



MAIN ARTICLES

Exploring Religious Experience in Nigerian Igbo Indigenous Religious Tradition: Toward a Christianity and Church with an Indigenous Face

*Explorando a experiência religiosa na tradição religiosa autóctone Igbo da Nigéria:
em direção a um cristianismo e uma Igreja com rosto autóctone*

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ABSTRACT: Various religious systems potentially generate religious experience for their adherents. Although religious experience is a particularly personal subjective involvement with the sacred, it, nevertheless, possesses a social element, in that socially acquired beliefs, rooted in religious traditions and symbolisms provide the cultural repertoire into which the individual is both socialized and draws upon for deeper personal meaning. This article explores how Igbo indigenous religious tradition shapes the translation and experience of the Christian faith in Igbo society. We argue that the dominance of spirits' phenomenon in Igbo indigenous religious tradition, including spirit possession, has been creatively reworked mostly in prophetic, Charismatic, and Pentecostal versions of Christianity into experiences of the Holy Spirit for healing and edification of the community.

KEYWORDS: Cross-Cultural Translation. Decolonial Turn. Public-Religion. Ecclesial Structures. Trinity.

RESUMO: Vários sistemas religiosos potencialmente geram experiência religiosa para seus adeptos. Embora a experiência religiosa seja um envolvimento subjetivo particularmente pessoal com o sagrado, ela, no entanto, possui um elemento social,

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pois as crenças adquiridas socialmente, enraizadas em tradições e simbolismos religiosos, fornecem o repertório cultural no qual o indivíduo é socializado e se baseia para um significado pessoal mais profundo. Este artigo explora como a tradição religiosa autóctone o molda a tradução e a experiência da fé cristã na sociedade Igbo. Argumentamos que o domínio do fenômeno dos espíritos na tradição religiosa indígena Igbo, incluindo a possessão espiritual, foi criativamente retrabalhado principalmente em versões proféticas, carismáticas e pentecostais do cristianismo em experiências do Espírito Santo para cura e edificação da comunidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tradução Intercultural. Virada Decolonial. Religião Pública. Estruturas Eclesiais. Trindade.

Introduction

The various religious traditions and belief systems that exist in the world have the potential to generate religious experience for their adherents both on a group level and individual level. Aspects of religious systems including beliefs, symbols, festivals, values, practices, ritual words and ceremonies, and so on, have the power to evoke not only experiences of awe, trembling, wonder, mystery, joy, pleasure, security, but also of a sense of the presence of God in everyday life activities and situations (McGuire, 2008, p. 19). Some religious experiences can be considerably intense such as those involving extraordinary mystical experiences or those dealing with spirit possessions, speaking in tongues, or prophetic utterances, and yet, eagerly sought, as in the case of Pentecostal and charismatic groups (McGuire, 2008, p. 19). But other experiences are not so intense. Religious experience is undoubtedly a personal “subjective involvement with the sacred” (McGuire, 2008, p. 19) or a transcendent reality. Yet, it is equally socially embedded in the sense that it is socioculturally acquired beliefs which are rooted in religious traditions and symbolisms that provide the cultural package and hermeneutic framework by which individuals interpret and understand religious and mystical experiences. Thus, the symbolisms, belief and knowledge systems of religious traditions shape how religious and mystical experiences are interpreted by religious individuals and groups.

From its very beginning, the Christian gospel has shown its compatibility with diverse human cultures and traditions. Going beyond its Judaic natal locus, the Christian gospel has demonstrated its inherent pluralist thrust starting with what missiologists have described as the Gentile breakthrough.¹ Since this inaugural Gentile breakthrough, the Christian faith has not only found expression in Hellenic, North African, Eastern,

¹ Missiologists note that the expansion of Christianity beyond the Jewish and Greco-Roman circumscription, as well as its expressions beyond both its Catholic and Protestant iterations, “affirmed with the Gentile breakthrough the shibboleth of God’s faithfulness toward all

and Western versions, but continues to unfold today in Latin American, Asian, and African versions as well. The emergence of these different versions of Christianities is an eloquent testimony about the cross-cultural translatability of the gospel. The history of Christianity thus shows that it does not have a monoculture. Unfortunately, however, in the history of Western version of Christianity, particularly during European expansionism and colonialism, colonial Christianity tried to stifle the Spirit of God already at work particularly in indigenous cultures. Under the pretext of civilization and Christianization, certain colonial missionary efforts were geared aggressively toward suppression of local cultures of natives and silencing or replacing indigenous epistemic systems/histories and languages with European cultures, knowledge systems, and languages considered to be civilized because superior. Hence, in this particular instantiation of the Christian faith, the hegemony of Europeandom (Mignolo, 2000) and monoculturalism (Loneragan, 1999, p. XI) posed a serious threat to the cross-cultural translatability, transculturality, and pluralist thrust of the gospel.

Not surprisingly, though, in his very first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, out of his profound sensitivity to and recognition of the diversity of cultural sensibilities, highlights the transcultural quality of the Christian gospel message. As the Pope clearly notes,

we would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural (Francis, 2014, n. 117).

The Pope here calls attention to the urgency of Christianity to recover its transcultural character and its ability to express itself in legitimate forms appropriate for each indigenous culture and indeed, for all emergent cultures in their plurality. Christianity is not simply transplanted into cultures to assimilate and totalize them. Rather, as much as it has a transforming effect on cultures, the values and fruits of cultures, in turn, enrich the gospel, expanding its polysemic horizon in the way it is proclaimed, interpreted, understood, and lived out in everyday life. In this way, the church and Christianity “will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and take root” (John Paul II, 2001, n. 40).

However, in the emergent Christianities and churches in the Global South today, there has been an ongoing robust reconsideration of European Christian mission old theology and history of the colonized world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indigenous people’s “religious and social life was portrayed as culturally inferior, intellectually backward, and

peoples” (Sanneh, 1985, p. 233). The Gentile breakthrough initiated an enduring pluralist paradigm in the cross-cultural process of the transmission of the gospel and faith (Walls, 2005, p. 32; see also Njoku, 2013, p. 71).

religiously superstitious” (Dharmaraj, 1993, p. xvi). Since how we construct reality or define a person or groups of people have consequences for how we act toward or treat them, it is not surprising that framing indigenous people and their cultures as inferior, savage, or barbaric was used to politically justify and missiologically encourage dehumanization and colonization of natives because they were seen to be different. In this study, we adopt a postcolonial and decolonial approach to deconstruct the purported naturalness of colonial hegemonic frames whose vestiges (through missionary involvement in colonization), still remain in the legacy of missionary old theology and ecclesial structures today. Our concern is, therefore, to foreground suppressed indigenous epistemic histories and cultural values as a requirement for radical structural and theological transformation that is not only consistent with but perhaps also goes beyond mere ecclesial public statements. An inculturation strategy is used to valorize indigenous religious traditions and values that shape the translation and reception of the gospel, and finally, an interdisciplinary approach is also utilized. Therefore, this article explores how Igbo indigenous religious thought has been shaping the experience, translation, and reception of the Christian faith in its encounter with Nigerian Igbo culture. We argue that the dominance of spirits’ phenomenon in Igbo indigenous religious tradition, including spirit possession, has been creatively reworked mostly in prophetic, Charismatic, and Pentecostal versions of Christianity into experiences of the Holy Spirit for healing and edification of the community.

The first section of the study provides explications of key concepts and categories in the taxonomy of Igbo cosmo-religious worldview. The next explores the cross-cultural character of the translatability of the Christian gospel in order to highlight its irreversibly inherent transcultural pluralist thrust in the context of its encounter with diverse human cultures. This then leads us directly into a consideration of the concepts of scriptural inspiration and translation in relation to the refractive dynamism of human language and meaning. Following this is an analysis of Igbo notion of relational anthropology. This section aims to examine and analyze how Igbo indigenous religious thought serves as a formative tradition for the ethical-moral and religious subjectivization of religious subjectivities in Igbo society. It is these religio-culturally subjectivized subjects who receive and creatively rework the translated gospel to produce an inculturated Christianity in Igbo style. The final section looks at the implications of the Igbo cosmo-religious worldview for the Christian faith, church, and theology.

1 Explication of Key Concepts/Categories

From the beginning of time, a fundamental principle undergirding Igbo indigenous cosmology and how the Igbo have lived and conceived

all of reality is the notion of dynamic relationality. The basic idea is that everything is inextricably interconnected. This notion is encapsulated in the Igbo proverb that says: “*The kwuru, ihe akwudobe ya*” meaning “Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it” (Achebe, 2005, p. 68). This is a way of saying that nothing and no one exists in an absolute state of isolatedness, everything is in some fashion interconnected or linked with everything else—the visible and invisible, human and the divine, human and humans, and other living beings, and the entire cosmic environment. This relational principle finds expression in various cultural aspects of everyday life including myths, symbols, narratives, festivals, celebrations, spiritualities, and so forth. Understood in this sense, Igbo cosmo-religious worldview abhors absolutism and *stasis* as seen in Aristotelian metaphysics, Platonic dualism, and the bounded individualism of Western modern thought and ontology. Moreover, while a certain Western philosophical scheme centers on disjunctive logic or logical exclusivity based on the principles of non-contradiction, identity, and excluded middle (Charupá, 2019, p. 17), Igbo indigenous wisdom centers on a conjunctive, non-dualist logic, and in which contraries are held in creative tension. Such relational principle is lived at the different levels of everyday life such as the spiritual, social, political, historical, cultural, religious, personal, and cosmic.

In terms of ‘culture,’ we refer to it here as “the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do” (Hiebert, 1985, p. 30). Culture, hence, is the totality of these systems of ideas, knowledge, values, material objects, language, shared norms and patterns of behavior which are all learned and socially transmitted from one generation to another. Indeed, culture is a people’s conceptual and symbolic map of their universe. The “totality of these learned, socially transmitted” (Schaefer, 2019, p. 38) shared beliefs, ideas, feelings, knowledge, and values “makes communication and community life possible. They provide people with the categories and logic they use to experience the world” (Hiebert, 1999, p. 376). In short, they enable people to function effectively and maximally not only in actualizing themselves but also in contributing to the ongoing advancement of their society.

Clearly, learning is an important element of culture. All peoples acquire the cultural heritage of a larger community by learning. This is because religions and cultures are discursive traditions. Besides, through what has also been described as a toolkit or cultural package of skills, habits, values, and styles commonly shared by people in the same group or society, culture provides ethical-moral frameworks for shaping action and subjectivizing human subjects through embodied practices and activities into becoming a certain sort of people. Learning thus involves embodied actions and techniques, and not merely an exercise in intellectualist abs-

traction. Underscoring this point, Howard Law writes, “Each individual from his birth is influenced and restricted, at least to some extent, by the patterns of behavior that already exist in his society” (Law, 1968, p. 13). In affirming the social nature of human beings and hence the need for cultural learning, the Pastoral Constitution *Guadium et Spes* (1964, n. 36) of the Second Vatican Council declares that the human person “by nature stands completely in need of life in society.”² Consequently, the patterns of behavior (beliefs, feelings, and values) of one community is distinct from that of another, hence cultural plurality and distinct ways of inhabiting and seeing the world.

What then is meant by indigenous culture? By indigenous culture, we understand it here as the culture created by indigenous peoples with shared common belief and knowledge systems, ancestral tradition and deep historical and generational connection to ancestral land, as well as a common way of societal organization politically and socioeconomically (Woerner, 2024). For the Igbo, indigenous culture is a lived reality that saturates and permeates every facet and moment of Igbo religio-cultural life. Within this cultural milieu, religious experience is mediated in everyday life through prayers, sacrifices, dances, festivals, work, business, and so on, rather than limited only to extreme moments of “‘Alternate states of consciousness’ or ‘peak experience’” (McGuire, 2008, p. 20) when the transcendent and numinous reality is experienced in the form of “*mysterium tremendum*,” as described by Rudolf Otto (1958).

The Igbo cosmo-religious worldview shapes not only how Igbo perceive, interpret, and understand the world they inhabit, but also their attitudes and actions. As Victor Uchendu suggests, this worldview not only serves as a framework for forming ideas about the origin and nature of the universe, but also prescriptively shapes the societal moral ethos which governs rules of behavior, social and cosmic relationships (Uchendu, 2016). Other scholars have equally pointed out that Igbo cosmology provides the Igbo with a meaningful framework for organizing their activities and making sense of quotidian existence; this also includes the deployment of symbols from which flows creative intelligence (*ako-na-uche*) and which, in turn gives rise to customs and codes of society which become internalized from childhood through socialization (Animalu, 1990). Hence, Igbo cosmology undergirds the potency of indigenous Igbo religious traditions similar to any other religion (Ejizu, 1987, p. 132 *apud* Nwoye, 2014, p. 289).

As is typical of every other aspect of Igbo cosmo-religious worldview, its taxonomy is characterized by relational and dynamic hierarchy. The

² See SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL. Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed on: July 28, 2024.

structure of Igbo cosmology, as Emefie Ikenga-Metuh describes, comprises five basic components: (1) belief in God called *Chukwu* (the Almighty God) or *Chineke* (the Creator God); (2) belief in divinities called *Mmuo* (understood as possessing divine quality precisely as manifestations of God and with distinct personal names and cults); (3) belief in spirit-forces called *Arusi* (unlike divinities, understood as having no distinct personal names and cults); (4) belief in ancestral spirits (understood as the living-dead), and finally, (5) belief in medicinal spirits called *Ogwu* (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 54-55). In this taxonomy, *Chukwu*, the Origin of origins, who is at once transcendent, non-gendered, mysterious, and immanent (Lonergan, 1999, p. 105-106), assigns each divinity a particular area of competence in view of human needs and cosmic harmony. Unlike *Chukwu*, the divinities are gendered, for example, *Ala* — (Mother Earth), a female deity and a feminine symbol of fertility, justice, life, and human flourishing; and *Amadioha* — a male deity (Njoku, 2012b, p. 101). Operating under the logic of relational, dynamic, and inclusive divine hierarchy, these divinities, whether female or male, through their particularly assigned areas of competence, enjoy equality in collaborating with *Chukwu* in “dispensing divine beneficence for the well-being of human beings and the world” (Njoku, 2013, p. 78). In other words, the multiplicity of divinities are divine intermediaries who mediate and effectuate divine purpose for humans and the world. Underscoring this idea, some African scholars note that, “The African traditional religion brought the transcendent God in the sky into everyday life. The transcendent only became immanent. It did this through the innumerable deities who shepherd different aspects of the African life” (Ikwaagwu, 2007, p. 30).

The role of divinities as mediators of the transcendent God’s presence and beneficence is illustrated by the existence, in various Igbo communities, of shrines dedicated to different divinities/spirits who are invoked for the various necessities of the people (Jell-Bahsen, 2014, p. 52). The logic of relational and inclusive divine hierarchy is also reflected in these shrines and other avenues, where human mediators include both priests and priestesses, diviners/healers, and clan heads. These human mediators are able, by means of divination or spirit possession, to obtain inaccessible information and insights (MBonu, 2010, p. 28-47) in answer to problems and crises in the community, as Chinua Achebe aptly noted (Achebe, 1958, p. 40). Besides the divinities, the diviners also often invoke the ancestral spirits (the living-dead) who occupy a privileged and preeminent position in the religious experience of the Igbo people and other Africans. According to Olupona, “Ancestors, having transcended the human realm, occupy a higher realm of existence and are equipped to bestow honor and blessings on the living members of their lineage” (Olupona, 2014, p. 28).

We cannot overemphasize that Igbo indigenous religions and spiritualities are undergirded by the matrix of relationships between God

(*Chukwu*), the divinities, spirit forces, ancestors, and other supramundane powers and human beings in the world. Relationships between humans and the supramundane realm are enacted through ritual actions and the mediation of intermediaries. It is important to note that the idea of *Chukwu*'s transcendence here is not the same as Otto's idea of the *deus otiosus* and as popularized by Mircea Eliade.³ Hence, it is worth reiterating the crucial role of mediation in Igbo indigenous religious system. Because the transcendent *Chukwu* exercises power in a dynamic form as "power-with," that is, power shared with divinities assigned to take charge of the different domains of human and earthly concerns, we can understand the significance of the multiplicity of spirits in the Igbo cosmos (Uzukwu, 2012). The notion of transcendence of *Chukwu* in Igbo religious cosmology not only strengthens the autonomy of the divinities in their jurisdictions of competency through power-sharing, but also promotes collaboration with *Chukwu* while at once keeping *Chukwu* beyond instrumentalization. In Igbo cosmology, only the divinities and spirit forces, but never *Chukwu*, can be instrumentalized and sometimes for ill to cause harm. However, other special functionaries of mediation in the Igbo worldview are diviners, priests/priestesses, healers, indigenous medicine men/women, and so on (Adogame, 2023). All of these intermediaries together with ritual actions including divination, mediate the immanence of the transcendent *Chukwu*.

The elements of relationality and collaboration that characterize the Igbo ancestral religion and thought have implications for social engineering in Igbo society. The fact that *Chukwu* exercises power dynamically as 'power-with' by recognizing the autonomy of the multiplicity of divinities in their intermediary functions makes autocracy or authoritarianism abhorrent to Igbo sensibilities. It is small wonder that despite the multiplicity of spirits and divinities, there is no extant legend of theomachy between God and the spirits in the Igbo spirit cosmos, unlike the case of Marduk and Tiamat in Babylonian *Enuma Elish* or among the Olympian Greek gods. Here, the logic of dynamic and relational divine hierarchy celebrates difference and alterity by refusing to reduce the 'Other' to the regime of sameness and domination. Hence, "Among the Igbo, the spirit of republicanism is prized over autarchic unilateralism. Everyone has a right to express her or his

³ Mircea Eliade, who was influenced by Rudolf Otto, made popular the idea of the *deus otiosus* – the withdrawn god. Eliade posited that in so-called primitive societies, the god of the sky seemed so ultratranscendent and so beyond human reach that other religious conceptions must supplant him. Hence, the multiplicities of gods, deities who appear to be more concrete and more directly involved in human affairs because they are competent in one task. On the contrary, the transcendence of *Chukwu* in Igbo indigenous religion is not the condition for the emergence of the deities and divinities. Rather, they are created by *Chukwu ab initio*, and God's transcendence, as conceived within the framework of dynamic and flexible hierarchy, allows for the independence of the deities in their collaborative agentic work toward the realization of God's beneficence for humans and the world. For more on Eliade and Otto, see Pals, 2006, p. 206; see also Eliade, 1969.

views on any issues. This right...is often expressed as '*onye kwuo uche ya*' (let each say his/her mind on matters of concern to him/her)" (Njoku, 2013, p. 79). The idea of '*onye kwuo uche ya*' is profoundly significant among the Igbo. It highlights the egalitarian ethos of the Igbo society where no one is a king who rules by fiat but always by consensus. It speaks to the equal respect ideally accorded the dignity and independence of every person, and the recognition of equality-in-difference. Essentially, each person matters and is seen to have a worth, and "no individual is swallowed up in the 'we.' Every person is seen as irreplaceable and irreducible" (Njoku, 2013, p. 80). We shall discuss more on this in the section on Igbo relational anthropology. At any rate, the recognition of the importance of difference relative to individuals, cultures, societies, and so forth in Igbo worldview is salient for our understanding of the condition of possibility for the cross-cultural translatability of the gospel.

2 Exploring the Cross-Cultural Translatability of the Christian Gospel

A central feature of Christianity along with the Christian Gospel is its cross-cultural translatability. This feature, which shapes its compatibility with diverse human cultures, has resulted in what is today described as world Christianity. Translatability thus unleashes the inherently pluralist dynamism that has always characterized the gospel message of Jesus Christ, which is why we even have four Gospels in the New Testament, in the first place. As Andrew Walls notes, in what has been described quite eloquently as the "Gentile breakthrough," Acts 11 and 15 highlight the fact that it was not the apostles, but some unknown believers from Cyprus and Greece who were expelled from Jerusalem that "were responsible for the breakthrough of Antioch, whereby Greek-speaking pagans heard of the Jewish Messiah as the Lord Jesus" (Walls, 2008, p. 32). This occurrence of the Gentile breakthrough, which, *inter alia*, brought about Hellenic version of Christianity, was not only a part of an early paradigmatic instantiation and affirmation of the translatability of the gospel, but also what has become its irreversibly programmatic pluralist thrust as inaugurated at Pentecost.

It is our contention that beyond the earlier instantiations of the Judaic, Hellenic, North African, Eastern, and Western versions, the programmatic thrust has continued to unfold in new forms of emergent Christianity in Africa, Latin America, and Asia on account of the encounter between the gospel and diverse socio-cultural contexts. Here, our main concern is specifically how the epistemological underpinnings of the Igbo cosmo-religious and anthropological worldview shaped and continues to shape "the translation and reception of the gospel in a distinctively West African Igbo style" (Njoku, 2013, p. 72).

Contrary to the ideology of monoculturalism, we argue that God's *ruach*, the Creator Spirit, did not only inspire the Scriptures but also primordially bedewed creation with plurality including the diversity of peoples, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. Hence, the Spirit arguably is the architect of the compatibility of the gospel with diverse human cultures. This is because the same Spirit inspires both the gospel and whatever is true, good, and beautiful in all human cultures. Put another way, the same Spirit who inspires the Scripture is also the dynamo behind its translatability into the diverse cultural contexts and languages that God created in the beginning in her power and which she ratified at Pentecost. The mystery of the incarnation accomplished in the power of the Spirit functioned to affirm the value of the particularity of material cultures, shared values, meanings, and symbols as arenas of divine epiphany. In what sounds seemingly oxymoronic, Colin Gunton suggests, the Spirit does not abolish particularity in bestowing diversity upon creation, but "rather maintains and strengthens particularity" (Gunton, 1993, p. 182) through diversity in a way that expresses unity-in-diversity. Thus, diverse cultural milieus and historical contexts provide the epistemological medium and hermeneutical tools for how we experience, interpret, and understand God; express our faith, construct God-talk, and articulate that understanding and speech theologically. This leads us directly to the consideration of scriptural inspiration and translation both of which are characteristically refracted by cultural specificities.

3 *The Character of Inspiration and Translation*

Now, let us take a closer look at the notions of inspiration and translation in order to silhouette the contours of the encounter between culture and the gospel, as well as elicit the outcomes of such interaction. Regarding inspiration, a critical question is: does religious inspiration come solely from its divine intent or does it also come from and include the particular pre-existing religious narratives, stories, words, and local cultural idioms chosen by the inspired recipient as a medium of expression? In other words, is inspiration solely a divine act or the product of divine-human concursus? Where lies the demarcation in the inspired scripture between the word of God and the words of humans? If the scripture consists of narratives of how godly people in times past witnessed to their experiences and encounter with God, narratives of experiences that were "written long ago in the thought forms and categories of ancient, foreign cultures" (Grenz; Franke, 2001, p. 60), how does the same scripture speak to modern people and in diversity of contemporary cultural contexts? Is the scripture simply a divine text and voice, or simply a human book—an inspiring chronicle of human religious experiences and hence a mixed bag

of truth and error (Grenz; Franke, 2001, p. 60), or is it both? Is scripture an objective propositional revelation from God? If so, how do we explain the attributions of violence, oppression, injustice in several scriptural texts? What do we make of the inerrancy of scripture in modern times? These and more are some of the unanswered questions that, for want of space, will not be the primary concern of this present study. But suffice it to say that the inherent pluralist thrust and polysemic nature of the inspired scripture warrants translation and interpretation in the light of the diversity of cultures and languages.

At any rate, while building on T.S. Eliot's interesting formulation of the notion of inspiration, Talal Asad comments: "if the word 'inspiration' is to have any meaning, it must mean just this, that the speaker or writer is uttering something which he does not wholly understand – or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him" (Asad, 2018, p. 47). With this cue from Eliot, Asad herein seeks to move attention away from "the question of what decisive *origin* the inspiration reflects (whether 'outside' or 'inside' the subject) and toward the question of how it *strikes* the subject" (emphasis original) (Asad, 2018, p. 48). By directing attention away from the question of decisive origin of inspiration toward how it strikes the prophet or its religious figure bearer, Asad focuses on inspiration as having to do with "confronting something that is true and yet something whose full significance may not be understood" (Asad, 2018, p. 48).

Asad is here pointing out the "mystery" character of inspiration as a saturated phenomenon whose inexhaustible depth cannot be plumbed jejunely by circumlocution or literal translation from one language into another. In this sense, the language of inspiration is, as Asad describes, "polysemic, indeterminate, and opaque" since it is given to hermeneutical ambivalences and various semantic ranges due to its demand for engagement with the embodied and culturally embedded sensibilities expressed in prophetic utterances (Asad, 2018, p. 48). Precisely as polysemic, the language of inspiration cannot be translated merely by the replacement of one word by another in different cultural contexts. To do so, would amount to failure of recognition of what the language of inspiration does with and to the human subject, that is, about its capacity for "unlocking or locking up particular ways of thinking and acting" (Asad, 2018, p. 48). To put it another way, it is about how inspiration strikes the subject. Moreover, implied in this Asad's view is the important idea that language is not fundamentally "a neutral system for description or argument" (Asad, 2018, p. 48), it is not simply a system of collocation of words or abstract cognitive concepts. Rather, language, as the home or womb of being, is "an aspect of how we inhabit the world" (Asad, 2018, p. 50). How we inhabit the world does not come naturally. We learn, through socialization and subjectivization, how to become certain sort of human subjects who live a certain way in the

world. As a result, language produces, via subjectivization, a diversity of human types by availing of a cultural package, meaning, shared values, symbols, which constitute knowledge systems through which agentive individuals form a particular outlook and understanding of reality. If language is understood as part of how we inhabit the world, then what really calls for attention is, as Asad writes, “not only what we do with language but also what language does *with* and *to* us” (emphasis original) (Asad, 2018, p. 50). Having acknowledged this aspect of language, Asad then observes, “Translating language is more than a matter of finding verbal equivalents in the language we know best” (Asad, 2018, p. 51).

This profoundly insightful observation bears serious implications for both past and present propagators of the Christian gospel particularly in cross-cultural and intercultural contexts. It was one of the missteps of colonial Christian missionaries who, in the nineteenth century in Africa, tried to find verbal equivalents of African notions, words, symbols, and so forth in English, German, Portuguese, or French. On this account, Asad, in no uncertain terms, states quite categorically that scripture is “translated not simply into other words but into life, that is, into practices in the context of a particular tradition of ritual and disciplining of the soul” (Asad, 2018, p. 64). Language is more than the written words. It also includes nonverbal aspects such as symbols, artifacts, embodied ritual actions (e.g., dance, talking drums, festivals), and so on. This is significant in particular when it comes to translating scripture into religious traditions that originally did not have written text or scripture, but where religion was interwoven into every aspect of everyday life, emphasizing embodiment, practice, and action rather than assent to a codified set of beliefs and doctrines. For beliefs and doctrines mean nothing if they are simply a chain of ideas that are assented to and applied correctly or orthodoxly unless they are “contextually embedded in [and emanate from] practices that are learned and that come to be inhabited in communities over time—practices that include verbal conventions...and behavioral customs” (Asad, 2018, p. 95). Although John Austin, in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, brilliantly elucidates what we do with language (Austin, 1975), but that is not all there is to it, since language is also about “what it does *to* us and *in* us” (emphasis original) (Asad, 2018, p. 64). To understand a way of life, one needs to understand how its language is embedded and embodied in and shapes practices and actions in a particular context. Put another way, the kind of life people are living cannot be appreciated simply on the basis of their declared beliefs. This echoes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language as a game (Wittgenstein, 1969). For Asad then, “Understanding a language game is understanding a form of life” (Asad, 2018, p. 2).

In the entire gamut of the history of Christian tradition translation has never occurred directly from divinity, without some form of mediation, into the believer’s body. Rather, it has always occurred through mediated

representations and incarnations which gradually culminated in the Word made Flesh. When the content of biblical revelation is translated into material local cultures, traditions, and languages with their particular idioms, values, and worldviews, it is being translated into ways of particular behavior patterns as regulated and taught by those traditions. In being translated into local cultures and traditions, Christianity, for example, from the very beginning, “acquired not merely theoretical knowledge...nor simply an emphasis on the value of contemplation but a practice exemplified in what the Greeks called *paideia*, the education of young aristocrats for roles they would need to perform in their society” (Asad, 2018, p. 68). In those local cultures, particularly the West African ones, through ritualization processes such as initiatory rites as systems of knowledge, certain behaviors, roles, and indeed, way of life are learned and cultivated through repetition and correction under the guidance of representational figures in the community and tradition. Religion in these traditions, is, therefore, not merely about “what one learns *to say* in disembodied words but how one learns *to live* in and through language” (emphasis original) (Asad, 2018, p. 74).

In the light of the foregoing, it becomes obvious that cultures, language, and the people who inhabit them are not passive entities. The translation of the gospel into other cultures and languages does not negate the ability of the receiving language to refract the revelation and understanding of God against the backdrop of its local cultural idioms, symbols, values, and contextual set of meanings as epistemic systems which shape a people’s way of life and seeing the world. The existence of multiplicity of cultures and languages as opposed to monoculturalism, serves to guarantee that the translatability and pluralist thrust of the gospel would not be undermined. In accounting for how the translation of the gospel across cultural frontiers gives rise to plural versions of Christianity, Gambian historian and scholar of world religions, Lamin Sanneh, points out how not only missionary endeavors across cultures but also proclamation, teaching, faith expression, or theologizing can never be culture-neutral (Sanneh, 1985, p. 29; see Bevans, 2005; Njoku, 2013, p. 74). Having recognized early on, in his book *Translating the Message* (1985), how the gospel translation into diverse cultural idioms, values, meanings, and languages brings about diverse versions of Christianity, Sanneh later published a sequel entitled *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (2003). The first part of the title posited as a question is a way of indicating that no one single culture can claim a monopoly of Christianity or as the sole normative and authentic locus of divine revelation and religious experience (Sanneh, 2003). Thus, Western Christianity is only but one particular version and instantiation among others.

To further delineate what is essential to translation, Sanneh makes a conceptual distinction between diffusion and translation. The diffusion model focuses on the transplantation of the gospel from one cultural base without shedding its particular cultural trappings into another culture

mainly by means of imperial and forced imposition. This was the model adopted by colonial Christian missionaries who saw indigenous religions and cultures merely as *preparatio evangelica*. The basic idea, as construed by such an early Christian writer as Eusebius, is that indigenous people's belief and epistemic systems, and insights were, long before the arrival of the missionaries, merely a preparation for the gospel (Cavanaugh, 2019, p. 1). With the coming of the gospel, such so-called pagan beliefs were superseded. In this sense, *preparatio evangelica* was hegemonically enlisted to indicate the superiority of Christianity and European cultures. It very easily became a tool for justifying suppressing indigenous people's epistemic histories and assimilating their belief systems and cultures viewed as primitive, savage, inferior, and irrational under the pretext of the violent ideology of civilization and Christianization.

To the contrary, the translation model involves critical engagement, interpretation, and a continuous process of active reception and reworking by the receiving culture in a way that is culture-specific (Sanneh, 1985, p. 29). Unlike diffusion model, translation paradigm recognizes that the Creator Spirit of God was already actively at work among different peoples, cultures, and places in different ways long before missionary incursions. Indigenous religio-cultural spaces were already holy grounds and as such an interpellation of colonial missionary strategy in Igbo land and all of Africa. Working in cahoots with colonial administrators, the missionaries believed that the subordination, displacement, or even destruction of indigenous belief and knowledge systems by replacing them with European knowledge and so-called civilized religion (that is, Christianity) through aggressive conversion was the panacea for all social problems in Igbo society and other places. We must acknowledge, however, that some missionaries spoke out against the injustice of this imperialist approach and some even gave their lives while trying to stand for justice in protecting and preserving indigenous peoples' heritages. But these were the exception. The colonial missionary assimilationist and totalizing approach to indigenous peoples' religions and cultures remained the default.

The colonial missionary strategy was nothing short of an aggressive and ideological assertion of Eurocentric epistemological hegemony forcefully imposed on natives as the only and normative way of knowing. It was an invented device of "coloniality of power" (Mignolo, 2000, p. 17) for socially controlling indigenous populations in different parts of the globe during Europeanism. Through such a wanton exercise in Eurocentricchutzpah, European local knowledge systems and histories were catapulted unto global designs, which thereby created a cycle of imitative gnoseological dependency syndrome among natives. By playing a crucial role in this colonial strategy, the missionaries, unlike the biblical Moses when confronted with the theophany that preceded his arrival at the Burning Bush, failed to heed the injunction to tread lightly for where they stepped foot

was already holy ground. They failed by not taking off their hubristic colonial shoes of cultural hegemonic domination and by not sheathing their violent swords of ideologically based epistemicide of indigenous epistemic histories (Mignolo, 2000, p. 17) and anthropological pauperization (Boulaga, 1984) of indigenous people's *humanum* before all else. But as Sanneh suggests, translation model allows the gospel and Christianity to be at home in cultures and languages where it is received and creatively appropriated among diverse races and conditions of people (Sanneh, 1985, p. 51). Because religion is not merely about beliefs and doctrines, to appreciate what religion means for individuals and particular groups, it is crucial to consider the human dimension of religion as it is expressed in thoughts, practices, actions, and indeed, in ways of life. Evidently, these thoughts, practices, and actions are also shaped by particular cultural and epistemic worldviews since, as Pope Francis notes, "The human person is always situated in a culture" (Francis, 2013, n. 115). With this, let us segue now into an analysis of Igbo religious anthropological perspective.

4 Analysis of Igbo Relational Religious Anthropology

The notion of person and personhood in the Igbo worldview can be understood against the backdrop of Igbo spirit cosmos. As previously noted, Igbo indigenous religions and spiritualities are undergirded by the fundamental principle of relatedness and interconnection. The Igbo notion of the dignity and independence of each person is rooted in the recognition that at conception God (*Chukwu*) endows each person with a unique personal spirit called '*Chi*.' *Chi* can be translated as guardian spirit, destiny, bearer of fortunes, or a God-element of a person (Achebe, 2005). This spiritual element signifies the divine in each person, links each person ontologically to God, and as destiny, orients each person through agentic self-transcendence toward God and others. Indeed, *Chi*, as a differentiating principle, carves out the individuality, agency, and creativity of each person and steers the actualization of each person's destiny. In this way, all that a person has and becomes both interiorly and exteriorly, and achieves are experienced and interpreted through religious framework. Although no two persons have the same *Chi*, because as the Igbo say, "*Onye na Chi ya*" meaning to each hers or his *Chi*, yet every person possesses the same equality and dignity regardless of gender or sexual orientation due to their personal *Chi* just as the Igbo again say, "*Chi anaghi aka ibe ya*" meaning no person's *Chi* is greater than another's.

The endowment of *Chi* makes each individual porous by enabling them open up and ecstatically orient themselves in self-transcendence toward God and others. Thus, *Chi*, the principle of differentiation and individuation underpins human-human, human-world, and ultimately human-divine re-

lationships in which the individual achieves full personhood. In this way, *Chi* signals the fundamental worth of each individual and the rights that follow as a result (Achebe, 2005, p. 72). In recognizing such worth and in exercising such rights, each individual's personhood and identities are hence shaped and nourished from and within those multistranded layers of relationships — spiritual, social, cultural, personal, and so forth. Within Igbo worldview, refusal to transcend oneself in order to sustain these relationships signals a turn to absolutism (Achebe, 2005, p. 72). Absolutism in this view is abhorrent not only because it is considered as an affront on those values of worth and rights, but also because it introduces disharmony and imbalance in the spiritual, social, and cosmic equation which would then require ritual action, such as sacrifice, to restore harmony.

At this juncture, let us return to the notion of porous and buffered/bounded self as previously noted in order to articulate what type of self is produced under the rubric of subjectivization in the Igbo cosmo-religious worldview. There is a relationship between the interiority and exteriority of the self in that both aspects are formed through socially prescribed behaviors, ethical and embodied practices and activities which are not considered as hindering the freedom of the subject. Rather, such socially and culturally prescribed ways are seen as a scaffolding through which the self is subjectivated and thus oriented toward becoming a certain sort of religious subjectivity (Mahmood, 2005, p. 192). This view comes to relief against the backdrop of the post-Enlightenment construal of ethics and ethical formation in purely intellectualist abstract terms. Whether it is in Kantian, Hegelian, or Husserlian tradition, for example, both religion and its concomitant ethical cultivation were framed along the lines of consciousness delinked from bodiliness and materiality (Smith, 2012). Put another way, within post-Enlightenment thinking, various forms of bodily practices and techniques relative to ethical formation were discountenanced as contingent and inferior in preference for solely rational, categorical, and axiomatic principles construed as necessary and universal. In a more postmodern tone, however, Michel Foucault countered this intellectualist strand by arguing that ethical cultivations are embedded in particular discursive traditions and which in turn are embodied in specific sets of procedures, practices, techniques, and exercises through which the body is disciplined and specific ethical-moral subjects are formed (Foucault, 1997c).

Evidently, religious and ethical formation in the virtuous and pious life is not merely intellectualist but involves embodied procedures and techniques that through systematic repetition and/or acquisition through social and cultural exposure, what Pierre Bourdieu (Swartz, 1997, p. 4) describes as *habitus*, the self comes to be formed as a certain sort of religious subjectivity (Mahmood, 2005, p. xiii). On this account, Dominique Zahan writes,

One is not born a 'mystic' in Africa; one becomes it. This is where recourse to initiatory methods comes into play. One sees the human body as the

starting point of religious and mystical feeling. This is taken so far that the body becomes, in a way, the authentic symbol of the elevation of the human being to the heights of spirituality (Zahan, 2011, p. 21).

Clearly, rather than this-worldly rejecting (in the cast of traditional Christian monastic *fuga mundi*), Igbo religion and mystical experience is this-worldly oriented in that it does not transport the religious subject, in an ascending fashion, into a transcendental realm in quest of union with the divine. Rather, the “mystical in African religion does not remove the human being from the earth” (Zahan, 2011, p. 21) and from bodiliness but instead, in a descending fashion, the divine is perceived to approach a porous subject who is open even to spirit possession. This orientation is particularly typified in divination practices. As an important indigenous religious-hermeneutic approach, divination (*Afa*) plays a pivotal role in Igbo and African cultures. Among different African peoples, “questions, problems, and choices do arise for which the everyday knowledge is insufficient and yet action must be taken. The information necessary to respond is often available, but only through a diviner” (Peek, 2005, p. 171). The diviner, following a set of routines, utilizes a variety of processes and devices “by which otherwise inaccessible information is obtained” (Peek, 2005, p. 171), interpreted, and dispensed to clients. Oftentimes, “the diviner’s body becomes the vehicle of communication through spirit possession” (Peek, 2005, p. 171). Divination practices in Igbo ancestral religion, therefore, constitute one key “institutional means of articulating the epistemology” (Peek, 2005, p. 172) of the people. This means that Igbo religious and cultural tradition cultivates religious selves based on its own *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld).⁴

It is in this sense that the notions of porous and buffered/bounded subject take on new significance. In Taylor’s view, the buffered self is a product of the Western liberal secular modernity. This self is an atomized, self-legislating, and self-thinking thought whose operation is encapsulated within the immanence of consciousness. Such a buffered self, as Taylor writes, takes a distance and disengages “from everything outside the mind” (Taylor, 2018, p. 27). Moreover, against the backdrop of the so-called disenchantment of the world (Weber, 2007, p. 155), the buffered self assumes “a new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos.” Since the notion of disenchantment implies that human beings were no longer seen as in a field of spirits, then humans were no more “open and porous... to a world of spirits and powers” (Taylor, 2018, p. 27). But besides disen-

⁴ The term “lifeworld” (German: *Lebenswelt*) was introduced and popularized by Edmund Husserl. Following Husserl, it is employed here to denote a world that subjects may phenomenologically experience together. Husserl stressed the importance of this concept in terms of its role in grounding all knowledge in lived experience. And in order to access this lived experience of subjects, Husserl posited the centrality of adopting a phenomenological *epoché* – “bracketing” all judgement and attending to being or experience itself on its own terms. See in that regard Husserl, 1970.

chantment, modern exclusive humanism which boosted the confidence of the atomistic and autonomous self-legislating subject in its own “powers of moral ordering” (Taylor, 2018, p. 27) also contributed to producing the buffered self. The buffering effect has implications for the kind of human subject produced in this modern liberal-secular cultural and social milieu. The bounded self becomes unencumbered by setting a boundary around itself. This allows the buffered self to define a supposedly secured inner base area from which it “can disengage from everything else...such that the things beyond [itself out there in the world including societal problems, the pains and sufferings of other persons] don’t need to get to...[it]” (Taylor, 2011, p. 41).

To the contrary, the porous self abhors erecting a barrier or setting a boundary between ego and *alter*.⁵ Indeed, the porous self is rather capable of self-transcendence and radical openness to being permeated by the feelings of others including their distress and suffering. By extension, the porous self is open to the world of spirits and powers, and to spirit possession. Thus, religion, and in this case, Igbo cosmo-religious worldview, through ethical and moral subjectivization cultivates an Igbo person type who is porous rather than buffered/bounded. Through religious ethical and moral formation, a person cooperates with one’s *Chi* and through sustained relationships to achieve personhood and fulfillment of one’s destiny. This evokes the Igbo saying: “*onye kwe chi y’ekwe n’eluwa*” meaning “when a person says yes to her/his *Chi* in this world, then her/his *Chi* also says yes.” Ultimately, religious ethical and embodied practices not only produce an Igbo person type but also endows such a “self with the particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 139). In what follows, we explore the implications of Igbo cosmo-religious and anthropological worldview for Christianity, church, and theology.

5 Implications of Igbo Cosmo-Religious Worldview for Christianity/Church/Theology

In important ways, the implications of Igbo cosmo-religious worldview for Christianity, church, and theology cannot be overemphasized. How has this worldview been shaping the translation and reception of the Christian message and hence, the emergent Igbo version of Christianity

⁵ Here, we are not discussing the concept of “alter ego,” that is, the self as understood in its various aspects or its “other I,” which is the subject matter of personality or self psychology. Rather, we use the Latin term “*alter*” in terms of alterity to refer to “the other” as different from and irreducible to “the self.”

today? The various aspects and expressions of Igbo indigenous religious tradition have much to teach us and for reflection as they also constitute a *locus theologicus* which demands attention. From what has been articulated previously, it is obvious that a central key to understanding the emergent Igbo version of Christianity is the dominance of the dimension of spirits in the Igbo worldview. The dominance of a spirit cosmos as a field where human subjects are porous and self-transcending shapes Igbo epistemology, way of understanding reality in its interconnectedness, the ethical-moral embodied cultivation of self, and overarching way of life. The dominance of spirit dimension has no doubt opened up a diverse and vibrant religious marketplace in Igbo society today, whether it is in Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, African Independent Churches (AICs), charismatic renewal movements, healing ministries in mainline denominations, all competing with one another for the supply of religious goods according to demands.

Within Igbo style Christianity, the dimension of spirits has been reformulated and translated into qualities of the Universal Holy Spirit who has been at work in all of creation and cultures from the very beginning. The universal Spirit has been operative and manifest where human subjects engage in ethical-moral cultivation that enables porosity, self-transcendence, and openness to others in relationships of love, charity, service, and solidarity in the community. The explosion and growth of Pentecostalism, AICs, and other New Religious Movements have challenged and forced traditional missionary churches to purify their conceptions of God that were woefully deficient in addressing the peculiar needs of Nigerian Igbo Christians. These religious institutions have allowed themselves to become enriched by the indigenous religious values including ways of accessing spiritual power for addressing human needs and problems.

Not surprisingly, numerous healing ministries have burst forth on the religious scene in Igbo land and all over Nigeria where the Holy Spirit now possesses priest-healers, charismatic figures, prophet-diviners (MBonu, 2016). The Spirit now empowers such figures for healing the sick and liberating those under the spell of malevolent forces such as witches, wizards, sorcerers, evil spirits, and unfavorable conditions such as infertility, unemployment, lack of promotion, lack of educational success, financial backwardness, relationship failures, unmarriageability, and so forth (Ndiokwere, 1995, p. 58). These rebranded prophet-diviners and priest-healers have been very successful because, like the diviners and healers (*dibias*) in the indigenous religious system, they have learned to take the religious *Lebenswelt* of their clients including their sufferings, fears, anxieties, hopes, desires, and stories seriously (Ndiokwere, 1995, p. 58). Thus, religion here is not merely intellectualist but entails a demonstration of power in action for human beneficence and cosmic harmony. Religion in this worldview does not dichotomize the material world and the spiritual realm. In its epistemology, it conceives

the sacred and the secular as non-dualistic but as co-existent since the supramundane is immanently mediated in the mundane. As Ogbu Kalu recapitulates, African religious beliefs including

Ancestral beliefs... [and for that matter, Igbo religious dynamic cosmology], underscore certain social ideals: the vibrant reality of the spiritual world or 'an alive universe,' the continuity of life and human relationship beyond death, the unbroken bond of obligations and the seamless web of community (Kalu, 2011, p. 55).

Indeed, the notion of the multiplicity of spirits/divinities and the diversity of personal *Chi* in Igbo cosmo-religious anthropological worldview have contributed to the emergence of Christianity in Igbo land as a public religion. Here religion is not relegated to the private domain. Through the dynamic process of translation, the multiplicity of spirits and plurality of *Chi* have been creatively reworked into the doctrine of the Holy Spirit who gives a variety of charisms for different offices, services, and ministries. As Uzukwu affirms, in Igbo Christianity, the multiplicity of spirits deepens an appreciation of the many ways in which the diverse gifts of the Spirit manifest for the edification of the community and humanity (Uzukwu, 1996, p. 143-144).

Evidently, many Igbo Christians and groups are not content with privatizing their religion. Having been religiously cultivated, they deploy their subjectivized capacities to witness within the confines of civil society as subjects of public religion in responding to various social problems and needs in our modern society. For example, members of the Catholic Women Organization of Nigeria (CWON) have become such subjects of public religion through their subjectivization. The CWON was first founded in 1964 in the former Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha in Igbo land (Dyikuk; Egielewe, 2020). By 1965, the organization had started to spread to neighboring dioceses and before long, became a national body with chapters in every diocese and parish in Nigeria. As subjects of public religion, the practices and efforts of these religiously cultivated women are geared not toward identity politics or recognition but rather toward infusing the rivalrous public space with an alternate sensibility issuing forth from porous selves who feel for others, unite, and heal. This is what informs the witness of CWO as manifest in such good works as caring for the poor and vulnerable, reconciliation and peace-building, reaching out to women in need, particularly indigent widows (Catholic or non-Catholic, religious or non-religious), providing and caring for unwed teenage pregnant girls and premature babies, providing scholarships for the girl-child and indigent boys and girls, providing health care for the poor, providing capacity building for indigent widows and other poor women, and so forth (Okure, 2001, p. 269). These women have become this sort of persons who deploy the

power of public religion to contribute to the stability of the social and democratic order, but not in spite of their religious *habitus* that has formed them as porous selves, radically open to the sufferings of others without withdrawing or buffering themselves.

Moreover, the notion of relational and collaborative divine hierarchy, as articulated in Igbo cosmo-religious worldview, challenges us to rethink ecclesial structures and the autonomy of local churches (Njoku, 2012a) in the face of unyielding “resistance to structural changes from the ecclesial hierarchy” (Andraos, 2019, p. 4). It calls for “a need for a new and different pastoral and theological ways of thinking and acting” (Andraos, 2019, p. 4) that take indigenous perspectives seriously. Because of Western Christendom’s involvement in colonization, ecclesial structures within the Roman Catholic Church in indigenous lands have continued to “affirm the supremacy of a dominant Western vision, which is embodied, for example, in a precise style of organization (power, [ecclesial] government) and... therefore dismissing *other* visions and styles” (emphasis original) (Charupá, 2019, p. 23). The present moment, therefore, calls for a self-critical urgency and a decolonial turn on the part of the church. A decolonial turn demands for a church and theologies that “contribute to encouraging intercultural dialogue with indigenous peoples and become active responsible actors in the processes of decolonization of [ecclesial structures,] theology and pastoral ministry” (Charupá, 2019, p. 23). It demands that it be done in a way that is not only consistent with, but also goes beyond the rhetoric of official statements which are, not too infrequently, contradicted by ecclesial realities on the ground. But it remains to be seen, however, how ecclesial structures, ministry, and certain persistent vestiges of the old theology of assimilation and totalization that were deeply shaped by the experience and legacies of colonialism, and continue to perpetuate the coloniality of power in the church, “could truly become part of a ‘decolonial turn,’” as Michel Andraos wonders (Charupá, 2019, p. 5).

Furthermore, another important contribution of the Igbo cosmo-religious worldview to theology is that because of the dominance of spirits’ dimension, rather than beginning with Christology, it adopts pneumatology as the entry point into the communion of the Trinity. The rich concept of relatedness and relationships paves the way for a creative reworking and reception of trinitarian theology in Igbo Christian style. The logic of relational and dynamic divine hierarchy in which *Chukwu* exercises power as “power-with” in a way that honors the autonomy of the divinities and spirit-forces, enriches a trinitarian perichoretic-communitarian model that does not diminish nor obliterate the distinctness and otherness of each Person of the Trinity. It provides a model of collaborative leadership that recognizes the autonomy of local and autochthonous churches whose organizational structures should be allowed to have an indigenous face

rather than the regnant dominant colonial model of absolute power-over that flows from the center to the peripheries. Additionally, this is further enriched by the notion of *Chi* which not only establishes the individuality and worth of each person regardless of gender, but also energizes their agentic self-transcendence in radical openness toward God and others. Thus, emphasis on cultural diversity, the autonomy of local churches, and the recognition of every member's gift (in a non-gendered and non-exclusionary way) for the building up of the People of God should never be viewed as a threat to church unity. For the Spirit who gives a diversity of gifts for the edification of the community is the same one who also ecstatically choreographs us into communion with the Trinity. As Pope Francis affirms,

The Holy Spirit...enables us to enter the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony; just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity (Francis, 2014, n. 117).

In the light of the recognition of the Spirit's variety of gifts and diverse ways of acting and working in all cultures, indigenous religious practices and forms should be seen as fruits of the translated and inculturated gospel. To underestimate this would amount to failure to recognize the inscrutable ways of the Holy Spirit who blows how and where she wills (see John 3:8). Instead, as Pope Francis exhorts, "we are called to promote and strengthen... [the work of the Holy Spirit], in order to deepen the never-ending process of inculturation" (Francis, 2013, n. 126). In this way, we can have a diversity of local and autochthonous churches with an indigenous face.

Conclusion

From the forgoing examination, it has become clear that from its very beginning, the Christian gospel possesses an inherently pluralist quality which allows for its translatability into diverse cultures and languages. In the wake of the Judaic version of Christianity and following on the heels of the Gentile breakthrough, this pluralist thrust of the gospel has continued to birth other versions including Hellenic, early North African, Eastern, Western, and today, Latin American, Asian, and African versions. Thus, contrary to the claims of monoculturalism, there is no such thing as one single Christianity expressed in one exclusive, normative cultural trappings that can then be universalized as appropriate for all. Based on this conviction, we have examined how the dominance of spirits' dimen-

sion in Igbo cosmo-religious anthropological worldview has been shaping the translation and reception of the gospel, leading to an emergent Igbo style Christianity. In Igbo Christianity, as we have seen, the multiplicity of spirits has been reworked into the Person and gifts of the Holy Spirit who now serves as the point of entry and access to the power of the God of Jesus Christ. The multiplicity of spirits have creatively become the various charisms of the Spirit which, through religious subjectivization, empowers Igbo Christians to witness as subjects of public religion. Thus, the internal logic of Igbo ancestral religion and thought based on relationality and collaboration highlights “the diversity which constitutes an integral part of the church’s unity” (Njoku, 2013, p. 83).

On occasion, eruptions of the tired and antediluvian tendency toward triumphalism, various forms of supersessionism, and propositionalism still rear their ugly heads in certain ecclesiastical documents and pronouncements. The Igbo cosmo-religious anthropological tradition that we have examined and analyzed challenges the contemporary church to intentionally pursue and promote relational and multicultural collaboration, as well as dialogue among indigenous religions, other faiths, and theologies. For such an approach will both benefit the gospel in its ongoing and irreversible unfolding transcultural, pluralist thrust and as well, enrich cultures in their openness and receptivity to the gospel.

Abbreviations

AIC = African Independent Churches

CWON = Catholic Women Organization of Nigeria

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Submitted on 21.10.24 and accepted on 20.03.25.

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