

## **AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THE SUCCESS OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE: A HISTORICAL ENQUIRY**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines African traditional religion and the success of the Christian missionary endeavors: a historical enquiry. This study collected primary data from interviews and the secondary data from review of literatures in journal, articles, textbook and internet. The sub literatures of this study were analyzed using content analysis method. The study found that African traditions were expressed through folk tales, songs, festivals, beliefs in spirit beings, higher and lower gods,  veneration of the dead,  use of magic and  traditional African medicine. The study concluded that the existence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) was never hostile to Christianity in Igboland rather, it welcomed it and allowed it to blossom on the African soil. That it was through African Traditional Religion (ATR) that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries recorded tremendous success in their missionary enterprise in Igbo land and Nigeria at large. This could not be possible without some contributive factors of ATR enabling the Christian faith to thrive in the indigenous land. Thus, this study recommended that the existence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) should be recognized in the practice of Christianity. Also, the way early Christian missionaries work and interact with African Traditional Religion (ATR) to convert people should be a great lesson for modern day Christians not to abolish African Traditional Religion (ATR) entirely as some those practices can be capitalized on for evangelism and souls winning.*

### **Introduction**

Every society is that which is tainted by religion and culture. In Africa, African traditional religion (ATR) is regarded as the indigenous religion of the African people and it has been in existence from antiquity to this present time. Awolalu (1979) opines that before the advent of foreign religions there had been the indigenous religion upheld by our fore-fathers and passed on from them to succeeding generations. The traditional beliefs and practices of  African people are highly diverse including various  ethnic religions (Sage, 2009). These traditions are upheld and are also expressed through folk tales, songs and festivals and it includes beliefs in spirits and higher and lower gods, sometimes including a supreme being, as well as

the veneration of the dead, and use of magic and traditional African medicine (Nweke and Kizito Chinedu, 2022). These traditions are also not religious principles but cultural identity that is passed on through stories, myths and tales from one generation to another.

In the mist of all the traditional practices in Africa, Christianity emerged. Nwadiolor (2016) asserts that in many parts of West Africa, the Portuguese missionaries brought Christianity to West Africa in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity had fully gained ground as it spread to greater parts of West Africa. At the initial, the missionaries never saw anything good and worthwhile in African traditional religion. According to Oduro, et al. (2008), Christian missionaries saw the African culture and religion not only as lower than the Western culture and religion but also as undesirable and even dangerous to converted Africans. Sanou (2013) observes that the religious piety of Africans was viewed as wholly erroneous, idolatrous, superstitious and necromantic. Nwaozuru (2019) summarizes that the foreigners wanted Africans to accept totally foreign culture and religion at the same time rejecting everything indigenous culture and religion.

Thus, the above viewpoints portray that the European Christian missionaries made efforts to eradicate the indigenous religion of the host communities. This was as a result of misconception of African worldview by the early missionaries. Also Nwadiolor (2015) opines that some were prevented from the real understanding of the phenomenon, they studied because of their lack of understanding of the people's languages. But with time, as the European Christian missionaries interacted with the indigenous people (with the help of the ex-slaves), they found out that there were some indigenous values and belief system of the African people that could be capitalized upon to spread Christianity among the indigenous people. This was to make the Christian faith appeal to them as well offer them sense of belonging and ultimately for them to accept it. Hence, this paper aim at examining the contribution of African traditional religion to the success of the Christian missionary endeavors: a historical enquiry.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Structural Functionalism Theory**

The structural functionalism theory was propounded by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). A structural functionalism theory is a framework for building

theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability (Macionis and John, 1944 - 2011). This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape the society as a whole and believes that society has evolved like organisms (DeRosso and Deb, 2012). This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses the society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements such as norms, customs, traditions and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as organs that work toward the proper functioning of the body as a whole (Urry and John, 2000). In the most basic terms, it simply emphasizes the effort to impute as rigorously as possible, to each feature, custom, or practice, its effect on the functioning of a supposedly stable, cohesive system. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms with their various working together in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion toward achieving an overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as functional in the sense of working together and are effectively deemed to have lives of their own. They are primarily analyzed in terms of this function. The individual is significant not in and of themselves, but rather in terms of their status, their position in patterns of social relations, and the behaviours associated with their status. Therefore, the social structure is the network of statuses connected by associated roles in the society.

Structural functionalism theory is applicable to this study as it emphasized that the society is a complex system whose parts is to work together to promote solidarity and stability. African traditional religion is an inherit part of the structure of the African society that determines the belief system, custom, tradition and culture of its people. The role of the belief, culture and norms upheld by Africans help in the acceptance and promotion of Christianity in Africa. The early Christian missionaries discovered that some of the beliefs of the people in Africa especially in Igbo land embrace the knowledge and idea that God exist. They believe in the spirit being and existence of Chukwu. So, they often times, observed some scarifies and celebrations such *Iri Ji Ohuru* (new yam festivals) for thanksgiving, praises, worship and songs which the early missionaries capitalized and introduce Christianity among the people and it succeeded.

### **Conceptualization of African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

Conceptualizing African traditional religion is a difficult task. Ulvestad (2012) opines that since mid-1900s, the era has been a tug of war between Western and African representatives and even among African scholars who grasp the authentic African religion. Awolalu (1980) explains African traditional religion as the indigenous religion which the Africans regarded as their authentic religion that passed from generation to generation. Nwaoga, Nche and Olihe (2014) assert that it is a religion founded on African soil, and inextricably interwoven with the culture of the people expressed in beliefs and practices. George and Amusan (2014) view that African traditional religion is the fundamental religion of the indigenous African people in Nigeria and the belief and practices of ATR are based upon the faith of the ancient indigenous people (Ancestor) handed down from one generation to another. According to Ekwunife (1990) African traditional religion are those institutionalized beliefs and practices of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectal process of continuities and discontinuities. They centered on ancestor worship, the belief in a spirit world, supernatural beings and free will. They believed that deceased humans (and animals or important objects) still exist in the spirit world and can influence and interact with the physical world. Ugwu (2002) maintained that African traditional religion is full of lives and activities through ceremonies, festivals and so on. It has values and places emphasis on virtues and morals. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) avers that the practice of African traditional religion is based on African world view with a hierarchy of the following beings; belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors; belief in mysterious powers also the practice of magic and medicine each with its own consequent and attendant cult. Uche (2014) opts that, the religion is not based on scriptures or chronicled on a founder, it is a community based religion that does so much to instill discipline on the people with lots of dos and don' ts. It is a guide to the life of an African. There are religious functionaries that facilitate the practice of African traditional religion which include priests, priestesses, diviners, devotees, queens, rain makers, traditional healers among others.

## **Evaluation of Christianity Brief Examination of Church History**

Christianity as a living religion did not emerge out of vacuum, it has an origin. Christianity and its history have been marked with Jesus Christ and His apostles. According to Odoom (2020), the basis of Christianity is formed upon the birth, life activities, teachings, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. After the death of Jesus, Christianity is believed to have spread across nations. Christianity spread to the Roman Empire, some Roman Emperors like Nero and others persecuted the early church. Despite the various persecutions meted out to these early Christians by the Roman emperors, it became a state religion in Rome from the reign of Emperor Constantine. It further spread to Europe during the middle ages from Europe to other parts of the world.

In tracing the origin of Christianity, Maher and Rafferty (2018) state that there is a general belief that the birth of Christ is the starting point of Christianity. The spirit of Christ is the indispensable condition of understanding the Gospel. Many Christians worldwide have the belief that on the very day Jesus Christ was born which was prophesied long ago, then that means the founder of Christianity has been born to them. Hence, Christianity is based on the life, works and teachings of Jesus which were explained and interpreted by the apostles. It could be summarized that Christianity started in Jewish soil. The early believers were following the footsteps of Christ, hence in Antioch in Syria the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians meaning the followers of Christ. Ituma (2003) affirms that Jesus is the foundation of the New Testament (NT) and that NT itself is the foundation of Christianity.

### **Evaluation of Christianity and Early Christian Mission in Nigeria**

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However, Christianity was brought to Nigeria by Portuguese Christian missionaries. Nwadiolor (2016) affirmed that the first contact of Christianity in Nigeria was through the activities of a set of missionaries from Portugal in the fifteenth century and they recorded initial success in the kingdoms of Warri and Benin. This did not endure for a long time as the pre-colonial missionaries failed due to many reasons like lack of personnel, finance, lopsidedness, attack on African culture and beliefs, language barrier, unfavourable climate et cetera. The enduring and successful missionary enterprise began in the nineteenth century. Nwadiolor (2016) further observes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there was an intensive missionary activity by various missionary sects in Nigeria. Clarke (1986) comments that it was from among the ex-slaves that the missionary societies chose as their agents to assist in spreading the gospels who may later replace them as Nwadiolor (2016) confirms that the Church Missionary Society (CMS) ideology of Self-governing, Self-sustaining and Self-propagating Churches which was preached by Venn and Buxton was for native missionaries to enable them reach the interior towns. Ajayi (1975) opines that the first Niger Expedition marked the beginning of the missionary movement to be re-established in Nigeria. It was through this Niger Expedition that Christianity was planted in Igboland.

Okpalike and Nwadiolor (2015) traces that, the first Igbo town that the expedition landed was Aboh, J.F. Schon, a German linguist and the leader of the C.M.S. team that accompanied the expedition, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave and Simon Jonas, a liberated slave from Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage, were able to forge a personal link with the King of

Aboh, Obi Ossai with Simon Jonas acting as an interpreter. Here the missionaries succeeded in preaching the gospel message to the king and his people. In 1857, the C.M.S. finally came to establish a permanent station in Igboland with their headquarters in Onitsha after making a brief stop-over at Aboh. On 5th December 1885, Roman Catholic missionaries arrived the shores of the River Niger and found safe havens in Onitsha. The Roman Catholic missionaries were led by French Reverend Fathers Lutz and Horne and Brothers John and Hermas. The Obi of Onitsha readily received them and the C.M.S. missionaries ceded a piece of land originally given to them by the rulers of Onitsha to the Roman Catholics (Kanu, 2011). Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) opine that the Qua Iboe mission who derived its name from a local river of the same name, was established by a Northern Irish missionary, Samuel Alexander Bill, came to Igbo land in 1887. It made Etinan its headquarters, and the Primitive Methodists later came to Igboland in 1920, and occupied Uzuakoli and Umuahia. It was from these various missionary bodies that Christianity came to Igboland and spread to other parts of the Igbo nation.

### **Contributions of African Traditional Religion (ATR) to the Advancement of the Christian Missionary Enterprise in Igbo Society**

There is no doubt that the Christian missionaries who came to Igbo land, achieved success in their missionary enterprise. This study proposes that African traditional religion, contributed immensely to this success. Therefore, there is need to examine indigenous religious practices, cultures and value systems embedded in ATR that made this possible.

#### **Belief in *Chukwu* (Supreme Being)**

Igbo people are religious in nature, they believe in the existence of the Supreme Being (*Chukwu* or *Chineke*) who created all things and nothing created him. The belief in the Supreme Being is an indispensable factor of African traditional religion. Conteh (2008) asserts that Africans see the Supreme Being as Omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, all-seeing god, creator and the ruler. In Christianity, there is a belief in Supreme Being known as the Trinity. Ware (2013) explains that Trinity is a doctrine that is not neatly defined in a specific passage of Scripture yet, He points that the doctrine of the Trinity is built upon three biblical truths; there is one God, God exists in three distinct persons and each of those persons is fully God also the three great ecumenical creeds; the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasius Creed are all structured around our three-in-one God. Bruce (2005) confirms that:

The Christian faith affirms that there is one and only one God, eternally existing and fully expressed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God-not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead. Each person is equal in essence as each possesses fully the identically same, eternal divine nature, yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of the one undivided divine nature. (pp. 121-122).

The European Christian missionaries came with this idea to Igboland. It could be recalled that some ex-slaves from Igboland joined the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries to evangelize the gospel in Igboland. These recaptives preached the gospel in vernacular telling their fellow countrymen that *Chukwu* came to save them. The indigenous people having been properly taught about God, meaning *Chukwu* in their own language did not resist but accepted the gospel. This is exemplified in the encounter between Simon Jonas and Obi Ossai. Ekechi (1972) reports that during the encounter with the king, Jonas was asked to translate the Beatitudes into Igbo. As he translated the gospel, the king was said to have been so impressed with his eloquence and apparent erudition. Obi Ossai exclaimed, you must stop with me, you must teach me and my people. During his short stay at Aboh, Jonas made a remarkable progress in forming a Christian group among the people. Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) states that, this initial breakthrough convinced the missionaries that the Igbo were not only responsible but quite receptive. This was the same experience witnessed in various towns where the missionaries and the recaptives evangelized.

Moreover, the missionaries observes that the Igbo man strongly believes that he cannot bow down to any mortal man except *Chukwu*, therefore, they capitalized on that philosophy to teach about God who cannot share his glory with any man. The indigenous people accepted the gospel not because a new God was introduced to them but because they were properly taught that *Chukwu* the Supreme Being is the same as God only that the nomenclature varies in various languages in the universe. They were further told that *Chukwu* could be accessed directly through Jesus Christ who came and died to save the world.

### **Observance of Circumcision (*Ibiugwu*)**



Circumcision (*Ibiugwu*) is a rite and ritual that is attached to Igbo traditional religion. It is usually done after giving birth to a new born baby. In Igbo culture, circumcision goes beyond cutting of the fore genital skin for health purpose but has social and moral implications. As a result of this, Uchegbue (2017) attests that *Ibiugwu* is a rite which an Igbo man will on no account omit. *Ibiugwu* serves various purposes such as: Integration into the community and connection to the spirit world. In Igbo cosmology, there are the physical and the spiritual world. There is need to maintain a balance and connection between the physical and the spirit world of which sacrifice and appropriate rites of passage like *Ibiugwu* is among. Mbah (1993) points that the bloodshed during the physical operation of circumcision binds the person to the land and consequently to the earth deity and to the departed members of the land. Participating in circumcision is an eloquent testimony that the individual is alive and wishes to enter into the bond of communion and be tied to the community and his people. Ogunmodede (1995) avers that circumcision is the ritual which confers on one the full social acceptability and integration into the community.

The Christian missionaries did not condemn circumcision (*Ibiugwu*) during their missionary work in Igboland. This was because from the biblical point of view, circumcision started with Yahweh' s command to Abraham to circumcise all the male people under his household and new born males born to Abraham' s family must undergo circumcision after eight days. Also, Jesus whom the missionaries preached about was circumcised according to the Mosaic Law. In Jewish culture, circumcision of male children binds the Israelites to the covenant of Yahweh with Abraham. Just as the circumcision in Israel is a sign of covenant, a solemn relationship, with Yahweh, *Ibiugwu* in Igboland according to Mbah (1993) serves as a covenant or a solemn agreement between the individual and his people. This bond is that which the Igbo call *Umunna* (kinsmen). It guarantees the individual respect as an integral person in the community and fosters the philosophy of community consciousness. Thus, as the Christian missionaries never opposed this cultural practice, it created an avenue for many Igbo people to join Christianity which accept this indispensable cultural practice.

### **Sanctity of Human Life and Dignity of Human Person**

In Igbo traditional religion, it would be affirmed that in the hierarchy of values, human life is the most primary. Life is seen as a value of no mean magnitude. The names Igbo people bear portray the indispensable and

inalienable place of human life in the scheme of things; *ndu-ka-aku* (life is of more value than wealth and riches), *ndu-bu-isi* (life is a primary value). They believe that *Chukwu* created human life and thus, no man should not destroy it. This indigenous value of sanctity of human life is attached to *Ibiugwu*, as a sign of covenant between people of the same community. This ensures that the shedding of human blood (*Igbu Ochu*) by anyone in the community is considered as an abomination (Mbah, 1993). When people are bonded by covenant, there exists a close tie between them which restrict them from shedding each other's blood. Rather they make efforts to be their brothers' keeper. This is vital in preserving the sanctity of human life. The Christian missionaries keyed into this indigenous value to teach the people that all have sinned against God and are condemned to death. But that only Jesus could save and give eternal life. This is expressed in Igbo language as *Chi ji ndu* (God is the sustainer of life). Thus, many Igbo people received the gospel in order to be saved.

Also, since Igbo people profess sanctity of human life, the missionaries capitalized on this value to make case for abolition of the killing of twins which was invoke as at the time of their arrival in Igboland. The missionaries especially Mary Slessor a member of Church of Scotland Mission was very vocal in this area. According Peña (2021) in 1903, Mary started a mission at Itu which reached Arochukwu, Mary focused a great deal of energy and effort to saving twins who were facing death by the ethnic leaders. She also devoted herself to ministering to the twin's mothers, who were often isolated from the village to die. Peña (2021) affirms that Mary transformed communities with the love of the Gospel; starting orphanages, preaching the Good News, standing up for women's rights, and saving many innocent lives from death. This motivated greater number of Igbo women and youths to gladly accept Christianity. Furthermore, it was based on this sanctity of human life and dignity of human person found in Igbo value system that the missionaries capitalized upon, to make efforts to see that slave trade was abolished. This increased the population of Igbo people into the Christian faith.

### **Hospitality and Generosity**

Hospitality and generosity is an integral aspect of Igbo indigenous value system. The Igbo man is noted for his sense of hospitality and generosity. He welcomes strangers and easily incorporates them in the community. Igbo people have symbolic ways of expressing welcome such as forms of presenting kola nuts (*Oji*), palm wine (*Nkwu elu*) among others. It could be

said that Igbo people were hospitable and generous to the European Christian missionaries when they came. For instance, at the arrival of Roman Catholic Mission, Kanu (2011) observes that the Obi of Onitsha readily received Roman Catholic Mission and ceded a piece of land to them. At first, the host communities gave them lands for construction of church premises. When the missionaries saw this kind gesture extended to them by the indigenous people, they reciprocated by not only preaching the gospel. They began to provide social and humanitarian services to the host communities. They welcomed outcasts, built hospitals where sick people were treated, established schools where people after schooling were employed. The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) was exceptional in provision of humanitarian services. Igwe (1977) emphasizes that the Catholics at first adopted the strategy of reaching the people through the charitable approach of erecting hospitals and dispensaries, where the sick and the suffering were treated free or at nominal charge. They also established Christian villages where run-away slaves or those redeemed by mission money were protected and educated in the Christian way of life. The Catholics also provided its members with food and clothing. These humanitarian services offered by the various missionary bodies improved the standard of living of the indigenous people. This further attracted many Igbo people into Christianity as Alagoa (1999) agrees that Western education had been identified as probably the most important motive for the acceptance of Christian mission.

Furthermore, many Igbo people saw Christianity as a key to progress and transforming the society to greater heights. Onitsha was among the first Igbo town that prospered as a result of their hospitable deeds and good dealings with the European Christian missionaries. Thus, other towns did not fail to extend their hospitality towards the missionaries as a sign that they were ready to welcome them in their own towns. Hence, this act of hospitality and generosity embedded in Igbo value system showcased towards the Christian missionaries by the indigenous people, when they arrived the hinterland also contributed to the success of the Christian missionaries.

### **Chastity Before Marriage**

This is another value embedded in Igbo traditional religion. Chastity before marriage is one of the highly valued norms in Igbo culture. It is a taboo for youths who are not married to be involved in premarital sexual relationships. The Christian missionaries who came to Igbo land also taught

that sex is for married couples only. Meaning that they upheld to this value system. Since such teaching is applicable in Christianity, it further appealed to Igbo people to accept Christianity.

### **Observance of Traditional Festivals and Acceptance of Christian Feasts**

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Igboland, Igbo people observed and celebrated various traditional feasts majorly *Iri Ji* (new Yam) festival and so on. The European Christian missionaries also introduced Christian feasts such as Easter, Christmas among others to the people. They were told that just as some of their traditional feasts were mainly for expressing thanksgiving to *Chukwu*, so are some of the Christian feasts. This also motivated the people especially convert to accept and begin to observe Christian feasts.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines African traditional religion and the success of the Christian missionary enterprise. The paper has been able to review most of the African traditional religion (ATR) practices upheld by the people before the advent of Christianity. That researcher observed that the Africans traditions expressed through folk tales, songs, festivals, beliefs in spirit beings, higher and lower gods,  veneration of the dead, use of magic and traditional African medicine. The paper concluded that the existence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) was never hostile to Christianity in Igbo society rather, it welcomed it and allowed it to blossom on the African soil. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian missionaries recorded tremendous success in their missionary enterprise in Igbo land and Nigeria at large. This could not be possible without some contributive factors of ATR enabling the Christian faith to thrive in the indigenous land. Through observance of various ceremonies such *Iri Ji* (new Yam) festival and so on as thanksgiving service to *Chukwu*, the European Christian missionaries also introduced Christian feasts such as Easter, Christmas among others to the people making that them believe in Christianity. So, the role of African traditional religion, cultures and value systems cannot be gain said in the success recorded by the European Christian missionaries in Africa.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this paper:

- a. The existence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) should be recognized in the practice of Christianity.
- b. The way early Christian missionaries work and interact with African Traditional Religion (ATR) to convert people should be a great lesson for modern day Christians not to abolish African Traditional Religion (ATR) entirely as some those practices can be capitalized on for evangelism and souls winning.
- c. The present day Christianity should be able to modernize some of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) practices so as to give Christianity a full place in Africa.
4. The present day Christians should endeavour to live by example of what they preach as early Christians lived by example and that re-soughed to recognizing them and their preaching by the African people making them to accept Christianity.

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