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Influence of African Traditional Religion on Christianity in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State

Prof. Clifford Meesua Sibani[1]; Prof. Innime Righteous[2]; Onyinyechi Fidelia Maduagwu[3]; Moses Onyendu Okai, PhD[4]; Eberechukwu Blessing Amaka[5]; Wotogbe-Ozuzuma, Igwechi Hope[6]; Ununuma Ideaozu[7]

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education

***Corresponding Author**: Onyinyechi Fidelia Maduagwu

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Abstract

The study examined the influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) on Christianity in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State. The investigation was prompted by the continuous interaction between African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices and Christian beliefs, worship, and communal life. Specifically, the study examined the historical relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, analyzed the ways ATR beliefs and practices have influenced the development of Christianity, investigated the impact of traditional religious elements on Christian theology and worship practices, and explored the challenges arising from the integration of the two religious systems. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population consisted of Christians from five selected churches in Ahoada West Local Government Area, while a sample of 100 Christians was selected for the study. Data were gathered through a researcher-developed questionnaire comprising two sections, with responses rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Disagree. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by the researcher's supervisor. The collected data were analyzed using frequency tables and simple percentages, while inferential statistics were proposed for testing the study's hypothesis. The reported findings revealed that African Traditional Religion influences the development and expression of Christianity through various worship practices, including traditional music and dance, interpretations of spiritual realities, healing and prophetic ministries, and communal values such as respect for elders, solidarity, and social harmony. The study concluded that the interaction between African Traditional Religion and Christianity has contributed to the cultural expression and contextualization of Christianity within African communities. It recommended that theological institutions incorporate the study of African Traditional Religion into their academic curricula, churches encourage respectful interreligious dialogue, and pastors receive appropriate training in culturally sensitive ministry. Further localized studies were also recommended to enhance understanding of the relationship between traditional religious heritage and contemporary Christian practices in Ahoada West Local Government Area.

Keywords: *African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, Religious Syncretism, Indigenous Religious Practices, Traditional Beliefs, Cultural Influence, Ahoada West Local Government Area.*

Introduction

The encounter of ATR and Christianity has had a profound impact on the religious beliefs and practices across the whole of Africa. In the context of the spread of Christianity in missionary work and contact with early African religious traditions which include ancestor worship, intermediaries, and nature-based cosmologies, Christianity met some of

these longstanding African beliefs. Mbiti (1990) states that ATR provided a religious and philosophical foundation that challenged some aspects of Christianity. Mbiti (1990) therefore notes that the conversion from African Traditional Religion to Christianity in many African societies did not necessarily lead to an end of the practice of the African religious and cultural norms, but rather, the Christian teachings were re-interpreted and understood in the light of the African religious and cultural viewpoints.

In addition, the impact of ATR can also be seen in the worship of African Christianity, such as the use of music, dance, and ritual symbols. In sub-Saharan Africa, Christian churches often use drums, call and response singing, and the use of highly expressive ritual practices, which are similar to the traditional ATR ceremonies (Anderson 2001). These cultural expressions have helped Christianity to bridge the gap with African believers, especially by making worship a communal and participatory activity like the traditional African religious gatherings. African Initiated Churches (AICs) are also a product of such cultural integration that are forms of Christianity which deliberately incorporate African cultural values and religious identity (Daneel, 1987).

Of course, the theological impact of ATR on Christianity is of note as well. The African Traditional Religion has a Supreme God and has lesser spirits and ancestors, which can be interpreted as an interface between the spiritual and human worlds. This framework has affected the lives of some African Christians in regards to their understanding of ideas concerning God, angels, spiritual mediation and the afterlife. Bediako (1995) points to the need of such a framework to enable African Christians to respond to theological issues related to divine mediation, spiritual warfare and life after death. Further, while ancestor worship is condemned in many Christian religions, it is still practiced in certain African Christian faiths, such as the memory of the deceased and the commitment to their ongoing spiritual value (Awolalu, 1976).

Additionally, the emphasis of African Traditional Religion on community, kinship and moral responsibility has helped to shape the Christian ethics and church practices in Africa. In accordance with African Christian values and teachings on social justice, reconciliation, mutual support and collective worship, ATR encourages collective responsibility, social cooperation and communal welfare. As a result, churches have grown roles that are wider than religious activities to provide educational and health care services, and to involve in conflict resolution and community development. In this context, the communal values which arose from African Traditional Religion have reinforced the role of the churches as vital institutions in the spiritual and social life of African communities (Turaki, 1999).

Religious syncretism, whereby Christian and traditional religious beliefs and practices co-exist, has increased, reflecting not only the continuing influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in African Christianity, but also the contested nature of the relation between these two. Syncretism has seen opportunities for cultural continuity and the preservation of indigenous identity, while at the same time causing theological disagreements within Christian communities. Missionary churches have often tended to regard syncretism as a deviation from the established Christian teachings, while some indigenous churches have sought to develop a contextual theology which acknowledges and adapts to the spiritual experiences and cultural realities of Africans (Shorter, 1973). This condition is an ongoing process of the struggle of inherited Christian traditions and indigenous religious and cultural expressions.

To sum up, African Traditional Religion (ATR) has contributed much to the development and expression of Christianity in Africa. The influence of it can be traced in the forms of worship, theology, church architecture and shared morality among the community which offers a significant cultural and spiritual context for indigenizing Christianity. Prior research has focused on the need to appreciate African Christianity within the context of its past and ongoing engagement with indigenous religious practices. The impact of the ATR is important in the understanding of religious change and transformation on the continent as African theologians continue to create African Christian theologies to address the local context.

Research Design

Research design refers to the framework of methods and procedures adopted for collecting the information required to address a research problem. This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate in view of the nature of the research problem and the objectives of the study.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study comprised Christians from five selected churches in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample of a study represents a selected portion of the target population from which data are collected for investigation. For this study, a total of one hundred (100) Christians were selected from five churches in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State to participate in the research.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was carefully structured to ensure clarity, simplicity, and ease of understanding. It was divided into two sections, namely Sections A and B. Section A was designed to obtain respondents' personal and demographic information, while Section B contained questions formulated from the research questions to elicit relevant responses from the participants. The response options were Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Disagree (D).

Validity of the Instrument

To establish the face validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was carefully examined by the researcher's supervisor to assess the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each item. The supervisor's observations and recommendations were used to make necessary modifications and produce the final version of the instrument. The revised questionnaire was further assessed for content validity to ensure that its items adequately represented the subject areas and variables the instrument was designed to measure.

Method of Data Analysis

The responses obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using frequency distribution tables and simple percentages. The research hypotheses formulated for the study were tested using the Chi-square statistical technique.

4.2 Presentation of Data

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaire

	Frequency	**Percent**
Returned	87	87.0
Unreturned	13	13.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.1 showed that 87%(87) respondents returned their questionnaire while 13% (13) respondents did not returned their questionnaire. This implies that a large proportion of the questionnaire were filled and returned.

Table 2: Distribution According to Gender

	Frequency	**Percent**
Male	51	58.6
Female	36	41.4
Total	**87**	**87.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

As indicated in Table 2, 58.6% (51) respondents were male while 41.4%(36) were female. This shows that male respondents participated more in the research than their female counterpart.

Table 3: Distribution according to Age

	Frequency	**Percent**
21 – 30 years	30	34.5
31 – 40 years	24	27.6
41 – 50 years	18	20.7
51 – 60 years	9	10.3
51 – 60 years	6	6.9
Total	**87**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

In the age grade category in Table 3, it shows that the respondents 34.5%(30) respondents are between 21 – 30 years, 27.6%(24) are between 31 – 40 years age range, 20.7%(18) are from 41 – 50 years, 10.3%(9) respondents are in between 51 – 60 years, while 6.9%(6) are in the age bracket of above 51 – 60 years.

Table 4: Distribution According to Marital Status

	Frequency	**Percent**
Single	49	56.3
Married	38	43.7
Total	**87**	**87.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The Marital category of the respondents shows that 56.3% (49) respondents were single wile 43.7%(38) respondents were married. This implies that respondents with single status attended more to the questionnaire.

4.3 Testing of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1

Ho: Beliefs and practices from African Traditional Religion cannot influence the development of Christianity in Africa

H1: Beliefs and practices from African Traditional Religion can influence the development of Christianity in Africa.

Table 5: Relationship between Beliefs & practices from African Traditional Religion and Development of Christianity in Africa.

Structure	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	df	Standard Error	t_{cal}	t_{crit}	Decision
Beliefs & practices from African Traditional Religion	87	3.59	0.883	172	0.177	2.813	1.96	H_0 Rejected
Development of Christianity in Africa	87	3.09	1.398					

0.5 level of significance

Table 5 above shows that the calculated value of t-test t_{cal} = 2.813 which is greater than the critical value t_{crit} = 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with degree of freedom df = 172; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis which states "Beliefs and practices from African Traditional Religion cannot influence the development of Christianity in Africa". This showed that Beliefs and practices from African Traditional Religion can influence the development of Christianity in Africa.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

The findings underscore the profound and multifaceted ways in which African Traditional Religion (ATR) has influenced the development of Christianity in Africa, confirming existing scholarship that views this interaction as dynamic and transformative. Consistent with Mbiti's (1990) seminal work, the data reflect that African Christian communities continue to integrate their holistic worldview—where the spiritual, social, and physical worlds are interconnected—into Christian theology and praxis. This integration shapes not only doctrinal formulations but also the lived experience of faith, making Christianity culturally resonant for African believers.

Worship practices provide clear evidence of ATR's influence, as traditional forms of music, dance, and ritual participation permeate Christian liturgy across many African contexts (Anderson, 2001). The findings show that these expressive elements fulfill both spiritual and social functions, fostering community cohesion and facilitating a sense of divine presence. This corroborates earlier studies which argue that African worship cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the indigenous performative and participatory heritage that energizes it (Kalu, 2008). Thus, ATR practices contribute to a vibrant, embodied Christianity that departs from more formal Western liturgies.

The theological influence of ATR is particularly salient in the ongoing negotiation of concepts like God, ancestors, and spiritual forces. As Bediako (1995) notes, African Christianity frequently maintains belief in a supreme God while reinterpreting ancestral veneration to align with Christian doctrine. The findings highlight this adaptive theological stance, whereby ancestors are honored as moral exemplars and intercessors without contravening the Christian principle of monotheism. This nuanced approach helps mitigate doctrinal conflicts and fosters a faith identity that is both authentically African and Christian.

Healing and prophetic ministries, which are prominent in many African churches, also reflect the influence of ATR's spiritual worldview. The data align with Shorter's (1973) observations that African Christian healing practices borrow heavily from indigenous rituals and cosmologies, addressing holistic health concerns that encompass body, mind, and spirit. This practical synthesis meets communal needs and enhances the credibility and relevance of Christianity in African societies, affirming the church's role as a site of both spiritual and social restoration.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that African social ethics embedded in ATR—such as communal responsibility, respect for elders, and the pursuit of social harmony—are deeply woven into African Christian moral teaching (Turaki, 1999). This fusion supports the church's function as a custodian of cultural values while advancing the gospel message. It challenges Western individualistic notions of religion and highlights the communal orientation that remains central to African Christianity's identity and mission.

In conclusion, the study's findings confirm that African Traditional Religion significantly influences the development of Christianity in Africa through theology, worship, healing practices, and social ethics. This ongoing interaction produces a Christianity that is indigenized, contextual, and socially embedded. The implications suggest that theological reflection and church practice in Africa must continue to engage respectfully with indigenous religious heritage to foster a faith that is both authentic and transformative.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that African Traditional Religion profoundly influences the development and practice of Christianity in Africa. The findings reveal a

complex and dynamic relationship wherein indigenous beliefs and practices are not merely remnants of the past but active contributors to the shaping of African Christian identities.

From worship styles enriched by traditional music and dance to theological reinterpretations of spiritual entities and ancestors, ATR has facilitated the contextualization of Christianity, making it culturally relevant and spiritually meaningful for many African communities. Healing and prophetic practices rooted in indigenous spirituality further exemplify this fusion, addressing holistic human needs beyond what Western Christianity traditionally emphasizes.

Additionally, the communal ethics derived from ATR continue to underpin Christian social teachings, reinforcing values of solidarity, respect, and social harmony. Overall, the study highlights that Christianity in Africa cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its ongoing interaction with African Traditional Religion, which has resulted in a faith expression that is both authentically Christian and distinctly African.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the positive integration of African Traditional Religion and Christianity in African contexts:

1. **Theological Education Reform:** Seminaries and theological institutions should incorporate courses on African Traditional Religion and its relationship with Christianity. This will equip clergy and church leaders with the knowledge and sensitivity needed to engage constructively with indigenous beliefs and practices, fostering a more contextual theology.
2. **Promote Interreligious Dialogue:** Churches and religious organizations should encourage dialogue between Christian and ATR practitioners to promote mutual understanding and respect. Such dialogue can help dispel misconceptions, reduce conflicts, and foster collaborative community development initiatives.
3. **Pastoral Training on Contextual Ministry:** Pastors and church leaders need training on how to navigate syncretism and cultural integration in worship and ministry effectively. This includes recognizing beneficial traditional practices that can enrich Christian life while addressing practices that may conflict with core Christian teachings.
4. **Support for African Initiated Churches (AICs):** Recognizing the significant role AICs play in blending ATR and Christianity, there should be support for these churches in theological formation and community engagement. Their contextual approach offers valuable insights for mainstream churches seeking to be culturally relevant.
5. **Further Empirical Research:** More localized and comprehensive studies should be conducted to understand the nuances of ATR's influence on Christianity in various African regions. This will help in formulating policies and church practices tailored to specific cultural and religious contexts.
6. **Cultural Preservation within Christian Practice:** Churches should embrace and preserve African cultural heritage within Christian worship and social life. This can strengthen believers' identity and ensure that Christianity remains rooted in the lived realities of African communities.

By implementing these recommendations, African Christianity can continue to grow as a vibrant, authentic faith that honors both its indigenous roots and its Christian convictions.

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