Authenticity of Belief in African (Igbo) Traditional Religion

A Critical Appraisal in the Light of Christian Faith
General Introduction

The research work “The Authenticity of Belief in African (Igbo) Traditional Religion – A Critical Appraisal in the Light of Christian Faith”, presents the belief of the traditional religions in Africa especially in Igboland. “Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the creator and of a spiritual world. The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these people, as is also the need for rites of purification and expiation.”

These religious senses help the people in their approach to God the creator and giver of life. In a bid to address these religions many writers, like Aylward Shorter, John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Emejie Ikenga-Metuh, have written extensively about them. Some authors use traditional religions – plural, while others in singular. Are these people speaking about the same religion? This work will throw some light into that. The religions in Africa before the advent of Christianity and Islam are not the same as we see them today. Today, Christianity and Islam have swept aside these religions and institute their different religious tenets. What exist now sometimes lack relevance among the people, because some conceive them as pagan, archaic and devilish.

The basic reason for religion is to reunite humanity to God. It therefore plays a vital role by trying to bring human image, dignity, personality and identity back to God. It also shapes the patterns of human behaviours, values and attitudes in the society. It has great influence on human being. It plays a great role in the reconciliation of human beings with God and gives theological answers to these basic questions of life: How did the world come into existence? Who is the source of life? Why the creation of the world and human being? What is the essence of human life, death, judgement and retribution? What does God expect from human being and where is human being’s final destination? Is there any reward or punishment after life? Is God immanent or transcendent? Did God create the world to be good? Or can we say that evil and death came into the world through human disobedience? Is God interested in humanity by involving Himself in human sufferings and anxieties or has He distanced Himself from the world after creation? What is the ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: where do

---

1 John Paul II, Ecclesia in Africa, 42.
2 Wilfred, The Swing and Sway of the Bamboo, 75.
we come from, and where are we going? These are the questions religions answer and African religions give answer to these ultimate questions.

Religion as a natural phenomenon in Africa is found in every tradition. There is no tradition without religion and it influences one who is born into it. To be without religion amounts to self-banning from the society because it involves the daily activities of human beings. Sometimes the religion one practices can influence the other either through conviction or compulsion (this is with regard to Christianity and Islam). One is converted to other religion through either conviction or compulsion. The question is: is Africans convinced to abandon their religions or compelled to abandon them?

The Abrahamic monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) we shall discuss have great connection with and influence from African continent. Moses the man who led the Israelites out of slavery and received the Torah on Mount Sinai was born, raised and educated in Africa, in the Egyptian royal court and its divine mysteries. Judaism and its priesthood have their origin from Africa. In Judaism, like in African religions, the duties of the priests are to offer sacrifices, perform the purification of rites of uncleanness, teach moral and social laws, arbitrate between individuals, and act as medical practitioners and fortune-tellings. Moses learnt the religion in Egypt, and passed on to the Western world through the Mosaic books, law and the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes people will argue against old Egyptian religion in comparison with the religions found in Africa. Some will say that the religion was not African. But if it is not African, where then can we attribute it since Egypt is in Africa, and remains in the map of Africa?

Africa has been a place of refuge for Christianity and Islam. Christianity inherited a lot from religions in African through Judaism. The continent was a place of refuge for the new born child Jesus when King Herod wanted to kill him (Matt.2:1–21). It is described as a second homeland of Jesus since it was there that he sought refuge from Herod's cruelty. Africans were also there on the Pentecost day, when the church was first proclaimed (Acts 2:15–13). In Islam, Mohammad had direct contact with Africa and when his followers were persecuted, he sent

---

3 C.f., Nostra Aetate, No. 1, Human beings expect answers from various religions about the unsolved riddles of human conditions which deeply stir the hearts of men: what is man? What is the meaning, the aim of life? What is moral good, what is sin? What is suffering and the purpose it serves? Where is the road to true happiness? What is death, judgement and retribution after death and where is the last human abode?


6 John Paul II, Ecclesia in Africa, 142.
them to Kusch (Ethiopia) for 15 years until conditions at home had improved. This relationship was the reason Mohammad did not attack Kursch when his army conquered Palestine, Egypt and North Africa.\textsuperscript{7} These monotheistic religions later influenced Africans so much that the traditional religions of the people are heading to extinction. The people are now at the cross road because they neither live their traditional religions nor Judaism, Christianity or Islam convincingly. With this development, the religion in Igboland is so much influenced by Christianity that everything tends to look forward Christ and the Western culture, thereby setting aside the traditions of the people.

The advent of Christianity in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century in Igboland was so closely linked with colonialism. The colonial masters and the European merchants came first and later came the missionaries. They came along with the Western culture, and their views regarding the local people and their land were identical. This made it difficult for the Christian faith to be deeply rooted in the lives of the people because they were interested not only in imparting the religion, but also in plundering the wealth of the people. There was a story that: “The white missionaries came to us and we lovingly welcomed them in our land, and they said, ‘close your eyes, and let us pray,’ and when we opened our eyes, there was a Bible in our hands, but our lands were all gone.”\textsuperscript{8} They threw away the symbol of justice (\textit{Ofo}) of the people and gave them the Bible. Since then, there has never been peace. The Bible has sometimes become a cause of war against one another and against the traditions of the people. With this mentality of the Bible and approach to life issues, the community love, peace and unity that were in the community were gone because of the new religions, is this the aim of religions?

The people followed another religion to the detriment of their tradition. There was neither conviction nor dialogue as regards the faith that was propagated by the missionaries. The people swallowed the teachings of the new religion; hook, line and sinker, but their unquestionable acceptance postponed the day of reckoning when African theologians will rise up to demand a redress or redefinition of Christian theology.\textsuperscript{9} Africans have become conscious of the religions they have abandoned, only to realize that, they have picked up the tradition of the Europeans. They have started asking why they should abandon the religions of their ancestors to follow the religions that condemn their tradition. They have started asking why they should condemn their ancestors because they did not know Christ and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{7} Twesigye, The African Origin of Human, Monotheism and Civilization, 26f.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{9} Odey, Africa, The Agony of a Continent, 35.
\end{flushright}
venerate Christian ancestors who are the Saints and the Martyrs. They have started asking why they should condemn some of the positive values found in their tradition, because Europeans could not understand them. They have started asking many questions which they did not have the courage to ask when they first received the Gospel of Christ. Christianity is good but the problem is, some missionaries had condemned everything they did not understand and had expected the people to follow them without questioning. Is this not religious slavery or terrorism? Christianity should incarnate itself into the culture of the people. Every incarnation ought to be understandable to the people and their ways of living. God can only appear to the black people through their traditions.

The Igbo people of Nigeria worship Chukwu (the Supreme God) in the way that is related to their tradition and culture. For Christ to be relevant to them, he needs to be associated with Chukwu who took the human form in order to bring the people closer to Chukwu. In the worship of Chukwu in Igbo traditional religion, the community gathers to express their joy, grief and praise to God, acknowledging their dependence on Him and pray for forgiveness. They do these through their rituals. Through rituals the community interacts with God. The essence of worship is to have religious experience. This experience contains an element of renewal. Experience is the key to renewal; without it, the community and the individual cannot turn to Chukwu. Chukwu is experienced by the people in a unique way. It is through experience that one reacts and responds to God, like Thomas confronted with the risen Lord (John 20) or Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Liturgy in African context will therefore be relevant only when it expresses the experience of African people. Yet the historical churches of Africa have tended to use forms of liturgy produced in Europe and North America in their liturgical worship and are therefore lacking the vitality of African spirituality. God ought to be worshiped in the tradition that influences the people.

God for the Igbo is a loving Father, who takes care of His people and provides for them. He is not a God of war or vengeance, rather He punishes when the people offend Him and He shows mercy when the people offer appropriate sacrifices. It is certain that, if we worship a warmongering God, we become warmongerers. If we worship a loving and forgiving God, we become loving and forgiving. If our image of God is that of self-righteousness, who would punish with eternal fire those who disobey God’s commands, then we would feel justified in being intolerant and punishing those who in our opinions are against us or even only different

10 Bakare, The Drumbeat of Life, 5.
from us. The God the people worship is loving and caring, and the people are loving, caring, hospitable, friendly, faithful and happy. They are forgiven people, the experience of the Nigerian – Biafran war proves this, because after the war, many of the Igbos went back to those places and started relating normally by going about their normal businesses without calling the past to mind. So the God they worship influences them positively.

In Igbo traditional religion, God is one and there is no other. The religion is monotheistic, propounding only one God. But do they worship the same God which the Jews, the Christians and the Moslems worship? One can talk about different approaches to God through religions, but He remains the same. Hence, God is like one large tree with different branches that represent the religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, African traditional religions and so on. These branches are part of the same tree of God. They all speak about God from different perspectives. God is the same, but the approach to Him differs from one religion to another.

For an African, God can be worshipped everywhere, a market place can be a place of worship, bearing each other’s burden and enjoying life together. Every social gathering has religious undertone and such cannot begin without first calling on the name of God. These are the expressions of faith that help to keep the people together and communicate with their God.

**The Aim of this Work**

This work aims to promote the good things, spiritual and moral as well as the socio-cultural values found among the Igbo people, how they experience the Supreme Being and how religion permeates into their lives. This experience shows that there is authentic belief in Igbo traditional religion before the coming of the missionaries. The missionaries met a people that believe in Supreme Deity known as Chukwu, whose essence and existence is beyond human comprehension. He

---

11 Rasiah, Asia in Dialogue with Jesus Christ, 78.
12 After the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966, there was riot in the North that resulted in the death of many Igbo people living in Northern Nigeria. The situation led to the secession of Igbo from Nigeria and declared independence of Biafra. This resulted into Nigerian – Biafran war from 1967–1970. In this war, Nigeria with the help of many Western nations fought against Biafra (Igbo). In the end, Biafra lost the war and many of their properties were seized or regarded as abandoned properties. They suffered during these periods.
13 Healey and Sybertz, Toward an African Narrative Theology, 295f.
is the God whose existence is unfathomable. His identification with the believers led to what is known as African spirituality. African spirituality has God at the centre of religious worship, moves around the person and the community. God is transcendent and at the same time immanent. He is all powerful, all knowing, and ever-present and He responds to prayers. By praying to God, a religious person believes that human being can influence his situation.\(^{14}\) Praying to God with personal effort is necessary in African spirituality.

African spirituality conceives God as the Being who is far removed from the people. Because of His transcendent nature, there is need for intermediaries between Him and the people. These are the lesser deities and ancestral spirits. In some communities, ancestral veneration is more regular than the divine worship. God is usually approached only as a last resort in extreme cases. This attitude might have been more frequent in former times, as is shown by the information of early ethnographers and the widespread myths of a *Deus otiosus* or *remotus* (the far removed God): the one who retired to heaven after some human misdeed or the one who is not affected by what is happening in the world. But it would be incorrect today to characterize the African God as a ‘do-nothing’ or ‘withdrawn’ God.\(^{15}\) He can be seen as the God who is mediated with His people through His intermediaries known as the deities: the spiritual entities and the ancestors.

The God that Africans worship is the One God who is revealed in different ways to various religions of the world. He reveals Himself to the people in a unique way. This work is not a call, for the Igbo people to return to pre-Christian era, but to reconsider the peoples approach to the traditions which the Gospel message of Christ ought to incarnate itself into the culture of the people. Christianity has no problem with African culture and social values, but some missionaries did have problem with them. This work will help us to see Christianity as a religion that comes not to dominate and assimilate or annihilate the traditions of the people, but a religion that comes to help the people to see the fulfillment of Christ’s message in the religions and the traditions of other people. It will help us to see Christianity as a religion that will help to reveal the positive aspects of other religions. Hence “The greatest good we can do to others is not just to share our riches with them but to reveal their riches to themselves.”\(^{16}\) The greatest good Christianity can do to Africans is to help them to see the positive light of their cultures through the

\[^{16}\] Healey, A Fifth Gospel, xi.
propagation of the theology from below, through proper inculturation or incarna-
tion and not theology from above through imposition.

The work is divided into six chapters. In chapter one, religion and the concepts
associated with religion are examined. When we talk about religion; belief, faith
and tradition have to come in. They give relevance to religion. They are discussed
in a unique way. The German language has the same word for faith and belief
(Glaube). The English language has a clear cut distinction between the two. Faith
is seen as absolute trust while belief is seen as opinion that can be changed. Belief
is a step towards faith. It has to do with human reasoning, while faith has to do with
the supernatural conviction and trust. The former has to do with the natural, while
the latter has to do with the supernatural. Belief leads to faith and faith is the height
that human reasoning cannot reach. Belief can also be scientific. Every scientific
truth has a process to arrive at its final destination. It is always subject to change or
alteration. Faith is a thing of the heart, a total conviction and acceptance of the truth
that is based not on evidence of fact, but on the supernatural revelation. But belief
has to do with the mental state of assurance or conviction, and the attitude of the
mind towards its own experience in which it accepts and endorses as having real or
significant values. There is no religion without faith and belief and they point to the
direction of every believing community. Hence every religion comprises the beliefs
and the practices of a given community or a number of communities.¹⁷

All religions have traditions that are interpreted by those who practice them.
Tradition is the handing over of the values of the people; it comprises both verbal
and non-verbal. The verbal tradition explains the non-verbal tradition. The non-verbal tradition comprises of the arts, gestures, signs, monuments, customs and
designs. The verbal tradition is oral and can also be written down. Initially, the
absence of the art of writing made it necessary in African traditional religions to
employ oral tradition as a means of preserving and transmitting their cherished
traditional religious beliefs and practices. Forms of oral traditions include: myths,
legends, folklore, proverbs, names, riddles, prayers and formulae of invocations,
blessings and curses.¹⁸ The handing over of the traditions can be the activities of the
visual aid and signs as well as instructions and directives. But the use of language
is of great importance. Oral tradition is essentially and fundamentally dependent
on words and other forms of verbal expressions.¹⁹ The religious traditions of the
people are transmitted verbally and non-verbally.

---

¹⁷ Ikenga-Metuh, Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions, 14.
¹⁸ Ibid., 30.
¹⁹ Ojoajogwu, Social and Cultural Identity of an African Society, 35.
In the second chapter, the Abrahamic monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are treated. Judaism is the oldest of the three monotheistic religions. It was instituted and founded on Mount Sinai, but the religion is traced to the Israelites’ ancestor Abraham. Abraham was not a monotheist, but rather a henotheist. He was born in a polytheistic culture, but after his call, he worshiped the true God who made the heaven and the earth. He worshiped God without religion because what constitute religion are the law and the priesthood. These were fulfilled in Judaism not during the life of Abraham, but during the time of Moses. Judaism as we have it today was not practiced by Abraham, but was instituted by Moses. In the beginning of the encounter between God and Abraham, God made covenant with him and the sign was circumcision. It was the rite of the Jewish initiation, but the fulfillment of the Torah received on Mount Sinai implies closeness with God and chosenness by God. One who wants to join Judaism has to be part of this covenantal relationship and be committed to the Torah. From Judaism springs Christianity.

Christianity is the fulfillment of the Old Testament law in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He is the word incarnate that was with God from the beginning and through whom all things were made. He existed with the Father from eternity (Jn.1:1–18). The Christian movement started on Pentecost day with the inaugural public preaching of the apostles, which attracted a lot of followers. Jesus came, preached the Gospel of the kingdom of God, healed the sick, cast out demons and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist before his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. He handed over the task of preaching the Gospel to his disciples. He is the second person of the Blessed Trinity. The New Testament was written after his death. The Christian sacred book is known as the Bible.

The Islamic religion was founded by Mohammad. He is regarded by his followers as the seal of all the Prophets. He had a strict notion of monotheism. For him, God cannot be represented in any way or any form. He saw his mission in restoring the monotheistic religion that was distorted by the Jews and the Christians. The greatest source in Islamic religion is the Qur’an which is the sacred book of the Moslems. It is not like the Jewish sacred book: Torah nor the Christian sacred book: the Bible. These two sacred books are not written by the same author, but rather by different authors in different epochs. The Qur’an is rather believed to be a revelation made to Mohammad within the period of 23 years. This revelation has become the way of life of the Moslems. The five pillars of Islam are: Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Ramadan and Al-Haji. They are necessary in the life of every Moslem.

Chapter three deals with African traditional religions, their origins and whether they should be called African traditional religion in singular or religions in plural.
The religions are written in the hearts of the people. They are the religions not handwritten or printed, but recorded in the oral traditions and the memories of the ethnic groups. They are held together by the drums. The people hear the drums and they instill pride and fear to them and the ancestors speak through them.\(^{20}\) This becomes a means of communication between God and the people. The work is narrowed down to the Igbo people of Nigeria. Their world view that is based on the ontological existence of the two world views: the material and the immaterial world are discussed. African traditional religions are monotheistic in reality but polytheistic in outlook. Can one say that African traditional religions are monotheistic or polytheistic or even pantheistic? Is Igbo traditional religion really monotheistic?

In the fourth chapter, the human intermediaries are discussed. They mediate between the deities and the people through the offering of the worship. Worship is the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, beliefs and participation in religious activities are generally constituent elements of religions.\(^{21}\) Through worship, human being expresses submission to God and approaches Him with reverence. It is presented to God through offerings of sacrifices and prayers. In prayer one addresses the divinity with precision and courtesy, by formal titles and by rehearsal of its power and attribute. Through prayers one communicates with God and it discourages excessive pre-occupation of self or excessive dependence on others to meet ones personal needs.\(^{22}\) Human being expresses its insufficiencies to God through prayers.

The chapter five presents some ethical, social and cultural values in African traditional religions. These values are practiced in the community and they promote community loyalty and solidarity. Solidarity is the outcome of group welfare and it is founded on the over-ridding norms of mutual reciprocity, functional interdependence and co-operation, intense informal and close inter-personal contact, and collective responsibility on which hinges on the security and the survival of the individual.\(^{23}\) One has to be united with the community for the realization of the common goal and without the community, one loses ones identity. The individual identity cannot be over-emphasized at the expense of the community identity.\(^{24}\) The individual authentic life is realized in the community and it gives the individual the personality, identity and security. The people find security within the

\(^{20}\) Fisher, West African Religious Traditions, 35.
\(^{21}\) Rasiah, Asia in Dialogue with Jesus Christ, 76.
\(^{22}\) Koenig, et al., A Handbook of Religion and Health, 225.
\(^{23}\) Okoro, The Communal Dimension of Igbo World-view, 84.
\(^{24}\) Onwubiko, Missionary Ecclesiology: An Introduction, 23.
community. In cases where individuals have been detached from the communities of their homeland, they very often manage to create a new community where they live.\textsuperscript{25} The people need each other to authenticate their humanity. Hence human life without the other is valueless and baseless.

For the Africans, the power of life and vitality are pivotal and religion is not separated from life. Religion functions to make life meaningful, maintain and protect it against illness, misfortune, enemies and death. The whole world is viewed as an arena of forces, affecting life for good or for bad. The people believe in the powers that control and bestow life and vitality: ancestors, spirits, magic, witchcraft, and the Supreme Being. At the centre of these powers, the human person tries to placate the powers for human well being and happiness.\textsuperscript{26} God is always at the centre irrespective of other deities. He supplies for the need of the people and the people placate Him through other deities in order to have rest of mind.

African spirituality abides on human beings conscientized in the world that moves toward death. It is the continuity of life. No sense of irrevocability and uniqueness determines the ideas about life and how to organise it, instead, the concepts of continuity and unity with the ancestors bring relief when one thinks about death. For the Africans, death has meaning and death with meaning is durable, ongoing form and informing on the life of the living. The dead are spirits and these spirits are the instructors and guardians of the living.\textsuperscript{27} Through death one transcends the level of material and acquires the supernatural power to look into the minds of the future by helping the living or receiving offerings from them as the ancestors.

The most favourable expectancy of human being after death is the attainment of the status of an ancestor with its concomitants enhanced powers. In spite of the interruption of the biological phenomenon of death, the present life and death are in one continuous stretch of life. The material and the spiritual are interconnected. The line dividing life from death is very thin. Life is a gift from God and death brings about a complete reordering of human relationship with God. The most loathsome expectation in the after-life is to end up a wandering spirit, cut off from the community and communion with one’s family and kinship. Death is always welcome from God (though sometimes with mixed feelings). Death at old age is seen as natural and a blessing. But the death of a young person remains a curse. After death what survives is the ‘personality spirit’. It is this spirit that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Shorter, African Christian Theology, 122f.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Verstraelen, Ghana, West Africa: Between Tradition and Modern, 74f.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Boulaga, Christianity Without Fetishes, 82.
\end{itemize}
receives reward or punishment: installed as the ancestor or ends up as a wondering ghost.\textsuperscript{28} Appropriate funeral rites at burial are necessary for one to be accepted as the ancestor.

The last chapter “Critical Appraisal of Igbo traditional religion in the light of Christian faith” discusses both the positive and the negative impacts of Christianity in Igboland. It states that one thing necessary for the growth of Christianity in Igboland is the incarnation or inculturation of the Gospel into the lives and the culture of the people; otherwise Christianity will always be foreign to them. When Christianity is foreign to the people and their tradition, the people will not have good understanding of what the Christian faith is all about and this can lead to syncretism. This misunderstanding had led many people across the road of religious confusion and they cannot be real either to Christ or to the traditions of their ancestors. The enfleshment of the Gospel of Christ through inculturation is necessary. It is the initiation of the word of God and the spirit behind the word in African world and culture, thus becoming indigenous.\textsuperscript{29} The hierarchy of the church and the people have to work together in order to actualize this. The presence of the church is to direct and not to dictate for the people.

In this inculturation, the central message of Christ or the Christian identity ought not to be inculturated because the Christian identity remains binding on all who call themselves Christians, regardless of race, class, sex or socio-cultural and geographical locations. The basic Christian identity is not negotiable, because it is given by the one who provides the identity for all Christians and he is Christ. It is only Christ who determines the basic identity of the Christians.\textsuperscript{30} He determines what the identity of Christianity ought to be. He is the source and the heart of Christian religion. One becomes a member through baptism. The chapter offers also theological explanation of ancestral veneration and the breaking of Kola Nut. It is used as a sign of welcome and for the invocation of the spirits of the ancestors. It is also good and revealing to see how some of the cultural and traditional lives of the people tally with some Biblical narratives, Christian virtues and the sacraments of the church.

\textsuperscript{28} Ikenga-Metuh, Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions, 264f.
\textsuperscript{29} Odoemena, The Quest of the African Person, 113.
\textsuperscript{30} Okure, Christian Identity and the Challenge of Authenticity, 180.