

## **Book Review:** Towards an Agenda for Understanding the Igbo Religion from a Holistic Perspective

Title of Book:	Igbo Religion: Beyond Misrepresentation, Distortion and Fabrication
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**T**he title may probably create the impression that this is a work of art that tries to make a casual assessment of Igbo religion or discuss it as a mere academic exercise. However, a sojourn through the book will reveal that it is a product of an exercise undertaken from the social scientific standpoint and with a considerable degree of academic

objectivity aimed at probing, explicating, analysing, highlighting, understanding, and promoting the Igbo religion as well as encouraging inter-religious tolerance within Igboland in particular and Nigeria in general. The subtitle **betrays** what appears to be the main intention of the author, which is to highlight and correct the misrepresentation, distortion, and

fabrication woven against the Igbo religion by the British colonialists, colonial anthropologists, early Christian missionaries, as well as Christian converts of Igbo extraction. In the preface, he states in succinct terms that the motive of the book is not to compare and contrast Igbo religion with Christianity, or extol the virtues of the religion, or to influence Igbo Christians to return to the religion of their forefathers but 'merely to provide a historical record which would enable Ndigbo to know how their forebears lived, and what belief system guided their lives' (p. vi). It is left for the reader to find out the extent to which he adhered to this motive or deviated from it.

In Chapter one, the author exposes the reader to the roots of the dilemma facing the religion. The first is the unwritten nature of the belief system. Quite unlike the Christian and Islamic religion that has the Bible and Quran respectively, which embodies and explains the tenets of the belief system, the Igbo religion has no documented historical account. It was the absence of records and religious tracts written by the practitioners themselves that gave the British colonialists and their cohorts, who were objectively not in a position to present the religion in its true form and content, the latitude to define the religion from their uninformed perspective. Laden with a competitive spirit, they set out characterizing the religion with a long list of negatives and narratives bordering on demonic,

diabolical, primitive, and infantile attributes with a view to projecting it in a manner that it would be rejected and replaced with the Christian religion. Secondly, there was no centralised political authority or a clear structure of religious authority to oppose the distortions and falsehoods and this explains the reason the 'rampaging Christianity' (p. vi) came with aggression in Igboland, as opposed to its peaceful and tolerant disposition in places like the northern Nigeria, India, and Burma. Thirdly, and based on the above, 'even the surviving practitioners do not seem to fully understand the nature and dynamics of the religion' (p. 1). All these resulted to the situation where the 'Igbo religion is being highly disrespected and disparaged by Ndigbo who have embraced Christianity' (p. 8).

The author dedicates the second chapter to explaining the menace of intolerance suffered by the Igbo religion in the hands of colonial religion. The foreign invaders adopted the wrong approach in studying the religion and as such failed to understand it. Since they could not find churches or a general place of worship where the Igbo religion is being practised; since they could not find priests, religious books, church rituals, prayers, worship and congregation as well as other elements that characterize other religions, they decided to capture the Igbo religion with pejorative attributes. Having negatively defined the religion, their

pedagogy towards the religion tilted towards the direction of 'teach to reject' (p. 15). The Christian converts adopted this line of thought and, consequently, not only accepted the superiority of Christianity over the Igbo religion but also have gone beyond the colonialists in demonizing and negatively characterizing the religion.

In chapter three, the book presents the four pillars that hold up the religion, which include: (a) Chukwu-Okike, or Chineke, (b) Ancestors, (c) Humans, and (d) Non-humans, and dwells extensively on the first. Through a detailed explanation, the reader is made to understand that Chukwu-Okike (Chineke) is the most important of all the pillars and indeed the creator of the universe. Chineke simply creates and provides its human creations with a personal spirit called 'chi', which is expected to guide the individual through life. To the extent that Chineke does not grant favours but simply creates, 'there is no reason to ask it for favours either through worship or prayers' (p. 21). Thus, there are no prayers in Igbo religion but affirmation. The reader is equally exposed to the four commandments that have a similar character to the affirmations through which Ndigbo sail through the turbulence of life. Unlike the Christian commandments, its violation does not attract punishments or rewards. They are simply 'designed to enable the individual to live life effectively and successfully here on earth' (p. 25).

The relevance and place of the second pillar, the ancestors, comes alive in chapter four. The spirits (of the ancestors) are next to the creator in importance and they are believed to play the most significant role in the security and survival of the individual. They are of two types – the good and the bad – and are pitched in a deadly battle to ensure or threaten the security and survival of humans respectively. How do they come about? The author offers explanation by discussing the religious importance of funerals. The good and bad spirits are contrasted by the manner of their burial rites. Whereas the good spirits are the spirits of dead ancestors accorded proper funeral, the bad spirits are either those whose funeral rites have not been performed but have a right to those funeral rites, or those who are not entitled to any funeral rites because of the (evil) way they had lived their lives. The phenomenon of maintaining the spirit-human interaction comes in handy for the purpose of ensuring that the good spirits do not feel alienated or isolated from the society so as to continue playing their vital role in the security and survival sector.

The book addresses the third pillar – humans – in chapter five. Guided by chi and the commandments provided by Chukwu-Okike, 'their function is to make, create and innovate things and relationships within the physical, biological and social environment' (p. 56). Here, emphasis is laid on the belief that sustenance and the biological and

physical wellbeing of the individuals can only be achieved by humans themselves (employing their brains and muscular energy) and not through the involvement of the spirits of whatever nature. It is on this basis that the author takes the position that money making rituals and other involvement of the spiritual world in creating good life and well-being for humans is not a product of Igbo religion.

The place of non-human earthly things, living and non-living animate and inanimate objects in Igbo religion forms the focal point of chapter six and they are listed to include the heavens and earth, plants, rivers and streams, domesticated animals, wild animals, and other non-living things. They play a role in the practical life of the individual. The myth of sacrifices in Igbo religion equally comes under discussion and the reader is informed that it is never in the tradition of the Igbo religion for a human being or any part of human body to be used as a source of the sustenance of members of society. This position is reinforced by the belief that the second commandment prohibits the killing of a human being.

The author sums up the discussions under chapter seven and harps on the need for religious tolerance and co-existence in Igboland. He gives nine recommendations as a roadmap to achieving this tolerance and co-existence.

To a large extent, the book reflects a bold attempt geared towards

filling the identified existing gap. Truly, there is a dearth of documentary account, which embodies and explains the tenets of the Igbo religion. Though *Igbo Religion: Beyond Misrepresentation, Distortion and Fabrication* cannot be equated with the Bible/Quran or seen as an exhaustive compendium of the Igbo religion, one can still find the 'Four Commandments' and some other basic tenets and facts about the religion in the book. Thus, this can be seen as a practical and positive step towards providing a reliable documentary account on Igbo religion.

It is doubtful, however, whether the author adhered to his original motives. Perhaps, in a bid to drive home certain points, he actually compared and contrasted Igbo religion with Christianity. Aside the comparisons that one finds in all the sections of the book, a more poignant comparison manifests in Chapter Six where the author tries to establish the religion (between the Igbo religion and Christianity) that is more savage. Besides, judging by the comparisons, the manner of presentations, and the glaring persuasive language of the author, can one really say that he refrained from *extolling the virtues* of the religion; refrained from influencing Igbo Christians to return to the religion of their forefathers? It cannot be denied that the book provides a historical record, as promised. However, there are indications that the author approached the study with a "wounded heart" and from the

standpoint of a narrator highly biased in favour of the Igbo religion. Phrases like 'most annoying aspect' (p. 15), 'mischievous misrepresentation by evil-minded opponents and detractors of Igbo religion' (p. 56), etc employed in describing the British colonialists, colonial anthropologists, early Christian missionaries, and Christian converts of Igbo extraction speak volume in this regard.

One of the things any *feminist-minded* individual might notice in this book is that the place of women in Igbo religion remains unclear. Let us consider these: there is no place for prayers and worship in Igbo religion; what exists in Igbo religion is affirmation; the basic means or objects employed in making the affirmation remain oji (kolanut) and ofo (sacred stick); and it appears that women do not engage in making affirmations with oji or ofo. So, how and with what objects do women make affirmation? Perhaps, this is part of the issues the author expects subsequent contributors to enquire, analyse, and put forth in a documentary form so as to advance and deepen knowledge about the Igbo religion.

The recommendations offered by the author are quite apt, though some appear as a tall and unrealizable order. For instance, is it possible to eliminate 'the conversion of adherents of one religion by another' (p. 86)? Perhaps, this might take the form of completely discouraging the discussion of religious matters outside worship places or the performing of charitable

works under the umbrella of religious groups because these are capable of exerting *conversionary* influences on the audience/beneficiary. It is easy for the adherents of Igbo religion (which has no place of worship and does not encourage preaching) to abide by this recommendation but is it likely that the rest of the religious sects would abandon a practice that has become an integral part of their worship system? Again, what is the practicability of convincing the different religions and denominations to 'eschew partisan electoral politics' or encouraging them to 'use pulpit sermons and other mobilization techniques available to them to enjoin believers to vote according to manifestoes of the candidates rather than their religion?' (p. 87). This is especially in view of the seeming general attribute of Nigerian politicians that rely mainly on sectional and religious appeal to seek for votes. Somehow, this sounds like requesting Nigerian masses from the different ethnic divides to desist from allowing sectional considerations to guide them while making national political judgements. Furthermore, how possible is it to convince the Islamic scholars to strike a divorce between religious and secular matters in public administration and encourage members of their sect to maintain such?

In all, the book will definitely live up to the aim of the author because it truly raises issues that 'provoke discussion of the culture of Ndigbo, especially their cultural

heritage' (p. viii) as well as issues bordering on religious intolerance. Some of the questions that should keep running through the mind of the reader include: Why do Igbo Christians oppose Islamization of Nigeria but impose Christianization of Igboland? Why do Igbo Christians preach religious tolerance with Muslims but show extreme intolerance towards practitioners of Igbo religion through such means as destroying their religious icons and symbols? Is there any hope for Igbo religion in view of the fact that even the surviving

practitioners do not seem to fully understand the nature and dynamics of the religion?

I suggest that every Igbo wo/man should read this book, assimilate its contents, take up the challenge and make further relevant contributions based on facts so as to allow *thousand flowers bloom*. I equally encourage every other knowledge-loving individual to read the book and understand what the Igbo religion truly stands for. This will help in promoting inter-religious tolerance.