

## CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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### **Abstract**

*The problem of knowledge is an age-long and perennial problem. Its effect is vast and far-reaching, even in religion. For religion though divinely inspired is woven on the finest enlightened fabrics of human knowledge. This accounts for the many dialogical squabbles in the inter-religious dialogue fronts of virtually all religions. As a matter of fact, Christianity and African Traditional Religion are in this conflict regarding knowledge and its authenticity too. While Christianity propelled by the western cultural fuel labels African Indigenous knowledge as evil, archaic, barbaric, fetish or inadequate, the African indigenous knowledge tends to retaliate by reaffirming itself and seeing Christianity as a cruel usurper, an imposter, a recluse, an ignorant and social misfit to mention but a few. Be that as it may, the front of meeting between the two brands of knowledge in view must not always be of conflict. Rather the two knowledge orders are two sides of the same coin; they are two modes of perceiving reality since the popular saying goes that there are many ways to kill a rat. Given the circumstance, this paper is geared toward underscoring the salient points of convergence between the western-driven knowledge of Christianity and the African Indigenous knowledge, notwithstanding there points of divergence too.*

### **Introduction**

In the epistemological world, the order of knowledge is such an existing reality that sometimes lies silent and amoral in the contours of the universe, waiting for human exploration and discovery. Many minds venture to discover knowledge based on the degree of their exploration and the dynamism of their most immediate environments. Hence as many as are conscious minds in existence, so also are the many epistemological exploration that go simultaneously as the human lives go.

However, the epistemological discoveries which are mind-based apply to the functionality of the subject's subsistent existence when eventually harnessed. From there it sales abroad, considering its publicity and pragmatic value. Thus the implication is that there is no conscious mind that is without knowledge and there is no limit to be placed on what the mind knows and can know. This is

because the human mind knows more than we can ascertain that it knows. And what we can know that the mind knows is only dependent on what our

empirical tools of analysis can help us know. Yet we do not forget the fact that there is more to reality than meets the senses (especially eye).

As it is the case, African indigenous knowledge is a sacred epistemological order that existed long before the advent of Christianity. It embodied many knowledge bases that could be placed in the categories of spirituality, humanity and environmentality. The indigenous Africa was indeed knowledgeable and lived in viable societies long before the Westerners arrived the African shores for evangelization. This reality accounts for the existence of many elements of Christian knowledge in the African world, prior to the coming of Christianity. These elements of African indigenous knowledge converge with the Christian knowledge at various points, thus presenting fronts of inter-religious dialogue.

The points of convergence between Christianity and African Indigenous knowledge inhere in the fact that every conscious mind has direct access to knowledge of reality independent of the other. They all know the same thing but from different points, angles and perspectives. In this case no mind can claim “superiority” over another, since each uniquely knows what the other knows. The instance of a recently circulated piece of reflection composed by an unknown African author on THE TRUE HOLY COMMUNION as observed by Christianity and African Traditional religion respectively, paints a practical scenario:

#### THE TRUE HOLY COMMUNION

Where we raise the kolanut made by God  
They raise the bread made by man  
Then we declare “he who brings kola brings life”  
They declare the bread of life

We offer thanks  
They offer thanks  
We offer wine  
They offer wine  
Then we bless the congregation  
They too bless their congregation

We call our Ndichie and worthy ancestors; Okeke, Okafo, Okonkwo, Okorie, Igbokwe, Odenigbo and Igbokenyi, in “the communion of the living and the dead” to partake in our kola. They too call their Ndichie and ancestors; St. Peter, St. Cyprian, St. Caro, St. Mark and St. Kizito to partake in their rite, in the communion of the living and the dead.

Then we break and eat the consecrated kolanut  
They break and eat their consecrated bread  
For this task we chose our men folk  
They too chose their men

A properly consecrated kolanut is the true Holy Communion  
Yet many of you fail to see that  
WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE TIME BEGAN!  
and they can only walk in our ancestor

They took what is ours and made it look like theirs, yet in their envy they call us EVIL, we who welcomed them into our homes.  
They enslaved the minds of our children and set them against their fathers.  
Now our children no longer know who they are; the first born creation of Chukwuokike, a Noble race, Freeman, priests, priestesses, all have lost their place in the light.

We descendants of Ndiigboo – the ancients, we are the light of the world.  
I bring good news from our ancestors.

(Copied From The Unknown)

The above excerpt shows that Christianity is not older African Traditional Religion in the realm of knowledge and scheme of spiritual things. So also is the indigenous Africa not bereft of knowledge before the advent of Christianity. A typical model of African indigenous knowledge in the category of religious spirituality is the African Traditional Rites of Initiation which though integral and independent, converges at certain points with the Christian knowledge of Initiation – baptism. This work hence sheds a little light on this phenomenon especially with the Igbo Traditional Religion as a case study.

## **IGBO TRADITIONAL RITES OF INITIATION VIS-À-VIS CHRISTIAN RITES OF INITIATION - BAPTISM**

Religion as an age-long facet of human expression of Divine consciousness has been a vital aspect of human existence and spirito-social development. This phenomenon is so because it is ever transmitted intergenerationally, ensures succession and thus is always contemporarily relevant to all human epochs and society. The longevity of religion in the human culture and society is highly due to the sustained accumulation of its faithful followers and practitioners through initiation. A religion therefore dies and fizzles out of existence in the human society, when initiation into it ceases. Little wonder why initiation is of basic and vital importance to all religion without which an individual cannot belong to such religion.

However, initiation has different rites designed by the progenitors of its religion, according to their dictates and symbolism. It consequently goes by various different names and practices pending its socio-cultural origin.

### **rites of initiation**

The term "rite" denotes a celebration performed for some religious or spiritual purposes. According to Manu Ampim, "a rite is a fundamental act (or set of rituals performed according to prescribed social rules and customs."<sup>20</sup> The word "Initiation" from its etymology comes from the Latin verb "initiare" which means "to initiate." It means a rite by which one is initiated into a fraternity. Thus the Latin "initatio" means taking part in the sacred rites. Initiation here then has a religious overtone. According to Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, the word 'rite' is a ceremony performed by a particular group of people, often for religious purposes. Eg. Funereal rites, initiation rites.<sup>21</sup> Initiation is a rite of passage. Initiation according to Oranekwu George "usually possesses a special meaning, referring to male circumcision, female puberty rites or induction into secret societies."<sup>22</sup> For Shorter, there is a wider context of initiation which encompasses "the whole life-process of culture (religious) education, which includes social celebrations, as well as socialization of the

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<sup>20</sup> [www.manuampim.com](http://www.manuampim.com), 11/3/2018, 10;38AM

<sup>21</sup> Sally Wehmeier (ed) Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary 2005. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition

<sup>22</sup> Oranekwu George Nnaemeka, *The Significant Role of Initiation in the Traditional Igbo Culture and Religion: An Incultural Basis for Pastoral Catechesis of Christian Initiation*. Enugu: Snaap Press Nigeria Ltd, 2016 p.60

young and the continuation of this learning process in adult life.”<sup>23</sup> As Van Gennep describes it, “this process of incorporation from one stage of being to the other, be it ontological, biological, social or religious is known as Rites of Passage”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Mircea Eliade discussed initiation as a principal religious act by classical or traditional societies. He defined it as “a basic change in existential condition which liberates man from profane time and history”<sup>25</sup>. “Initiation” for him “recapitulates the sacred history of the world and through this recapitulation, the world is sanctified anew and the initiate can perceive the world as a sacred work, a creation of the Gods”<sup>26</sup>

As it stands “initiation is a rite of passage (that) marks entrance or acceptance into a group or society. It could also be a formal admission to adulthood in a community or one of its formal components. In an extended sense, it can also signify a transformation in which the initiate is ‘reborn’ into a new role. Examples of initiation ceremonies might include Hindu diksha, Christian baptism or confirmation, Jewish bar or bat mitzvah, acceptance into a fraternal organization, secret society or religious order.”<sup>27</sup>

Having seen the meanings of the separate terms “rite” and “initiation”, we can by inference define Rites of Initiation as ceremonies by which a neophyte is turned into an initiate. They are celebrations by which individuals are produced as corporate persons who have been fully integrated in the community. This according to Oliver Onwubiko is what anthropologists used to call “rites-de-passage or transition rites.” He avers:

Rites of initiation as it is properly known, takes place at the period in life when a young man is no longer disposed to allow others to do his thinking for him, a period he is undergoing a fluent and impeccable transition, which if care is not taken, can result in a rebellion. He is therefore

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<sup>23</sup> Shorter A, *Christianity and the African Imagination: After the African Synod Resources for Inculturation*, Nairobi 1996 p. 87

<sup>24</sup> Van Gennep A., *The Rites of Passage*, (trs) Vizedom, M.B. and Caffé, G. L., London 1960 in Oranekwu George, 2016 p. 61

<sup>25</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018, 10:50am

<sup>26</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018, 10:50am

<sup>27</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018, 10:50am

made to imbibe the culture of his people through rituals.<sup>28</sup>

For Metuh, rites of initiation is not just a ceremony. It is a phenomenon of socio-religious transformation and integration. Expatiating on this he writes:

The scope of initiation rites is not primarily to celebrate physical changes brought about by adolescent life (though rites of this nature are sometimes included) but to make an individual a man or woman, fit to be one...<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting on the rites of initiation in view of the Christian baptism, Cajetan Ehiem in his unpublished lecture note says that every ancient religion has its rite of initiation . Thus it is that at the institution of baptism, Christ did not prescribe a completely new rite that he handed over to the apostles. This way of thinking contrasts with the biblical reality concerning the institution of this sacrament. There is no mention of a new rite. This could be deduced from the manner in which Jesus spoke. He did not specify any form of baptism but only commanded them to baptize. The same could be said of St. Peter when on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14ff) he commanded the crowd to be baptized. This mode of speaking, points to an already existing rite of baptism.

## **IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) is the indigenous religion of the Igbos. It is a religion “based on the belief that there is one creator, God also called Chukwu or Chineke”. The creator can be approached through numerous other deities and spirits in the form of natural objects, most commonly through the god of thunder (Amadioha)”.<sup>30</sup>

In Igbo Traditional Religion, there are certain places and things that are considered highly sacred. These “sacred” places or things could either be a piece of land, a certain kind of animal, specific water bodies, masquerades etc<sup>31</sup>. These are believed to be points of meeting with these transcendental beings whereby worship is rendered to them.

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd. 1991 p.41

<sup>29</sup> Metuh E.I., *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, Onitsha 1987 p. 197

<sup>30</sup> <https://igboguide.org>

<sup>31</sup> Obindigbo.com, Nov 22 2015

Throwing more light on the Igbo Traditional Religion and Worship, a prominent Igbo scholar Arinze F.A clarified that in ITR, “there are three subjects of worship which are of three levels. They are: Chukwu/Chineke, Ndiichie and Arusi”.<sup>32</sup> “Chukwu” (Chi-Ukwu) is the Great Being. He is also regarded as “Chineke”, the Being that Creates. He is the greatest being, greater than whom there is no other being. There is no shrine to or image of Chukwu in Igbo Traditional Religion. An attempt to create such, is considered a taboo in ITR. This is more so because Igbos believe that “Chukwu” is so much beyond the human imagination that no one can describe him.

Igbos have Ndiichie which refer to the spirits of our departed holy ancestors, not all our departed ancestors. According to Dunu Okigbo, Ndiichie are those who lived on earth according to the laws of “Chukwu”. And we communicate with these ancestors through dreams, apparitions and through the eyes of holy seers.

Furthermore, we have Arusi (the elemental beings) as subjects of worship. They are the gods in charge of the four basic elements land, water, fire and wind. These gods have shrines where they can be consulted and communed with. As Dunu Okigbo rightly pointed out, Arusi are more connected to earth than the other two subjects of worship in Igbo Traditional Religious system<sup>33</sup>

## **CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**

Baptism is a rite of initiation into the Christian fold. It is “a Christian sacrament of admission and adoption, almost invariably with the use of water into the Christian Church generally.”<sup>34</sup> According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, baptism is a sacrament that washes away the sin (both original and actual) of its recipient, makes him a Christian, a child of God and a member of the Church. Christian initiation is accomplished by three sacraments together: Baptism which is the beginning of new life; Confirmation which is its strengthening; and the Eucharist which nourishes the disciple with Christ’s body and blood or his transformation in Christ.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Arinze F.A, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*. Ibadan: University Press, 1978

<sup>33</sup> Obindigbo.com.ng, Dec 11 2015

<sup>34</sup> Wikipedia.org 15/2/2018; 12:09am

<sup>35</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1275

The word baptism is etymologically derived from the Greek word “Baptizo” meaning “plunge or deep” as in John 13:26. It has come to mean “purify or cleanse”. Regarding this, the Council of Florence stated that “the holy baptism holds the first place among all the sacraments because it is the door to spiritual life”<sup>36</sup>

Historically the onset of baptism as a religious practice is quite uncertain. However, the nearest historical account to which it could be traced predates 412AD Alexandria, which was the cradle of Christianity in the time when St. Cyril was Bishop.<sup>37</sup> There are also bold

indications that point to the claim that Baptism is an age-long pre-Christian initiation ritual. It was practiced by the Essene brotherhood who “as an active band of workers, maintained two principal centers, one in Egypt on the bank of Lake Moeris, where the great Master Moria-El was born in his first known incarnation , educated, prepared for is great mission and established the principle and law of initiation”<sup>38</sup>

Be that as it may, there is an important point to underscore as regards Baptism. This is in connection with the Jewish origin of the Christian baptism. “Christian Baptism with regard to its external rite depends on the baptism of John as we can see in the New Testament”<sup>39</sup> (cf. Jn 3:22-26; 4:1-3). Jesus himself recognized John the Baptist as the Angel who according to Prophet Malachi, was sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah (cf. Mtt. 11:10; Lk. 7:57) and to prepare (with his baptism) for the baptism of Christ. The gospel of John 3:26 precisely points out that Jesus was in the company of John and he took some of his earliest disciples from among John’s disciples (cf. Jn 1:35-42).

Corroborating this view, Dentzingel writes:

Some of the Fathers of the Church maintain that the institution of baptism should be considered in relationship with the baptism of John in River Jordan. Some others hold a different view. But if

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<sup>36</sup> Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definition and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*; Latin-English, Edited by Peter Hünermann 43<sup>rd</sup> Edition. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, 1314

<sup>37</sup> Otigbuanyinya O.C Onyesoh, *Nri The Cradle of Igbo Culture and Civilization*. Onitsha: Tabansi Press Ltd. 2000

<sup>38</sup> Otigbuanyinya O.C Onyesoh, *Nri The Cradle of Igbo Culture and Civilization*. Onitsha: Tabansi Press Ltd. 2000 p.80

<sup>39</sup> Cajetan Ehiem, *Unpublished Lecture Notes*. Owerri: Seat of Wisdom Seminary Ulakwo. 19/10/2017

Christian baptism depends on the baptism of John, this in turn derives from the rite of purification that were in use by the Jews<sup>40</sup>

Supporting this assertion, Augustine, Tertullian and Thomas Aquinas said that “the baptism of John is a sacrament preparatory of the baptism of Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, “the baptism of John is not only a rite of repentance and forgiveness of sin but of affiliation to the community. Baptism therefore was a rite necessary to indicate the incorporation of men into the remnants of Israel who were expecting the future Messiah (eg. Baptism of the Proselytes). All were called to be part of these remnants – sinners, pagans, Pharisees, Sadducees etc.”<sup>42</sup> Another Romano-Jewish historian Joseph Flavius presents historical backings that seem to favour this social dimension of baptism. This proposes that baptism in its foremost primordial essence even in the Proselytes, Essenes, and the Jews in general was “a sign of belonging to the community”<sup>43</sup>

### **The Proximity between the Christian Knowledge and African Indigenous Knowledge**

Our point of concern here in the on-going research is the conception of baptism as a rite of initiation which serves not only for spiritual enhancement but also for social integration viz: the incorporation of all men into the remnants of Israel. This marks a fundamental point of meeting between the Christian rites of initiation and the Igbo Traditional Religion’s rite of initiation. This meeting points point to the proximity between the Christian knowledge (especially orchestrated by the Western culture) and the African indigenous knowledge. The convergence also point to the commonness of human knowledge that flows thereof.

### **Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that knowledge is a common reality that is naturally a general commodity. Each and every conscious mind has access to this reality from which cultures and religions emerge. Different cultures and religions develop their wealth of knowledge based on their peculiar experience of life circumstances and relative exploration of the universe around them that leads to discoveries.

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Dentzingel D2 846

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* Bk3 Question 38a art 1

<sup>42</sup> Cajetan Ehiem, Unpublished Lecture Notes. Owerri: Seat of Wisdom Seminary Ulakwo. 19/10/2017

<sup>43</sup> See Joseph Flavius, *Contra Apionem*, ii §39 in [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com); accessed 25/4/2018, 10::12am

However, since the reality of knowledge is infinite, no one can claim monopoly of it all we know depends on all we can find out. Yet there is more to knowledge than we can discover and so it is inexhaustible. Every society has its own system of knowledge which continues to expand, develop and upgrade with the socio-historical levels of existence.

The indigenous cum ancient African society already had the knowledge which Christianity brought to it even of God. This knowledge has been developing since the ancient times began. It has metamorphosed through the ages of the medieval, modern and contemporary African societies where the notable convergence of conceptual imports has begun to vindicate the previously incriminated African indigenous knowledge. Since it is a sin against reality for one knowledge system to rule out the rest due to universal diversity, collaboration between the knowledge systems is the watch word so as to enhance complementarity and enlightenment the more.