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## CHRISTIANITY, IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND ISLAMIZATION

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### Abstract

*In all Igbo society, there are no atheists. This is because religion in the indigenous Igbo culture was not an independent institution. It is an integral and inseparable part of the society. Every Igbo man has the idea of the existence of the Supreme Being and worships him with every reverence. There was peace and tranquility among the people. The people had fear and respect for sacred objects. Morality, respect for elders and the fear for the gods were highly regarded. Since the arrival of Christianity and Islam in the Igbo society, the peace and stability in the Igbo society has been threatened. Christians and Muslims have resorted to unhealthy competition for religious and political power in order to assert their rights and supremacy which has resulted to violent encounter and consequently created a pluralized religious environment in the traditional Igbo society. Yet those who converted to Islamic and Christian religions still resort to the tradition religion in the face of serious challenges. This work among other things adopts a functionalist theory to arrive at its findings. And the methodologies such as sociological, phenomenological, anthropological and historical were utilized to harmonize on the issue of Islamization and Christian inversion of the traditional Igbo society. This work recommends that a proper enculturation theology be applied as a solution on the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture. It observed that the Igbo man is highly religious and have had much religious experience before the advent of Christianity and Islam. This work therefore concludes that all the element of foreign culture should be contextualized and adapted into the Igbo tradition.*

## Keywords

Christianity, Igbo Traditional Religion and Islamization

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## 1. Introduction

For over a century, Christianity, Islam and the Igbo traditional religion have been coexisting in Igbo land.

This coexistence sometimes has been mutual and sometimes the issue of religious intolerance sets in. Both Christianity and Islam see the Igbo people as a people who have no knowledge of God, hence the struggle to either Islamize them or Christianize them. Igbo is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria.

There is a misconception of the Igbo People and their belief system. The people were seen as a set of people who could not conceive God.

**Major A.G. Leonard (1968:429)**, remarked that:

The Igbo people are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and a deeply religious people, of whom it can be said that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bath religiously and sin religiously. In a few words the religion of these people as I have all along endeavored to point out is that their religion is their existence and their existence is their religion.

This observation is true of the Igbo. They have the idea of the Supreme Being and have been worshipping him in truth and in spirit not only that the Igbo religion has been an all embracing religion which has its cardinal principal as “live and let live”, it thus allows coexistence of people and cultures. The coming of the Christian and Islamic religions on the Igbo land brought new ideas and a kind of religious change. The division of people on the basis of their religious denominations and sets was nonexistent in the traditional Igbo society as each person respected the religious beliefs of his neighbors.

**Onunwa (1990:9)** observes that nothing has divided African countries more than the presence of the religions of the book.

According to him;

The Igbo who were said to be fragmentary, were not only united in their common reverence and dread of the oracles and deities of the people of the different subculture areas, but also some other ethnic

groups like the Ijaw were united with them in the acceptance of the appellate role of the priest as the custodian of the oracles.

There was peace, unity and tranquility in the Igbo society before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. The Igbo people were aware of the existence of the Supreme Being (Chukwu) who created all things. But to see them as a people without the knowledge of God became a problem to them. This work among other things tries to bring to bare the issue that the Igbo man has been worshipping the Supreme Being before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. Igbo traditional religion being their landlord accommodated these two foreign religions. It tries to bring to our knowledge the fact that the two new religions which arrived the Igbo society, in the process of trying to make the people accept their new religious beliefs brought much religious change and intolerance among the people. It reminds us of the fact that all the religions in Igbo land talks about one particular creator – The Supreme Being.

## 2. A Brief on the Igbo Race

Igbo is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria.

**Onuh (1991:54)** posits that there is an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term “Igbo”.

For **Ekwunu (2009:66)**, it is very difficult to arrive at the real etymological and semantic clarity of the word “Igbo”. According to him, the meaning can be trace in the imprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people.

**Afigbo (1975:12)** conjects that Igbo history can be described as terra incognita. For him, Igbo people are not indifferent to the crisis of identity. He Observes that the Igbo experience of colonialism and even the Biafra Civil War, sparked off in them the quest of a historical identity.

**Uozie (1991:16)** observes that “to date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of the territory”.

For **Ekwunu (2009:66)**, any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. In all these conjunctions, it remains that the Igbo belongs to the southeastern part of Nigeria, west Africa who speak the language Igbo.

### 3. The Unity of God in all Religion

In the introduction, it was made clear that the Igbo people are religious people, and they worship the true God the Supreme Being – the creator of the whole universe. Through the Igbo traditional religion. The introduction of the new religions into the existing Igbo traditional religion created much competition and social disruptions that each of the religions tries to keep its head above the deep waters. They forgot that each of them are talking and professing one being as the creator of the universe – the Almighty God, with which ever name they call Him.

According to the Christian and Muslim religions, God is the centre of all things. He created all things and sustains them in unity deriving that unity from His oneness. For the Qur'an the oneness of God (al-Tauhid) expresses His absolute authority and ownership of all things. "There is no god but Allah" (La illa illah Allah). According to Professor Abdul, Surah 112 (Surat – all-Ikhlās) says that God is "one in his person (dhatib), one in His works ('af'-alih)". From this view, there is unity or oneness in all creation.

The differences in religion and culture do not change this essential nature of God and His creation. Oyelade (1993:46) posits that in order to ensure the unity of the universe, Allah assumes the position of the universe, Allah assumes the position of the King (al-malik) (Surah 114). Allah is revealed as both the God and King of mankind. He does not just rule over his creations, but He is their God in whom their souls can find fulfillment and peace; (alam alaikum). For Al-Ghazzali, this views by implication shows that Allah as the King is:

The one whose essence and attributes are independent of all existing things but everything in existence is dependent upon (in need of) Him. In this sense He is an absolute king who needs nothing, but everything needs Him.

From the Christian Bible, it is stated clearly the fact that there is the unity of God. In Genesis 1:1, the opens with these words, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". The absolute authority of God and His ownership of all things run throughout the Bible.

Psalms 24:1 says "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those that dwell therein".

**Oyelade (1993:44)** opines that the unity of God is especially held and taught by the Jewish divines. For example as the Muslim child is taught to say "there is no god but Allah" so also the Jewish child must know the same recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4-9; vs. 4-5 reads

Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

According to him, in Mark 12:29-30, we find Jesus reproducing the above quotation as the answer to a scribe's question "which commandment is the first of all?" to the unity of God. Jesus added the principle for achieving the unity of mankind when he said "and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself" (verse 31).

God, the Absolute unity" expects the unity of his creatures. All mankind belong to him regardless of differences in culture, race, color, and religion. He has shown his singular concern for all by sending his messengers and revelations to them for example the Qur'an 2:136 reads;

Say O Muslims: we believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinctions between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered.

A similar view is expressed of God's concern for the generality of mankind in Hebrew 1:1-2

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in last days he has spoken to us by a son who he has appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

If the messages sent by God to the various religious groups came from a common divine source – why should man employ the different religions as basis of dissension and strife? Religions appear in the presence of God as a bunch of beautiful flowers of different colors and fragrance. Each religion uses its own mode of liturgy and expression of spiritual gifts as an expression of the glory of God. Even when one flower is more beautiful, it is still part of the bunch that constitutes the ultimate beauty.

Since God is absolute and the sole master of man and the universe, men are substantially the same and no tangible and actual distinction can be made among them on account of their accidental differences such as nationality, color, race or religion. Every human being is therefore related to each other and all become one community of brotherhood in their honorable and pleasant servitude to the most compassionate Lord of the universe.

The Igbo traditional religion cannot be eradicated but let every religion enjoy the essence of worshipping the only one and true God.

#### 4. Christianity And Islam In Igbo Land

Many historiographers have various dates for the advent of Christianity and Islam into Igbo land. For E. Arnold, (1982:8),

It may likely be between the 18th and 19th century. Christianity covering a wide area may be dated during the 19th century. The result was the coexistence and intermingling of the three main religious cultures – traditional, Islam and Christianity. Subsequently, this led, as is expected to a mutual awareness of religious pluralism.

According to **Kukah, M.H., (2011:1)**, the Igbo by nature are accommodating and by habit, ecumenical. For this is pronounced in some part of Igbo land, the Northern Nigeria and any other place where both Islam and Christianity have been accommodated by the traditional religions as we can see the presence of the adherents of these religions in very many households today.

**Oparanozie P. U. (2019:298)**, posits that the toleration that the indigenous religions displayed in accommodating both religions accounted for the spread of these faiths, Islam and Christianity did not do much to reciprocate these gestures. Their propagators, fired by zeal, rather sought these traditional religious beliefs and political system down to size.

#### 5. The Effect of the Co-Existence and Symbiosis

Apart from a bilateral relationship involving festival participation, inter marriage, community and cooperation and commercial engagements, this co-existence have affected the adherents of these religions. For instance, it has tremendously affected the Igbo life. Traditional societies have been disrupted. A new social order is emerging partly out of the old and partly as a response to the new contact with powerful external change agents. Often the impression one gets is that Christianity and Islam has made such a huge success in Igbo land that the traditional religion has no strong grounds again. Often it is presented that Christianity completely affected the traditional religion and transformed it in such a way that people lose sight of the fact that the form of Christianity in Igbo land today has a lot of traditional elements in it, same with the Islamic religion especially with the areas they occupy.

One important point I want to raise here is that both Christianity and Islam in Igbo land today are “tenant” of the traditional religion from whom they have “borrowed” many things. There has been a lot of conflicts and compromise between them. Many compilation studies which came

out in the recent past have shown the extent of such conflicts and accommodation as well as interactions between religious systems.

According to **Onunwa (1990:132)**,

From the early 1930's, some European Christian theologians who realized the errors of their predecessors who tried to destroy the traditional religion and culture adopted a new strategy to study how some elements of the traditional religion could be used as a means of propagating the Christian Gospel.

This trend has been reversed in a subtle way by which the traditional religion adopted some elements of Christianity to equip itself in its struggle for survival. One basic issue here is that both Christianity and Islam must try as much as possible to allow their religion to take root in the soil of the Igbo culture in which they are planted. A situation whereby people who claim to be converts of these new religions are still influenced by the activities of the traditional religion. This makes these religions to still be alien institution intruding upon but not integrated with social institutions.

## **6. The Need for Proper Enculturation**

Obilor, (2010:277), opines that scholars of Igbo religion and culture agree that there conflicts and tensions in relation to Igbo culture and the new religions – Christianity and Islam. They also agree that the root of the problem can be traced to colonial evangelization. The Igbo are often exposed to the hard choices between what they are used to in their traditional sphere and what is proposed to them as alternative by the new religions. It is clear that to be truly Igbo, one must reject some of the things that are proposed to him for acceptance by the new religions. The sources of tension are the inability to manage both, religion equitably. It has been stated without number that no one gives himself gratuitously always. Cardinal Arinze (1990:55) describes the Igbo in conflict because of his new found religion

When they find themselves in moments of crisis – sickness, matrimony, birth of a child, funeral of relatives, construction of a house, and for students, facing important and difficult examinations. It is not rare to find them having recourse to superstitious practices of the traditional religion.

Enculturation means to create a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question, but also as an enrichment of the wide world religions.

In enculturation, all elements that don't conform to the right worship of the true God are eliminated. This work therefore suggest that enculturation should be the proper means through which both the Christian and Islamic religions can penetrate more in the life of the Igbo man and his culture.

## 7. Recommendations

From this work, we have been able to establish that the Igbo people are religious in nature, and have been worshipping their God – the Supreme Being in their traditional religion. Even at that, they still accommodated Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam should realize that Igbo traditional religion is their landlord in Igbo land.

Christianity and Islam should also be aware that before their arrival, in Igbo land, the people are already aware of the existence of God and worships him in truth and in spirit and should find a proper way of introducing their religion to the people without force so that those who respond to their teaching will do that with their whole heart.

Again, all these religions preach peace, there is no need for conflicting situations rather, let them realize that all of them preach the message of the only one and true God.

## 8. Conclusion

In this write up, we have tried to look at the issue of Christianity, Igbo traditional religion and Islamization.

We were able to observe that the Igbo people have conceived the Idea of the Supreme Being before the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Igbo land.

We also realized the fact that Igbo traditional religion accommodated the two new religions and created a peaceful atmosphere for them. But the effort to eradicate and down size the Igbo traditional religion may not be the right thing to do. The work therefore recommend for a proper enculturation as a means through which the religions can co-exist in Igbo land and build up a stronger and veritable Igbo society.

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