

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN CENTRAL NIGERIA

Terna Mark Gboko
History Department,
Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria
ternamarkg@gmail.com
+2348062879701

Abstract

This chapter dwells on Christianity and the impact it has on indigenous religious practices in Central Nigeria, this has been done as a result of the scarce nature of academic literature on the subject matter. The study adopted the use of secondary sources of data to articulate the discourse. It examined the nature and character of indigenous religions in central Nigeria before the advent of Christianity using the selected cases of Tiv, Idoma, and Igala ethnic groups in the geographical enclave. Given this, the chapter argues that Christianity is not an indigenous religion but rather it was introduced by European missionaries and subsequently was embraced by the indigenous people. It also argues that Christianity brought about changes in the nature and character of the people's way of life. The chapter examines the impact of Christianity on indigenous religious practices in the area. The chapter found out that Christianity contributed decisively to the erosion of core indigenous religious practices thereby tempering with the people's core ancestral norms, values, and beliefs.

Keywords: Impact; Christianity; Indigenous Religious Practices; Central Nigeria

1.0 Introduction

Religion is an integral part of human society, especially in African societies and Central Nigeria in particular. The importance attached to religion emanated from the fact that any occurrence in society had a religious narrative. As a result, there was a belief in supreme beings like deities and gods because the people attributed good fortune and misfortune to these beings. The conviction the people had in the existence of these supreme beings led to the formulation of indigenous religious practices which enabled them to pay homage, reverence, and worship to their spiritual providers. However, the introduction of Christianity by European missionaries in the 15th century ushered in an era of change which had a significant impact on the nature and character of indigenous religious practices in the area.

Be that as it may, over the years scholarly articles have been published to reveal the peculiarities of indigenous religions in the area, on the other hand, some scholarly works have examined the general impact of Christianity on the people's lives some examples of the numerous works are Fafunwa, A.B. (1974). *History of Education in Nigeria*, London. Falola, T. (1991). et al, *History of Nigeria 2: Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century* and Wegh, S.F. (eds.) *Catholic Diocese of Makurdi at 50: A Celebration of Service to Humanity*. Despite the wealth of literature about indigenous religious

practices and Christianity in the area, maybe little attention has been paid to the impact of Christianity on indigenous religious practices in Central Nigeria.

It is in line with the above that this chapter profiles the impact of Christianity on indigenous religious practices in Central Nigeria. The objective is to bring out certain peculiarities about the impact of Christianity on indigenous religious practices. To achieve this, the chapter has been sectionalized into various sections namely introduction, conceptual clarification, nature and character of indigenous religion in Central Nigeria, Christianity and its impact on indigenous Religious practices in Central Nigeria, and conclusion.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

The theme of this chapter has important terms that need conceptual clarification to provide clarity as it pertains to the usage of concepts in this chapter. Therefore, the concepts to be interrogated by this chapter are religion, Christianity, and central Nigeria. According to Ajiki:

The term *religionis* derived from the Latin term *religio*, the etymology of which is disputed. Some scholars have tried to *religio* with other Latin terms, such as *relegare* (to reread), *relinquere* (to relinquish), and *religare* (to relegate, to unite, to bind together). The root word “religare” particularly when applied in the sense of persons being bound to God or superior powers, has been the most common, or classical understanding. (Ajiki, 2016: 6)

He further observed that religion is a human activity that satisfies one's inherent spiritual needs and desires and it is a universal phenomenon that is virtually as old as the human scene itself. He also stressed that no matter when or how human beings developed, from the time they became human their irresistible urge to worship has created and still creates endless forms of religious behavior. (Ajiki, 2016).

On his part, (Durkheim, 1915) defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. By sacred things, he meant things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices that unite into one single moral community and all those who adhere to them. Similarly, Aloko and Abdullahi defined religion to be:

In general, religion involves one's conduct, principle, way of life, concept of the hereafter, and one's way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively. Hence, religion cannot be limited to man's relation with spirit/gods/God, because it also determines the relation of its adherents with others who are either "believers" of such faith or "unbelievers".(Aloko and Abdullahi, 2013: 13).

For this paper, religion is defined as a system of belief and practice that involves the worship of a Supreme Being by a particular group of people. The Supreme Being is often revered by the worshipers as the being that has the authority to bless good deeds and punish evil deeds.

Christianity according to Ajiki:

Takes its name from the title of "Christ" attributed to Jesus (from Greek Christos, which means "anointed" the Hebrew word for "Anointed" is *Mashiah*, hence the English word “Messiah”). It emerged in Palestine (modern Israel). (Ajiki,2016: 224)

For this chapter, Christianity is defined as a religion or spiritual doctrine built on the teachings of Jesus Christ the son of God who works in a Trinity as God the son with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is a religion introduced to the indigenous people of central Nigeria by the European missionaries.

Indigenous religious is another key term in the chapter and it has been captured here as those practices that are religiously oriented which was adopted by the indigenous people of central Nigeria as a pathway to interacting with spiritual beings and for the worship and reverence of the Supreme Being. Giving more light to the issue of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) which birthed indigenous religious practices, Awolalu noted that:

It is the inborn and aboriginal religion of Africans, embraced by the forefathers of the present generations. It is described as the religion that emerged from the sustaining faith of the forebears of the present generation of Africans passed from generation to generation and still practiced today by the present generation of Africans. It is a religion without a founder, as 'the founders cannot be found no matter how far we go back in history. AIR is the belief of the forefathers in the existence of the Supreme God, divinities, Spirit beings, Ancestors and mysterious powers, good and evil, and the afterlife. (Awolalu, 1991: 30-40).

For the discussion in this chapter indigenous religion is defined as a form of peculiar religion that has its origin and roots among the aboriginal people of a particular indigenous community. It is a religion that strongly believes in the existence of ancestors, oracles, spirits, and mystical powers and it varies in nature and character from one community to the other with some certain level of affinity.

3.0 Central Nigeria in Historical Perspective

Central Nigeria is a geographical area that encloses states that are located centrally on the map of the country. In geographical parlance, the states that are found in the above-mentioned area are collectively called the Middle Belt states and they include, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, and Kwara states. These states have diverse ethnicities, none of them can lay claim to having one ethnic group and as a result, this area is known for multiple indigenous religious practices because each of the ethnic group have a peculiar religion. The area in question is saturated with numerous ethnic groups and making a detailed fact sheet about the religious practices will rather make a book chapter too ambiguous. Therefore, this chapter selects some dominant ethnic groups like the Tiv, Idoma, and Igala people in the area to paint a vivid picture of the nature of indigenous religious practices and sum up by bringing out relevant examples of the impact of Christianity on the phenomenon under discourse.

4.0 Nature and Character of Indigenous Religion in Central Nigeria Area Before Christianity

Indigenous religion before the advent of Christianity was a priority because the religious practices adopted by the various people mirrored the centrality of religion among the people, to the indigenous people any event that occurred under the sun was a result of the machinations of Supreme Beings or supernatural forces. Emphasizing the importance of religion in societies, Latejuopined that:

Religion is found in every human society in the world. It is one of the most important structures in all the established human societies that make up the entire social system. The major interest of religion from the theological point of view is

about the sacred, the holy, or the numinous. Religion is concerned with man's relation to and attitude towards God and other spiritual beings. Because religion is concerned with the divine, its institutions have been the most viable forms of human associations. Religion concerns itself with the most sublime of human aspirations; it is regarded as the source of morality and public order and the inner peace of the individual persons. It is regarded as a civilizing element. At the same time, it has been accused of being a stubborn obstacle, which retards progress and of promoting fanaticism and intolerance, conflict, ignorance, and superstition. In the Nigerian context, religion is regarded as one of the cohesive factors in society. However, the major significance of religion is to bring peace and harmony among men. There is no traditional society in Nigeria that can do away with religion because it permeates all the activities of life. (Lateju, 2008 : 7).

Given the foregoing, communities in central Nigeria before the advent of Christianity were religiously inclined. (Ndemanu, 2018) succinctly stated that traditional religions have had tremendous influence on Africans in their thought processes, belief systems, and worldviews. (Olupona, 2007) on his part noted that Traditional African religions refer to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the people of Africa that include worship, consultation of priests, rituals, symbols, cosmology, arts, practices, and society. The diversity of religions within African communities prompted (Mbiti, 1970) to argue that it should be religions in the plural. His reason is that Africans are notoriously religious and there are different beliefs and traditions according to ethnic groups. There are so many ethnic groups as there are many traditional religions. Furthermore, he argues that African indigenous religions do not have one origin or one historic movement and that the beliefs among the different communities differ greatly.

Suffice it to say the religions of the various people of central Nigeria before Christianity are usually discussed in the academic milieu of African Indigenous Religion (AIR), thus this peculiar phenomenon has distinct features that have set her apart from other religions around the globe. Primarily, AIR is based on the belief in Supreme Beings, spirits, divinities, deities, ancestor veneration, sacrifices, reincarnation, good and evil. These attributes of AIR were also the yardstick of indigenous religions in Central Nigeria before Christianity.

However, it is pertinent to note that practitioners of AIR in central Nigeria are hard to come by in contemporary times. The advent of Christianity brought about a change in the religious scenario of the area and the change was so drastic that it ushered in a new *modus operandi* as it concerned the spirituality of the people. Christianity as a new religion did not only affect indigenous religions in the area it also had far-reaching consequences on the culture and history of the people.

5.0 Indigenous Religious Practices among the Tiv, Idoma, and Igala People of Central Nigeria

Studies on Christianity are in their numbers as a result historians and scholars from disciplines that interrogate the subject of religion have exhaustively traced the advent or history of Christianity in Nigeria, A.P. Adegba and J.F.A. Ajayi just to mention are some of the scholars that have discussed Christianity in academic quarters. An attempt to point out the origin of Christianity as it pertains to the study area in this chapter can amount to the repetition of an over-flogged case study hence the need to swiftly attend to the impact that Christianity has had on indigenous religious practices in the area.

The Tiv people are an indigenous ethnic group that is settled in Benue state of central Nigeria and before the advent of Christianity had practiced a distinct form of religion. They had peculiar religious beliefs that governed the spiritual needs of the people. The indigenous religion of the people was accompanied by certain practices because religion without practice is deemed obsolete. Against this backdrop, the indigenous religion of the people was popularly referred to as *Kwagh Aondo* which translates to affairs of God. According to (Dzurgba, 2016) *Aondo* is the native name for the Supreme Deity or Supreme God and the creator of the universe (*akaa shawon chii*) and the earth (*Tar*). Therefore, *Aondo* as a native name in the Tiv language is an equivalent of God in the Bible in particular and Christianity in general. (Ajiki, 2016) on his part noted that the Tiv religious belief is that *Aondo* the creator God, is father God is father of the indigenous ancestor of the Tiv people known as *Takuruku* who is called the deity of Tiv.

Extrapolating on the nature and character of the Tiv indigenous Religion Waapela observed that:

Tiv Religion and culture are intricately intertwined with their cosmology. As a consequence, their religious beliefs, and physical and meta-physical conceptions constitute in their entirety, an inseparable worldview. Tiv cosmology centers on the existence of *Aondo* (God), *akombo* (rituals), *tsav* (witchcraft), *azov/ujijingi* (spirits) all conceived as supernatural while *or/umache* (man/human), *tar* (land, district, locality) and *gba' aondo* (nature) are similarly conceived as natural. Yet, most importantly, Tiv's religion hinges on cosmic powers, on the belief in *akombo* and *tsav*. The Tiv also approach the divine either *Aondo* and *or akombo* among other elements of worship. (Waapela, 2012:7).

Suffice it to say, that the people had a religious belief and practice that was entirely different from the doctrine introduced by Christianity, at most the new religion changed and affected the practice and belief system of the people.

The Idoma are another prominent ethnic group within central Nigeria that had a viable indigenous religion before the advent of Christianity. Given the foregoing, (Adole, 2018) opined that like every other African ethnic group, the Idoma were deeply religious, practicing the Idoma version of the African Traditional Religion. Religion was a very strong factor in Idomaland, and exerted probably the greatest influence on their worldview and thought pattern in the pre-colonial era. He further noted that a main attribute of the Idoma indigenous religion was the recognition of one Supreme God called *Owoicho* and the people believed he lived in heaven and had absolute control of nature. (Adole, 2018).

To them, *Owoicho* was omniscient and transcendent in nature. From heaven he controlled everything in the world that affects virtually all aspects of human existence. Thus, the people's life was regulated by religion. Their birth, death, and burial had religious connotations and importance. He was invisible and could not be physically approached by the people. Therefore, he chose to rule the universe through intermediaries such as *Alekwu*, *Anjenu*, *Owo*, *Abor*, *Enyawu*, *Iyampe*, *Idogwu*, *Ejembi*, and *Egil*. (Apochi, 1995). Expatriating on the functions of the supernatural intermediaries, (Adole, 2018) maintained that the people as mere mortals could not communicate with *Owoicho* directly therefore through the instrumentality of the priests the people made supplications to the intermediaries each time there was a need for divine intervention. As a result, Shrines were common in Idoma society where the deities were consulted through prayers, sacrifices, and libation. He

further observed that although the *Owoicho* was recognized as the creative supernatural force, because of the physical distance between the Idoma and god, the people thought it necessary to look for a substitute that acted as an intermediary between them and the Supreme Being.

Another striking feature of Idoma indigenous religious practice was the belief that the universe is made up of two realms which is the physical and spiritual realm and to them, the manifestation in the physical realm was the orchestration of the spirit world where the *Owoicho* directed the deities to interfere. As a result, *Owoicho* governed the two realms through the intermediaries they performed important duties like protection of the lives, provision of good fortune, healing, and luck.

The Igala people resident in Kogi state in Central Nigeria are a numerically dominant ethnic group in the study area that had a distinct indigenous religion. According Ojoajogwu:

The Igala Traditional Religious Ideas are imbedded in a monotheistic belief in one Supreme Being, *Ojo*, who nevertheless, has agents and intermediaries between him and man. These agents and intermediaries, although referred to as deities and spirits, exist essentially in the physical and spiritual world. And the reason for this is the supposedly remote existence of the Supreme Being, who can only be reached through these agents. This conditions the Igala belief in the world of spirits and natures as transcendental as well as actual and thus forms the basis upon which certain spiritual things are capable of manifesting themselves realistically. The manifestation of such spirit enhances the various styles of manipulation and machinations which are sometimes regarded as witchcraft, sorcery, and magic. (Ojoajogwu, 2023).

He further affirmed that The Supreme Being, *Ojo* has several attributes in Igala to denote his supremacy over all the things created by him. Thus, there are such attributes as *Ojo-Onu* (God the King); perceived as the king of kings, *Ojo-Ajogwu* (God the Warrior); as the most victorious, *Ojo-Uma* (God of Knowledge); as the most knowledgeable, *Ojo Ogecha* (God the Truth); as the most truthful judge etc. (Ojoajogwu, 2023)

There was also the peculiar attribute of spirits and deities associated with the Igala indigenous religion where by the people strongly believed in the existence of the above-named spiritual beings. Throwing more light on the issue Ojoajogwu observed that:

In Igala religious ideas, deities and spirits generally refer to the second cadre in the hierarchy of beings, and these are subject to the first order because they are created by him. Deities and spirits are powerful because it is believed that they have a more direct contact with the Supreme Being, at whose service they are day in and day out. Like the Supreme Being, whose abode is essentially in the sky, the abode of the deities and spirits is in the sky but being spirits they can visit the earth anytime they want to do so. Hence their abode on the earth is represented by shrines and cults of worship. (Ojoajogwu, 2023)

There was also a strong belief in the spiritual supremacy of ancestors, given Ngedu posited that:

There is almost a thin line between divinities and ancestors in Igala culture. However, the ancestors (Ibegwu) rank second in authority to the Supreme Being.

Some persons extol the Ibegwu as having a direct link with God himself. This is due perhaps to the role of Ibegwu as messengers or representatives of God. In interior villages where Igala culture is practiced to its fullest, God is not even mentioned when Ibegwu is the topic of discussion because it is taken for granted that they act in place of God. People always tend to fear those things that threaten their life and their sense of courage is affected, especially about disasters. The presence of the Ibegwu confirms the statement; "The evil that men do live with them. (Negedu, 2013, p, 118).

He further observed that Ancestors were especially remembered once every year at the *Ibegwu* festival. The day of this festival occurs shortly before yams are harvested. It marked the beginning of the period of harvesting yams. In this period, the ancestors were appreciated for their protection throughout the previous year and were appeased to bestow more blessings in the coming year. The *Ibegwu* shrine was cleaned thoroughly during this period in preparation for the festival. (Negedu, 2013).

6.0 Impact of Christianity on Indigenous Religious Practices in Central Nigeria

Having examined selected indigenous religious practices in Central Nigeria, the next move is to analyze how Christianity has impacted the indigenous religious practices in contemporary times. It has been earlier acknowledged in this chapter that before the advent of Christianity and the subsequent acceptance of the religion by the indigenous people of central Nigeria there was the presence of different religions with different religious beliefs that characterized the people's spirituality. For instance, the three ethnic groups selected for discussion in this chapter provided adequate examples of the distinctive nature of the religious practices in the area. Thus, the Tiv Idoma, Igala, and the many that have not been discussed in the chapter all had very peculiar religions and unique religious practices.

Be that as it may, the very first impact of Christianity on religious practices is the issue of the extinction of religious practices in the area. It is a fact that indigenous religion and its practice in central Nigeria was so revered that almost all human activity centered around religious activities, it was so important that every member was an adherent of the indigenous religion. As a result members of different communities usually came out in high numbers to participate in religious festivals and rituals. However, the advent of Christianity ushered in a new religious norm that slowly pushed out indigenous religious practices to the extent that adherents of indigenous religions are not commonly to come by in the area and the trend has affected the obligatory role of the people in the indigenous religious practices of the area. This can be felt when one considers the fact that adherents of indigenous religions in most cases do hide to carry out certain religious practices or rituals. Talking about indigenous religious practices is even seen as a taboo, thus the few practitioners found around are referred to as witches and wizards thereby painting the religion as an evil one and the narrative has forced indigenous religious practices into extinction in contemporary times.

Another impact is the erosion of religious practice diversity in the area, by this, the chapter means the coming of Christianity introduced the universality of God hence the doctrine of one Supreme Being who has control over the seen and unseen. Hitherto, the people had believed in various gods and a supreme being whom they addressed with different terminologies and also envisaged with a unique

perspective. To the various indigenous people, their god was different from the one worshiped and revered by another group of people. For instance, the Tiv felt their god was different from that of the Idoma and Igala respectively so were the religious practices, It is pertinent to note that the religious practice pursued by a group depicted the nature and character in which they envisaged their god. Thus, minute details were put in place through religious practices by the indigenous groups to please their god to attract favours and good fortune from the Supreme Being. As a result, what was obtainable was not universal with the geographical enclave that has been discussed in this chapter. However, the coming of Christianity in the area eroded the diversity of indigenous religious practices in the area and brought about universality. The effect is noticed throughout the area among Christians as they no longer believe in the respective gods of their ethnic groups rather the terms that were used to address the Supreme Being in indigenous religions have been adopted in the vocabulary of indigenous Christian texts and teaching in the area.

Christianity has also impacted religious practices in the area by changing the existing places and symbols of worship. For instance, the indigenous religious practice had shrines as sacred places for interaction with God whilst Christianity has replaced the shrines with churches. Symbols of indigenous religion in most cases were idols and these idols have been replaced with sacred Christian objects. Similarly, deities and ancestors have been replaced with angels and biblical figures. Incantations and curses have been also replaced with the Word of God and His promises to Mankind and most importantly Christianity unlike the indigenous religion promised eternity all of which has extinguished the popularity of the indigenous religion and the practices inherent in it. On a general note, Christianity has continued to displace indigenous religious practices thereby improving the life choices of the indigenous people of central Nigeria by pushing into extinction some of the barbaric indigenous religious beliefs and practices formally held dear by the people under interrogation.

7.0 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the impact of Christianity on indigenous religious practices in central Nigeria, it selected the indigenous religion of the Tiv, Idoma, and Igala among the numerous ethnic groups of the area. The main crux of the chapter is that Christianity played a central role in the extinction of indigenous religious practices in the area thereby reducing the relevance of indigenous religion to the barest minimum. The chapter observed that Christianity has become a major religion in the area and has eroded most of the institutions and beliefs that stood as the pillar of indigenous religion in the area.

References

- P. Ajiki, (2016) *Understanding World Religions: Tradition and Cultural Change*, Makurdi: Selfers Academic Press Ltd
- E. Durkheim, (1915) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London: George & Allen
- M.A. Aloko and U. Abdullahi, (2013) "Youth Unemployment and Rising Insecurity: A Critical Assessment" in R. A. Dunmoye et al (ed) *Proceedings of A.B.U. @ 50 Humanities International Conference: National Security, Integration and Sustainable Development in Nigeria*, P.13

- J.O Awolalu, (1991) "The Encounter Between African Traditional Religion and Other Religions in Nigeria" in J.K. Olupona (ed.) *African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society*, St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, Pp. 30-40
- F. Lateju, et al, (2008) *CTH192: Introduction to African Traditional Religion*, Abuja: National Open University of Nigeria, P.7
- M.T. Ndemanu, (2018) "Traditional African Religions and their Influences on the Worldviews of Bangwa People of Cameroon: Expanding the Cultural Horizons of Study Abroad Students and Professionals", in *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Vol.XXX, Issue 1, January, P.78
- J. Olupona, (2007) *Beyond Primitivism*, New York: Routledge
- J.S. Mbiti, (1970) *African Religions and Philosophy*, Garden City, NY: Anchor
- A. Dzugba, (2016) *Elements of Tiv Culture: Material and Ideological Studies*, Ibadan: John Archers Publishers
- N.P. Waapela, (2012) *Symbolism in Tiv Religion and Culture*, Lagos: Bahiti & Dalila Publishers
- J.O. Adole, (2018) "Idoma Society and the Emergence of Ocheship" in J. E. Agaba, (ed) *Studies in Idoma History and Development Since the 19th Century, Volume 1*, Lagos: Freedom Books
- M.E. Apochi, (1995) *Catholic Diocese of Otukpo 1922-1995*, Catholic Star Guide (Inyilowo) Apostolate
- N.O. Ojoajogwu, (2023) *Socio-Religious Effects of Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic- An African (Igala) Perspective*, A Soft copy of this work can be accessed at <https://www.researchgate.net/net/publication/354006230>
- N.O. Ojoajogwu, (2023) *Studying Basic Igala Traditional Religious Concepts and Practices As a Christian*, Soft copy of this work can be accessed at <https://www.researchgate.net/net/publication/354074255>
- I. A. Negedu, (2013) "The Igala Traditional Religious Belief System: Between Monotheism and Polytheism", in *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies Vol. 10*, 2013, P.118
- A.B. Fafunwa, (1974). *History of Education in Nigeria*, London: Boston & Sydney, George Allen & Unwin.
- T. Falola, (1991). et al, *History of Nigeria 2, Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century*, Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc.
- S.F. Wegh, (eds.) *Catholic Diocese of Makurdi at 50: A Celebration of Service to Humanity*,

J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria, 1841-1891, The Making of New Elite*, London, Longmans, 1965

Adega, A.P. (2013). *Christianity and Indigenous Christian Movements in West Africa*, Makurdi: Obeta Printing and Publishing Co.