

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18817/ot.v15i25.635>**RELIGIÃO COMO PATRIMÔNIO NA NIGÉRIA:** Cristãos Igbos e Religião Tradicional africana<sup>1</sup>**RELIGION AS HERITAGE IN NIGERIA:** Igbo Christians and African traditional religion**RELIGIÓN COMO HERENCIA EN NIGERIA:** Cristianos Igbos y Religión Tradicional africana

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**Resumo:** Partindo de uma perspectiva histórica, considerando a chegada dos primeiros missionários anglicanos, em meados do século XIX, entre os Igbos, na Nigéria, abordarei o impacto do cristianismo (incluindo missionários e convertidos) sobre o debate local acerca da identidade Igbo. Argumentarei que a cultura Igbo tradicional e não cristã foi definida por e em resposta aos debates da missão cristã sobre a conversão e o comportamento dos cristãos Igbos. Depois disso, vou relatar como a identidade Igbo veio a coincidir com o cristianismo e como isso resultou em uma apreciação renovada da religião "tradicional" local como herança e não como "paganismo". Além da literatura mencionada na bibliografia, esta interpretação é baseada em entrevistas que realizei na Nigéria, jornais nigerianos locais, revistas missionárias e correspondência original dos missionários da Church Missionary Society (CMS).

**Palavras-chave:** Religião. Patrimônio. Nigéria

**Abstract:** Starting from a historical perspective, considering the arrival of the first Anglican missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century among the Igbo in Nigeria, I will address the impact of mission Christianity (including missionaries, converts, and prospective converts) upon the local debate about Igbo identity. I will argue that traditional, non-Christian Igbo culture was defined by, and in response to, the mission Christianity's debates on conversion and the preferred behavior of Igbo Christians. Finally, I will relate how Igbo identity came to coincide with Christianity and how this resulted in a renewed appreciation of local, 'traditional' religion as heritage rather than as 'paganism'. Apart from the literature mentioned in the bibliography, this interpretation is based on interviews I held in Nigeria, local Nigerian newspapers, missionary journals, and original correspondence from the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS).

**Keywords:** Religion. Heritage. Nigeria.

**Resumen:** A partir de una perspectiva histórica, considerando la llegada de los primeros misioneros anglicanos, a mediados del siglo XIX, entre los Igbos, en Nigeria, enfocaré el impacto del cristianismo (incluyendo misioneros y convertidos) sobre el debate local acerca de la identidad Igbo. Argumentaré que la cultura Igbo tradicional y no cristiana fue definida por y en respuesta a los debates de la misión cristiana sobre la conversión y el comportamiento de los cristianos Igbos. Después de eso, voy a relatar cómo la identidad Igbo vino a coincidir con el cristianismo y cómo resultó en una apreciación renovada de la religión "tradicional" local como herencia y no como "paganismo". Además de la literatura mencionada en la bibliografía, esta interpretación se basa en entrevistas que realicé en Nigeria, periódicos nigerianos locales, revistas misioneras y correspondencia original de los misioneros de la Church Missionary Society (CMS).

**Palabras clave:** Religión. Herencia. Nigeria.

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Every year, Igbo people living around the world celebrate the New Yam Festival.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they celebrate not only the yam harvest, just like many Igbo communities in South-East Nigeria do, they also perform the existence of an Igbo ethnicity and cultural heritage, which all are said to share. At the same time, by stressing that the roots of the festival lie in the village community, which offered yams to the gods before enjoying the new harvest, they acknowledge the notion that true, authentic Igbo culture is located in the village and based around Igbo traditional religion<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, the annual celebration of the New Yam Festival by Igbo inside and outside Nigeria stresses the ‘traditional’, non-Christian nature of Igbo identity. However, these same people go to church every Sunday and consider Christianity as equally central to their identity. Even though some prophets are active who argue that Christianity cannot be combined with a continued appreciation of Igbo traditional culture – a view that is shared by several charismatic churches active in Nigeria and among African migrants in Europe – most Igbo define ‘being Igbo’ as being a Christian *and* appreciating African traditional Igbo religion as heritage.

The approximately 25 million Igbo form one of the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria. While the Igbo area is in the South-East, many Igbo have migrated to the cities in other parts of the country and beyond, often working as traders or as laborers. Although within the Nigerian context the Igbo hold a reputation for being more ‘modern’ and more Westernised than other Nigerians, many of the emblems representing Igbo identity refer to a shared pre-colonial Igbo tradition. The commonly shared perception of Igbo traditional culture as the culture of the village focuses on the essentially non-Christian nature of Igbo identity. Nevertheless, following the introduction of Christianity to the area, ‘Christianity’ has become one of the main emblems of Igbo identity. In this respect, the Igbo differ from other major groups in Nigeria, such as the Yoruba<sup>4</sup>. This importance of Christianity resulted in part from the successful activities of the Christian missionaries. However, political and social factors were equally important. These included the widespread employment by the British colonial administration of mission-educated Igbo throughout Nigeria, the emergence of a North/South divide in Nigerian politics which corresponded (very) roughly with a divide between Islam and Christianity and, finally, the experience of the Biafra Civil War (1967-1970) which was widely perceived as a confrontation between Christian Igbo and Muslim

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<sup>2</sup> For a report, see Children of the yam. *West Africa*, 1-7 dec. 1997.

<sup>3</sup> BERSSELAAR, Dmitri Van den. Imagining home: igbo migration and the village in colonial Nigeria. *Journal of African Histor*, v. 46, n.1, p. 51-73, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> PEEL, J. D. Y. *Christianity, islam and orisa-religion: three traditions in comparison and interaction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

Hausa.

Today, next to a majority of Christian Igbo, there still exist a substantial minority of ‘traditionalists’, as well as a relatively small number of Igbo Muslims. The vast majority of Igbo are Christian, and to most of them, there is no contradiction in being a Christian and appreciating Igbo traditional culture. How did this come about? Why did Christianity become so important, and how was it combined with traditional religion? How did the Christian appreciation of Igbo traditional religion change from ‘gross superstition and cruel practices’,<sup>5</sup> to traditional heritage? Furthermore: with Christianity widespread among so many West African groups, how did the Igbo accomplish to claim Christianity as central to their identity? And, finally, how did Christianity relate to Islam during the rise of a Christian Igbo identity?

My perspective for discussing these relations is historical, starting from the arrival of the first Anglican missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. I will address the impact of mission Christianity (including missionaries, converts, and prospective converts) upon the local debate about Igbo identity. I will argue that traditional, non-Christian Igbo culture was defined by, and in response to, the mission Christianity’s debates on conversion and the preferred behavior of Igbo Christians. After this, I will relate how Igbo identity came to coincide with Christianity and how this resulted in a renewed appreciation of local, ‘traditional’ religion as heritage rather than as ‘paganism’. Apart from the literature mentioned in the bibliography, this interpretation is based on interviews I held in Nigeria, local Nigerian newspapers, missionary journals, and original correspondence from the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS).

### **Identity, religion, and heritage**

There exist more different Igbo identities than there are Igbo individuals. Despite the emphasis on ethnic group identities in the study of Africa, the ethnic component is only one part of an individual’s identity. The list of other aspects of identity is endless in principle and includes religion, gender, occupation, political affiliation, class, family, and household. In the African post-colonies as much as in Europe, each and every individual has multiple identities<sup>6</sup>, which are selectively mobilized, with different emphasis in different contexts<sup>7</sup>. It

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<sup>5</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1889/87 Letter Bishop Crowther, May 1889.

<sup>6</sup> CHHACHHI, Amrita; PITTIN, Renée. Multiple identities, multiple strategies. In: CHHACHHI, Amrita; PITTIN, Renée (Ed.). *Confronting state, capital and patriarchy: women organising in the process of industrialisation*, London: Springer, 1996. p. 93-130.

<sup>7</sup> DE VOS, George; ROMANUCCI-ROSS, Lola. Ethnicity: vessel of meaning and emblem of contrast. In: DE

would, therefore, be wrong to assume the existence of single, continuous identities that are there to be used -- or studied<sup>8</sup>.

Although identity cannot be reduced to ethnicity, ethnic identity is important in providing links between the different spheres of society and the individual. Individuals operating in different contexts and having different interests, all rally round the same set of ethnic emblems, representing one – allegedly shared – ethnic identity. Here identity relates to the notion of heritage. The idea of a shared cultural heritage relates to many of the emblems of an ethnic identity, but can also exert on other levels, including that of national heritage. Despite the fact that individuals share an acknowledgment of the emblems that represent the identity – including their shared heritage – they do not perceive ethnic identity in the same manner. The debate about the ethnic group's identity contains as many diverse and contradicting elements as that of the individual, and actors selectively mobilize different elements, depending upon the social or political context.

Religion is among the important elements of an individual's identity, and in postcolonial Africa often associated with ethnicity. Religious identity may be linked to local 'traditional' religions and to any of the world's religions ('traditional' is, of course, a problematic term, which I nevertheless use in this article because it is the term used by the Igbo people I write about). In Africa, as elsewhere, the global claims of world's religions have been given local meanings through processes of appropriation and they have often been incorporated within ethnic discourses<sup>9</sup>. A world religion is often part of the ideas about the ethnic identity, providing important emblems of that identity<sup>10</sup>. Religion can function as boundary-marker in the definition of the identity<sup>11</sup> and it can function as moral justification for the existence and intended future of the group<sup>12</sup>. However, religious discourse may also deny the relevance of ethnicity<sup>13</sup>.

In Nigeria, identity, religion, heritage and nation/state have been interacting in

VOS, George; ROMANUCCI-ROSS, Lola (Ed.). *Ethnic identity: cultural continuities and change*. Palo Alto: Mayfield, 1975. p. 363-90.

<sup>8</sup> ROUSE, Roger. Questions of identity: personhood and collectivity in transnational migration to the United States. *Critique of Anthropology*, v. 15, n. 4, p. 351-380, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> VEER, Peter van der. Introduction. In: VEER, Peter van der (Ed.). *Conversion to modernities: the globalization of christianity*. New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> PEEL, J. D. Y. The cultural work of Yoruba ethnogenesis. In: TONKIN, E.; MCDONALD, M.; CHAPMAN, M. (Ed.). *History and ethnicity*. London: Routledge, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> VEER, Peter van der. *Religious nationalism: hindus and muslims in India*. Berkeley: Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> O'BRIEN, C. C. *God land: reflections on religion and nationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> VAN DIJK, Rijk A. From camp to encompassment: discourses of transsubjectivity in the Ghanaian Pentecostal diaspora. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, v. 27, n. 2, p. 135-59, 1997.

complex ways since the founding of Nigeria as a colonial state in 1914. The colonial administrative ideology and practice of ‘indirect rule’, intended to recognize as local intermediaries of the colonial state traditional rulers, whereby the latter’s claims to traditional authority frequently had a basis in traditional religions. That the colonial state recognized and supported the authority of those who were associated with traditional religions, was a concern for missionaries and Christian converts alike. Attempts to argue that Christian converts should not have to obey the instructions of traditional, non-Christian chiefs, were resolutely rebutted by the colonial state. The colonial division of the country into regions that were roughly ethnically and religiously defined, became particularly problematic in the inauguration to independence, when, following the decision in principle that Nigeria would gain independence, ethnic and religious politics became rife, with consequences that were divisive for the Nigerian nation<sup>14</sup>. The 1967-70 Biafra War conflict had diverse origins, but was (and often still is) mainly understood in terms of ethnic and religious conflict. When the Nigerian (military) government, during the oil boom that followed the conflict, organized the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), it did so to place Nigeria on the world map, but also to contribute to nation-building through the celebration of Nigerian national culture. However, in doing so, the Nigerian state reiterated and amplified colonial understandings of Nigeria as a patchwork of ethnic groups and, thus, the national culture that FESTAC defined and displayed, remained ethnically anchored<sup>15</sup>. Current political debates and tensions continue to have strong religious and ethnic elements, as can be seen in the continuing efforts of a highly visible group of Igbo politicians to gain independence for the part of Nigeria that had previously tried to secede during the Biafra conflict.<sup>16</sup>

### **Mission Christianity and Igbo traditional religion**

Christianity first came to the Igbo area in 1857, when the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) opened a mission station in the town of Onitsha on the river Niger. These missionaries were convinced of the existence of an Igbo people, living in the area. They based this opinion on the frequent mentioning of an ethnonym ‘Igbo’ in the context of the slave trade and the existence of an Igbo community in Sierra Leone. However, in the ‘Igbo area’ itself the missionaries had difficulty finding individuals who were prepared to accept the

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<sup>14</sup> NNOLI, Okwudiba. *Ethnic politics in Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978

<sup>15</sup> APTER, Andrew. *The Pan-African Nation: oil and the spectacle of culture in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> *This Day*. 8 September 2017. ‘Igbo elite team up with IBOP for Biafra restoration’. Available in: [www.thisdaylive.com](http://www.thisdaylive.com) Accessed in: 9 sep. 2017.

name 'Igbo' as referring to themselves. A shared notion of being Igbo did not yet exist in the area. Rather, a number of local communities existed. From a few mission stations on the Niger, the missionaries nevertheless proceeded to convert 'the Igbo'. Initially, they made very slow progress, but they became very successful after the British conquest of the area in the early twentieth century. Missionary enterprise included activities such as church services, schools, and medical services, but also the reduction of the local language into writing, the translation of the Bible into that written version, and many discussions about society and religion with converts and prospective converts<sup>17</sup>. All these activities and especially the attempts to standardize the language have influenced local African perceptions of Igbo identity<sup>18</sup>.

In order to understand the interaction between Christianity and notions about Igbo traditional culture, we need to look specifically at the discussions between missionaries and prospective converts<sup>19</sup>. Mission Christianity related to traditional Igbo culture in the context of two different discourses. The first discourse was with 'Europe', that is, with the missionary parent body as well as with the mission's supporters in local congregations in Europe. This discussion was concerned with the progress of the mission, with showing that Africans were in need of conversion to Christianity, and with indicating that there were great prospects for converting the Igbo. While this first discourse has had considerable impact upon the perception of Africa and Africans in Europe as well as among Africans<sup>20</sup>, it is the second, local discourse I am concerned with in this article.

This local discourse was a dialogue between the missionaries and their Igbo counterparts (both converts and prospective converts), about the nature of Igbo society and about how one can become a Christian while remaining Igbo. In order to make sense of conversion, traditional Igbo society had to be understood as being in need of Christianity, lacking essential Christian values, and also, with traditional African religion as a threat to salvation. Missionaries and equally their local converts needed an image of traditional, pagan

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<sup>17</sup> AJAYI, J. F. Ade. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: the making of a new Élite*. London: Longmans, 1969; EKECHI, F. K. *Missionary enterprise and rivalry in Igboland*. London: Cass, 1972; OZIGBOH, R. A. 1980. *A christian mission in the Era of Colonialism: a study of the Catholic Missionary Enterprise in South-Eastern Nigeria 1885-1939*. 1980. Thesis (Ph. D) - University of Birmingham, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> BERSSELAAR, Dmitri van den. Creating Union Ibo: missionaries and the Igbo language. *Africa*, v. 67, n. 2, p. 237-59, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Compare MEYER, Birgit. Komm herüber und hilf uns of hoe zendelingen de ewe met andere ogen gingen bekijken (1847-1914). *Etnofoor*, v. 2, n. 2, p. 91-111, 1989; MEYER, Birgit. Modernity and enchantment: the image of the devil in popular African Christianity. In: VEER, Peter van der (Ed.). *Conversion to modernities: the globalization of christianity*. New York; London: Routledge, 1996. p. 199-230.

<sup>20</sup> COOMBES, Annie. *Reinventing Africa: museums, material culture and popular imagination*. New Haven; London, Yale University Press, 1994; MUDIMBE, V. Y. *The invention of Africa: gnosism, philosophy and the order of knowledge*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Igbo culture that was an antithesis to Christianity. As a result, the relation between pagan Igbo and Christianity was perceived through a set of opposites. These opposites continuously appeared in the missionaries' descriptions, which contrasted 'death', in the form of human sacrifice, to the lives saved by Christianity (in the case of slaves and twin children often quite literally). They also characterized traditional Igbo society as being in a state of war, violence, and continuous crime, which was then contrasted to the peace and justice advocated by the missionaries, who indeed claimed to settle disputes, or at least attempted to do so. Another commonly explored theme was that of the 'sexual immorality' of the pagan Igbo, a term missionaries used to indicate that Igbo were polygynous and that unmarried women walked about with their breasts uncovered (which was very decent in the Igbo context, but rather different from the ways in which European Christians expressed modesty and decency). Also, the 'deceitfulness' of the traditional priests was 'exposed' and condemned, and compared to the truth of the Christian message. Finally, the 'darkness' in which the Igbo were living was contrasted to the light that was brought by Christianity. Although the unconverted Igbo was perceived as living in darkness, as 'a child of hell' even,<sup>21</sup> he was not usually accused of having made a conscious choice for Satan. Rather, the ignorance of those who did not know God, and their suffering as a consequence, were demonstrated.

To illustrate these notions, the missionary perception of pagan Igbo society was described in narratives. These narratives came in two genres, the one being conversion stories, the other being short but detailed descriptions of a ritual or situation that was considered characteristic for the allegedly barbarous non-Christian Igbo society. Usually, these latter descriptions started from a generalization about heathenism, which was followed by a telling example, and was then concluded with a remark stressing the contrast to Christianity. Among the issues described in these narratives are the worshipping of idols, poison ordeals, the killing of twins, and burial rituals involving human sacrifice. While the above descriptions only discuss paganism as the opposite of Christianity, in the genre of conversion stories the Christian Igbo appear themselves. In these stories, the honest, brave and noble lives of the converts are contrasted to the wickedness of the pagan population.

This conscious creation of extremes differed of course from the reality. In July 1890, for example, a group of 26 people – including 15 Church members – living in Onitsha were accused of witchcraft. Some of the accused admitted to sorcery during a public meeting

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<sup>21</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, apr. 1871, p. 115. A more detailed discussion of this – including references to various CMS sources – can be found in BERSSELAAR, Dmitri van den. *In search of Igbo identity: language, culture and politics in Nigeria, 1900-1966*. Leiden: Leiden University, 1998.

in the marketplace, claiming that they operated as a group and that they killed people using medicine. They described how ‘After killing a person we extract the fat and blood and put it in a bottle and use it for Chop Oil in our chop.’<sup>22</sup> However, most of those accused refused to admit to their guilt and were prepared to undergo a poison ordeal to prove their innocence. For the Christian converts in the area this was a very embarrassing incident, as it showed that the clear boundary between Christians and pagans which existed, in theory, was not so strict in practice: here, two of the evils that they associated with the pagan Igbo, namely witchcraft and poison ordeals, was also practised by Christians. This prompted the members of the Church in Asaba, on the opposite bank of the Niger, to write to their ‘brethren’ in Onitsha, accusing them of not being good Christians and of damaging the Church.<sup>23</sup>

While it is clear why the missionaries created such a negative image of Igbo society, what needs to be explained is why the converts, too, took such a strong stand against traditional customs? That they were against witchcraft is not so surprising of course, since witchcraft was a particularly dangerous phenomenon against which it was nearly impossible to protect oneself, especially not as a Christian.<sup>24</sup> However, it is less easy to see why they should be against polygyny, bride price, title taking, and against every other aspect of traditional society, including many aspects that were maybe not specifically un-Christian.

I think that three factors explain this attitude. The first aspect is the background from which most of the early converts came. Most of the early converts had held a fairly marginal position in the local society before they turned to Christianity. Many of them had been slaves – some had actually been ransomed by the missionaries – while others continued to work as slaves for traditional families after their conversion<sup>25</sup>. Among the converts were also women who had given birth to twins, and twin children who had been saved from death by the missionaries and had since been raised by Christians (missionaries pointed out that in Igbo tradition, giving birth to twins was considered non-human, and that the mothers of twins were cast out and the babies were killed)<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, to the doctrinal position that non-Christian society was evil and under the influence of Satan, they could add their own experiences as oppressed individuals and misfits in that society. In a sense, it was a claim to a

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<sup>22</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1890/138 Statement of Okuwan. Meeting on the 28/29th July 1890.

<sup>23</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1890/139 Letter from members Asaba Church to Peter Abulu and the members of Onitsha Church, 31 July 1890.

<sup>24</sup> As late as in 1937, Sylvia Leith-Ross noted that many witches were Christians, and that being a Christian could not protect one from witchcraft. In Onitsha, witches were associated with churches to such an extent that people hesitated to become Christians out of fear of the number of witches they would have to meet in Church. LEITH-ROSS, Sylvia. *African conversation piece*. London: Hutchinson, 1944.

<sup>25</sup> JORDAN, John P. *Bishop Shanahan of southern Nigeria*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1949.

<sup>26</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1889/87 Letter Bishop Crowther, May 1889.



new form of respectability to denounce the powerful men as slave-owners and to disqualify the non-Christian authorities as deceitful and evil.

Added to this was the fact that, until the early twentieth century, the number of converts was low, forming small communities on the fringes of mainstream traditional society. They constituted an alternative to the establishment, with their own rules and rituals, and - to some extent at least - their own authorities. The rituals that represented the Christian community included the Church service, but also the denouncing of the Igbo pagans, and preaching in the streets once in a while to confront the pagans with the Christian message. The missionary and the church building were the centers of this alternative community, and indeed the missionary wielded real power over the converts as the latter tended to depend on him for protection.

Finally, and most importantly, becoming a Christian indicated a whole new identity, part of which was the rejecting of the old life and everything it stood for as wrong. Often, the convert physically moved to the Christian community, thereby giving extra meaning to the new identity. To turn against the pagans was an expression of this new identity.

Nevertheless, the missionaries feared that many of the converts were only nominal Christians, who still had to become 'real' Christians. Missionaries were constantly concerned about what they called 'backsliding' into traditional culture, something to which especially the more successful male converts – who, for example, evolved their missionary education to good account, working with one of the trading companies as clerks – were prone. As they managed to raise their social status they often married a second wife or took a traditional title. In a number of instances, people were expelled from the mission for this reason.

The converts themselves realized that their identity as Igbo Christians needed to be continuously maintained. They had to prove to the missionaries that they were not sliding back, and also to the fellow members of their congregation, who were quite alert in these matters, not only for theological reasons but also because they feared the consequences of traditional practices such as witchcraft. This explains their fierce rejection of everything traditional, and the embarrassment that resulted in each time it was shown that the pagans were not as extremely different from the Christians as the latter wanted to believe. The difference between theory and practice was explained by arguing that the Christians were not yet steadfast, and were subject to many difficulties. When one of the members of the congregation slid back, a delegation of the remaining members came over and argued with the

person, trying to convince the person to return to the fold.

Of course being a Christian was not the only new aspect of the converts' identities. As the notion of being Igbo was not yet accepted when the missionaries arrived, the missionaries' insisting upon the fact that the converts were *Igbo* Christians added an extra dimension. I will discuss this in more detail below, where I show why Christianity became so important to Igbo group identity. Here, I merely want to note that conversion turned people both Christian and Igbo.

The Christians' negative image of Igbo culture did not last. I have already mentioned the successful male converts' tendency to take traditional titles and second wives. This 'backsliding' was a phenomenon as old as the Anglican and Catholic missions. However, backsliding became particularly rampant after 1900 and even resulted in the closing down of mission stations. Also, and especially among the Catholics, Christians started to protest against the strict position of their Church on traditional practices<sup>27</sup>.

This increasing defiance of Church doctrines by the local Christians coincided with a shift in prestige from the margins of society to a more mainstream, and later even an elite position. This was, of course, a result from the colonial conquest of the Igbo area. The colonial presence boosted the Christians' status in two ways. First, the colonial military presence made the missions, and thereby the converts, less vulnerable. Moreover, the missionaries tried to get the Christians at least partially exempted from forced labor on colonial road construction. Secondly, the colonial administration's need for clerks provided opportunities for those who had been to the mission schools and could read and write in English. Many of these clerks indeed knew how to make use of their position as crucial links between the English administration and the traditional society. On becoming more successful, individual Igbo Christians decided on a bid for power within mainstream Igbo society.

What the missionaries rejected as backsliding, therefore, was not so much a rejection of Christianity, but rather individuals' attempts to combine Christianity with traditional status. This development necessitated a redefinition of the relationship between Christians and traditional society. This happened during the local discussions of the local Church Councils, during the meetings of the missions' executives, and during special conferences that explored the relationship between Christianity and local 'native' customs, organized by the Catholic and Anglican missions.

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<sup>27</sup> OZIGBOH, R. A. 1980. *A christian mission in the Era of Colonialism: a study of the Catholic Missionary Enterprise in South-Eastern Nigeria 1885-1939*. 1980. Thesis (Ph. D) - University of Birmingham, 1980.

The general outcome of these discussions was that Igbo traditional customs were not always un-Christian and, therefore, Christians could be allowed to participate in some of them. About others that remained unacceptable, it was decided that these traditions would have to be changed in order to become acceptable to Christians. As a result of this re-evaluation of the relation between Christianity and pagan society, most Christians could no longer perceive the two as opposites. Rather, Christianity came to be seen as the next step up from traditional society. This line of argument was developed further, and soon it was claimed that certain aspects of traditional culture were actually very similar to Christianity. Eventually, influenced by a long-established idea of Jewish origins for West African peoples, they began looking for parallels between Igbo rituals and those of the ancient Israelites. This new perception gave Igbo tradition more value and placed it in a temporal scheme that pointed to Christianity as its eventual destiny.

The Igbo were not unique in conceptually linking their traditional, pre-Christian culture to possible Hebrew origins. It was, in fact, a very common claim, applied to many West African groups<sup>28</sup>. Nor was it particularly new for the Igbo. Already Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who published his autobiography in 1789, suggested connections between the lost tribes of Israel and his own 'Eboe' people<sup>29</sup>. Likewise, James Africanus Horton in his 1868 volume on *West African Countries and Peoples* argued that Igbo religion showed clearly that they were one of Israel's lost tribes<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, this perspective was absent from the local Christian discourse on Igbo traditional culture until the early twentieth century.

It appears that the emerging of a Christian appreciation of Igbo traditional culture started relatively late compared to the situation among the Yoruba, where this line of argument goes back to the 1860s<sup>31</sup>. In the Igbo case, this perspective emerged, and gained importance fairly gradually, in the period following the colonial conquest.

All this time, the Christians constituted only a minority of the total population categorized as 'Igbo' by the colonial administration<sup>32</sup>. The impact of the missionaries on the debate about Igbo culture was not confined to their influence upon the local Christians.

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<sup>28</sup> LAW, Robin. The Hamitic hypothesis in indigenous West African historical thought. *History in Africa*, v. 36, p. 293-314, 2009; ZACHERNUK, P. S. Of origins and colonial order: Southern Nigerian historians and the Hamitic hypothesis, c. 1870-1970. *The Journal of African History*, v. 35, n. 3, p. 427- 456, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> EQUIANO, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African (with a new Introduction by Paul Edwards)*. London, 1789 (reprinted 1969). 2. v.

<sup>30</sup> HORTON, James Africanus. *West African countries and peoples*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press., 1868 (reprinted 1969).

<sup>31</sup> PEEL, J. D. Y. For who hath despised the day of small things? missionary narratives and historical anthropology. *Comparative studies in history and society*, v. 37, n. 3, p. 581-607, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> TALBOT, P. Amaury. *The peoples of Southern Nigeria: a Sketch of their history, ethnology and languages with an abstract of the 1921 census*. London: F. Cass, 1926. p. 107. v. 4.

Mission Christianity's perception of Igbo traditional religious concepts had - and continues to have - an enormous impact on definitions of Igbo group identity as missionary tended to stress the idea of the existence of an Igbo people with their own, specific culture, and also provided definitions of the characteristics that came to be considered typically Igbo. Christian missionaries thus helped to define what Igbo cultural heritage included. That this influence has been long-lasting is reflected in the authority that continues to be accorded to missionary publications on Igbo culture such as the volumes by Basden<sup>33</sup>. This mission Christian perception of Igbo culture impacted upon later writings by Igbo on the subject, as is reflected in the choice of subjects, opinions, and style, of publications by Igbo authors such as Chinua Achebe, Victor Uchendu, and Chukwuemeka Ike.

I have stressed that the missionary debate on Igbo culture and identity was a debate in which both missionaries and local people participated. However, the view I am able to present remains rather one-sided. Although the development of a rather negative image of Igbo society that was shared both by missionaries and Igbo Christians can be traced fairly clearly from (mainly) missionary sources, the traditionalists' reaction to the Christians' perception of their culture is barely documented. The missionaries' accounts usually portray non-Christians as duplicitous, and as more interested in trade and acquiring medicine against bullet wounds, than in the missionaries' preaching. Nevertheless, of course, this does not provide us with any reliable information. This is all the more regrettable because the missionaries' descriptions of Igbo culture were discussing traditional, pagan Igbo culture, and explicitly not that of the local Christians.

### **Turning traditional religion into heritage**

The local missionary discourse on Christianity, paganism, and Igbo identity shows interesting paradoxes and inversions. Initially, traditional Igbo culture was seen as the opposite of Christianity, and indeed, descriptions of Igbo society did not mention the Christians. Nevertheless, the Christian converts were the first to accept the label 'Igbo', as this was part of their classification – by the missionaries – as *Igbo* Christians. This contributed to

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<sup>33</sup> BASDEN, G. T. *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: an account of the curious and interesting habits, customs and beliefs of a little known african people by one who has for many years lived amongst them on close and intimate terms*. London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1921; BASDEN, G. T. *Niger Ibos: a description of the primitive life, customs and animistic beliefs etc., of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One Who, for Thirty-Five years, Enjoyed the Privilege of their Intimate Confidence and Friendship*. London: Seeley, Service & Company, 1938.

the situation whereby a generally accepted image of Igbo culture existed, which was recognized as the opposite – at least in theory – of that adhered to by the very people who were prepared to call themselves Igbo. Later, this situation changed, when Igbo Christians tried to come to terms with traditional Igbo culture. An essentially oppositional view was gradually replaced with a more positive view, which allowed pagan Igbo culture to be seen as a precursor to Christianity. This reassessment resulted in a Christianisation of sorts of the image of traditional Igbo culture and turned traditional religion into heritage.

When the image of Igbo traditional religion shifted towards a more positive assessment, this did not indicate the end of the missionary impact upon the discourse on Igbo culture. On the contrary: the discourse continued to be largely held in the context of mission Christianity, discussing, among other things, whether aspects of traditional culture were acceptable to Christians. Moreover, while negative connotations of missionary descriptions were disputed, the missionary descriptions themselves, and the choice of subject remained important. Many of the aspects condemned by missionaries came to be seen as constituting the essence of traditional Igbo culture. The use of a Christian conceptual scheme placed emphasis upon notions within Igbo culture which were especially important to Christians, but maybe less so to traditionalists. Therefore, the modern image of traditional Igbo culture, also for the Igbo themselves, is to a large extent a Christianised image, describing Igbo practices in terms that are essentially Christian.

The diversity of local culture is not reflected in the Christians' discourse on Igbo society. Although the missionaries and their converts were clearly aware of the dissimilarities between even nearby towns in the area,<sup>34</sup> there was no space for the recognition of these differences in a debate that contrasted Igbo-ness to Christianity. The resulting image was a simplification of both traditional Igbo culture and Christianity. The Christians' debate unified Igbo culture and emphasized what towns had in common (such as 'idolatry') rather than their differences.

The resulting more unified perception of culture was heavily influenced by the geography of the process of missionary expansion from its initial base in Onitsha, which culture was taken as the standard for 'the' Igbo culture. Many culture aspects which, as a result of the Christians' debate, have become known as 'typically Igbo' were characteristic for the area around Onitsha, more specifically the town of Awka.

The mission station at Awka was one of the first stations away from the river

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<sup>34</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1900/60 Letter P.A. Bennett, Obusi, 22 February 1900.

Niger and it was used as the base for further expansion into the hinterland. Not only is Awka one of the places with the longest history of Christianity in the Igbo area, it also developed into an administrative center of the CMS, at times favored above Onitsha as it was considered more authentic than Onitsha which was subjected to strong outside influences.<sup>35</sup> In 1903, the CMS even decided to move its training institutions for teachers and catechists from Onitsha to recently occupied Awka.<sup>36</sup> The missionary Basden's influential books on Igbo culture were based on his long stay in Awka. The practical reason for this was the fact that he was based in Awka, but in the introduction to *Niger Ibos* he claimed that the Awka area was where 'ancient Ibo law and custom can be best studied'<sup>37</sup>.

Although the missionary descriptions proved influential and were widely used, not everything they claimed was accepted; many of the moral judgments that went with these descriptions were either questioned or ignored by Igbo authors who were otherwise influenced by missionary descriptions. This has happened to traditional aspects such as title-taking and Osu. The institution of Osu, cult slavery, which was condemned by the missionaries and Igbo Christians, is nowadays described as a rather humane and benign institution by at least some Igbo authors, although its existence is never denied. Title-taking and secret societies, formerly denounced by Igbo Christians, are now perceived as having constituted some of the core institutions of pre-colonial Igboland, fulfilling very positive and beneficial functions within traditional society<sup>38</sup>.

Other aspects of pre-colonial society, described by missionaries and early converts, have been largely ignored by later Igbo Christians. Consider the example of cannibalism, the existence of which was regularly mentioned by missionaries and converts. This does not necessarily mean of course that cannibalism really was rife in pre-colonial times. It was common practice in West African societies to accuse strangers and enemies of cannibalism, and often, these accusations were merely vague claims based on hearsay. There exist some more detailed accounts of missionary writing, but these do not always come across as reliable. What to think of Jordan's description of the treatment by an Igbo town of its enemies, who, he writes, was 'summarily beheaded, expertly dismembered, and flung into the

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<sup>35</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1899/69 Dennis. A Week's Itineration into the Ibo Country; G3 A 3/O 1903/54 Minutes of Niger Executive Committee, 23-28 February 1903.

<sup>36</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1903/87 Letter T.E. Alvares, Onitsha, 4 August 1903; G3 A 3/O 1903/96 Minutes of Executive Committee, Onitsha, September 1903.

<sup>37</sup> BASDEN, G. T. *Niger Ibos: a description of the primitive life, customs and animistic beliefs etc., of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One Who, for Thirty-Five years, Enjoyed the Privilege of their Intimate Confidence and Friendship*. London: Seeley, Service & Company, 1938.

<sup>38</sup> IFEMESIA, Chieka. *Traditional humane living among the Ibo: an historical perspective*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Pub, [1980].

cooking pots ranged around<sup>39</sup>? In 1919, then 22-year old CMS teacher Mr. Onubogu spoke of fighting and cannibalism when offered it to an idol while his townsmen ate the rest of the man's body. He also claimed that he once watched three men being killed and eaten, thinking he would like to join in the banquet, arguing 'I didn't think it wrong.'<sup>40</sup> Onugbogu's claims have the features of a conversion narrative, which puts their reliability in question. Nowadays, cannibalism is no longer regarded as a characteristic aspect of traditional Igbo culture. Indeed, Igbo authors have argued that traditionally, the Igbo had great respect for life and did never take another man's life<sup>41</sup>.

### **Christianising Igbo identity**

So far I have argued that the interaction between Christian missionaries and (prospective) Igbo converts largely shaped current notions about what is traditionally Igbo. Other factors – which I will not discuss in this article – including of course the contact with the colonial administration, the interaction with other, non-Igbo Nigerians, and the confrontation that was felt between 'tradition' (defined in terms of Igbo-ness) and 'modernity' (perceived as Western). However, to most Igbo individuals in late-colonial and postcolonial times, Igbo-ness referred not merely to aspects of a pre-colonial Igbo tradition, but also and especially to matters that were perceived as 'modern' and often also as 'Western'; matters that had been introduced since the coming of the British. These included the notion that the Igbo had adapted more successfully to life in the colonial state, were better educated than other groups and held more positions in the colonial civil service<sup>42</sup>. The most important of these 'modern' elements of Igbo identity has to be Christianity.

Christianity could become so central to notions about Igbo group identity, due to its ability to straddle individual and group identities. On the one hand, the form of Christianity that was introduced by the missionaries is individualistic, with emphasis upon individual responsibility and individual conversion. On the other hand, mission Christianity also introduced the notion of Christian communities, and of the brotherhood of all those who are Christians. In principle, Christian groups are made up of those who believe in God, irrespective of ethnicity, and in theory, therefore, ethnic and religious identity do not coincide.

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<sup>39</sup> JORDAN, John P. *Bishop Shanahan of southern Nigeria*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1949.

<sup>40</sup> CMS; Acc. 119 F1 Diary of Rev. Harold Taylor, Awka 1918-1921. Entry for 7 May 1919.

<sup>41</sup> UCHENDU, Victor C. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.

<sup>42</sup> OTTENBERG, Simon. Ibo receptivity to change. In: BASCOM, W. J.; HERSKOVITS, M. J. (Ed.). *Continuity and change in African cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962. p. 130-43.

In practice, of course, they often do. The Bible already offers the example of a chosen people, a concept that has not gone unnoticed by some Igbo politicians and authors<sup>43</sup>. However, the association of the Igbo group with Christianity does not follow automatically from the conversion to that religion by a number of its members: other factors were important. In this section I discuss three such factors: first, the missionary notion of the Christian Igbo as a buffer against the spread of Islam; second, the interaction of Igbo Christians with other Nigerians; and finally the experience of the Biafra War.

While Christianity in principle is not concerned with ethnic groups, from the very beginning the missionaries were. This was largely the consequence of their conceptual framework, which led them to understand Africa encompassing of individual tribes, the boundaries of which were determined by language<sup>44</sup>. This also influenced practical decisions, such as the decision to prepare one Igbo Bible translation for the area and one shared curriculum for the mission schools. Catechists, school teachers and, later, preachers could be established all over the area, which helped to strengthen the notion that the Catholic or Anglican mission in question, was actually an Igbo mission. Within the CMS, this resulted in the emergence of the Ibo Native Church Union, which tried to act as an Igbo clergy trade union, and the Ibo Pastorate Association, which had the task to provide for spiritual needs of Igbo-speaking Christians outside the Igbo area. Apart from the consequences that this thinking had for practical matters, it also determined the attitude towards converts and prospective converts. The aim of the CMS Niger mission became to ‘convert the whole of Igbo land’. Therefore, it was very important to the missionaries that the converts were not merely Christians, but more specifically Igbo Christians, as these people were to be the vanguard of a movement to convert all Igbo.

Missionary enterprise, of course, had not been limited to the Igbo. Next, to other groups in what later became Southern Nigeria, the missionaries had targeted the mostly Islamic communities in the North. While the missions were successful in converting non-Muslim individuals, they did not gain many converts in communities that were mainly Islamic. Indeed, missionary discourse, in general, was even more negative about Islam than about pagans. This was not immediately obvious in missionary discourse produced about the

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<sup>43</sup> IKE, A. *The Origin of the Ibos*. 1950; ZACHERNUK, P. S. Of origins and colonial order: Southern Nigerian historians and the Hamitic hypothesis, c. 1870-1970. *The Journal of African History*, v. 35, n. 3, p. 427- 456, 1994

<sup>44</sup> BERSSELAAR, Dmitri van den. Creating Union Ibo: missionaries and the Igbo language. *Africa*, v. 67, n. 2, p. 237-59, 1997.



Igbo case as there were not many Muslims in the area, but after 1900 a consistent anti-Muslim discourse emerged in the mission journals that circulated through the area, and that was read by Igbo school children and converts.

When Nigeria was formed in 1914, the northern part was largely Islamic, while the south – due to the missions' success – contained many Christians. Missionary societies perceived this situation as threatening as the British administration told them that the missions were not welcome among the Muslims in the North, while, at the same time, they saw Islamic influence spreading southwards. These fears arising from the local situation, combined with the existing opposition to Islam, resulted in a determination of the missions to defend their position in the south. Here, the Igbo were seen as important, as they were the one major Nigerian group that did not have a substantial number of Muslims. Hence, the missionaries continuously stressed that the Igbo were *inherently* Christian. They predicted that the perceived southward drive of Islam would stop at the borders of the Igbo area, not because of the missionaries' presence, but because the Igbo, being 'naturally endowed with considerable powers of discrimination' were 'not favorably impressed' with Islam<sup>45</sup>.

The interaction of Igbo with other Nigerians was to a large extent shaped by the successful functioning of individual Igbo Christians within colonial society. Although Christians constituted a minority of the Igbo population during most of the period, they were the Igbo that was most visible in the colonial context, as civil servants working for the colonial administration, as traders or laborers. The majority of the Igbo that migrated to other parts of Nigeria and Cameroon were Christian. In the largely Islamic North, it was noticed that most of the Igbo there claimed to be Christians, although many Muslims judged their behavior not worthy of 'people of the Book' and considered them to be pagans at heart<sup>46</sup>. In this context, being Christian became important not only in the sense of the religious experience of the individual but also as an important emblem of Igbo group identity vis-à-vis other Nigerian groups. However, Christianity was but one aspect: in emphasizing their difference from the Islamic northerners and from the Europeans, Igbo defined the religio-philosophical part of their identity as at the same time encompassing a non-Christian traditional Igbo worldview, *and* a sincere commitment to Christianity. This may seem rather

<sup>45</sup> BASDEN, G. T. *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: an account of the curious and interesting habits, customs and beliefs of a little known african people by one who has for many years lived amongst them on close and intimate terms.* London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1921.

<sup>46</sup> ALBERT, I. O. *Urban migrant settlements in Nigeria: A historical comparison of the 'sabon garis' in Kano and Ibadan 1893-1991.* 1994. Thesis (Ph. D.) - University of Ibadan, 1994; ANTHONY, Douglas A. *Poison and medicine: ethnicity, power, and violence in a nigerian city, 1966-1986.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002.

contradictory and it is indeed attacked by a vocal minority of Igbo Christians. However, it makes perfect sense if one accepts the point made at the start of this article that there is no need for the different elements of an identity to form a consistent, rational whole, especially so since the different aspects of identity become relevant depending on the context. Christian Igbo appreciation of the Igbo traditional worldview is often voiced in terms of cultural heritage which has to be respected, rather than living religion. Finally, Igbo clerics have argued that Igbo tradition is not entirely contradictory to Christianity. Indeed, the major Churches are committed to ‘inculturation’: trying to root Christianity in Igbo culture – including social organization, morality, philosophy, and music – rather than imposing it as an improvement from outside. However, all this does not prevent some of the more militant Christian Igbo groups from conducting rallies and even witch hunts against ‘traditionalists’ (who adhere to traditional Igbo religious practices) and nominal Christians.

The religious aspect of Igbo identity was also relevant during the Biafra conflict. According to the contemporary opinion, the war between Biafra and the Nigerian federation was also, and essentially, a struggle of Igbo Christians to be freed from Islamic oppression. Naturally, the Igbo assumed that in this struggle they could count on God’s assistance. This also resulted in moral and material support for Biafra from European Christian congregations. Furthermore, the Biafran struggle was widely backed by local Igbo clergy. Church buildings were not only used to attend to the wounded, but also to shield and accommodate Biafran warriors and their weapons. One Catholic bishop reputedly declared that ‘if Biafra does not win this war I shall pull off my soutane’<sup>47</sup>.

### **How do Igbo Muslims harmonize?**

With all this attention for Igbo Christians, and for the extent to which ‘Christianity’ as a key element in Igbo group identity was defined in opposition to Islamic northerners, we might forget that there also exist a number of Muslim Igbo, who form a small minority of the Igbo population. This is not new<sup>48</sup>. In the north of the Igbo area, Islam has been around longer than Christianity, and it seems that Islam was fairly common among Igbo in that area, although numbers diminished as the consequence of conversion to Christianity and the impact of the Civil War. I have met some Igbo individuals with Islamic family names

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<sup>47</sup> ISICHEI, Elizabeth. *A history of the Igbo people*. London: Macmillan, 1976.

<sup>48</sup> UCHENDU, Egodi. Being Igbo and Muslim: the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria and conversions to Islam, 1930s to recent times. *Journal of African History*, v. 51, n. 1, p. 63-87, 2010.

who told me that their fathers or grandfathers had been converted from Islam to Christianity after attending mission school. However, there are also Christians and traditionalists from all parts of the Igbo area who have converted to Islam, and who in some cases managed to convert sections of their communities as well<sup>49</sup>. According to Alhaji Abdulaziz Ude, who converted to Islam in 1977 out of ‘spiritual disenchantment’ with Catholicism, there is no reason why Islam should not have as much success in the East as in other parts of Nigeria<sup>50</sup>. How do these Igbo Muslims relate to the emblems of Igbo group identity of which ‘Christianity’ is so prominent? Also, to what extent do they perceive of themselves as Igbo, and do others accept their claim to Igbo identity?

When Ude converted to Islam he was already a successful businessman, operating on the national Nigerian level with partners from different ethnic groups, many of whom were Muslim. Although Ude probably converted to Islam out of a genuine spiritual conviction, his Islamic identity does assist his operations on the national level. Based in Lagos, he held a number of ‘traditional titles’ from communities within the Igbo area as well as outside it and was also present at national economic fora. Although he gave up his Igbo first name upon conversion, Ude continued to define himself as an Igbo, carrying the title Ebube Ndi Muslim of Igboland (pride and glory of the Muslims in Igboland) and publishing books on Igbo history. As a powerful businessman, Ude of course used ethnic and religious affiliation to position himself, which in principle may not be so very different from what other individuals do, but worked out different in practice because of the wider arena he operated in, and also because of the fact that his many donations and grants to institutions and communities were very convincing. Ude’s identity as Igbo Muslim seemed to have been accepted in most situations, although on the level of Igbo group politics it was challenged by his opponents, who accused him of being a traitor who became Muslim in order to collaborate with the Northerners who, they claimed, suppress the Igbo.

While Ude was operating primarily on the national level, the situation is quite different for other Igbo Muslims who are socially and economically active mainly in local networks, such as those associated with the village. In the village, those who convert to Islam are often identified with non-Igbo Muslims and are even called ‘Hausa’ by the other Igbo<sup>51</sup>. They often live in a separate quarter of the village where the non-Igbo Muslims also live, and I have met Igbo who converted to Islam and actually left their compounds to move to that

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<sup>49</sup> OTTENBERG, Simon. A Moslem Igbo village. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, v. 11, n. 42, p. 231-60, 1971.

<sup>50</sup> *West Africa*, 1-7 dec. 1997.

<sup>51</sup> UCHENDU, Egodi. Being Igbo and Muslim: the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria and conversions to Islam, 1930s to recent times. *Journal of African History*, v. 51, n. 1, p. 63-87, 2010.

area. According to one Igbo convert: ‘We Hausas, we live together’. However, the Igbo Muslims continue to regard themselves as Igbo, despite the fact that their religion makes it difficult to fully participate in the community. Not only do they not go to Church on Sunday, they are also forbidden to take part in village activities such as a masquerade performance, something that Christians nowadays can do freely as these aspects of traditional religion are now regarded as cultural heritage. As the Muslim communities are small, the members feel rather exposed and are careful to ensure that they, or their fellow Muslims, do not discredit the faith by participating in pagan events. Although every Muslim Igbo I spoke to denied ever having had anything to do with ‘pagan’ rituals, most people were willing to share gossip about Muslims who visited pagan Igbo herbalists or made sacrifices to local Igbo shrines. Even though they personally did not see anything strange in being Igbo and Muslim, it was generally accepted by Muslims and Christians alike that Islam was not an Igbo thing. Indeed, for a good number of Igbo ‘conversion to Islam is tantamount to a betrayal of, and disloyalty to, their ethnic group’.<sup>52</sup>

Igbo Muslims in certain respects resemble the early Christian converts in that they are outside the society, not allowed to participate in masquerade societies or burials.<sup>53</sup> Some claimed that they were not even allowed to shake hands with non-Muslim Igbo. Yet, they perceive themselves as Igbo. Also: the pressure of members of the Muslim community to stay true to Islam has parallels with the functioning of the first groups of Igbo Christians. On the level of the individual, modern Igbo Muslims manage to create an identity that is both Igbo and Muslim, at the same time creating an opposition between Islam and local Igbo religious concepts. As the early Christian converts, they consider traditional concepts to be totally unacceptable (although in actual practice this separation is not so strict). Igbo Muslims, thus, tend to not talk about traditional Igbo religious practices as constituting their heritage.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have shown how, among the predominantly Christian Igbo population, it has become possible and common, for people to regard themselves as Christians while respecting and celebrating (aspects of) Igbo traditional religion as cultural heritage. This is the result of a process that took place during much of the twentieth century and included

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<sup>52</sup> UCHENDU, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> OTTENBERG, Simon. A Moslem Igbo village. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, v. 11, n. 42, p. 231-60, 1971.

many inventions and inversions. These included: the invention of the Igbo as an ethnic group; the invention of an Igbo traditional religion, initially as the antithesis to Christianity; the reinvention of traditional religion as cultural heritage; and also the redefinition (in Nigeria at least) of Islam as being the antithesis to Christianity, as well as being fundamentally un-Igbo. Between 1880 and 1950, Christianity developed from being an important signifier of individual identity to being an important emblem of Igbo group identity. It did so, to a large extent, because of its opposition to Islam. At the same time traditional religion – which had been defined as quintessentially Igbo but also essentially evil – was redefined as an essential part of Christian Igbo identity as cultural heritage.