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NEO-PAGANISM AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Recent happenings reveal a rise in neo-paganism and religious syncretism among Christians in Igboland. This is evident in the sudden return of Igbo Christians, especially young people, to different forms of African Traditional Religion. While some claim to do this simply because it is their cultural heritage, many do it in a quest for solutions to different problems. This work begins with a clarification of terms and an exposition of neo-paganism and religious syncretism in Igboland. It identifies such causes as shallow evangelization, incomplete conversion, inadequate catechesis, conflict between faith and culture and the quest for solutions. It highlights the theological, pastoral and psycho-social implications for the Church. Finally, it recommends intensified theological education, the culture of witness, integral Christian formation, special attention to the youths, inculturation and the digitalization of the Christian message. If these ills of neo-paganism and religious syncretism in Igboland are to be addressed, immediate action must be taken by the Church.

Keywords: Ndigbo, neo-paganism, religious syncretism.

1. Introduction

On Friday, 4th April, 2025, news headlines were awash with the news of the arraignment of three popular native doctors by the Anambra State Government for alleged involvement in criminal activities. The accused, Chidozie Nwangwu, (aka *Akwa Okuko Tiwara Aki*), Onyebuchi Okocha (aka *Onye Eze*), and Ekene Igboezekwe (aka *Eke Hit*), were in court for the alleged claims of possessing supernatural powers to make money, stagnate destiny, as well as conspiracy to commit felony, kidnaping and obtaining by fraud (Anaso, 2025). In February 2025, the Asagba of Asaba, HRM Obi Prof. Epiphany Azinge, banned the activities of female native doctors/goddesses (popularly called *Ezenwanyi*) and other unregulated traditional practitioners. This decision was taken amid concerns that such individuals were fueling criminal activities including kidnappings and ritual-related activities (Ochei, 2025). While we commend the efforts of the government and traditional institutions to curb this growing menace in Igboland, there is the need to consider if these approaches would provide a lasting solution to the problem. Would the problem be permanently solved or would it just evolve into a different form?

There is a deep crisis of faith among many Igbo Christians, which, according to Ezenweke and Kanu, is occasioned by a “shallow Christianity, superficiality of faith or skin-deep Christianity.



This is evident in the lives, beliefs and practices of those who call themselves Christians in many African communities” (72). In *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI states the problem addressed in this study very lucidly:

Witchcraft, which is based on the traditional religions, is currently experiencing a certain revival. Old fears are re-surfacing and creating paralyzing bonds of subjection. Anxiety over health, well-being, children, the climate, and protection from evil spirits at times lead people to have recourse to practices of traditional African religions that are incompatible with Christian teaching. The problem of “dual affiliation” – to Christianity and to the traditional African religions –remains a challenge (no. 93.4).

This raises disquieting questions concerning our Christian faith and practice: To what extent has Christianity taken root in Igbo Christians? Have Igbo Christians wholeheartedly accepted and truly internalized the Christian religion? Has the average Igbo Christian been able to establish a balance between the Christian faith and the Igbo traditional worldview? Why does the traditional religion still retain much appeal for many contemporary Igbo Christians? Are we actually practicing Christianity or ‘Christo-paganism’? Or have we ended up being ‘half-Christians, half-pagans’?

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Ndigbo

The Igbo (pl. Ndigbo or Igbo) are one of the three major tribes of Nigeria, the other two being Hausa and Yoruba. They are the major occupants of the South-East geo-political zone: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, as well as some parts of Delta and Rivers states in the South-South. However, recently, Igbanke, an autonomous community in Edo State, affirmed their Igbo origins. Ndigbo are known to be adventurous and are found in many parts of the world to which they migrate in search of greener pastures. Historically, commerce and farming were the major occupations of the Igbo, but with the dawn of western education, many contemporary Igbo now seek formal education and white-collar jobs. Most Igbo are Christians, with the Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists taking the highest population (Ezeala, 5). The Igbo are blessed with a rich cultural heritage. They speak one language (Igbo), which has are many’ dialects, and have many other things in common: dressing, music, dances, festivals, chieftaincy titles, marriage practices and a general world-view. The Igbo are also very religious. In ancient Igbo-land almost every community had its deity, thus we have such names as Alaogbaga to Mbaise, Chukwu of Arochukwu, Igwekala of Umunoha, Arishi of Okija, Efulu of Ukene and Amadioha of Uratta among others. The Igbo carry the same devotion into Christianity.

2.1 Neo-paganism

The term ‘neo-paganism’ is a compound word. The prefix neo- meaning ‘new’, implies that an ancient belief, practice or custom has been remodeled and adapted to the modern era. The word ‘pagan’ is a derivative of the Latin word *paganus*, which according to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* originally means a person who lives in a rural area or “a country dweller” (November 5, 2023). However, the term ‘country dwellers’ was used to refer to the Roman citizens who refused to accept the Christian faith during the Christianization of the Roman Empire. This is how



it acquired its pejorative use which has continued till today. According to *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia* “paganism in the broadest sense includes all religions other than the true one revealed by God, and in a narrower sense, all except Christianity, Judaism, and Mohammedanism. The term is also used as the equivalent of polytheism” (November 5, 2023). Consequently, when the early missionaries came to Africa, they erroneously condemned the African traditional religions with such disparaging words as ‘primitive’, ‘pagan’, ‘heathen’, ‘fetish’, ‘savage’, ‘barbaric’ etc. Scholars have profusely pointed out that the designation of African traditional religions as “paganism” is pejorative, demeaning and unfounded. However, let us for the purposes of this research which stems from a Christian theological perspective, refer to our traditional religion as paganism, at least because of its manifest polytheism. Neo- paganism therefore according to Okafor in *The Church and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism in South-Eastern Nigeria*, is “a modernization of the pagan cult and practices to render them attractive to modern people particularly the youths” (64). It is also referred to as ‘revived paganism’, ‘contemporary paganism’, etc.

2.2 Religious Syncretism

The word syncretism, from the Greek *syncretismos*, means “to combine, to unite”. For Ezenweke and Kanu, in *Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend: A Case of Christian and African Traditions*, syncretism would refer to the attempt to unite those elements which do not agree (73). In religious parlance, syncretism is the inadmissible fusion of two or more conflicting or incompatible religious practices. Such a fusion or amalgamation of contrasting and opposing elements can only be superficial and cosmetic. Asogwa identifies syncretism as “the impermissible admixture of Christian faith with practices, beliefs and attitudes that bespeak of rooted alliance with the traditional religion” (*Half Christian, Half Pagan*, 55). It is in this sense that scholars variously refer to syncretism as a religious dual affiliation, a religious ambivalence or even as religious ‘amphibianism’. Asogwa further explains syncretism as “a process whereby religious beliefs or practices from diverse sources are grafted into Christianity in such a way that they merely experience change in guise, while their meanings and significance remain sacrosanct. In a word, it refers to the inadmissible mixture of different religious beliefs or practices” (21). By religious syncretism therefore, we mean the unacceptable admixture of the Christian faith with elements or attitudes from the traditional religion or ‘paganism’ that are diametrically opposed to it. This is what Luzbetak in *The Church and Culture: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, would refer to as a “theologically untenable amalgam” (360). Such blending gives rise to what some authors refer to as ‘Christo-paganism’ - a religious system that combines beliefs and practices of Christianity with beliefs and practices of paganism, or that observes them in parallel.

3. Neo-paganism and Religious Syncretism in Igboland

In his work *Christians and the Way of Culture*, Onaga, addresses two major concerns. One of them has to do with the various experiences and reports concerning the resurgence of and lure to paganism in our era. Akin to this is the alacrity with which many of our people derail and resort to sensibilities and practices that are incompatible with Christian principles and way of life. These two issues can conveniently be referred to as neo-paganism and religious syncretism. The author blames these phenomena on the lingering crisis or tension between our faith and culture,



observable from the religious mindset and lifestyle of many of our professed Christians. Elucidating the situation in more poignant details, the author observes that

...as it were, the Igbo traditional religion is waning in most parts of Igbo land, but its influence in the lives of Igbo Christians continues to present serious challenges to Christianity and accepted modern realities. Churches, crusade grounds, fellowship venues, healing ministries and miracle centers are overflowing with people. But just the next moment, and at the least provocation, the same people change gear and resort to shrines of idols or deities, either personally or by proxy... some Catholics, for instance, may see nothing wrong in coming to receive Holy Communion while having charms in their pockets or around their waists. The same people, who called a fortune-teller to advise them whether the spirits would allow them to build a big house and live in it in peace, would later invite a Catholic priest to bless the finished house (23-24).

In effect, many Igbo Christians attempt to resurrect and stick to obsolete and frivolous aspects of the traditional religion and pagan culture of past years, which have lost their currency and usefulness to the present day and age. This anomaly is typically referred to as syncretism, which according to the author is “a glorified paganism” (24). The author then defines religious syncretism as “the unorthodox and inadmissible mixing of Christian belief system with unwholesome elements of traditional religions and non-Christian ideas” (24).

In *Faith Rooted and Built up in Christ*, Okeke remarks that the Igbo people received the Christian faith and have been living that faith for over a hundred years. Nonetheless he avers that the problem with many people who turned to Christianity without proper motives and authentic conversion is that they hold on tenaciously to the tenets and beliefs of the African Traditional Religions, and then only half-heartedly to the tenets and beliefs of Christianity. For such people, Christianity is just like a veneer used to cover their deep-seated pagan mindsets. The unfortunate product of this stance is religious syncretism, whereby “the mentality and practices of African Traditional religions are being fostered and promoted by Christians in the name of tradition and culture” (13). He also identifies neo-paganism, which he describes simply as “the resurrection of traditional religion under the guise of Igbo culture” (14). He reprimands those who do such with the words of our Lord in the Gospel: “and why do you break away from the commandments of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matt.15:3).

The author likens neo-paganism to the attitude of the Egyptians, who kept longing for the fleshpots of Egypt after they had been liberated from the idols of Egypt and dedicated to the worship of Yahweh. This culminated in the worship of a false god in the form of a golden calf. But such admixture of God-worship and idol-worship was inadmissible and unacceptable to God, for which reason he wanted to annihilate all of them (Exodus 32:9-10). According to the author, “such apostasy is with us where some baptized persons go out to revive idol-worship, repairing the shrines and reviving the festivals and cult of the deities that were abandoned, in the name of cultural authenticity and revival” (87). Such Christians want to continue the way of life which the pagans had with their idols, sacrifices, feasts and all, but at the same time, continue to be called Christians. He advocates a pastoral approach towards such grey areas of our culture like the *ofo*



symbol, *ozo* title taking and masquerade (*mmanwu*). In doing so he adopts the admonition of St Paul to the Corinthians:

For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall (1 Cor. 8:10-13).

Obiefuna, an erstwhile Catholic bishop who had worked assiduously for many years in Igbo land in his work *Idolatry in a Century-Old Faith*, acknowledges the reality of neo-paganism and religious syncretism amongst Christians of the Igbo extraction. In this work, he reports that:

...times without number the rumour reaches us that our Christians are worshipping 'idols', false gods. They swear on idols. They erect shrines in their homes, in their compounds. They hide fetishes in their shades in the market places and in their workshops.... At every retreat, (they) bring out from their homes fetishes and charms of all kinds. Idol worship, superstitious practices, fear of witchcrafts, charms, and all sorts of vain observances are realities among our Christians. We cannot simply deny they obtain (17).

According to him, such attitude is often occasioned by the quest for solutions to problematic situations that confront the Igbo Christian. To survive such situations, the person will seek solutions in the Catholic Church (perhaps with the use of holy water, blessed oil etc). Concerning the abuse of the sacraments and sacramentals due to such erroneous mindset, Obiefuna warns that “unless the Sacraments are understood as the actions of Christ... they might constitute another pastoral problem as they could be reduced to the role of satisfying the urges of a highly ritualistic and superstitious people” (42).

4. Causative Factors

By and large, it is irrefutable according to Ejizu, in *Liminality in the Contemporary Nigerian Christian Religious Experience*, that

...the battle with the ‘gods’ of the traditional religious cultures is far from being over. Rather, it appears that from their places of retreat, the gods have continued to regroup and to exert tremendous influence on Christianity... through back-sliding, to a bewildering array of syncretic beliefs and practices among many Christians, the traditional religious cultures have continued to metamorphose and to adjust their grip in line with prevailing values and needs (433).

The causes of this ugly reality include but are not limited to:

4.1 Shallow Evangelization by the early Missionaries

The life of the traditional Igbo person is inextricably tied to his religious beliefs. The early missionaries failed to take cognizance of this fundamental fact, and unwilling to understand the traditional religion of the Igbo, they sought to overhaul it completely, and foist the Christian religion on the Igbo people. Thus, the Good News as was brought to our people was not properly



indigenized by the evangelizers. The devastating repercussion was a conversion to Christianity not rooted on a solid Christian faith. As Ozigbo in his work *Igbo Catholicism: the Onitsha Connection*, rightly observed, “syncretic practices came about because indigenization which should have been the hallmark of evangelization was very poorly conceived and executed” (81). Therefore, the Igbo Christian finds himself on a religious crossroads. Buoyed by this disorientation, some begin to talk about coming home to their ancestral religion which they feel that they are more at home with. This so-called ‘homecoming’ is one of the most popular ways of depicting the process of becoming a follower of neo-paganism (Adam *et al*, 2013).

4.2 Incomplete Conversion from the Traditional Religious Background

Being very pragmatic people, the traditional Igbo people did not generally worship the Supreme Being directly. There was no altar or shrine, no cult or sacrifice for the Supreme Being. As such the Igbo people rather worshipped the myriads of cosmic deities whom they believed had direct and powerful influence in their lives and affairs. Thus, the Igbo traditional religion has a superstitious and polytheistic mindset. Transposing such mindset into Christianity, the effect became the unfortunate permeation of fetish practices in Christian garb. For this reason, the conversion from the old religion to the new one is far from being complete. All these led to what Okeke calls “external changes but unchanged mentality” (Okeke 92). Accordingly, “the result is the persistence of mentality and practices of African Traditional religions being fostered and promoted by Christians in the name of tradition and culture” (Okeke 13).

4.4. Inadequate Catechesis

According to Ejizu in *Christian Evangelism in Nigeria: A Blueprint for the Future*, it is incontrovertibly so that “partly due to the absence of a well-articulated programme of effective catechesis, many Nigerian Christians still have great difficulty in relating their new faith to their lives” (69). Asogwa avows that perhaps it is “such lack of systematic and sustained policy of evangelization that has kept Christianity a foreign religion to our people, making it difficult to be incarnated into our people’s way of life” (*Half Christian, Half Pagan*, 47). The consequence of this inadequate catechesis is weak nurturing in the faith of Christian converts, which in turn produces weak roots and syncretism.

4.5 Conflict between Faith and Culture

Neo-paganism thrives on the ideology of culture. The clamor for cultural reawakening has led some Igbo people to believe that Christianity is an imported culture that came to usurp or denigrate their cultural heritage. Cultural promotion and revival is a worthwhile endeavor, but when interposed with the Christian faith, the resultant effect is often an “apostasy... where some baptized persons go out to revive idol-worship, repairing the shrines and reviving the festivals and cult of the deities that were abandoned, in the name of cultural authenticity and revival” (Okeke 87). It is essential to remember that culture is not a readymade and packaged product handed down to be preserved without any altercation, but a dynamic and ever-contemporary process that affects and is affected by contacts and influences from other cultures or ideologies. Thus, “we must be constantly on our guard against compromise with idolatry, superstition and fetish practices under the guise of our culture” (Okeke 97).



4.6 Quest for Solutions

Most people who return to pagan practices do so in search of quick and practical solutions to their problems, especially when Christianity does not seem to provide answers to their existential needs and questions. This shows that, for most, the phenomenon of neo-paganism is utilitarian in nature. This attitude is informed by the Igbo pragmatic concept of religion. The Supreme Pontiff recognized this great challenge of faith to the Church in Africa thus: "... anxiety over health, well-being, children, and protection from evil spirits at times lead people to have recourse to practices of traditional African religions that are incompatible with Christian teaching" (*Africae Munus*, no. 93). Pre-eminent among these problems has always been financial or economic problems. Despite being richly endowed with human and natural resources, the majority of the Nigerian populace lives in abject poverty. In the face of this destitution, what is paramount in the minds of Nigerians especially our youths today, is how to make "quick and endless money" (*ego mbute*), not minding the often-cataclysmic consequences. Consequently, they flock to unorthodox prayer houses, and even visit pagan shrines in search of sordid wealth.

5. Implications of Neo-paganism and Syncretism for Ndigbo

Asogwa in *Half Christian, Half Pagan: the Dilemma of the Nigerian Christian*, highlights the implications of syncretism for Igbo Christians as theological, pastoral and psychosocial. It is within these frameworks that we shall proceed with our discourse.

5.1 Theological Implications

Due to the onslaught of neo-paganism and syncretism, the predominant image of God in the mind of the average Christian in Igboland "is more akin to traditional conception than that of Christianity" (Asogwa 52). This anomalous conception has manifold theological implications:

a. Pragmatic Approach to Religion – *Deus ex machina* Mentality

The Latin phrase *deus ex machine* (god from the machine) refers to "any person or thing in a narrative introduced by artificial means to provide a quick solution to a difficulty" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023). In this context, it expresses a situation where people have recourse to God or gods only when they need a solution to a difficult situation, even though they have not been in any meaningful relationship with the god. The relationship with the deity thus becomes only pragmatic and utilitarian. Unlike the demands of Christianity to worship God for His own sake, the traditional Igbo person has need of a particular deity only as long as it makes itself useful by solving problems swiftly and effectively. As such when faced with a problem, one moves from one deity to another till one finds the one that solves the problem. Eze, in his work *Re-Imaging God in our Local Church: Towards a more Christian Image of God*, captures this thus: "(African) men's relationship with the supreme God and other gods is contractual, pragmatic and wholly geared to his materialistic and spiritual welfare and not primarily for the welfare of the gods" (20).

Many Christians tend to transpose this same religious mindset into Christianity. If God does not answer fast, then recourse must be made through other means or alternatives, hence the proliferation of so-called churches and prayer houses and their prophet-healers. Worse still, many Christians who attend churches during the day, find their way to shrines at night. This reflects the theological effect of neo-paganism and syncretism as expounded by Asogwa:



Theologically, the image of God and the idea of salvation in African Traditional Religion which is all too pragmatic, contractual and primarily oriented towards material wellbeing is carried over wholly or partly to Christianity such that prosperity Gospel becomes the order of the day. God is discarded if he does not alleviate suffering immediately. If he does, he regains his usefulness and the minister is revered almost to the point of deification (69).

b. Superstitious Mindset

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (subsequently referred to as CCC) explains that “superstition is a departure from the worship that we give to the true God. It is manifested in idolatry, as well as in various forms of divination and magic” (no. 2138). Superstition can as well be a mindset or attitude accruing from a false conception of the supernatural. It is “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance... an irrational attitude of the mind toward the supernatural, nature or God” (*Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* 2023). Due to the lingering of the vestiges of the traditional religion and consequently a false conception of Christianity, a good number of Igbo Christians still exhibit a superstitious attitude in their belief and practice of the Christian religion. For instance, some believe that the mere fact of wearing a particular medal or scapular at the point of death would merit automatic entrance into heaven for them, despite their internal disposition or moral state.

Another phenomenon prevalent among Catholics in Igboland is the grading of blessings according to the priest who gives the blessing. For example, the object blessed or Mass celebrated by Fr. A is more efficacious than the object blessed or Mass celebrated by Fr. B; because Fr. A is presumed to be more spiritually ‘powerful’ than Fr. B. Njoku avers that “this behavior reflects the pagan assumption that the priest is as powerful as the shrine he serves and some shrines are more powerful than others” (Njoku 2023). All these consolidate and buttress the fact that “a critical look at Christian practices in this present age reveals to one the same traditional religious thought and mindset” (Onah *et al*, 17). Against this backdrop, the Church consistently and authoritatively teaches that “to attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition” (CCC no. 2111).

c. Abuse of Sacraments and Sacramentals

The Church teaches that “all practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one’s service and have a supernatural power over others... are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion.... Wearing charms is also reprehensible” (CCC no. 2117). However, with a careful observation of the attitude of some of our Christians, one is left with the impression that “the average Nigerian Christian simply ‘replaced’ the attachment to protective charms and amulets with exaggerated use of sacramentals, retaining the same attitudinal symbolism, but now in a more presentable and fashionable guise” (Asogwa 28). In Igbo land, the use of sacramentals has been abused. The Church rejects the use of the local charms and amulets, but now the people have replaced them with medals, scapulars, rosaries and holy water. Some people have gone to the extent of burying sacramentals as a way of protecting their family members



or attracting customers. Some may prefer drinking holy water and holy oil to receiving orthodox medicine when sick..

Asiegbu in *A Crisis of Faith and a Quest for Spirituality* notes that “for these Christians, the enrichment of charms in this way provides more security. This explains why they juxtapose charms with holy water, the cross, blessed olive oil, incense, rosary, bible and holy pictures, so that if one does not work, the other will surely be effective” (68). In light of this, Obiefuna warns that “unless the Sacraments are understood as the actions of Christ... they might constitute another pastoral problem as they could be reduced to the role of satisfying the urges of a highly ritualistic and superstitious people” (Obiefuna 42).

5.2 Pastoral Implications

a. Shallowness of Faith

As a result of syncretism and backsliding of converts into traditional beliefs and practices, faith becomes ever shallow, superficial and unable to influence lifestyle. This explains why we have many Christians whose lives do not reflect Christian morality and discipline both in interpersonal relationship and public affairs. On the one hand, syncretists are neither well-grounded in Christianity nor in paganism. They no longer possess a strongly rooted faith in God because they see the Church as merely an institution to which they belong to as a mark of social status. On the other hand, neo-pagans cannot even be said to be practicing the pristine ATR but an overly adulterated version of it. Asogwa refers to this as a fundamental problem of Christianity in Nigeria – being half Christian, half pagan.

b. Emergence of New Religious Movements

In Igbo land today, there are as many so-called independent churches as there are available open spaces, each practicing various degrees and manners of neo-paganism and syncretism. This is manifest in the attempt to ‘command’, ‘control’ or even ‘manipulate’ God in order that he might manifest his power; or in hoodwinking gullible and shallow-minded Christians into believing that in Christianity, anything is permissible in the name of belief and worship. For this reason, Agunwa in his work *Promoting a healthy Interaction of Christianity and Culture in Nigeria*, holds that “some independent churches who felt that Christianity could not adequately address particular human crises or issues as much as the traditional religion did, felt called to start churches where a mélange of both Christianity and indigenous religion occur” (28).

c. Covenant-making and oath-taking to traditional deities

In the Igbo traditional worldview, oath-taking to deities obliges the parties concerned to say the truth since it instills fear of misfortunes, punishment or death on them should they dare to breach it. Cases abound of Catholics going to pagan shrines for adjudication and settlement of their disputes. Some even employ the services of one dreaded god or the other to secure their property. In many communities, elders who call themselves Christians still insist that fellow Christians who commit an abomination (*alu*) must carry out the traditional rites of expiation or purification before the earth goddess. Many present-day Igbo Christians have great confidence in the efficacy of oath-taking before deities. Indeed, there is a common belief that since the God of the Bible is a merciful God, who does not kill. But traditional deities invariably visit those who invoke them in vain with



instant wrath. Therefore, many people still insist on their use for serious covenants and oaths. Under such circumstances therefore, “the Christian may openly swear on the Bible, and secretly swear on the deities” (Asiegbu 77).

d. Divination and fortune telling, often disguised as prophecy

According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, divination is “the art or practice of foreseeing or foretelling future events or of discovering hidden or secret knowledge” (440). For the Igbo people, divination is called *igba afa*, and it represents a pivotal aspect of traditional religion. This explains why it is always difficult for some people to shrug off divination, even after conversion to Christianity. Thus, Ejizu avers that “the belief in the success of divination and its practice are as much alive today as they were in the traditional background in Nigeria” (25). The average Igbo man hardly accepts a natural explanation of things, or that things have taken their natural course. There is always a “who” and “why” behind happenstances which must be unearthed through divinations and augury. Asiegbu describes the situation aptly:

Many Christians do not believe that things take their natural cause, or even in God’s omnipotence in controlling events in nature, especially when confronted by misfortune or other crisis situations. It is in the light of this traditional world view and influences that Christians resort to divination, not only to obtain knowledge about the future, but also to discover ways of dodging or avoiding misfortunes, averting dangers, illness and placating angry or revengeful ancestors (61).

Some Christians cover their inclinations to divination with a veneer of prophecy. However, prophecy is not merely about foretelling of the future, but an encouragement, to entrust the past to God’s mercy and the future to His providence. Putting neighbors or family members at daggers-drawn all in the name of ‘messages’ or ‘revelations’, or telling people that calamity will befall them if they do not make specific expiatory offerings, is much more akin to divination than prophecy. The Catechism of the Catholic Church warns us that:

All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future.... Recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone (no. 2116).

5.3 Psycho-Social Implications

a. Fear and insecurity (psycho-spiritual bondage and manipulation)

The phenomena of neo-paganism and syncretism border on irrational fear and superstition. There is pervading fear and psychological insecurity that are necessitated by a superstitious worldview that see the machinations and manipulations of malignant spirits and their agents in every event. Asogwa remarks that “amidst such captivity due to fear of diabolic forces and other forms of superstition, the Christian makes recourse to whichever is handy between charms or amulets and sacramentals... in all, the fear persists unabated” (Asogwa 48). Njoku expatiates this point beautifully:



Due to this fear, some people turn to whatever belief system that can give them assurance of safety. So it is not unusual to see people who know nothing about the rosary wearing it as a protective charm around their neck and hands. Some will go as far as wearing both the finger rosary and another ring they received from a spiritual or traditional healer. The bigger issue with facing fear through the use of charms is the addictive impact this can create. Because the charm does not directly ameliorate fear, once a person begins the practice of making charms for protection, the tendency is to acquire more charms as the fear heightens (Njoku 2023).

Another unfortunate development arising from these issues is the resurgence of violent masquerades. While masquerades have always been a part of the Igbo cultural entertainment, these masked humans have been prone to unleash unprovoked violence on passersby sometimes resulting in grave injuries. In September 2024, two persons were reported to have died due to the activities of the *Oriokpa* Masquerade in Nsukka Local Government of Enugu State, resulting in the launching of an investigation into the activities of the masquerade cult by the state government (Ede 2024). This unhealthy behaviour of some young people has bred fear and made it difficult for some people to travel to their hometowns.

b. Impatience Syndrome

Our people always had the concept of a Supreme God, contrary to the erroneous notion that our ancestors did not know God. But our people conceived this Supreme Deity as a distant God. However, driven by the lack of patience to wait on this transcendent God, our people had recourse to intermediary deities. Such impatience still runs in the blood of Christians in Igboland today. Hence, people once used to expecting dramatic divine answers and interventions are prone to be bored by the present relative silence and indifference of the God of Christianity and often silence is interpreted as absence, and non-intervention as non-existence. As a result of this impatience syndrome, when the average Igbo Christian encounters problems, as Obiefuna observed, the person will seek solution in the Catholic Church (perhaps in terms of holy water, blessed oil etc). Whereby it fails, he or she proceeds to other healing homes, and then to fortune-tellers and makers of charms (58).

c. Mutual Suspicion

The malaise afore-described necessarily gives rise to mutual suspicion in the community, acrimony, rancor and even physical confrontation. This accounts for why many Christians no longer see distasteful things happening around them as a punishment for their own sins or as a cross to be borne, but as machinations of the evil people and forces around them. As Thagale aptly articulates the problem, “some people find it difficult to accept that objective conditions may militate against their success or wellbeing or that their condition of illness or misfortune has nothing to do with the next person. There is a clear reluctance to accept personal accountability for certain situations” (Thagale, 2023). It is not new in Igbo communities to hear of close family members accusing one another of practicing witchcraft and being responsible for one another’s misfortunes. People are suspicious of everything: physical objects, spiritual forces, neighbors, family members, ancestors, etc. In such a situation, religion, instead of giving meaning to life and



solidarity to the community, breeds suspicion, confusion, crisis of faith, and hostility in the community.

6. Recommendations

a. Intensified Theological Education for all Christians

There is thus an urgent need for intensified theological education of our Christians to enhance proper understanding of the true nature of Christianity and its mode of interaction with elements of culture and tradition. This will go a long way to make Christians less prone to patronizing such cheap theologies that advocate here-and-now panacea to existential difficulties, and be better prepared to live above the enslavement of the traditional mind-set that truncates the much needed integration of Christianity into the personality of the average African.

b. The Culture of Witness

Many people go into neo-paganism and syncretism because of disorientation with the scandalous or disreputable lives of some so-called Christians. It is necessary that all Christians, especially those directly involved in the work of educating others in the faith, must be shining examples of what they preach. This is because “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41). The Bishops of the United States called it the “culture of witness”. According to them, “a Christian life lived with charity and faith is the most effective form of evangelization... strengthens the faith of her members, and renews the faith of those who have slipped away from the Church” (U.S. Conference of Bishops, 2023). This is especially true for Igboland and Africa since “genuine witness by believers is essential to the authentic proclamation of the faith in Africa today” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 77).

c. Integral Christian Formation

Material and structural development of the Church is commendable and worthwhile, but should come at the expense of the mental and spiritual development of Christians. Integral Christian formation can be realized through profound teaching, preaching, retreats, summits, conventions and all other forms of pastoral charity.

d. Pastoral Attention on the Youths

Neo-paganism and syncretism are prevalent among a generation of youths that knew little or nothing about ATR because rushing back into its antiquated practices. This calls for urgent and serious pastoral attention on the young people. Thus they have to be engaged through teachings, conventions, skills acquisitions, economic empowerments, sporting events, Christian cultural festivals etc.

e. Authentic and Integral Inculturation

For inculturation to be proper and authentic, it has to be universal and integral in nature, touching all aspects of the human person. And so, to effectively confront the effects of faith crisis among our people, every aspect of Igbo culture must be open to and penetrated by the Christian message: our worldview, attitude, religion, language, music and dance, art, fashion and dressing, etc.

f. Digitalization of the Christian Message



The opportunities and advantages offered by social media in terms of communication are almost limitless and the Church must pass her message through these channels. Many magicians and charlatans that lure our people into paganism and syncretism are very influential on social media. Thus, it is advisable that pastors of the Christian faithful should take advantage of such opportunities to make the authentic Christian message and practices available for the public on social media and other digital means of information and communication.

7. Conclusion

Every culture presents its own peculiar challenge to the Christian faith. In our own cultural background the faith is seriously confronted by neo-paganism and syncretism, vestiges from our pre-Christian era. The onus therefore lies on our own theologians to rise up and come to grips with our own peculiar challenges to the Christian faith. This work, through its theological reflection and proposal of evangelical strategies, is a contribution to the efforts of well-meaning indigenous theologians and researchers who have already done some work in that regard. In particular, this research opines that the Church in Igboland ought to be determined and courageous enough to reach out to the people's cultural heritage with a view to humanizing its values, ideals and ethics by the Christian principles. Without such cultural dialogue and intensified catechetical instruction, our Christians would remain steeped in the miry pit of neo-paganism and syncretism, and Christianity in Igboland would continue to wallow in superficial religiosity, with consequent compromise of those values which Christianity holds dear.

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