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Religions in Igboland: Diversification, Relevance and Belonging

Egodi Uchendu

Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract

Religion is one of the socioeconomic phenomena with undeniable impacts on humanity anywhere in the world. As sacrosanct as it seems, religion is not only important to the understanding of the existence of any indigenous population but also has policy relevance in the interethnic and developmental contexts. Historical and ethnographic evidence on different manifestations and nomenclatures of the phenomenon of religion abound. The Igbo nation in Southern Nigeria, on both sides of the Niger River, is one of the largest black entrepreneurial cultural groups in Africa, with unmistakable religious fervour that implicates sustainable development and interethnic interactions within its traditional borders. But the religious landscape of Igboland is constantly changing. Until 1840, the dominant religion(s) of the Igbo was indigenous or traditional. Less than two decades later, when Christian missionary activity commenced in the area, a new force was unleashed that would eventually reconfigure the indigenous religious landscape of the area. Christianity grew to dwarf the dominance of the latter. Before the centenary of Christianity in Igboland, Islam and other less hegemonic faiths arose to compete against indigenous Igbo religions and Christianity. This paper tracks the religious diversification and its functional relevance to harmonious development in Igboland. It draws its data from published works, interviews, and artefacts. It argues that as new religions emerge, the Igbo religious landscape will continue to diversify and/or adapt, either for inclusivity or exclusivity among the existing and emerging religions, for the survival of the Igbo.

Keywords: Nigeria, Igboland, Anioma, traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, other religions

Introduction: Mapping the Study Territory

The Igbo territory in Nigeria is located east and west of the Niger River. In essence, it sits astride that river. The heartland, which lies east of the Niger, is considerably larger than its western axis. Ohadike (1994) and Nwaokocha (2015) have convincingly demonstrated that Igbo populations now found west of the Niger River moved from the eastern heartland to their present location several centuries ago, starting from the ninth century A.D., as a result of land shortages and population growth. Thus, the Igbo of today are descendants of people who for several centuries lived in the Igbo territory, east and west of the Niger River, and spoke the Igbo language. The word, Igbo (sometimes mistakenly written as 'Ibo'), refers both to the people indigenous to Igbo territory in Nigeria along with their kith and kin in diaspora and also to their language.

Figure 1
Igboland, East and West of the Niger River

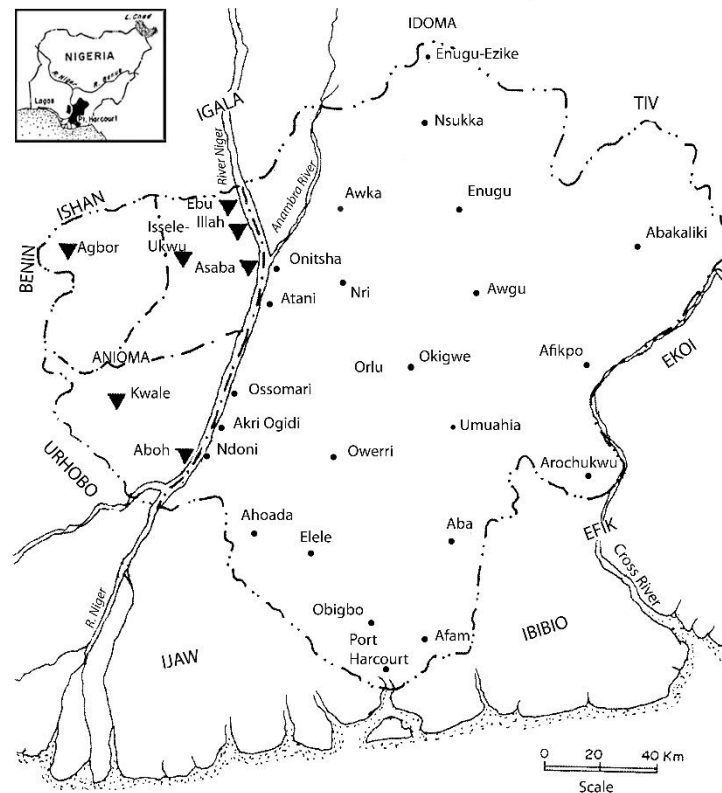


Figure 1 delineates the Igbo homeland. It would seem to be enclosed within an imaginary line inside of which is found the border towns of Enugu Ezike at its northern tip; Abakaliki, Afikpo and Arochukwu on the eastern end; Afam, Port Harcourt and Ahoada in the south; and Aboh, Kwale (Ukwuani), Agbor and Ebu in the west. Towns located within this periphery are united in their acceptance of their Igbo identity and their use of the Igbo language albeit with dialectical variations. Notwithstanding, after the Nigerian civil war (or Nigeria-Biafra War) in

1970, a few communities in southern Igboland located within and around the city of Port Harcourt—namely Rebisi, Ikwerre, Ogba, Ekpeye, Omoku, Etche, Oyigbo, Egi, Omanalu, Ndoni, and parts of Eggema namely Okwuizi, Aga and Mgbede—relinquished their Igbo identity, but continue to speak Igbo (Akwa: An Ikwerre Socio-Cultural Journal, 1993; Osuji, personal communication, 2016, October 6). This was one result of the unfortunate politics of the war period that aimed to weaken Igbo solidarity and capability to execute a successful war of secession from Nigeria (Ringim, 2016; Ekpo, 2016). Notwithstanding, these communities are included in this discourse for the period they regarded themselves as ethnically Igbo.

While Igbo communities east of the Niger constituted the major ethnic group of the old Southeastern (or Eastern) Nigeria¹, the western axis, Anioma, was among the minority groups of the old Southwestern (or Western) Nigeria before they were re-constituted after the 1963 referendum into the Midwest Region², later Midwest State in 1967 and Bendel State in 1976. Bendel State was split in 1991 into Edo and Delta States, with Anioma in the latter. Thus, from its minority status in Midwest or Bendel State, Anioma, the Igbo homeland west of the Niger River, became the second dominant ethnic group in the present Delta State (Uchendu, 2007).

In all, the Igbo inhabit the following states of Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, parts of Rivers and Bayelsa States and Anioma in Delta State. This paper recounts the religious life and experiences of the Igbo people on both sides of the Niger River. This is done using data sourced from Nigerian archives, interviews conducted in diverse locations across the Niger River interlacing the isolated Igbo communities, participant observation and data-rich publications on Igbo people and their religio-cultural life.

While works exist on the Igbo indigenous religions and Christianity since pre-colonial times (Isichei, 1978; Afigbo, 1986; Onwuejeogwu 1989; Tasié & Weneka, 2002), no study provides a panoramic view of the religious experience of the entire Igbo ethnic group on both sides of the Niger inclusive of outlying Igbo coastal communities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. This lacuna is filled by this study. This paper is divided into sections. Besides the introduction and mapping of the study location, the paper will progressively examine the religions practiced in Igboland using the order of their manifestation as a guide—Igbo indigenous religion, the Igbo and Christianity, the Igbo and Islam, and other religions of the Igbo. The conclusion incorporates an analysis of the functions of religious adherence in Igboland.

Igbo Indigenous Religion

All Igbo communities share common cultural traits. These include: (i) Igbo communities in eastern Nigeria that are demarcated into Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, which since 1999 are collectively referred to as Southeast geo-political zone; (ii) Anioma, the western Igbo homeland; and (iii) Igbo communities in Rivers State lying east of the Niger. These last two are currently located within the South-south geo-political zone. An essential characteristic of these Igbo communities, east and west of the Niger River, is their religiosity. As written of them, “there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular” (Ferguson, 1986, p. 328).

In pre-colonial times the Igbo demonstrated their deep religious tendencies by their acknowledgement of the existence of super-beings, which they believed co-existed with human

¹ Southeastern or Eastern Nigeria was the official designation for the area between 1914 and 1953. It became Eastern Region from 1953 until the eve of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967 when it became East Central State.

² Midwest Region was renamed Midwest State in 1967 when Nigeria abandoned the regional structure and split into twelve states.

beings, and their veneration of these beings. The primordial religion of the Igbo irrespective of their location east or west of the Niger River is what is popularly known as the Igbo indigenous religion, which evolved over the course of many centuries. They are indigenous because they are reasonably homegrown. This, by implication, means that they were not borrowed from non-Igbo communities; or that, where aspects were borrowed from elsewhere, they were reasonably domesticated to suit the Igbo psyche and Igbo religious needs.

Religion will be explained here as any attempt by human beings, in this case, the Igbo, to relate with non-human beings, whom I prefer to call super-beings. I locate in this broad category, “spiritual beings” of all sorts (Beyer, 2001, pp. 126 & 139) and objects believed to be inhabited by spirit entities. These include, but are not limited to, supreme beings, deified entities like rivers or streams, animals, trees, and groves; celestial and terrestrial bodies like the sun, moon, stars, mountains, and stones, among others; and souls of departed ancestors (mmuo).

It is widely assumed in academia that religion developed as men pondered the experience of living and the unusual happenings in their environments, not least the incidents of death and the mysteries beyond the grave (Chryssides & Geaves, 2014). While we do not discountenance this claim because we lack concrete proofs for it, it is evident, indeed, that the concept of religion for the Igbo derives from the understanding that there are powers that transcend human knowledge but are at the same time visibly active in the affairs of human beings. Those powers include one supreme and indivisible entity or several entities performing related spiritual functions. For several centuries, especially the last four, since the mid-1600s, for which we have documented data, at least, the life of the average Igbo, man or woman, revolved around the veneration of these super beings conceptualized as deities (Equiano, 2005). At no time, therefore, were the Igbo known to have counted among societies that discountenanced the existence of deities or the practice of belief (Beyer, 2001).

The religious practice of Igbo ancestors before the introduction of Christianity in Igboland has been described in a variety of ways. To the Igbo, it was their indigenous religion; but foreign observers using their different yardsticks and lacking real comprehension of various indigenous religious traditions described all traditional African religions as animism (Awolalu, 1976) or paganism (Baiké, 1856).³ Both terms denigrate and ostracise Igbo and other African indigenous religions. Whatever the world thought of Igbo indigenous religion, it held sway for many centuries and is still practiced all over Igboland and by the Igbo in diaspora despite the ascendancy of particularly the Christian faith.

Writing in the 1700s, Equiano (2005) recalled Igbo indigenous religion as practiced east of the Niger River during his childhood as follows:

As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun, and is girted round with a belt that he may never eat or drink; but, according to some, he smokes a pipe, which is our own favorite luxury. They believe he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity; but, as for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it: some however believe in the transmigration of souls in a certain degree. Those spirits, which are not transmigrated, such as our dear friends or relations, they believe always attend them, and

³ According to E. Tylor (in Awolalu, 1976), animism means attributing a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena. To Awolalu, “the word pagan is from the Latin word *paganus* meaning peasant, village or country district; it also means one who worships false gods; a heathen. But when the meaning is stretched further it means one who is neither a Christian, a Jew nor a Muslim.”

guard them from the bad spirits or their foes. For this reason they always before eating, as I have observed, put some small portion of the meat, and pour some of their drink, on the ground for them; and they often make oblations of the blood of beasts or fowls at their graves. I was very fond of my mother, and almost constantly with her. When she went to make these oblations at her mother's tomb, which was a kind of small solitary thatched house, I sometimes attended her. There she made her libations, and spent most of the night in cries and lamentations. I have been often extremely terrified on these occasions. The loneliness of the place, the darkness of the night, and the ceremony of libation, naturally awful and gloomy, were heightened by my mother's lamentations; and these, concurring with the cries of doleful birds, by which these places were frequented, gave an inexpressible terror to the scene.

Ohadike (1994) expanded on the relationship between the Igbo and their gods. Using the practice of Igbo indigenous religion in Anioma as his focus, he observes as follows:

Their religion was the hub of their entire being. To remain faithful to their religion was to lead a worthy life, to live in peace with the ancestors, to enjoy good health, and to have many children and good harvests. To break religious taboos or to dissociate oneself from the religious practice of one's community was to incur the wrath of the higher beings. (p. 98)

Traditional pre-colonial Igbo societies venerated a variety of deities. At the apex of Igbo cosmology is the Supreme Being—Chukwu (or Chi-Ukwu—the great God) for most Igbo, including Anioma; Chiokike (or Chi-Okike—the Creator) for Ikwerre Igbo of Rivers State, Chukwuabiana for Ogba also of Rivers State (Tasie & Weneka, 2002), and Olise bulu uwa (God who carries the whole world) also in Anioma (Nwaokocha, 2015). His different designations are reflections of his capabilities and evidence of his supreme status over all spirit entities and beings. In essence, he is not only the great God but also the Creator and the one who carries the world. The peculiar quality of Chukwu for all Igbo communities is that he lives far away in the sky from where he takes a direct and indirect interest in the affairs of humans.

Ranked below Chukwu are a plethora of divinities as varied as there are communities in Igboland. The Igbo believe that these spirits were created by Chukwu and were in effect emissaries of Chukwu. Below the group of divinities recognized and venerated by the Igbo are found the spirits of departed ancestors (mmuo). Separate from the spirit entities, the Igbo believe also in the practice of magic and medicine (Tasie & Weneka, 2002) — abilities assigned by Chukwu. Those who operate at this level occupy the lowest stratum of Igbo cosmology.

It is already clear from the foregoing that Igbo cosmology recognizes a universe in two parts: the sky (igwe) and the earth (ani). The chief spirit entity of the sky is the Supreme Being, while others recognized are Anyanwu (sun) and Onwa (moon). Most Igbo communities, if not all, venerate Anyanwu. Many Igbo also go by that name as a testimony of either their reverence or their ancestors' reverence, of the deity Anyanwu. The presence of the Supreme Being, Chukwu, undoubtedly made the realm of the sky (igwe) superior to the earth (ani). The Igbo illustrate this with the popular phrase, "igwe ka-ala."

The chief spirit entity of the earth is Ani, the earth goddess (also called Ali, Ala or Agbala). In Elele, Rivers State, she doubles as the goddess of revenge (Waga, 1999). Ani is the

chief goddess in Igbo cosmology and is widely revered as the giver of life and the source of fertility. Other communal deities in Igboland include Njoku, Ahajoku or Ihejioku (all refer to the yam god), Ibini-ukpabi, Agwu, Amadioha, Ukata, Kamalu, Ogwugwu, Ekwensu, Ojukwu, Ngene, Agaba (later borrowed by the Ibibio), Adolo or Adoro, Ngwu, Mgbara and numerous others. As Tasié and Weneka (2002) noted, some deities controlled definite spheres of life.

A vital entity in the realm of the spirits is Chi, the exclusive spirit entity and guardian of every individual. A man's Chi, the Igbo believe, follows him all the days of his life. One's Chi could be benevolent or malignant. Malevolent Chi, according to Igbo belief, can be turned into a benevolent one through the intervention of diviners and other ritual specialists, namely medicine men and women (Ohadike, 1994). Ancestral shrines, such as the one Equiano's mother visited, were quite common in pre-colonial Igboland and daily sacrifices and libations were offered to them in their capacity as the official guardians of the social and moral order.

Ancestral spirits especially of the masculine gender were known to appear to their living relatives at intervals in the form of masquerades. Female ancestors were not known to appear as masquerades to the living in the manner that male ancestors did. Masquerades commonly visited the living during communal festivals like the burial of a prominent man, usually a freeborn and therefore a potential ancestor, and at the instance of a breach in the community of the social order (Uchendu, 2007). Because of the close relationship they kept with their living family members, the Igbo regard them as the closest of the divinities to man and revere them as the "living dead" (Talbot, 1969, p. 298; Awolalu, 1976, p. 28).

Certain ancestors are categorized as bad spirits (*mmo*). These were those whose burials were not properly performed to qualify them to join other ancestors in the land of spirits. Consequently, they roam around either to protect people or to cause mischief to individuals. Given their restlessness after death, most are supposed to be malevolent and dreaded. It is not uncommon to hear diviners advise families or individuals going through trauma that their problems stem from angry dead relatives whose full burial rites have not been performed. In effect, the dead is using the crisis to remind the living of their obligations to them.

Birth, death and reincarnation were popular themes in Igbo religious thought, with reincarnation the basis for the veneration of Igbo ancestors. While most scholars of Igbo indigenous religion (Tasié & Weneka, 2002; Awolalu, 1989; Ohadike, 1994) identify four main categories of spiritual beings—Supreme Being, divinities (deities, spirits), the ancestors, and mysterious powers (the realm of magic and medicine)—the notable anthropologists, Onwuejeogwu (1989) makes no such distinction. Based on his study of the Nri, he regards the four categories of spiritual beings as rather extensions of the Supreme Being. He writes:

Chukwu (from *chi ukwu*) is the creator of all things, with four manifestations of his existence. First, Chukwu is *anyanwu*, in a symbolic meaning of the "sun"; as the sun's light is everywhere so is Chukwu's presence everywhere manifested... Secondly, Chukwu is *agbala*, the fertility of the earth and of the beings that inhabit it. Thirdly, Chukwu is conceived as *chi*, or the power in living beings enabling them to procreate from generation to generation. Fourthly, Chukwu is *okike*, creator of everything visible and invisible, and of the laws that govern them. (p. 41)

What the above reveals are the slight differences that may have existed across Igbo communities concerning their beliefs and indigenous religious practices. However, the essential

features remain the same all over Igboland. For, besides these manifestations of Chukwu, traditional Nri society believed, like other Igbo, in spirits that “manipulate the hidden laws to shower good and evil into the invisible world of man” (Onwuejeogwu, 1989, p. 42). They also subscribe with other Igbo communities to the two-fold cosmology of sky (igwe) and earth (ani), and to the existence of ancestral spirits (mmuo). When the Igbo pantheon is looked at as a whole, it represents a quasi-division of labour among the different strata of spirit beings, with Chukwu at the helm.

The everyday practice of Igbo indigenous religion can be pieced together from several sources notwithstanding the absence of a religious text that has created some mystery around it. The Igbo practiced their indigenous religion communally when groups of people take part in public acts of worship of communal deities for which much feasting and dancing featured. Ceremonies were enacted to make communal worship possible. Major deities regulated the life of their constituent communities and were essential parts of the way of life of those communities. For such communally owned deities, group worship thrived. There were also individual acts of worship occurring alongside group veneration. It is common knowledge that individuals related personally and directly to deities their communities worshipped and those they installed for themselves or their nuclear families just as they did with their ancestors irrespective of gender.

Worship sometimes occurred along gender lines. Most women would either as a group or individually worship fertility goddesses and river deities⁴ in the same way that men would do for certain spirits especially those connected with the masquerade cult, an essentially male cult. The veneration of one’s chi did not require the commune. It was the exclusive act of the individual in question who invested regular private prayers, sacrifices and invocations with the intent of warding off misfortune while keeping oneself in a state of harmony with the chi.

Shrines dotted the length and breadth of Igboland right until the middle of the twentieth century, but rarely were there shrines for Chukwu except in a few communities in the Agbor district of Anioma where altars were erected for him. One reason given for this is the fact that “no one knew what he looked like” (Ohadike, 1994, pp. 99-101). Moreover, he was so far away and left other spirits, his emissaries, to take care of his human population. Sacrifices and acts of veneration for spirit beings were understood to be indirectly for Chukwu. Priests and other ritual specialists, including family elders (okpala in Anioma), were always on hand to provide guidance during communal worship with respect to what objects should be used and what form it should take. They offered advice when consulted over family and individual worship.

The whole essence of Igbo indigenous religion remains to establish an accord between the spirit world and the physical world occupied by man. Harmony with the spirit world was very important as that realm controlled the physical world. Sacrifices featured dominantly in Igbo traditional worship and were the means for achieving the much-desired harmony with the spirit world. They were indications of gratitude for past and anticipated blessings or acts of propitiation, supplication, and atonement. In Anioma this worked out as follows:

When a person felt disturbed by some unseen forces, for example, he might approach a diviner who might recommend that the unseen forces be propitiated. A scapegoat, in the form of a chicken or other animals, might be used. Should a person want special favors from the higher

⁴ Two such deities exclusively worshipped by women in Anioma were Olokun and Igbe. While Olokun was supposedly introduced from Benin and Yorubaland, Igbe is traced to Urhobo, Itshekiri and Isoko areas where it is still a favorite deity. (See Ohadike, 1994, p. 101).

beings, the supplicant would make some sacrificial offerings, accompanied by the right prayers. During the periodic “national” festivals, the entire community, under the leadership of the chief priests and elders, would offer sacrifices, asking the higher forces for bountiful harvests, good health, good luck, many offspring, and long life. (Ohadike, 1994, p. 100)

An attractive quality of the Igbo indigenous religion is respect for each other’s sacred symbols. Talbot (1969) who made this observation remarked: “this tolerance in religious matters is one of the negroes’ most attractive qualities” (pp. 27-28).

Igbo indigenous religion was discredited by its heavy superstition. This manifested in the killing of twins, human sacrifices, and the dedication of persons to idols with their automatic transformation into life-long social outcasts, among others. With its teaching on freedom in Christ (The Gospel of John 8: 36), a doctrine that appealed strongly to social outcasts and slaves, both of whom used it to fight against their negative social circumstances, Christianity was able to undermine Igbo indigenous religion and to draw into its membership the bulk of its practitioners. Yet, Igbo indigenous religion has remained in practice long after the introduction of Christianity. Although it bequeathed much of its adherents to Christianity, as we shall see in the next section, it retained a resolute membership whose adherence has kept the traditional religious structure in existence.

A recent survey of religious practices in Igboland, east of the Niger River, reports an impressive nucleus that has stuck with the indigenous religion. The number of adherents is higher as the age category appreciates upwards.⁵ In other words, more grandfathers, in the age category of 65 years and above, have continued with the traditional religion of their forefathers than the lower age groups. There were instances of reconversions by which parents as they get older returned to the religion of their parents. Some did so because, to them, Christianity or any of the modern religions they subscribed to, had served its purpose in their lives.

There were also instances in which individuals, men and women, inherited the right to venerate their communal or family deities. Some were compelled, as a result, to also return to the indigenous religion to fulfil that obligation. These incidents ensure the continued existence of the Igbo indigenous religion. One more factor is the syncretized habits of some Igbo. What Leith-Ross (1939) observed of most early Igbo Christians when the nationalistic fervor was high and Igbo nationalists advocated a rejection of Abrahamic religions for indigenous ones, happens to be true today, although one may argue, at a minimized level. Then she wrote:

With no strain nor conflict, [one] can attend communion and believe in medicine ... tie up preciously in the same corner of a handkerchief his rosary and the shaped bit of ‘iron for juju’ made for him by an Awka blacksmith, plant side by side in the garden round his new cement and pan-roofed house the hibiscus of ‘civilization’ and the ogirisi tree of pagan family rites. (Leith-Ross, 1939, cited in Afigbo, 1986, p. 19)

⁵ This is part of the report of a survey carried out by this author in South East and South South geopolitical zones between June and November 2016. On average a hundred youths, aged 16 to 45 years, were sampled in each state in the two zones. A census was taken of the religious affiliations of the study participants’ parents and grandparents.

It was not only in the 1930s that recourse to indigenous religion by converted Christians was noted. Afigbo (1986) records how during the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967 to 1970) Igbo Christians prosecuted the war as well with “the guild of native doctors and rain-makers” (p. 19). Since after the 1970s, as the world advanced deeper into globalization, there appeared a kind of globalization of religion by which some individuals began to subscribe to more than one religious belief and set of practices. Hence a Christian would attend Christian activities and also take part in traditional religious practices with the hope that one or both would work for him or her.

Besides the above, much of the indigenous religious practices have survived or been adapted in contemporary social, economic, and political practices as *omenala* (culture). Indeed, the entire indigenous social and political organization of the Igbo continues to rest on traditional practices, including its religious dimension. With this, most Igbo remain in direct contact with aspects of indigenous religious worship. Meanwhile, many Igbo, especially teenagers and young adults (youths), engage in them without knowing their origin or linking them to traditional religion. Examples include economic rituals like the new yam festivals which are simply the veneration of the yam deity or several female mourning rituals, like the shaving of the hair and wearing of special mourning cloths, that are part and parcel of the traditional burial custom. Another example is masquerading, which is tied to ancestral worship, but commonly features during Christian religious feasts and at political ceremonies like the Independence Day celebration. Thus, we see much boundary crossing in religious practices that favor the Igbo indigenous religion. Impressively, the indigenous religion has remained resilient and is as visibly practiced as other popular, but newer religions in Igboland.

The Igbo and Christianity

From a commitment to indigenous beliefs that allowed the veneration of a host of deities and ancestors, the Igbo were exposed from the eve of the colonial period to Christianity, the world’s major monotheistic religion. The first attempt to introduce Christianity in Igboland was made by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Onitsha in 1856 (Afigbo, 1986). Samuel Ajayi Crowther led the team while Reverend J. C. Taylor and Simon Jonas, two Igbo ex-slaves and converts from Sierra Leone, assisted him (Dike, 1956).

A further attempt was made in 1865, again by Samuel Crowther, for Igbo communities in Rivers State whose exposure to Christianity occurred significantly later than their non-Igbo neighbors. In 1872, Samuel Edgerley of the United Presbyterian Mission, Calabar, led the first evangelistic outreaches to two Aro villages. An Efik interpreter assisted him in the endeavor. Mostly people of African origin did Christian mission work in Igboland. The exception was in Anioma, where in 1875, three years after the outreaches to the Aro, European missionaries with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Onitsha opened the first of the Anioma missions at Asaba. From these strategic locations, Christian mission work commenced and slowly moved into the Igbo hinterland. In 1882 the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) joined the campaign to rescue men from idolatry and bring the light of Christ to a people in darkness. Border communities in northern Igboland were among the last to be reached by Christian missions. For instance, Christianity was not introduced in Nsukka Division until the 1920s (Uchendu, 2011).

Christianity is significantly different from Igbo indigenous religion in that it projected a singular spirit entity, God (Yahweh or Jehovah for some), both as the Supreme Being and the only spiritual entity that is worthy of worship. Yahweh revealed Himself and manifests in three

indivisible forms—as the Father, the Son and Savior (Yehosua in Hebrew language, but Jesus Christ in Greek language), and the Holy Spirit.

The Christian doctrine is hinged on man's need for salvation from sin. Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the Savior of all men. He accomplished man's salvation from sin and eternal damnation through a physical death on the cross on behalf of all men. The Christian message emphasizes that man was separated from God because of sin;⁶ but through faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior, man is restored to right standing and fellowship with God. The whole essence of Jesus Christ's mediatory role is to save man from sin, reconcile humanity to God and qualify every man for eternal life in heaven.⁷

The central doctrine of the Christian faith is set out in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (adopted in 325 A.D. with the additions from the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.):

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.⁸

⁶ See *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. Genesis Chapter 3 reports the disobedience of Adam and Eve through the enticement of Satan in the form of a serpent. God consequently drove man out of the Garden of Eden thus signifying the break in the God-man relationship. In the same place, God promised future salvation for man through the seed of the woman (verse 15).

⁷ Relevant Bible verses that set out these truths include: The Gospel according to Matthew, 1 verse 21: "And she shall bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins." The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy, chapter 2 verses 5-6: "For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time." The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, chapter 1 verse 16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"; and Romans chapter 10 verses 9-10, 13: "That if thou confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation ... For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." The Gospel according to John, 6: 47, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on Me hath everlasting life."

⁸ For the Nicene-Constantinople Creed see https://orthodoxwiki.org/Nicene-Constantinopolitan_Creed, 2023. In a subsequent meeting, the Council at Nicea clarified a few issues especially the unity of the two natures, God and man. The first of its eleven 'Anathemas' state: "If anyone does not confess that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one nature or essence, one power or authority, worshipped as a trinity of the same essence, one deity in three hypostases or persons, let him be anathema. For there is one God and Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and one Holy Spirit, in whom are all things."

There is no question that at the beginning of Christian missionary activities in Igboland, Christianity was not well received, especially by prominent men. In Igbo communities of Rivers State the indigenous freeborn adult population disdained it (Tasie & Weneka, 2002). This was true of other parts of Igboland as Afigbo, Isichei and Ohadike all observed for mainland and Anioma Igbo communities.

Reasons for the slow progress made by Christian missionaries in converting the Igbo to Christianity between 1856 and 1900 hinged partly on the missionary methods adopted at that initial stage and also on the attitude of the Igbo to the new religion. The primary mode of conversion was by preaching. This was not very successful for these reasons: except for a few Aro traders (Leonard, 1898), the Igbo had not acquired knowledge of the English language to understand the preachers' theses; and the missionaries were not versed in the Igbo language to communicate in vernacular. In addition, the target population were adults. These, as Afigbo (1986) observed, were seeped in traditional culture and therefore staunchly resisted attempts to lure them away. A picture of Christianity among the Igbo communities in Rivers State during its early years was painted thus:

For a while the Churches struggled for survival in a somewhat hostile environment... it could not easily internalize its teachings at first because of some initial obstacles. There were communication problems as Church agents were foreigners who did not understand local languages, culture and worldview. Their intellectualized method of evangelism turned Christianity into a religion of the head rather than the heart. ... Only those who could successfully cram and recite in the Igbo language the Church Catechism, the Apostles' Creed, the Decalogue, select Bible passages and accept certain Western moral codes, such as having only one wife, were admitted into the full membership of the Church. (Tasie & Weneka, 2002, p. 297)

In Anioma the missionaries were cash-strapped and therefore unable to finance the building of their Churches and schools. This was interpreted by the indigenes as tight-fistedness, a situation that did not endear them to their hosts who also were determined to defend both their religion and independence (Ohadike, 1994).

As the prominent men—the chiefs, elders, and other members of the wealthy class—mocked these agents of religious change, their message nonetheless appealed to slaves and outcasts (osu) who began to accept it. An evident change in mission policy and methodology occurred. Missionaries began to engage with children whom they introduced to the enchanting world of reading and writing, the popular Western magic. As the fruit of their exposure to Western education in mission schools became evident from the late 1800s onwards, the resistance of the prominent men began to weaken leading some to relinquish their sons to mission schools where they were taught, in addition to reading and writing, about the Christian faith.

It was its function as a tool for accessing the best that the colonial order offered that eventually encouraged the Igbo gentry first to enrol their children in Christian mission schools and second to go to Church themselves. The great success Christianity had in Igboland was achieved through the mission school and by the provision of modern healthcare to indigenous populations. H. Adiku (personal communication, 2003, May 27) recalled his experience with the

mission school at Amufie, Enugu Ezike, in the early 1960s. Born to a Muslim father, he was sent to the Roman Catholic mission school. The school was important to him as the means of acquiring Western education, but not for the religion it exported. His need for the former, made him endure the weekly Monday thrashing for repeatedly missing Church catechism classes, which as a Muslim he did not need.

The eventual success of Christian missionaries became evident within decades. By 1963, three years after Nigeria's independence, the religious demography of the Igbo homeland, east of the river Niger, indicated that Christians comprised 77% of the population while the remaining 22+% belonged to the indigenous religion (Obaka, 1977), leaving Islam with less than 1% adherents, actually less than three hundred members (Uchendu, 2011). Between 1977 and 1996, Christianity gained an additional 18% membership from the indigenous religions. The current statistics show Christians to comprise up to 97% of the population of Igboland. In a 2016 survey for this paper, with a primary focus on Igbo indigenous religion, youths in Abia State defended their lack of interest in traditional religion on the fact that "Christianity is their heritage." This appears so from the figures posited for Christians in all Igbo states.

Reflections on Igbo Christianity

In its early stages, Christianity was seen as a destabilizing force. Its teachings undermined several traditional practices including the much-cherished polygamous structure that provided male heads of household with farm hands composed largely of their wives and children, not to mention multiple sexual partners. Its teachings also attacked if not undermined religious plays and masquerading that were hinged on primordial beliefs in ancestors who interacted physically with their erstwhile communities as masquerades.

After a combative beginning, it emerged the winning faith. Notwithstanding its success in Igboland, it compromised its essential quality because of the manner it was introduced and nurtured. That essential quality is the modelling of the life of Christ by subscribers of the faith. There was for close to a century the absence of deep piousness in the Christian lifestyle among the majority of Igbo Christians. The religion first was accepted for its utilitarian virtues, particularly its provision of Western education that qualified its owners an entry into the emerging colonial economic order. This gap—the absence of genuine Christian piousness—which from the observation of the paper is located within the ambit of an equal lack of spiritual understanding and piety by the early Christian mediators than anything else. These mediators knew more about Church Catechism, which they taught than the New Birth—the central teaching of Christianity, which is evidenced in a life patterned after Christ's and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Church Catechisms, no doubt, were important for simplifying core Christian teachings for easy memorization by converts but they emphasized the external trappings of the faith in place of its essential quality.

Indeed, early Christian missionaries themselves, in the bid to establish a foothold for their religious orders, did not emphasize this central focus of Christianity for their adherents. The outcome was an enlisting of people under new religious communities but without the commensurate understanding of what was required of them as Christian adherents by the Progenitor of their faith as established in their Scriptures. Little wonder that majority of the early generations of Igbo Christians remained nominal in belief and attitude until the 1970s when Pentecostalism (Anderson, 2011) made its debut in Igboland and began to emphasize the little-known core teachings of Christianity, giving rise to the 'born-again' community of Christians. In

its first two decades, the Pentecostal movement helped many Christians in Igboland to develop an informed personal relationship with God as outlined in the Scriptures (see John 1: 12-13; Acts 8:37).

The hostility that greeted Pentecostalism and its emphasis on the New Birth from Church clergy in Igboland as late as the 1990s is glaring evidence that until then, mainstream Igbo Christianity was dominantly nominal. Between 1985 and 1990, the New Birth experience, or the ‘Born-Again’ theology, which Pentecostalism popularised was much maligned by clergies in orthodox denominations in Igboland who marked it out for destruction. Accordingly, Church members who subscribed to it were ostracised. As pressure mounted on the ‘Born-Agains’ many felt compelled to leave mainstream Anglican, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic congregations for the few emerging Pentecostal groups like Assemblies of God’s Church (AGC) and also for non-denominational fellowship-style groups like Scripture Union (SU) and Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGBMFI), among others.

Once more, after roughly three decades of Pentecostal ascendancy, from the 1970s to 2000s, that movement seems to have lost its focus and adopted a new tradition of materialism believed to have been exported from the United States of America, which is akin to, but much in excess of, what existed in the first century of Christianity in Igboland. This new move is driven by the doctrine of prosperity and the desire to possess the earth. The danger in this theology is that Christians are again losing sight of their obligation as followers of Christ and the life in the hereafter for temporalism.⁹

The Igbo and Islam

Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah, the Quraysh-born merchant (570-631 A.D.), propagated the religion of Islam. His religious teachings according to some scholars embodied the principal ideas of the three great religions of the Near East, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (Reither, 1957). Muslims, however, maintain that Islam is the perfect religion. The Qur’ān, the Muslim Holy Book, identifies the Supreme Being in Islam, Allah, as the creator and judge of mankind. Prophet Muhammad, who taught the worship of Allah, is regarded as the seal of the prophets in Islam. His central role in Islam is captured on page 4 (iv) of the Qur’ān: “Whoever obeys Muhammad, obeys Allah; and whoever disobeys Muhammad disobeys Allah” (aL-Hilali and Khan, n.d.: iv). Individual Muslims maintain that perfection is attained and paradise reached by obeying the teachings and replicating the doings of Muhammad. The basic teachings of Islam include the belief in an afterlife; a day of judgement, paradise and hell—beliefs which were common to both Jews and Christians; and the struggle of forces of good and evil in the world—the central thought of Zoroastrianism (Reither, 1957). Hell and paradise are presented in several verses of the Qur’ān. Surah (chapter) 18:29-31 describes them thus:

And say: ‘The truth is from your Lord.’ Then whosoever wills, let him believe; and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve. Verily, We have prepared for the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers) a Fire whose walls will be surrounding them (disbelievers in the Oneness of Allah).

⁹ The Christian obligation as a follower of Christ, as stated in The Gospel According to Mark, 8:34 reads: “Whoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

And if they ask for help (relief, water), they will be granted water like boiling oil, that will scald their faces. Terrible is the drink, and an evil Murtafaq (dwelling, resting place.)!

Verily, as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, certainly We shall not make the reward of anyone who does his (righteous) deeds in the most perfect manner to be lost.

These! For them will be ‘And (Eden) Paradise (everlasting Gardens): wherein rivers flow underneath them; therein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they will wear green garments of fine thick silk. They will recline therein on raised thrones... (aL-Hilali & Khan, n.d., p. 320)

In addition, Allah “shall marry them to Hûr (fair females) with wide lovely eyes.” “Whom no man or jinn has had deflowered before them” (Qur’ân 44:54; 55:74). [Hûr are “very fair females created by Allah as such, not from the offspring of Adam, with intense black irises of their eyes and intense white scleras” (aL-Hilali & Khan, n.d., p. 544).]

Rahman et al. (2022) posit that the Arabic word *islām* (literally ‘surrender’) illuminates the fundamental religious idea of Islam—that the believer (called a Muslim; previously Mohammedan by British colonial personnel) accepts to surrender to the will of Allah, the sole creator, sustainer and restorer of the world. The will of Allah, to which human beings must submit, is made known through the Qur’ân, revealed through Allah’s messenger, Muhammad, who is regarded in Islam as the last of a series of prophets (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon and Jesus). To Muslims, Muhammad’s message simultaneously consummates and completes the ‘revelations’ attributed to earlier prophets.

Islamic doctrine, law, and thinking are based upon four sources: the Qur’ân, the Sunnah (“traditions”), *ijmā* (“consensus”), and *ijtihād* (“individual thought”) (Rahman et al., 2022). The Qur’ân indicates that Allah created two parallel species of creatures—human beings and jinn—the former from clay and the latter from fire. The Qur’ân says little about the jinn, although it is implied that they are endowed with reason and responsibility but are more prone to evil than human beings are. It is with humanity that the Qur’ân, which describes itself as a guide for the human race, is centrally concerned (Rahman et al., 2022).

Prophet Muhammad established some fundamental practices for his followers, popularly known as the five pillars of Islam. They are: the recitation of the *shahādah* or profession of faith, by which one accepts Islam as his or her religion¹⁰; the five daily prayers to be done facing Mecca; almsgiving (*zakāt*); fasting during the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca for those who can afford it. A true Muslim is one who faithfully adheres to these principles (I. Udo, personal communication, 2016, July 8). The Qur’ân buttresses this point thus:

A man asked the Prophet ‘What deeds are the best?’ The Prophet said: (1) To perform the (daily compulsory) *Salat* (prayers) at their stated fixed times; (2) To be good and dutiful to one’s own parents (3) and to participate in *Jihad* in Allah’s Cause. (aL-Hilali & Khan, n.d., p. 305; Bukhari, vol. 9, Hadith no. 625)

¹⁰ One becomes a worshipper of Allah by reciting the *Shahada*—‘*La ilaha ill-Allah*’ (‘There is no god, but the one true God’).

While there are issues on which Christianity and Islam agree, there are differences among them by which they differ significantly from each other. Key among these include the rejection of the Christian concept of original sin for which humanity needs the Savior, Jesus Christ; rejection of Jesus as the Son of God and God Himself, and the rejection of His crucifixion. The Qur'ān rather teaches that Allah saved him from crucifixion at the hands of the Jews. In addition, references in the Bible to the Holy Spirit are claimed by Muslims to refer to Muhammad. The Qur'ān's rejection of Jesus Christ as God, Son of God, and Savior is tied to its rejection of the Christian doctrinal principle of the trinity—One God with three manifestations. On this, it notes: “Indeed they are disbelievers who say, ‘Surely, Allah is none but the Messiah, son of Mary...’ ” (Qur'ān 5:73).

Islam was introduced into Igboland through Muslim migrants from different parts of Northern, North-central and Western Nigeria. The earliest migrants to arrive Igboland came between 1891 and 1920 from Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Gombe, Bauchi and Borno, all in Hausaland; Bida in Nupeland; and Osun and Ilorin in Yorubaland (Uchendu, 2011). The periods of occurrence of the Igbo exposure to Islam differed between the communities in the eastern heartland and the Anioma in the west. Elele, an Ikwerre community in Rivers State, was the first Igbo community to host Muslim migrants.¹¹ These were elephant hunters who arrived in the community in 1891¹² through the mediatory role of British colonizers that invited them to hunt off elephants in the area.

Aro, Oguta and Owerri communities came next. For the Aro, their contact with Muslims of Hausa origin occurred during the 1901-1902 Aro expedition by which the British brought into Aro communities some 317 Hausa soldiers, the majority of whom, if not all, were Muslims (Uchendu, 2011). Okigwe, Uzuakoli, Umuahia and Afikpo, Aba and Ibagwa made their earliest contact with Muslim migrants between 1907 and 1918. Besides the elephant hunters and Muslim soldiers in the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), other early Muslim migrants included tailors and traders who sought greener pastures in Igboland. They were encouraged to settle in Igboland by colonial officials who were enamoured with their monarchical structure by which colonial domination and administration of the Northern Province of Nigeria where they hailed from were made easy. British colonial officers, therefore, did much to expose indigenes of Eastern Nigeria, especially those in the Rivers and Cross River areas, to Islam in the bid to influence their organizational systems into something they could work with. In 1913, during a visit to Southern Nigeria, Herbert Richmond Palmer, the colonial Revenue Commissioner, remarked:

The Eastern Provinces is some centuries behind the countries west of the Niger River in natural development. Consequently, the social organization of its peoples is less easy for a European administration to deal with than the national organization of peoples like the Yoruba and

¹¹ “A Report of the History and Organization of the Ikwerre People living in the Elele and Nkarahia Native Court Areas: Ahoada Division,” File AHODIST 14/1/217, National Archives Enugu (henceforth NAE).

¹² There is no doubt about the exact year of the arrival of this first set of Muslim migrants to Elele led by Mallam Diko. Colonial and missionary reports agree with oral information collected from descendants of Diko in Elele. Other scholarly investigations also agree with this date. See Uchendu (2011, pp. 58-66); Kilani (2008, pp. 42-43); Tasie & Weneka (2002), Kilani, Tasie, & Weneka dated this earliest visit to 1896, but Uchendu to 1891, the exact date reported in colonial and missionary records. It therefore nullifies the misleading claim by Rufai (2012) that “Islam spread to the region in the nineteenth century.”

Hausa. 'Native' ideas, Native laws, and Native administrative machinery are so far remote from their European counterparts, that the destructive force of any European administration at all is proportionately greater than when applied to countries whose conceptions are more advanced and obvious. (Afigbo, 1965)

After two decades of exposure to Islam, pioneered by migrant Muslims, the Igbo remained untouched by the religion as testified in 1910 by George Basden (1966, p. 241) of the Niger Mission. Muslim proselytizers eventually recorded their first Igbo convert in 1937, forty-six years after the first recorded settler arrived Igboland. The waiting was considerably longer compared to the experience of Christian missionaries. The well-publicized convert, Garba Ocheme from Amufie, Enugu-Ezike, took Islam in Calabar province where he lived as a native stranger. Progress for Islam thereafter continued very slowly. Besides a handful that converted to Islam in Nsukka Division, from the late 1930s, a breakthrough came when some fifty persons took Islam in Enohia, Abakaliki Division, in 1958 through the efforts of Okpani Egwuani, who later took the name Ibrahim Niase Nwagui (Ottenberg, 1971). With these incidents, Islam took its seat as one of the religions of the Igbo.

By 1984, 93 years after its appearance in the Igbo heartland, east of the Niger River, the population of indigenous Muslims, according to Abdurrahman Doi, was 3450 persons (Doi, 1984). In 2013, it was estimated at 13,500 (Uchendu, 2022b). Muslim leaders, who provided these statistics, noted, however, that the figure was on the high side. The latest survey conducted between June 2016 and January 2017 by Uchendu et al. (2017) showed that Igbo Muslims, east and west of the Niger, number less than 20,000, with Anioma reporting the least number of Muslims.

Today mosques have been erected in many Igbo towns. The five daily prayers are observed in several mosques and Igbo Muslims are among other Muslims who make the annual hajj. It is widely known, however, that Igbo conversions to Islam are for the most part the result of a desire for economic and political aggrandizement for men, and the prospect of marriage for women (Uchendu, 2011; 2022a).

That Islam is progressing very slowly in Igboland is quite evident. The Islamic doctrine of jihad is believed to be at the root of the slow rate of conversion of the Igbo to Islam.¹³ Two concepts of jihad are taught in Islam: the major and lesser jihads. While the major jihad is the struggle by a Muslim to conform to the injunctions of Allah; the lesser jihad is the struggle to win non-Muslims, popularly referred to as infidels, to Islam. Efforts by local Muslim clerics to

¹³The following Qur'ānic verses exemplify this: Qur'ān 4:74: "Let those (believers) who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter fight in the Cause of Allah, and whoso fights in the Cause of Allah, and is killed or gets victory, We shall bestow on him a great reward." Qur'ān 2: 190 "And fight in the Way of Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors. And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out..." Meanwhile, the footnote to Qur'ān 2:190 reads: "Al-Jihad (holy fighting) in Allah's Cause (with full force of numbers and weaponry) is given utmost importance in Islam and is one of its pillars (on which it stands). By Jihad Islam is established. Allah's Word is made superior, (His Word being La ilaha illallah which means none has the right to be worshipped but Allah), and His Religion (Islam) is propagated. By abandoning Jihad (may Allah protect us from that) Islam is destroyed and the Muslims fall into an inferior position; their honor is lost, their lands are stolen, their rule and authority vanish. Jihad is an obligatory duty in Islam on every Muslim, and he who tries to escape from this duty, or does not in his innermost heart wish to fulfil this duty, dies with one of the qualities of a hypocrite."

clarify the inferior status of the lesser jihad have remained largely unheeded for the simple reason that Islam historically was spread by the sword and several passages in the Qur'ān endorse the practice for all times.

Moreover, the preponderance of globally identified Islamist groups fighting for the global enthronement of Islam, such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), Boko Haram, Signed in Blood Battalion (SBB), Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine, Islamic Movement for Azawad, to name a few, are daily pointers to the reality that Islamic expansion and propagation are driven largely 'by the sword'. In the 2016-2017 survey for this article, participants identified "violence and revolution" as current methods of Islamic propagation in Nigeria, courtesy of Boko Haram which has ravaged the nation since 2009, killed thousands of non-Muslims and destroyed Christian symbols in the bid to wipe out Christianity in Northern and North-central Nigeria (Onapajo & Usman, 2015). It remains a puzzle to many that the religion of peace has robbed the nation of peace to an unprecedented degree since 2009.

Another factor undermining the spread of Islam in Igboland is the unfriendly attitude enjoined of Muslims against Christians in particular. Qur'ān 5:52 reads:

O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. And whoso among you takes them for friends is indeed one of them. Allah guides not the unjust people.

According to the Islamic scholar, Abdul Saleeb (2003), when Muslims engage in violence, murder, and other acts of terrorism, they can legitimately claim that they are following the commands of God as found in the Qur'ān and the examples of Islam's prophet and his teachings.

Generations of Igbo consider unfriendly injunctions in the Qur'ān and the Hadith to be responsible for Muslim hostility to non-Muslims, especially Christianity, exemplified in Nigeria over several decades and currently symbolized by Boko Haram since 2009. An elderly Igbo Muslim, then the Enugu State Muslim Public Relations Officer, had in 2003 remarked about the Igbo and Islam, six years before the rise of Boko Haram: "The Igbo believe that if one joins Islam, he would be killed. If he is not killed, he would be made a killer. The Igbo man does not want to be a killer and he does not want to kill" (Uchendu, 2011, p. 211). In 2006, a non-Muslim Igbo from Ikwerre, noted: "Islam is good but the only area I do not agree with them is that they like fighting and shedding blood unnecessarily and believe it is not evil" (Uchendu, 2011, p. 212). The anti-bloodshed sentiment is widespread and became profound following the rise of Boko Haram. By way of sectional conclusion, however, Bowen (2012) reminds us that Islam should "be seen as a set of processes and practices, texts and interpretations, that were constantly in conflict with, and also adapted to, culturally specific ways of living and thinking around the globe" (p. 9).

Other Religions of the Igbo

There are a variety of other religions that are found in Igboland and practiced also by the Igbo in the diaspora, which do not fall within the liturgical delineations of the preceding three religions discussed. Chief in this category is Judaism, which is closely related to Christianity and Islam; and together with them constitutes the world's major religions. Miles (2011) estimated the population of Igbo Jewish community at between 3000 and 5000 members. A recent survey by

this author situates them at “not less than one million.” This figure¹⁴ according to Apostle J. Mbanugo of the Messiah Practical Sabbath Assembly, Nsukka (personal communication, 2023, April 26), comprises all those who “adhere to the Sabbath worship and identify as Jews.” This excludes the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) who do not identify as Jews, do not regard themselves as a branch of Judaism and upholds the doctrine of salvation through Christ.

Besides cutting a distinct religious identity as Igbo Jews, non-SDA Sabbatarians in Igboland espouse the cultural affinity between Israel and the Igbo (T. Okoro, personal communication, 2016, November 30; U. J. Azuh, personal communication, 2023, April 26). A major Igbo Jewish congregation is the Community of Hashem Worldwide (CHW) with headquarters at Nnobi, Anambra State. The CHW website describes the group as follows:

We are a pro-Jewish religious organization founded upon the principles of sound biblical doctrine. Its mission is to assemble God’s people in the diaspora, sanctified and re-covenanted to Hashem by the Salvaging power of the Messiah. We believe that every sinner can attain salvation by rejecting his sins, confessing them and taking up a daily living governed by the Torah and the faith of Yahshua the Messiah. Every biblical year we observe the appointed times of God Almighty and all the commanded rites. Being reconciled to The Father, we live deeply by observing God's unchangeable laws believing that through grace, the just – who endeavors to keep God’s laws – shall live by faith. (The Community of Hashem Worldwide, 2022)

The CHW, founded in 1955 by Ben Aaron Michael Nwobi Amagunze, popularly called Musa, was originally known as ‘Holy Sabbath Mission’. The name change was informed by a desire to isolate itself from tradition-based groups that adopted the word ‘Sabbath’ in their nomenclature. As my interviewee explained: native doctors began to use the word Sabbath in their names, thus giving them an unsavory image. Following a directive from Israel, they changed first to the Community of Yahweh Worldwide and subsequently to the Community of Hashem Worldwide. C. E. Amakaeze BEN AARON inherited the office of High Priest and General Overseers of CHW from his father following his death in 1995. CHW is the most populous Sabbath congregation in Igboland with branches all over the Southeast and beyond, as well as in countries outside Nigeria.

¹⁴ Apostle Mbanugo maintains that their numbers are uninfluenced by the IPOB movement in the region.

Figure 2

Author's Screenshot of a CHW Livestream on September 29, 2018



Jewish belief in a single, all-powerful God made them unique among other ancient Semitic peoples. This legacy was first passed on to the Western world and subsequently to the Islamic world. God's name in Hebrew, YHWH, simply and significantly means "I am". Judaism is not known to have any creed. However, the thirteen Articles of the Jewish Faith propounded by a 12th-century rabbi, Maimonides, and adhered to by most Jews serve as a summary of core Jewish beliefs. They are as follows:

- God exists
- God is one and unique
- God is incorporeal
- God is eternal
- Prayer is to God only
- The prophets spoke truth
- Moses was the greatest of the prophets
- The Written and Oral Torah were given to Moses
- There will be no other Torah
- God knows the thoughts and deeds of men
- God will reward the good and punish the wicked
- The Messiah will come
- The dead will be resurrected (CHW, 2022).

A significant feature of Judaism, which distinguishes it from Christianity, is the expectation of the Messiah. In this, Judaism resembles Islam, which is also still expecting its Messiah, the Mahdi. To Christians, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came over two thousand years ago and is being expected for the second and last time.

Religious practices of Igbo Jews include circumcision eight days after the birth of a male child, observance of kosher dietary laws, separation of men and women during menstruation,

wearing of the tallit and Kippah, and the celebration of holidays such as Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, and Purim (Afsai, 2013). A pilgrimage to Israel is a desirable practice for members of CHW who could afford it. The Sabbath groups have structures that coordinate their activities and priestly training. One of these is the Nigerian Council of Sabbath Churches, which began to ordain Sabbath religious leaders as far back as 1995 or earlier. The CHW variant of a theological institute is the Community of Hashem Theological Academy (CHTA) situated at Enugu (B. Mbanefo, personal communication, 2023, April 27). ‘Apostle’ (symbolizing teacher, rabbi, or leader) is the most popular appellation of Sabbath Church leaders or founders. Ordination occurs after an unspecified period of apprenticeship-like training under an established leader. So much have changed within the Sabbath milieu since Miles (2011) observed that in the absence of trained and bona fide local rabbis, Igbo Jews are Internet Jews most of who connect to the greater Jewish world of learning through the Internet. The current study reveals instead that CHW provides a platform for those Igbo who desire to connect with Israeli Judaism. Otherwise, the many Sabbath churches that dot the Igbo landscape suffice for the generality of curious seekers.

Outside Judaism, other religions practiced in Igboland differ in their levels of mysticism and application of science. Their identification in this paper as religions is based on their compliance with some characteristics of a religious community such as ‘sacred writings, religious professionals, the possibility of conversion, cosmologies, and moral codes’ among others. They include some variants of Christianity such as Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, more popularly known as OOO (derived from the initials of the founder, Olumba Olumba Obu), Celestial Church, Cherubim and Seraphim, Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW) and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons).¹⁵ Besides them are small congregations of Hare Krishna, Guru Maharajji, Baha’i faith and quasi-spiritual orders such as Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (commonly known by its abbreviation ‘AMORC’ or the Rosicrucian Order¹⁶), Grail Movement and Eckankar, among others.

While AMORC was among the earliest, already existing by 1941, most others were introduced in Igboland after the 1970s. Excluding OOO, Celestial Church, Cherubim and Seraphim and Jehovah’s Witnesses which regard themselves as Christian or extensions of Christianity, subscribers of AMORC, Grail Movement and Eckankar either practice their faith alongside mainstream Christianity, the dominant belief system of the Igbo, or exclusively, identifying fully and solely with these organizations. These other religions command less than one per cent of the Igbo population.

Before the Nigerian civil war (i.e., Nigeria-Biafra War), the Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW) had been established in Igboland. Currently, they are among the popular non-mainstream religious groups that dot the Igbo landscape. JW identifies as “a millenarian restorationist Christian denomination with nontrinitarian beliefs distinct from mainstream Christianity” (Pew Research Forum, 2015). Other beliefs of JW, according to *The Watchtower*, the official organ for sharing JW Beliefs, include:

¹⁵ Both the founder of Jehovah’s Witnesses and the founding prophet of Mormonism, John Taylor, were listed members of the Illuminati sect. See www.illuminatirex.com (accessed 2016, December 12).

¹⁶ Described themselves thus: “The Rosicrucian teachings allow individuals to direct their own lives, experience inner peace and leave their mark on humanity. It is for this reason that we urge our members to remain committed to the investigation, study, and practical application of all natural and spiritual laws for the attainment of Health, Happiness and Peace to the glory of God, the betterment of humanity and the evolution of the soul personality.” From <http://www.amorcigeria.org/aboutus.html> (accessed 2016, December 8).

- Jesus did not rise physically from the dead and is not divine.
- Michael, the archangel, is none other than Jesus Christ himself.
- There's no hell. There's heaven, where God exists. The doctrine of a burning hell where the wicked are tortured eternally after death is not true. Those judged unrighteous will not be tormented but will die and cease to exist.
- The Second Coming of Christ had already happened. Jesus returned invisibly in 1914 and started to rule also invisibly from the Watchtower organisation.
- To go to heaven, follow the dictates of Jehovah as laid out by the Watchtower organisation ("Way of the Master", 2021).

These are by no means all that JW theology proposes. A personal narrative that both buttresses these views and draws attention to others reads:

I was baptized by [JW] in 1970. I believed in God, but I didn't believe that Jesus Christ was God. I believed Jesus Christ was a god created by the true God. I didn't believe in life after death much less that there was a conscious spirit that would leave the body when one died. I didn't believe in any kind of miracle healing nor believed that God would communicate with people through visions or dreams. I believed that all kinds of healing, miracles and visions were the work of the devil. I was very loyal to these Jehovah's Witness teachings, and nobody could convince me of the contrary. ("The Near Death Experience", 2016)

Popular sights on streets in Igboland, on Saturdays and Sundays, are groups of 'Witnesses' sharing tracts, teaching JW doctrine, and seeking members. Occasionally they are found on weekdays. Within the last two decades, Mormons began to compete with JW on weekdays' street evangelism.

In 2004, OOO published its two-volume scripture called *The Everlasting Gospel*. The OOO community upheld, until his death, their founder and leader, Olumba Olumba Obu, as "the Eternal Father, Supernatural Teacher and Sole Spiritual Head of the Universe." To them, he embodied the person of Christ, but at death assumed the person of the Holy Spirit (M. Ime, personal communication, 2016, July 8). Before OOO's death, in 2000, he relinquished the position of Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, to his successor and son. On the dedication page in *The Everlasting Gospel* (Volume 2) is written:

This Holy Book is dedicated to our Lord Jesus Christ who willingly carried the sins of the entire world to the Cross, suffered the shame and pain, and died for the sake of man and his salvation. Christ is the foundation of our joy and peace and without Him today would not have been. Now He is in our midst never to die again. He is love personified, The Lamb of God, The first begotten Son of God, Crowned before the world was, as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, of whom the Father our Creator glorified in all His Everlasting Gospels, Lectures and Briefs Forever lives and reigns the King of glory His Holiness King Olumba Olumba Obu, the King of kings and Lord of lords. (The Everlasting Gospel, 2004)

Besides a theology adapted from Christianity, OOO's doctrine was described by one of its members in 2014 "as a bridge between Christianity and Islam." He noted the similarities as

follows: “in OOO, we greet ‘Peace O, Peace be unto you’. The other person will respond: ‘Perfect peace’. This is similar to ‘Asallamualikum’ and ‘Mualikumsaalam’. While BSC claims that ‘OOO is the last hope of man, Muslims say Prophet Muhammad was the last Prophet’” (M. Ime, personal communication, 2016, July 8). By 2015, OOO had initiated religious cooperation with some Muslim communities based on these commonalities. My interviewee reported that these commonalities led to his conversion to Islam.

Eckankar is another new religious movement on the Igbo landscape. Founded in 1965 by Paul Twitchell, it is anchored on a nineteenth-century Indian tradition called Sant Mat that centers on ‘surat Shabd yoga’ (yoga of the sound current). Eckankar focuses on spiritual exercises chief of which is the singing of HU, their love song to God, which enables them to experience the Light and Sound of God and recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Regional Eck Spiritual Aide, also the national leader of Eckankar-Nigeria since 2013, who incidentally is Igbo—Ifeatu Areh—explained Eckankar to mean “Co-worker with God” (Ossai, 2016, p. 22).

‘ECK’ and ‘Audible Life Current’ are alternative names for the Holy Spirit, the Life Force, or the Light and Sound of God. Through direct personal spiritual experiences like soul travel, dreams and other spiritual techniques, members find their way back to God and help others to do the same. Their spiritual exercises are believed to unlock the kingdom of God. Eckankar’s teachings concentrate on physical and spiritual techniques that enable the soul to travel beyond the physical limitations of the body to the higher spiritual realms of the ‘Sugmad’—the formless, all-embracing, impersonal, and infinite equivalent of God in theistic religions. Other teachings of the group are the eternity of souls, the unfolding of the human spirit through karma and reincarnation, and that the human soul is on the journey of self and divine realization.

There are a few personal requirements to be an ‘ECKist’. Besides the daily singing of HU, members are encouraged to create their own spiritual exercises. There are no dietary requirements, taboos, or enforced ascetic practices and they are also not required to leave their current religion for Eckankar. ECKists celebrate a spiritual new year every 22 October. Among the ceremonies an ECKist will experience in his lifetime are: a consecration ceremony for initiating the beginner and infants, a rite of passage into adulthood (around age 13), a wedding ceremony and a memorial service. Eckankar Igboland headquarters is situated in Rumuigbo, Ikwerre, Port Harcourt.

Functions of Religious Adherence for the Igbo

The Igbo have a small number of persons to whom religion has no meaning. For the overwhelming majority, however, religion plays important roles, some of which will be mentioned here. One of these is as the source of law and order in society. Igbo indigenous religion, for instance, had since primordial times ensured order and peaceful coexistence. Its teachings were the basis for the un-codified system of conduct called omenani, which was in operation in Igboland long before the introduction, during the colonial period, of the Western legal system; itself based largely on Christian teachings. Although the Western legal system was foisted on Igboland, it did not annul the people’s recourse to omenani. The latter has continued to be applied alongside the Western version and is even preferred by some Igbo, right until the present. This same value is evident in Islam whose rules for daily living and social relationships are based on the Sharia, much of which is drawn from the Qur’ān and the Hadith.

A second function of the religions existing in Igboland is the embedding of moral codes. Although their prescriptions differ from one religion to another, altogether they made governance and communal management possible over many centuries. The two oldest religions in the Igbo landscape served well as sources of entertainment. The traditional masquerade festivals, burials and other religious-tied celebrations enlivened communal life and enhanced communal cohesion. In like manner, the Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas continue to provide much entertainment for the community.

Igbo worshippers enjoy a sense of belonging to whatever religious community they subscribe to. The need to belong and to be accepted within a specific religious group was often at the root of religious switches or reconversions since the 1850s. To illustrate: the Igbo indigenous religion ostracised some members of the society, namely the *osu*; these in turn found acceptance and a community in the newly introduced Christian Churches. In some cases, they formed the core of the Igbo converts to Christianity during its early days. Subsequent religious switches can be understood from this search to belong to a religious group that satisfies the expectations of the intending member.

To a large extent, the Christian teaching confronted and forced the abandonment of many superstitious and inhuman acts accepted in the traditional religion such as the killing of twins, the abandonment to death in an evil forest of persons suffering from diseases that native doctors had no cure for such as scrotal elephantiasis. Igbo indigenous religion was particularly useful in providing employment for the traditional society. Local diviners, priests, and other ritual specialists both earned a living from their functions in the traditional religion alongside their self-employment as farmers, traders, or craftsmen. Christian and Muslim clerical elite, as well as those of other religious groups in Igboland, have all benefitted from their religious callings. Their non-clerical class have also benefitted as most Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other worship centers today offer employment to individuals, prioritizing their members.

Conclusion

Religion, the practice of worship, embeds belief in the supernatural. Most human beings need an anchor that transcends the temporal for everyday living. Some find that anchor in religion. Since the twentieth century, the world has witnessed a greater degree of fashioning of new religions with the result that men devised new religious practices for themselves that are both derivations from older established religions or entirely new formulations.

Thus, there will always be a religion that would appeal to one person or another. As this trend continues, the Igbo may find themselves diversifying further to new religious practices beyond what is discussed in this paper and confronting the world from the perspectives of their preferred religion. The evident harmony in inter-religious relations in the study area remains desirable.

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