their inability to appropriate the rich cultural values found among those they were sent to evangelize. Dulles (2009) thus avers:

In earlier centuries, missionaries tended to carry their own cultures with them. They did not clearly distinguish between the faith and its cultural expression. Converts were trained to express their newfound faith in the language and style of the missionaries, who came for the most part from Western Europe... Christians ... in Asia, and Africa tended to be highly Europeanized or at least Westernized and in many cases they remained small foreign enclaves estranged from the culture of their nation (p.48).

Hence, in today’s world, humans live in a global village and can easily communicate with each other. If this is so, interreligious dialogue becomes necessary as it will bridge the dichotomy between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Lack of dialogue often gives rise to misunderstanding and bias. Interreligious dialogue will lead to a better understanding of African theology and will make meaningful impact on the liturgical and theological approaches engaged in the church in Igbo society.

Ancestorship in Igbo Culture

The Igbo belief system includes Ancestorship, attributing power to the deceased over the living. This belief, akin to reincarnation, signifies that death does not signify the complete annihilation of life but rather a continuation in a different cosmic realm (Obiakor and Onuora, 2019). In the Igbo worldview, individuals, ancestors, and spirits play significant roles and the fear of ancestral wrath is a foundational principle guiding the Igbo to lead a righteous life. The ancestors have the ability to influence the lives and activities of their earthly relations, either bringing fortune or misfortune based on the living's regard and remembrance of them. (Nwoye, 2011)

Ancestorship, as understood among the Igbo, represents a lineage of departed elders from the same ancestral abode, forming a spiritual community that oversees the lives of the living. Emphasizes the continuity between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn, forming an unbroken family. (Nwafor, 2017) This affirms the general belief in the Igbo culture that communion and communication are possible between the living and the deceased. Thus the departed ancestors possess the power to influence, assist, or trouble the living. This interconnected relationship between the living and the deceased shapes the Igbo understanding of Ancestorship and its influence on daily life. (Idowu, 1973)

Jesus as an Ancestor in African Theology

Megazi and Igba (2018), drawing on Nyamiti (1998), assert that theologians in Africa primarily adopt two overarching bases—African theology of inculturation and African liberation theologies—when approaching the task of Christologizing. Those within the African theology of inculturation strive to embody the Gospel message within African cultures at a theological

level. Conversely, those within the liberation perspective seek to locate Christ within the socio-political context of Africans.

Among inculturating theologians, there exists a notable divergence in starting points for the development of Christological perspectives. On one hand, some theologians initiate their exploration from biblical teachings about Christ and subsequently identify relevant Christological themes within the African cultural context. On the other hand, another subset of inculturation theologians takes the African cultural background as the initial point of departure, elaborating on Christology based on this foundation (Megazi and Igba, 2018).

This diversity in approaches is exemplified by some African theologians who employ the category of "Ancestor" to formulate what is termed an "ancestral Christology." The concept of Jesus as an ancestor, or brother-ancestor, offers a distinctive angle that merits exploration, potentially serving as an illustration of an "honour Christology" (Megazi and Igba, 2018).

This shows that the easiest form of understanding Jesus in Igbo society is to identify Him as the Chief/Great Ancestor of the Igbo, hence to portray Jesus as an Ancestor is a possible way to make Christ clear to Africans (Stinton 2004). Bujo (1992) as highlighted by (Stinton 2001) has this to say:

The main feature of African culture is the belief in ancestors. To introduce Christianity to Africa, there must be a connection with ancestral beliefs. All life comes from God. Ancestors become the ones that mediate that life to people. Jesus becomes the proto-ancestor, the model upon whose life all followers are to build their lives (p.141).

More so, Mokhoathi, (2018) believes that;

Ancestor Christology is a sub-branch in African Christianity, which falls under the field of Practical theology. It is a paradigm which has been developing over the last four decades. As a form of Christology, the ancestor paradigm has been well accepted and used by African theologians to make Christianity more communicative with the African cultural heritage (p.17).

This shows that the belief in ancestors stands central in the traditional Igbo/African thought and is an essential pillar of religion practiced in Africa. (Stinton, 2014) There are many different ways in which this acknowledgement of the existence of the deceased are expressed. In Igbo cosmology, ancestors play significant roles in the day to day lives of the society. For instance, God is conceived as the Supreme Being of which people access through divinized spirits. God is preferred not to be directly approached as it implies disrespect or irreverence. According to Igbo traditions, earthly ancestors acquire a supernatural status at death. They ascend to a position of mediator between God and their human descendants, hence the main reason the ancestors are elders deserving respect and veneration. Ancestors merit honour because they brought benefits to their people when they "lived among them." The ancestor is a source of life for living descendants. In Igbo thought, death does not separate someone from the family. Rather, the living-dead remain united and connected with the living-living.

Roles of Jesus as an Ancestor in Igbo/African Cosmology

It is therefore important to identify certain roles of ancestors in Igbo/African cosmology as also seen in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus that certifies Him to be conceived as the Greatest Ancestor of Igbo Christianity. Such roles include:

Mediation Role: In the social structure of Igbo cultures, it is impossible for a person to approach directly a higher ranking individual. In the same fashion, ancestors function as the ‘go-between, between humans and God. Thus ancestors become the authority themselves that give advice and blessings (and misfortune) to human descendants. Ancestors therefore mediate the power from the Supreme Being to the living (Nwafor, 2017). In the words of Stinton (2004);
It is safe to say that ancestors have the task of being messengers between God and man. Ancestors can bless, protect and give advice. Ancestors function as intercessors with God, imploring God for help and forgiveness. This role is seen as one of the many acts of mercy that Jesus also fulfils (p.134).

Even holy functionaries like witchdoctors operate through the mediation of ancestors. Ancestors are therefore mediators between God and humankind in Igbo cosmology (Mbiti, 1989).

However, to speak of Jesus as our ancestor essentially means He must have shared some common features with the Igbo ancestors. For instance, to him, belongs the role of mediating between us and God, as well as modeling for us good and proper conduct. In return, we maintain a ‘sacred communication’ with him that is not broken by the reality of death (Stinton, 2004). Meko (2019) puts it thus;

Ancestors in Africa are the living-dead and the living-living are united and connected in daily transactions of life. One is honoured as he stays in a good relationship with the living-dead. Africans therefore understand the importance of Jesus’ mediation between God and man. As a respected Ancestor, Jesus reconciles man with God, and through Him (Jesus as the Patron), African Christians access the Divine presence (p.6).

According to Bediako (2007), “Jesus Christ is the only real and true Ancestor and Source of life for all mankind, fulfilling the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors” (p.14) thus, the Ancestral Christology has the potential to communicate an accurate picture of Jesus Christ – “the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself in Igbo terms (p.9)

When Christ is conceived as the honourable/chief Ancestor, teaching Christology from the perspective of ancestral language in Igbo is already a familiar ground for the Igbo society. Unfortunately because of a lack of honour theology in the mainstream (missionary) church in Igboland, the glory of the “Ancestor” and the glory that he restores to those who know him are not emphasized. With the coming of missionaries and colonization of Africa, ancestors were “demonized” and stunted as evil past that people should be saved from, hence, the loss of connection and relationship with the ancestors. Thus articulating an “Ancestral Christology” is not common for fear of syncretism. The truth is that the mediator, Christ, the Ancestor, comes to restore the lost glory we had before the fall of mankind.

Hence, the understanding of Christ as the true, holy, immanent but exalted Ancestor that solves the complex puzzle of life in the highly religious continent of Africa. Thus, “Ancestral Christology” is without exception a solid platform for theologizing in Africa. Christ, the Ancestor, invites believers to an everlasting relationship with God. He is to be honoured (worshipped) forever (Stinton 2004).

Sacred Communication/Companion Role: Ancestors remain in contact with their descendants for quite some time. They are still considered to take part in the daily routine of the family (Mbiti, 1989). Ancestors are mostly acknowledged up to four or five generations

whereupon the memory of these ancestors dies out and they are considered to be truly dead (Mbiti, 1989). The spirit of the deceased then becomes an impersonal spirit residing in the spirit world.

Jesus Christ who is forever present watching over everyone's life and who gives life as only God, is able to do these things. "As the ancestors watch over the life of their descendants and continuously strengthen it, so does Christ continuously nourish the life of the believers". Ancestors are expected to give everything, including life itself, and the very same thing is expected from Jesus Christ as the Great Ancestor. (Mokhoathi, 2018)

Ancestors having departed from the world of the living and are now in the world of the dead, they are believed to be still part and parcel of the community they had lived in. in the same manner, Jesus has departed from the world of the living and entered the world of the spirit, but still he has power over all the living creation and still lives and influences the world he once lived in. All of this is what Igbo Christians must believe concerning Jesus Christ as their great ancestor.

Also, Africans have a secular understanding of time and life is the rhythmic progression through certain stages of life. Hence, all humans are subjected to these phases of life: Birth, through puberty to adulthood and old age and eventually death. (Mbiti, 1989) These are all stages through which all human pass. To assist the successful completion of this cycle of life therefore, the ancestors act as guides on this journey. In African spirituality, at the onset of every stage, there are rites to be performed to initiate one into the next phase. Ancestors play a spiritual role at these rites (Stinton, 2004). Some, scholars like Bujo (1992) interpret "the role of ancestor at these rite of passage as that of mediators of salvation" (p.141). Thus the completion of rites passed on by the ancestors ensures salvation.

However, ancestors, having set the example of what the successful completion of this process looks like, can now provide advice on how to travel on this journey. In this sense, ancestors become the spiritual guides to people. By ignoring the ancestors, one demonstrates arrogance and self-reliance for the journey of life. Such negligence toward the ancestors is punished with misfortune. Hence, Jesus in His continues communion with His people guides and directs them in their life's journey till the earthly end of such man.

Exemplary Role: In Igbo society in particular, it would seem as if ancestors function as the social conscience of a community. The norms and moral values given by the ancestors assist individuals to live a proper life. The example set by ancestors ensures a harmonious community where everybody knows and understands their place and function. In doing so, there is continuity with the past. The social structure of the extended family is maintained (Mbiti, 1989). Ancestors are considered to be good models for human behaviour. Their acts of virtue are seen as good examples of proper life and by their way of living they educate social behaviour.

Not all living has the privilege of becoming ancestors; two conditions are identified by Sarpong (1996) as cited by Stinton (2004) to be a true ancestor:

- One must pass through all stages of life to attain adulthood, which is only considered to arrive once one has had children and so has transmitted life.
- One must die a natural death. Death by accident, suicide, unclean diseases or in childbirth is not considered a good death.

In the same vein (Mekoa, 2019) also agree:

Not just anyone accedes to the rank of ancestor. It is not enough to die, one must have “lived well” – that is, have led a virtuous life. One must have observed the laws and have incurred the guilt neither of theft nor of a dissolute life. One must have not have been a wrathful or quarrelsome person, or have dabbled in sorcery. One must have been a leaven of unity and communion among human beings. (p.118)

However, just as the ancestors are expected to teach the people in the community the correct way of living, the dos and don'ts that people have to know concerning life. Similarly, Jesus taught the people of His time and is still doing so even today as an Ancestor, through the ministry of the church - this includes the good moral way of living.

Jesus Christ lived such an exemplary life on earth. People listened to His teachings and guidance. This made Him qualify as an Ancestor. Furthermore, as He had such great power to defeat evil, surely He is a Great Ancestor granting protection from all the dangers of this world, including evil things, or from the devil himself, providing food, stable homes and granting protection to those who are weak and who cannot stand up for themselves against great powers or oppression, and to the children and women who are defenseless. Jesus declares: ‘I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who comes to me will never be thirsty’ (Jn 6:35).

The ancestors also preach repentance from evil, which if the living fails to oblige, they bring punishment upon their lives in different forms. When the people bring sacrifices to the ancestors, they accept their offerings and their punishment is wiped out. Jesus Christ also preached repentance from sin unto righteousness, of which anyone obliges, will receive forgiveness and absolution from punishment. Jesus was simultaneously the one paying for the sins by His blood having died on the cross of Calvary. What a great ancestor.

Firstborn/Elder Brother Role: From Biblical texts we derive the idea of Jesus as the firstborn among many (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15; Heb 2:10-18). Jesus is described as the eldest brother of man. Jesus then is the firstborn of God in the world. Through this familiar relationship with God through Jesus, human beings can talk with God, through their Ancestor, through consulting Jesus, human beings can follow the will of God (Gray, 2003).

Spiritual Efficient Role: According to Koenig (2012);

The Ancestors are also expected to rule over the life of the community. They can accomplish this because they have great powers. They could not accomplish these things while they were still alive on earth. (p.116).

Jesus Christ is also expected to rule over life more powerfully now because He is an Ancestor and because His power has been extended. Jesus Christ is in Christians lives every time we need him. Like ancestors, he can provide spiritual needs more than anyone. He can do this because He is our Great Ancestor. This is what African Christians believe, because Jesus Christ, is God's Son. One can trust him as an ancestor with everything: from giving life, guidance to even giving punishment. He is God and He is able to accomplish anything without anyone's help.

Conclusion

The parallels drawn above underscore a prominent feature of African culture: the profound belief in ancestor worship. Among the Igbo people, there exists a compelling comparison where Jesus assumes the role of a Great Ancestor. In the Igbo perspective, the significance of ancestorship resonates with the grandeur and potency attributed to Jesus. Describing Jesus as the "Ancestor" holds particular weight within Igbo traditions, as this title epitomizes the most conspicuous and influential manifestation of the transcendent realm. (Fotland, 2005) This term not only reflects the power and importance of Jesus but also underscores his visibility as a pivotal link to the spiritual dimensions within the Igbo cultural context.

Therefore, within the Igbo cultural framework, designating Jesus as an Ancestor is a rational and meaningful choice, aligning with the well-established roles played by ancestors in the African context, roles that are also prominently evident in His character. Jesus aptly assumes the title of Ancestor due to His exemplary life, His active presence among the living, His status as the eldest, and His role as the mediator between God and humanity. The use of the term "Ancestor" serves to capture and convey the essence of Jesus' virtues and significance in a manner that resonates with the cultural and spiritual understanding of the Igbo people.

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