

Cult of Igbo Ancestors and Veneration of Saints in the Orthodox Christian World: A Comparative Analysis of Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity

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Abstract

Traditional beliefs and practices creditably flourished in Igboland before the advent of Christianity. Thereafter, and with time, there were gradual attenuations in these concepts because of the retarding effects authenticated by the principles of Christian Religion being practiced concurrently with the Igbo cultural norms and values. This development (acceptance of Christianity) was consequent upon the Igbo strong belief and adherence to the Supreme Deity. It is the same conviction that led them to have and practice Traditional Religion in their own way. From the principal findings of this study, the researchers observed and experienced that it has become plausible to extricate the similarities the Igbo Traditional Religion shares in common with Christianity, and this relationship explains why Christianity is not strange to the Igbo people. However, the goal of this study is to prove that the Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity indeed have very much in common. The researchers employed the use of both primary and secondary sources of data collection to elicit correct and replicable study.

Keywords: Cult of Igbo Ancestors; Veneration of Saints; Orthodox Christianity; Comparative Analysis

Introduction

The comparison drawn from the study of the Old Testament and the Traditional Religion indicates that the Old Testament has African origin and more related to the Igbo Traditional Religion than to other types of religion. The Igbo Traditional Religion is pivoted on the Supreme Deity with God having unlimited attributes in the Igbo religion; His aura penetrates every department of the cultural life. Apart from the God Almighty, there exist myriads of other intermediary deities (*alusi*) and elementals in Igbo religion that should not be confused with God, the maker of heaven and earth. These invisible beings and forces were each created by God Himself to execute certain or special duties in human community. The *alusi* rewards virtuousness as well as chastises undesirable practices among the human race. They (God and elemental spirits) remain the custodians of moral values and codes of conduct for man.

Sacrifices of blood and libation are proffered, at the altars of these forces, to activate them into action when necessary. Also among the Supernatural Forces are the spirits of man's dead biological relations (ancestors). It can therefore be depicted here as already documented elsewhere in this study that the minor supernatural beings are varied with their ultimate assignments and outputs directed and perpetuated by the Omnipotent Deity Himself. These gods serve as mere messengers to God. The Igbo believe in the efficacy of God the Father; they direct communication with Him through supplications.

From the synthesis of the dogma of religion, it follows that these deities are analogous to the angels in Judeo-Christian tenet/domain. It is pertinent to admonish that the Igbo people do not worship their ancestors; rather the cult of Igbo ancestors simulates the veneration of the Saints in the Christian world. So, and really, the Igbo people venerate their ancestors and do not worship them. Generally, the Igbo are of the conception that God does not kill anyone. They believe the devil (*ekwensu*) and the idol (*alusi*) are responsible for evildoers' death as it is the wish and plan of God that people live to old age. As stated by Nwosu (2018) that God has no shrine; everyone reverences Him at all times. The Igbo exalt Him through Kola nut and white chalk (*nzu*) and not using specific ritual and blood sacrifice. Kola nuts and white chalk therefore are the critical objects or means deployed by Ndigbo in talking to the Supreme Deity.

However, as stated by Eme (2020), in discussing the drifting away of the Igbo people from their styles of cultural values, he says; "This *de novo* spirit sweeping across the Igbo people must be checked"¹. The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast the rich and esteemed cultural heritage and ethos of Igbo Traditional Religion with the orthodox practices of Christian religion. The researchers believe this comparative analysis is apt to provide modern youths and posterities with plausible and relevant data serving a good access/source for consultation and guidance, a *nemine contradicente* making them (readers) conscious of what, in the main, they should have been practicing and be proud of expectedly. Thus, the love for one's patrimony, moral rectitude, and loss of interest hastening for acquisition of foreign social values should be the ultimate. This concept constitutes a prudent gateway to wisdom, no more no less. It (the purpose) also aims at stirring up healthy controversy which may generate more information that could complement this and other works in the end.

Moreover, the paramount aim of this study is to inform, educate and motivate our people, especially the youths who have every right to have adequate and sound knowledge of what happened in their environment in respect of how their forefathers lived. Presently, Ndigbo as a people are swinging like pendulum in motion, since we have lost our norms and therefore can neither be identified with the western or foreign patterns of life, which we

now so much champion. Thus, we are neither here nor there. And it is even not a credit that we should underrate our own styles of lives in preference to ones that are foreign to us. This inevitably borders on inferiority complex and therefore should be deprecated and treated with the greatest contempt to justify our right to self-determination, which we had so much labored to achieve.

Comparative Analysis of the Christian Veneration of Saints and Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion

The Igbo ancestors are always remembered in every Igbo religious ritual and worship while they are also presumed to be present in meals with the living. The admittance into the ancestral cult is not automatic as several criteria are first put in place and considered: living a good life and dying at a ripe old age. The African Traditional Religion, the veneration of ancestors is based on the belief that the dead continue to exist after the physical death. According to Mbaegbu (2012), the rank of *ndi ichie*, the living-dead or ancestors as he exchanged the appellations “is the highest or the topmost in the grading of human spirits in Igbo traditional thoughts”¹.

Those who lived well among the dead are venerated because they are believed to be not only living but also can influence the fortune of the living. This practice forms the basis of African Traditional Religion. The goal in some African cultures is to ensure the joy of the ancestors and to attract their favour and care on the living. The non-religious or social function of ancestor veneration according to Madu (2003), is to cultivate kinship values such as filial piety, family loyalty and continuity of the family lineage. From this analysis, one could adopt Jahn (1961) view that “the dead are not alive, but exist”³ as what explains the Igbo belief on life-after death.

Ancestor veneration is not the same as worship of a deity or deities. While the ancestors were once human persons, the deities are created spirits that minister with some portfolios under the Supreme Being. Ancestors are better acquainted with human needs because they were once humans. This is why they are recourse to, when in need. Uchendu (2010) gave a detailed account of the role of the ancestors in Igbo world view when he said:

They are also well disposed to play their benevolent roles in their respective families, villages and clans. As the Supreme Being, they are better placed to act as intermediaries between the gods and the Supreme Being and the members of their individual families and clans. And also, because they possess better knowledge of the goings-on in the spirit world, they constantly warn their descendants and kinsmen of impending dangers and attract the most favourable fortunes. They also

watch over their families as loving fathers and constantly seek means of obtaining blessings, protection and prosperity of their families. (p. 65).

However, in some cultural groups, the objective for the veneration of the ancestors is not to seek any help or favour from them but to fulfill filial duty. In both ways, food is offered to the ancestors who are believed to be in communion with their living. When these ancestors are offended either directly by depriving them of their recognition or indirectly by defiling the land, propitiatory offerings and purification rituals are celebrated to appease them and the land.

Veneration of ancestors is preferred to worship of ancestors because many scholars who objected to the use of latter did that because of the connotation which the word “worship” bears. Worship in their description is the devotion accorded to a deity or a divine being. For these authors, what the venerators do is not an act of worship since that will imply that the ancestors have become divine beings. The veneration is rather a respect and honour to the ancestors for their great and heroic deeds and good lives and then to ask their favour. It is also very important to know that some ancestors have been attributed with the havocs and the misfortunes of their family members who neglected the celebration of their memory and their veneration.

The veneration of ancestors is made manifest in the way the traditional people pray. Because the ancestors are believed to be living even though they are physically dead, they are invoked in the prayers of the Igbo people. We hear prayer of this pattern from many Igbo person as adopted from Ifesieh in Uzuoku (1988):

Chukwu, biko taa oji: God please eat kola. *Chineke, biko taa oji:* Creator please eat kola. *Ala taa oji:* Earth Deity eat kola. *Nna anyi ha taa oji:* Our forefathers eat kola. *Ndi mbu na ndi egede tanu oji:* Those who were at the beginning of time, eat kola. (p. 56).

In the prayer aforementioned, one discovers that the ancestors (forefathers) are found in the hierarchy of spirits beginning from the Supreme Spirit. They are invited in the Igbo prayer session and are sent petitions. In some areas in Igboland, it is forbidden not to keep some food in the pots around the house lest these family members from the other world come and find the pot empty. Shrines are made for them where libations are poured in their honour and petitions are sent to them. Nwala (1985) recaptures this fact thus: “ancestral shrines are quite common in several Igbo communities. The shrines are severally called *Ndiichie* or *Ngwu* (*Ngwu* is in the shape of a mud pyramid with clay plate or pot on top of it and a small building to shelter it). The ancestors in Igbo religion are intermediaries between the living and the deity. They intercede for them and protect them from harms.

In relation to the ancestral veneration in Igbo traditional religion is the veneration of saints in Christendom. The beginning of the veneration of saints in the orthodox Christian world could be traced to the experience of the Early Christians during their persecutions. The early Christians were believed to have taken refuge in catacombs in Rome when their lives were on the verge of destruction by the Roman demagogues. In these catacombs, they prayed amidst graves and even used coffins and tombs in some cases to make altar for the celebration of the Eucharist. Records have it that in the early post-apostolic era, the church venerated the dead and witnessed miracles like healing, sweet smell in connection to the bodies of these dead Christians. One does not need to be told that the major underlying factor to these actions was their belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Similar to this was the Christian action of obtaining the remains of the martyrs. These martyrs together with the Christian leaders were asked to pray for the people to the point that even after the death of these leaders, their prayers were still sought with a belief that even at death they are still effective. This informs the present-day irresistible practice of seeking the prayers of the Christian living-dead (the saints). The saints are those whose lives were outstanding in holiness and sanctity.

In the Catholic and Orthodox churches where these saints are venerated, the practice is carefully distinguished from the worship given to God alone. Nwangwu (2018) distinguished between worship as veneration and worship as adoration. Worship as adoration is given to God alone and is designated by the Latin *latria* by Catholic theologians while worship as veneration which is an honour or respect given to distinguished holy persons in the church is represented by the Latin *dulia*. As early as 167 AD from the time of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, some historians stated that his body was preserved as a relic and a day was set aside for the commemoration of his death as a feast. There was also the erection of small shrines over the tombs of martyrs then. Not until the Edict of Milan (313 AD) and other official recognitions of Christianity “that the public cult of the saints attained full acceptance and began its true growth”. By 4th century, the tombs of martyrs had become the location and foundation of many large churches. By this time too, veneration of saints and their relics were so rated that a council of bishops meeting in Gangra (c.340) went as far as threatening excommunication for any Christian who despised relics.

Other evidences on the various ways Catholics venerated the saints in different nations abound. For instance, Park (2010) notes that in South Korea, ancestor veneration is recognized even by the church. He points that in the said country, “the Church ban on ancestral ritual was lifted in 1939 when the Catholic church formally recognized ancestral

rites as a civil practice”.⁸ The internet Wikipedia on the veneration of the dead also reveals that the ceremony of going to the cemetery and lightening of candles to dead relatives on the day of the dead which it amazingly identified as All Saints (1Nov.) existed in Europe before the Roman rule. In the U.S for instance, pictures of ancestors with flowers are seen on the roadsides for accident dead relatives. Even among the non- Roman Catholic denominations is found the practice of veneration or at least respect of the dead. Wikipedia reports that members of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints perform posthumous baptism and other rituals for their dead relatives.

The Essence of Veneration of Saints and Ancestors for the Christians and Igbo Traditionalists

The essence of veneration of the saints and ancestors is found in this related concept: “the communion of the saints, the living does not only accord this great respect to them but they also ask their help in prayer. The communion of the saints is not the same as necromancy where the dead are conjured for the purpose of causing harm or gaining knowledge of secret things. The communion is rather of prayer done to the triumphant members of the church and traditional Igbo religionists.

The same way the Catholic Church invites the saints to pray for them is the same way the Africans pours libations for their ancestors to intercede on their behalf in the land of the dead. The church believes in the organic unity of the church militant and triumphant, while the Igbo traditionalists believes on the ever presence of their living-dead and always invites them to partake in the activities of the living as a way of guaranteeing their security. In the Christian world, the participants in the communion are called saints (both living and dead) because of their fraternal relationship.

The help which the saints render includes surely the help of protecting the faithful especially those who invoke the saints in their devotions. Hence, we hear of patron saints of various places and conditions. These saints are sent petitions as done to the ancestors. Their relics are kept as symbols to their presence in chapels and shrines dedicated to them. This act is not far from the practice of *Ngwu* in the ancestral veneration pointed by Nwala in our earlier exposition.

In both venerations (the ancestors and saints) there is a familiarity. While that of the former is the family-tie, the latter is about the familiarity of faith relationship. The clear picture of the actions involved in the veneration of the saints especially in the early centuries of the history of the church when the practice began could be seen in the description made by Isichei (1995) about Monica, the mother of Augustine. She said: “Augustine writing in AD 397-8, observed, it had been my mother’s custom in Africa to make meal-cakes and bread

and wine to the shrines of saints”². Meer (1966) also asserts that the invocation of and veneration of the saints were solemn occasions approved at the Council of Trent. There the bishops were authorized to teach that the saints reign with Christ and pray for men. They were to teach that it is “good and salutary to invoke them as advocates”.

The underlying fact here is that there is a communion between the *noumena* (the incorporeal world) and the phenomena (the material world). This is not far from the Igbo belief in the existence of two worlds: the physical and the spiritual worlds which are though distinct from each other have the essential link that one cannot really continue its existence without the other. It is important to also note that the practice of the ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and religion stems from this belief. While people like Triebel (1992) believe that a link exists between ancestor veneration and the communion of the saints, Ela (1995) insists that it is deceptive to think that such a resemblance exists. We therefore refuse to subscribe to any opinion similar to that of Mbogu (2011) which holds that ancestor veneration or more specifically in his words, “ancestor Christology” may hinder individuals from understanding the true implication of Christ for their lives. Instead of posing such obstacles as posited by Mbogu, this practice when properly inculturated in a way that is unfettered with syncretism will give more meaning to Orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. It will ensure the authenticity in the Christian worship in Africa which will sink deep into African Christians.

Conclusion

After all the polemics on the issue of the veneration of the saints and that of the ancestors in Igbo religion, the simple fact is that a communion with the dead who are believed to be alive exists in the two religions. While the approaches and the rituals involved in this communion may differ, the truth of their intercessory function is acknowledged in both. Hence a link exists between veneration of the saints and the ancestors. Because of this link which we have proved, there is urgent need for a move for enculturation. A delay or total rejection of this simply prepares a good ground for hypocritical or syncretical Christianity to thrive which has already taken place to an extent. There should be no contradiction in holding a mixture of belief and practice from two or more religious traditions in Africa. In this situation, the person’s unconscious life is deeply traditional, but his waking life is oriented towards one of the world’s religions. It is in a way to reducing the acute rise of syncretism in Igbo religion that we are concluding this study on the premise that the Africans search for their identity, is not to imitate a particular saint from the Roman Calendar, but to situate the ancestors within the mystery of the Christian faith.

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