

## **THE INTERACTION OF TRADITIONAL AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN OKUKU ONYE UWA : A REINCARNATION RITUAL IN AWKA TOWN**

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### **Abstract**

*Reincarnation is a basic feature in traditional religious system in Awka Town. However, the interaction of traditional and Christian religious beliefs in reincarnation is a phenomenon that raises a lot of questions, controversies and conflicts in the life of the Igbo especially among the Awka people of Anambra State. The study understood that the reality, dynamism, understanding and proof of reincarnation are engulfed with a lot of difficulties. It is also discovered that most of the little knowledge known today about reincarnation in Igboland is either written by Western scholars or even Igbo scholars with Western background or orientation and who unfortunately used the western paradigm to access, analyze, explain and evaluate what is abundantly an Igbo phenomenon. The researchers, however, tends to attribute the concept of reincarnation, not as vague or superstitious belief but what the average Awka man believes it as the divinatory rituals over any unborn child in the traditional Awka community. This study is also poised at proving the reality of the existence of reincarnation in Igbo cosmology especially the way it is applied to the Awka people who hold tenaciously, the practice of Okuku Onye Uwa ritual rites during their traditional marriage rites celebrations. As a qualitative research, the researchers adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection and culture area approach for data analysis. The researchers, however, recommends an integration of traditional and Christian religious beliefs in Awka town through mutual dialogue of synthesis and hybridization of the good elements of each of the culture rather than using extreme acts of mutual extinction.*

**Keywords:** Traditions, Christian Religious Belief, Culture, Reincarnation, Awka

### **Introduction**

*Okuku Onye Uwais a strong belief which Awka people anchor on reincarnation. It is a divinatory rituals over any born child in the traditional Awka Community to know among the ancestors who has reincarnated in the new born child. Okuku Onye Uwaamongstthe Awka people, remains a traditional marriage rites performed as a proof and a means of appeasing the ancestors that have reincarnated in the new couple that is marrying to notify the ancestors about the reincarnate readiness to start his/her own family. This is done so that the ancestors will fortify the reincarnate with good health, wealth, long life, prosperity in business and above all to bless the reincarnate with children. Adunchezor, (2013) opines thus: "Okuku Onye Uwais a sacrificial fowl offered to the guardian-Spirit of a girl that is married. The ceremony has an underlying belief in reincarnation. The Awka people believe in reincarnation and ritualize it in their marriage rite celebration". (p. 1).*

The traditional Awka people believe that any born child of their family must have been reincarnated by any of their ancestors and as a result they carry out reincarnation divinatory rituals to know who has come back since lack of divinatory rituals is likely to cause problems such as persistent sickness, failures in business, strained relationships with others, scanty harvests and above all childlessness (Obidiwe, 2018). In order words, reincarnation in Awka traditional community is the belief that the souls of their dead family members are transferred to new bodies of

their relatives to be reborn again on earth as a new individual. For them, at death the immortal spirit can reincarnate and be reborn by their parents or different ones.

This rationality however, is not exclusively traditional in Awka community as Madu (1997) also made such assertions about Igboland generally as he opines that the ancestral is a continuation of the material world. According to him, there is no eternal damnation in hell fire or judgment as in Christian belief and teachings. For the Igbo, life is a continuum, one dies in order to live again. Life in Igbo cosmology is cyclic. One dies an honourable death with befitting burial rites and goes to sit with the ancestors in the underworld from where he comes out again to be reborn as a new baby (reincarnation).

Arguably, man is ever searching for meaning and one of the most difficult and disturbing of his searches being the meaning of life and what becomes of man after death. Reincarnation, however, offers a wide range of possible forms of man's life after death. The researchers as a matter of fact intended to uncover the unhealthy conception of man by the reincarnation and the interaction of Traditional and Christian religious perception of man at death. Since Christians believed that there is only one permanent residence in heaven and or eternal damnation in hell fire while for the Igbo world view, life is cyclic and death is not the end of life. This has however made reincarnation a problematic concept not to the African/Christian religions but almost other religions of the world. Some are for it and others against it. The aim of the research is mainly to investigate the reality of the persistent belief in reincarnation in Awka town despite the many years of Christian presence in the community. In order to achieve this objective, the researchers examined the Igbo concept of reincarnation within the prism of African/ Igbo cosmology.

### **The Concept of Reincarnation in Igbo Cosmology**

*Inouwa* or *Ihouwa* is the Igbo belief in reincarnation in their mythology, which translates from Igbo to English as to come back to the world. Reincarnation is believed to occur between immediate and extended family and sometimes the person who is reincarnated notifies the family, before their death, which they will come back to the world as. Relatives identify the reincarnated ancestor by checking the newborn for body markings/birthmarks or physical features the ancestor had had; statements as well as the behavior of the baby similar to the deceased ancestor are made to confirm the identity of who the child was in their past life. Oracles can also confirm the identity of the baby in their past life. (Madu, 2003)

In the Igbo cosmology, there are three worlds - one inhabited by the unborn, another where the living people inhabit and the last where dead people reside. However, some beings are said to move easily from one world to another and reincarnate how and when they want to. These class of beings are called *Ogbanje*, that is one that goes and comes back. *Ogbanje* are the negative or evil spirits that are reincarnated to cause misfortune to the family by constantly dying and coming back again (Obidiwe, 2018).

### **Reincarnation Christology in African Christianity and Theology**

The subject of reincarnation has been considered a reserve of primal (esoteric) religions or cultures. Therefore, it has not been thoroughly studied to decipher the philosophical and theological issues thereof. Notwithstanding, what seems to be the total neglect and lack of interest, the significance of christological parallelism that exists between reincarnation and resurrection as Christological parallels in both African Traditional Religion and African Christianity cannot be disregarded. Reincarnation Christology provides a paradigmatic christological framework that

conceptualises Africa's notion of life as a cycle of death, birth, and rebirth (reincarnation) similar to incarnation, death, and resurrection Christologies of the missionary (Western) Christianity and provides a competitive context that defines the identity, and significance of Jesus in African Christianity and Theology. Even though reincarnation provides a good context for the Christology of Jesus in African traditional religion, Christianity, and Biblical Theology, theologians and biblical scholars such as Mbiti, Bediako, Nyamiti, Wiredu, and Gyekye failed to give it any attention. Nevertheless, the article argued that, like incarnation, death, and resurrection Christologies, and reincarnation, Christology provides very powerful and strong philosophical constructs for the inculturation of the Christology of Jesus in African Traditional Religion, African Christianity and African Christian Biblical scholarship. The article further argued that, there also exists a strong parallelism between resurrection and reincarnation Christologies which can provide complementing philosophical paradigmatic framework for the christological nomenclatures in Christianity and African traditional religions. Reincarnation has remained a theological discourse in African Traditional Religion, Christian Theology and Biblical scholarship because of how it contextualizes the identity, role and significance of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus within the African Traditional religion and Christianity. The availability of adequate study of the Christological parallelism between the two concepts however does not comprehensively provide the answers needed since reincarnation and resurrection both leave much to be studied to fully comprehend the trajectories of Christological dynamics and frameworks they provide. Therefore, it is only within inculturation that any possible provision is made for a comprehensive discussion of the two.

### **African Christian Theologies of Inculturation**

The theology of inculturation emerged around the 1950s and the 1960s as a theological response to the alienation of African traditional religion and cultural values in theological discourses and biblical scholarship in Christianity in Africa, and a search for a context that correctly answered the questions African Christians were asking. Missionary perceptions in Africa were persistently negative. According to Ayittey (2015), missionaries condemned African's religion, and culture as Satanic, from which they had come to save them, any possibility of integrating them into Christianity was considered unacceptable. For Antonio (1998), inculturation like liberation was part of post-colonial discourse that provided appropriate, comprehensive, and suitable intercultural paradigms for making missionary Christianity and its theological nomenclatures meaningful in the African Christian context.

For Centuries in Africa, the dominance of the colonial hermeneutical framework prevented a holistic approach to Christian theologies and biblical studies in African traditional and cultural contexts. No opportunity was given to the possibility of African traditions and culture to provide a perspective on the many Christian theological and biblical hermeneutical frameworks found in the bible and traditions of the early Church. Bediako (2006) has proven how Jesus and the gospel are significant in other cultural contexts. Bediako argued that it was unreasonable to insist that the significance of Jesus and the Bible could only be perceived in Western or Euro-American contexts.

Inculturation theology according to Magesa (2004) was developed as a framework that explored the dynamics of cultural diversity and inter-cultural encounters within the context of religious belief and practice (especially in Africa). It sought to comprehend and address the theological implications of cultural diversity, globalization, and the interactions that exist between different religious and cultural traditions. Intercultural relationships recognize that culture or religion does not exist in isolation, and societies are increasingly interconnected and diverse. It, therefore,

acknowledged the inherent value and significance of cultural diversity and sought to promote dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding among different cultures and religious traditions. Its theological approach according to Stanley emphasized the need to engage in meaningful intercultural engagements that went beyond superficial tolerance and mere coexistence.

The African Christian theological paradigm also explored the ways in which theological concepts, practices, and expressions could be enriched and reimagined through various intercultural engagements. It acknowledged that different cultures provided unique insights into the understanding and experience of the divine, and by engaging in the intercultural exchange of ideas, new theological perspectives and understandings could emerge. For Ezigbo (2016), it was important for Christ to identify with the traditions and cultures of African Christians. Ezigbo provides insights into some key aspects of the complexities and politicization of African Christian identity including the incorporation of traditional African religious elements into Christian worship, the role of African theologians in shaping this identity, and ongoing dialogue between Christianity and indigenous African belief systems. Keith (2018) also highlighted the importance of Christ to identify with the African “condition” since according to him it had become extensively prejudiced. Apart from reclaiming the dignity of African identity, it elevated Christianity to a global (intercultural) status, making it a religion for every tradition and culture, especially because it made Christ identify and share in the suffering of the African people.

### **Incarnational Christology**

One of the major Christologies that emerged in African Christian theology was the attempt to conceptualize the significance and role of Christ's “incarnational” christology, that, the pre-existent divine person (Christ); God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, and the eternally begotten “Logos” (word) took upon human nature and “was made flesh”, conceived in the womb of a woman, (Mary). The incarnational theology which according to Coffey (2010) was originally formulated by the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) by the Byzantine Emperor Marcian (392-457) presented three facts for Christian theology: the divinity of Christ; the humanity of Christ and the “hypostatic union” (humanity and divinity) of Christ without “diminishing” the other. According to Dunn, this meant Christ was at the same time fully God and fully human. His body was therefore capable of being subjected or was subjected to all the bodily weaknesses to which the human nature (body) is subjected i.e., hunger (Matt 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), fatigue (John 4:6), pain, and death (Luke 23:46) Consequently, Torrance developed an incarnational Christology that underscored the centrality of the “incarnation” of Christ. He saw this as a key event in history and was crucial for understanding God's relationship with humanity. Torrance (2008) posits that in incarnation, Christ accomplished “redemption” and “reconciliation” reconciliation' between God and humanity. Magezi (2014) employs Torrance's Christological model as a nexus for Christ to identify with African Christians. He asserts, that there were enough reasons for Africa to develop this Christological model to see Christ in the identity, experience, and context of African Christians since he represented a connection between Christianity and African culture that enabled African Christians to relate to Him in a way that resonated with their struggles and special context.

The concept of Christ's sufficiency in Africa is however explored by Banda (1996) who posits that it was necessary for Christ to be found in the traditions and cultures of Africa in order to explain the significance of what He (Christ) represented and the possibility of his salvific work in the African social and cultural context. African Christian inculturation Christology, therefore, provided a



suitable framework to contextualize the incarnation of Christ in the African religio-cultural and socioeconomic context, allowing African Christians to see themselves reflected in the person and message of Jesus as it attempts to reclaim and reinterpret biblical teachings and traditions through an African lens. Akper(2000) further divides Christological discourse in Africa into Inculturation and Liberation. According to him, Inculturation Christology employed traditional African religious concepts to imagine and explain Jesus Christ and the salvific significance of his cross. Liberation Christologies also attempted to fit Jesus and the salvific significance of his cross into Africans' socioeconomic and religiocultural challenges and problems. According to Akper, African Christian Christology sought to identify and develop a suitable and relevant.

### **Ancestor Christology**

Ancestor Christology brought Christ closer to the African Christians. It provided a framework that enabled African Christians to see Christ as a relative, a person who is very much a part of the African family. According to Oheneba-Sakyi (2015), the African family provides an elaborate socioeconomic and religio-cultural foundation for the African to find his/her identity, and develop their personhood and function. As an institution, it ensures the survival, protection, and support of members. The significance of the nexus of the African family according to Chirozva, Mubaya, and Mukamuri(2018), is how it connects both the living and the dead (ancestors) and the role each plays in the survival, protection, and progress of the family. For example, ancestors, even though no more in their physical bodies, are not separated from their families, they get vested with mystical powers and authority and retain a functional role in the world of the living. They serve as guardians (protectors), sources of guidance, bestowers of good fortune, and spiritual connections between the living and the dead. As observed by Ubah (2017), death in the African traditions does not alter or end the life of an individual, it only causes a change in their conditions. It is important to add that it is not everybody who gets to become an ancestor. There are strict criteria for a dead relative to become venerated and considered an ancestor. For instance, among many other things, such an individual must have lived an exemplary (virtuous) life and demonstrated by all standards a high level of moral uprightness, and hard work whose legacies can be used to advise other members of the family, especially the younger generation. Their lives never brought shame and disgrace to the family and anytime they were remembered it brought dignity and honour. It is within this context that, the ancestor Christology within African Christian theology is developed. According to Lies (2020), this is developed as a consequence of the “incarnational” christology in both Western and African Christian contexts of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ and its significance in the context of what he represented and achieved.

### **The Interaction of Traditional and Christian Religious Beliefs in Reincarnation in Awka Community**

The concept of interaction as used in this study means one relating with one or more things, persons or belief system. Interaction in this study denotes a relationship between traditional and Christian religious beliefs in reincarnation. It means the coming together of the traditional religious belief and the Christian religious belief in reincarnation in Awka. Whenever, two different religious beliefs come together, there must be some influence which might either be positive or negative. This was in the case of the coming together of the traditional religious belief with the Christian religious belief in Awka community. If Christian and traditional religion come together, they will influence one another positively or negatively. Most of the traditional Awka people see the indulgence in *Okuku Onye Uwa* rituals as paganistic and as such refuse to embark on it during their traditional marriage act. This then creates problems which make the Awka men and women who attended the marriage ceremony to be discriminated against. It even creates disputes among the

concerned families and the kindred (*Umunna*). The confessors of Euro-religions in Awka community are today noted and nick named (*Ndi kpu Omu naonu*) meaning (people with palm frond in their mouth) and should not be associated with in the community. This is as a result of their refusal to imbibe the traditional Awka religious beliefs and practices. This was as a result of the influence of Christian and traditional religion in the community. This was also the case of the coming together of the Christian and Igbo traditional religious belief in the community. In a way of solving this challenge, there will be a deeper understanding of each other belief in reincarnation. There is also a room for understanding of one another, mutual dialogue and respect to their beliefs in reincarnation.

### Conclusion

The article has attempted to analyze the comparative relevance, trajectories, and implication of reincarnation in African and Christian worldviews. It has been identified that the African socioeconomic and religio-cultural cosmology occasioned several distinct ontologies and praxis that informed and influenced Christian theologies and African nomenclatures. One of such, the inculturation of resurrection and reincarnation Christologies provided a framework for the discourse of Jesus pre-existence, incarnation, death, and resurrection in African and Christian religions. Reincarnation as a Christological framework, provides sufficient explanations and answers to many of the claims of Jesus, especially his incarnation, resurrection and pre-existence. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, find relevance in reincarnation which provides a comprehensive and meaningful answer to its significance.

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