

Odinala Traditional Religion as Part of Igbo Catholic Christian Identity

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Abstract: Although recent statistics indicate that the majority of the Igbo – an ethnic group living mainly in West African Nigeria – claim to be Christian (of various denominations), their religious identity is in fact more complex: the Igbo do not forget their traditional Odinala religion and practice it together with Christianity without intermingling (multiple religious identity) or in syncretism with Christianity. Odinala is, in short, a polytheistic religious system where the highest reverence belongs to the god Chukwu. The aim of this article is firstly to give an introduction to the traditional Igbo religion of Odinala and secondly its influence on the co-formation of the identity of the Igbo – we choose for the purpose of this article – Catholic Christian. Through the ontological categories of Odinala religion, the paper examines how Odinala shapes the Igbo worldview, how it co-constitutes Igbo identity and helps to establish the ontological category of the human person. The topic is developed through a field research method, reinforced by a comparison of relevant literature.

Keywords: Odinala; Igbo; Christianity; Nigeria; human person; identity

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Odinala is a name for the religious traditions of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria and, in the broadest sense, also a complex social system where religion cannot be accurately separated from culture and the overall social tradition that shapes the identity of an individual.¹ The word odinala² is a compound word meaning: *located within the one God*. In various dialects, the religion is called: *odinani*, *odinana*, *omenala*, *omenana* and *omenani*.³ Although the vast majority of the Igbo formally profess Christianity in the census, their religious identity is actually more complex: The Igbo⁴ do not forget their

1 Apollos O. Nwauwa and Ogechi E. Anyanwu, *Culture, Precepts, and Social Change in Southeastern Nigeria: Understanding the Igbo* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 182–96.

2 Writing in the Igbo language requires special characters, which the local script literally abounds in, which is why we have decided to use Igbo terms in the text in European phonetic transcription.

3 Chigekwu G. Ogbuene, *The Concept of Man in Igbo Myths* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 207.

4 We are based on our own field research and available literature. It would probably be more accurate to say “many Igbos”, because we certainly cannot speak for all Igbos, or for every single member of this ethnic group.

traditional religion (in fact, given the way religion shapes their identity, shapes the person and permeates the overall culture, they cannot forget it)⁵ and they practise it together with Christianity without blending (multiple religious belonging) or in combination with Christianity (syncretism). Ođinala is basically a polytheistic religious system where the central position in the pantheon belongs to the Supreme God called *Chukwu*.⁶

The aim of the paper is to look at the traditional Igbo religion of Ođinala centred in Nigeria and its influence on the co-formation of the identity of the Igbo Catholic Christian. Through the ontological categories of Ođinala religion – in particular the personal deity *chi* and the human person – as well as the cosmological ideas of the believers, this paper will explore how Ođinala co-shapes the Igbo worldview, how it shapes Igbo identity and helps to establish the human person (which, according to Igbo belief, is born during life through initiation and rites of passage). The topic is elaborated by the method of own field research, supported by a comparison of relevant literature. Between 2001 and 2019, the author spent a total of three years on research (and working) stays in Africa,⁷ of which 12 months were devoted to West and Central Africa⁸ and the study of local syncretic⁹ religions.¹⁰ Field research in Igbo society was conducted in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana. The research method is centralized in the participant observation of religious ceremonies and structured and semi-structured interviews with

5 Richard A. Pruitt, "Contemplating the Inculturation of the Christian Gospel among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria," *Missiology: An International Review* 40:4 (2012), 425–42.

6 Cosmas O. Obiego, *African Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu-God* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984), 88.

7 Ondřej Havelka, *Náboženský šok: Religiózní otřesy v odlišných náboženstvích a kulturách, mezináboženský dialog a praktická religionistika poutnickou perspektívou* (Prague: Akbar, 2021).

8 Ondřej Havelka, "The Syncretism of the Gabonese Bwiti Religion and Catholic Christianity from a Theological and Theological-Ethical Perspective," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 12:1 (2022), 145–59.

9 Due to the scope of the article, we will not enter into a discussion on the assessment of syncretism. Suffice it to say that syncretic and eclectic religions are a relatively common phenomenon in Nigeria, which we do not assess in this article. For those interested in this topic, we refer to: Chinedu K. Nweke, "Is syncretism really harmful to Christianity?: The Igbos of West Africa as a case study," *Theology* 120:4 (2017), 262–70. E. C. Anizoba and S. I. Aande "A critical evaluation of religious syncretism among the Igbo Christians of Nigeria," *Acta Theologica* 41:2 (2021), 10–22.

10 Ondřej Havelka, "Synkretismus katolického křesťanství a západoafrického vodunu z teologickoetické perspektivy," *Studia Theologica* 23:3 (2021), 149–174.

representatives (expert interviews) conducted in English as well as ordinary believers of the given religion from different social strata in the cities and in the countryside, conducted mostly also in English with the help of an Igbo interpreter.

1. Traditional Religion of Odinala

At present, the majority of the Igbo – approximately 32 million – live in the West African country of Nigeria; hundreds of thousands of Igbo also live in the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Benin, Togo and Ghana.¹¹ Smaller diasporas also exist in the USA and Western Europe.¹² Up to 99% of the Igbo living in West African countries formally profess Christianity (of different denominations).¹³ In the polytheistic religious system, the central position belongs to the Supreme God called *Chukwu*,¹⁴ who is the source of all other deities and who also assigns them their tasks in creation. The Igbo believe that everything comes from *Chukwu*, who is not only omnipotent but also omnipresent in the entire universe – all of the space is *Chukwu*. The meaning of the name *Chukwu* is: *the greatest (spiritual) being*.¹⁵ Literally *Chi-ukwu* – *chi* means spirit, while *ukwu* means great.¹⁶

Other well-known deities are *Ala*, *Amadi-Oha*, *Anyanwu*, *Ekwensu* and *Ikenga*. Lesser spirits are called *ágbárá* or *árúsí* and are often associated with natural phenomena.¹⁷ The priests and spiritualists turn to the *árúsí* who interpret the will of greater spirits and deities. The priests do not directly address their pleas to the divine sphere. The system of divination in the Odinala religion is called *áfá*. As a comparison, the system of divination in the neighbouring Yoruba religion is called *ifá*, while it is called *fá* in the

11 Chinyere B. Egwuogu, “Cultural Dynamism and Linguistic Identity Crisis among the Igbo in Western Nigeria,” in Abimbola Asojo and Toyin Falola (eds.), *African Humanity: Creativity, Identity and Personhood* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2021), 21–23.

12 “Igbo in Nigeria.” *Joshua Project*, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12189/NI (accessed 10. 7. 2022).

13 Ibid.

14 Obiego, *African Image of the Ultimate Reality*, 88.

15 Charles A. Ebelebe, *Africa and the New Face of Mission: A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans Among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 24–30.

16 Evaristus Chukwudi Ezeugwu, “The Interplay of Traditional Religion and Christianity in Shaping Modern Igbo Values,” *Journal of General Studies ESUT* 3:2 (2021), 81–92.

17 Ibid., 28–30.

neighbouring Vodun religion. While the *árúsí* are worshipped in small shrines along the roads, the ancestors are mostly venerated in households. – The worship of ancestral spirits and lesser deities is a major component of religious practice.¹⁸ Until recently, human sacrifices were an integral part of the Odinala religion – as in Benin Vodun, human sacrifices were banned only after strong pressure from the Catholic Church in the early 20th century.¹⁹

At the end of the rainy season, an important religious festival called *íwá jí* is held, featuring masked dancers. The event is de facto an agricultural festival, a thanksgiving for the current and a prayer for the future harvest. At the very beginning of the festival, offerings are made to deities and ancestors, a ritual usually performed by the oldest man in the village. It was the fertility rituals of the past that required human sacrifices (banned at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries), which, according to believers, were reflected in later harvests, but also in the fertility of women.²⁰

The Igbo believe in an afterlife, and the human soul is immortal according to them. In the afterlife, there are spirits of the deceased who can influence the material world of the living.²¹ Deceased ancestors mainly protect their line of descent. Under certain circumstances, ancestors can reincarnate into their lineage, which is called *ilo-uwa*. Reincarnation is possible, but rare. The deceased may not enter the realm of the dead for some reason and must return, or their soul may be absorbed by a new-born child in their lineage at the very moment of their death. One can reincarnate only into a human again, not into another creature.²² If there is a chance that a new-born has absorbed the soul of an ancestor, a spiritualist is hired to verify this; the child is then usually named after the deceased. The soul of the new-born is usually not identical to the soul of the ancestor, but has a special relation to it. Exceptionally, an ancestor can reincarnate into more than one individual: they are then connected by the so-called mortal bond. As soon as one of

18 Jude Ezimakor, *Faith and Culture: Reconciling the Christian Belief with Igbo Faith Experience Today* (Baden-Baden: Tectum, 2021), 80–84.

19 Kateřina Mildnerová, “Náboženství a vodun. Historie a současnost tradičního náboženství v Beninu,” *Dingir* 18:4 (2015), 130–34.

20 Adolphus Chikezie Anuka, *Mmanwu and Mission among the Igbo People of Nigeria: An Inculturative Dialogue* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2018), 65.

21 Austin, Echema, *Igbo Funeral Rites Today: Anthropological and Theological Perspectives* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010), 48–52.

22 Nkuzi Michael Nnam, *Colonial Mentality in Africa* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 69–70.

them dies, the others die without cause. *Ogbanje* is a reincarnating evil or vengeful spirit who deliberately plagues a family with misfortune. In this context, female circumcision is said to rid a woman of an evil spirit.²³

Deities associated with natural elements are said to come from the earth goddess *Ala*.²⁴ More permanent deities include: *Amadi-Oha* (god of thunder and lightning), *Ikenga* (god of luck) and *Agwu Nsi* (god of divination and healing).²⁵ Shrines to nature deities are usually found in the countryside, most often near trees. There are statues, objects or tied flags at the shrines to signify the presence of deities. These places must be visited with the utmost caution and humility.²⁶ The female earth deity *Ala* is responsible for fertility and also the deceased ancestors who are laid in her womb. *Ala* is the most worshiped deity. Most Igbo villages have a shrine dedicated to *Ala*. Such shrine is called *ihú Ala*.²⁷ The earth (soil) is holy and therefore immoral people, suicides, murderers, thieves or sorcerers are not buried in the earth, for they are not considered to be complete human persons, as will be demonstrated below. The earth is good, fertile. The royal python is a sacred snake related to the earth deity *Ala*. If this snake appears in the house, it is considered an omen of extraordinary good luck. The python is called *nné* (mother) and symbolizes beauty, femininity and grace. Killing pythons is strictly prohibited.²⁸

The Igbo use an amulet called *ikenga* to bring good luck and success. It is a small wooden figure that is a source of knowledge, strength, luck, etc.²⁹ It may contain personal *chi* or the *chi* of ancestors or another spirit. Lesser deities include: *Mbatuku* (god of wealth), *Ikoro* (god of drummers), *Ekwu* (god

²³ Ibid., 69–70.

²⁴ Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1974), 239.

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

²⁶ Herbert M. Cole, *Mbari: Art and the Life Among the Owerri Igbo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 57–72.

²⁷ Edwin Anaegboka Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts Between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion Through Inculturation* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 45–53.

²⁸ Keith Ray, “Material metaphor, social interaction and historical reconstructions: Exploring patterns of association and symbolism in the Igbo-Ukwu corpus,” in Ian Hodder (ed.), *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66–78.

²⁹ Nkiru Nzegwu, “Art and Community: A Social Conception of Beauty and Individuality,” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 415–24.

of the home), *Imo miri* (god of rivers), *Okwara-afọ* (god of trade), *Aju-mmiri* (goddess of the sea) and others.³⁰

2. The Ontological Category of Ndi Mmuo and the Personal Deity Chi

Invisible beings are called *ndi mmuo*. This ontological category includes the divine earth force *Ala*, the personal deity of each individual *chi*, the deceased ancestors *ndichie*, and the minor spirits *mmu*. The second ontological category called *ndi mmadu* contains all visible entities. People pray to the lesser deities and spirits, and also make regular offerings to them. Prayers are most often directed to the personal deity *chi*.³¹ For faithful Igbo Nigerians, Odinala is not just a religion, it is also a worldview, a culture, a main pillar of their identity, and a general way of life.

According to Nigerian author Chukwuemeka Mbaegbu, the categories of monotheism, polytheism and others are not enough in the case of Odinala religion: he therefore proposes the concept of monopolytheism, which expresses that there are a multitude of deities and spirits, yet with one supreme force in the background that begets everything, which is, however, not God according to traditional ideas.³² The Igbo professing Odinala believe that each individual has a protective deity or spirit called *chi* (or *m̄m̄úo*) that is assigned to them at or before birth. *Chi* remains with them throughout their life.³³ The Igbo believe that every success in life is achieved with the help of personal *chi*.³⁴ Each individual shapes their destiny together with *chi*.³⁵ The breath of life is found in the heart and is called *óbí*.³⁶ A spiritualist can tune into someone's *chi* and if the *chi* is angry or in disharmony with them, the

30 George T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Routledge, 2013), 45.

31 Vernantius Emeka Ndukaihe, *Achievement as Value in the Igbo/African Identity: The Ethics* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006), 185–88.

32 Celestine Chukwuemeka Mbaegbu, "A Philosophical Investigation of the Nature of God in Igbo Ontology," *Open Journal of Philosophy* 5:2 (2015), 137–51.

33 In Igbo Christian theology, there is also a Christological conception of Christ as *chi*. Ezimakor, *Faith and Culture*, 109–11.

34 Ndukaihe, *Achievement as Value*, 185–88.

35 Molefi Kete Asante and Emeka Nwadiora, *Spear Masters: An Introduction to African Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 108.

36 Chibueze C. Udeani, *Inculturation as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007), 35–38.

spiritualist can harmonize it. In Igbo households, there is usually a small shrine or altar where personal *chi* is worshipped. After getting married, a woman brings her altar to her new home.³⁷

The neighbouring Orisa and Vodun religions among the Yoruba, Fon and Ewe have a very similar view of a personal deity; it shall be discussed briefly for a more comprehensive insight into this category. The Yoruba say that everyday life consists in the correct balance of *orí* (literally meaning head), which refers to a soul, or the part of it that is connected with the destiny of an individual.³⁸ This unique destiny of each individual is called *áyánmó* in the Yoruba language.³⁹ Everyone should seek their destiny, strive to be in harmony with it, achieve perfection, and do good and beneficial things. An individual's spiritual consciousness must grow to be able to eventually merge with the Supreme Yoruba God, *Olódúmaré*, at the moment of death and become one with it. The spiritual consciousness is strengthened through *iwapele*, meditative recitation and inward reverence, combined with prayer to the *orisa* and the Supreme God. Devotees of the neighbouring Vodun religion refer to the individual's personal deity as *se*, which is regarded in several ways: (1) *se* as the individual's destiny, (2) *se* as a personal life force, and (3) *se* as the human soul. According to Vodun believers, an individual's destiny is determined by their personal deity before birth and one should follow it.⁴⁰ The purpose of this excursion into Yoruba and Vodun religions was to draw attention to the fact that the individual's destiny and their personal protective deity plays an essential role in the self-understanding for the people of Nigeria and neighbouring countries.

3. Christian vs. Igbo Conception of the Human Person

For Western (say, Euro-American) Christians, the multiple religious identities of Christianity and traditional African religion, or their syncretism, is difficult to imagine, but it is a common phenomenon in West Africa.⁴¹ The

37 Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 48–64.

38 Wole Soyinka, "The Tolerant Gods," in Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (eds.), *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 31–50.

39 Afolabi Olabimtan, *Àyànmò* (Lagos: Macmillan, 1973).

40 Kateřina Mildnerová, *Pití fetišů* (Prague: Malvern, 2012), 216–20.

41 Havelka, "Synkretismus katolického křesťanství," 149–74.

theological conception of the human person was brought to Africa along with Christian theology and it was a foreign element that did not correspond with the conception of the person in African philosophies and religious ideas of indigenous African religions.⁴² If the imported European theological conception of the person is deeply rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, West African theologians do not consider Greek philosophy as the source of African theology because it is ideologically distant from them – they prefer indigenous African philosophies. According to them, African Christian theology is necessarily based on God's revelation (the fixed theistic pole), but interprets and accepts it in a specifically African way, in an African context and with the hermeneutical device of African philosophies (the variable androus pole).⁴³ In Western Christian theology – not just Catholic – a human being is always a person from conception to death (no detailed description is necessary, a more general explanation will suffice). Christian theology understands the human person as an individual substance of rational natural character open to (and fully realized in) relationality with humans on the horizontal level and with God on the vertical level.⁴⁴ In relationships with other people, the human person is actualized and fully realized, but does not emerge from them.⁴⁵ It is a God-created being and as such is also a substantial daughter or son of God.⁴⁶ Western Christian theology emphasizes that every human being – including embryos and severely intellectually disabled or unconscious people – is also a human person and thus entitled to inalienable human rights and the transcendently enshrined dignity of being in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), a child of God and even to share in a divine nature (DV 2).⁴⁷ The basic characteristics of the person according to the Western Catholic Christian line of thought include self-sharing (understood by some theologians even as the basic generosity of existence)⁴⁸ and its associated

42 Namakula Evelyn B. Mayanja, "Biblical and Dogmatic Theology on Personhood: Application to Africa's Milieu," in Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 462–79.

43 Rosino Gibellini, *Teologické směry 20. století* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2011), 478–98.

44 Romano Guardini, *Svět a osoba* (Svitavy: Trinitas, 2005), 115.

45 Norris W. Clarke, *Osoba a bytí* (Prague: Krystal OP; Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2007), 23.

46 Ondřej Havelka, "Teologicko-etický princip personality a jeho soudobé myšlenkové směry," *Verba Theologica* 2020 39:2 (2020), 98–109.

47 Document of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum*, Chapter II.

48 Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 90.

receptivity (as a complementary element of self-sharing), self-ownership and self-transcendence.

Given the African conceptions of the person,⁴⁹ the key theological account is that the person, as a being that understands itself, also discovers that it does not belong to itself in its being, that it comes to itself when it leaves itself and finds its true realization in relationality.⁵⁰ To be is to coexist, to be together – fully being a human person and the human community cannot be entirely separated: the person in full actualization and realization exists especially in the plural, when it includes the essential “we”; the “I” is fully realized only in relation to the “you”. This relational model of the concept of the person is based on the African model, which shall be discussed shortly. Nevertheless, the differences are crucial. Given relationality as an essential element of the person, at least four approaches have emerged in Western theology: 1. substantive, 2. moderately relational, 3. strongly relational, and 4. pure actualism.⁵¹ However, what is crucial for insight into how Igbo Catholic Christians in Nigeria understand the person is that a human being, according to Western (not only Catholic) Christian theology, is always a person, irrespective of external circumstances, state of consciousness, or inclusion in the fabric of relationships through which and in which they are realized, but not emergent from.

Igbo thinkers, not excluding Igbo Christian theologians, emphasize, however, that their conception of the person is different: in the Odinala system of philosophy and religion, which they regard as the legitimate source of Igbo Christian theology, a human being becomes a person during a long process of social life and ethical and moral maturation through rites of passage with the help of the personal deity *chi*.⁵² From a purely Catholic point of view, this may seem to contradict the magisterium’s statements about a human being always being a person from conception to death,⁵³ but on the other

49 Of course there are more African concepts of the human person. It is not within the possibilities of the article to overlook all of them; therefore, we will stick to the selected concept, contrasting with the concept of Western theology.

50 Joseph Ratzinger, *Úvod do křesťanství* (Brno: Petrov, 1991), 115.

51 Ondřej Havelka, *Náboženský šok: Religiózní otřesy v odlišných náboženstvích a kulturách, mezináboženský dialog a praktická religionistika poutnickou perspektivou* (Prague: Akbar, 2021), 257–79.

52 Ezeugwu, “The Interplay of Traditional Religion and Christianity,” 81–92.

53 Mezinárodní teologická komise, *Společenství a služba. Lidská osoba stvořená k Božímu obrazu* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2005), 14–36.

hand, the magisterium calls for respect for the local sources of theology – during his visit to Uganda in 1969, Pope Paul VI publicly stated that Africans could and even had to retain what was typically African in terms of culture and traditional religions, and had to necessarily form a specifically African Christianity.⁵⁴ This, of course, does not mean that this statement of the Pope shields the issue at hand, but it certainly sheds some light on it. According to contemporary African theologians, African Christian theology is to be formed and developed in the context of African life, African ontological categories and worldviews, to respond to African problems and challenges and to satisfy specifically African needs. At the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians in 1977, it was said that it was utterly nonsensical to implement Euro-American theology in Africa and ask Africans to conform to it.⁵⁵ African churches are to be formed autonomously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not to copy a European or American model that simply does not suit them. After the Bible, the patristic tradition (which has a deep African foundation)⁵⁶ and other generally valid sources, African philosophical systems and indigenous African religions are also legitimate sources of African theology. While theologians such as John S. Mbiti understood these traditional religions as preparation for the coming of the gospel, contemporary leading theological thinkers take them as one of the fully-fledged sources of African theology, not as imperfect preparation.⁵⁷ The issue of the conception of the human person is different in Western (not only Catholic) theology and in sub-Saharan African (also not only Catholic) theology.

The closest notion to the Western conception of the person for *Bantu* philosophy is the notion of *umuntu* (or *omuntu*), which is the ontological category of the human vital force.⁵⁸ It is the source of life, the personal energy for living, without which an individual cannot exist, for when it disappears, the individual dies. It is possible to find a correlation with the soul as well. According to the Igbo conception, humans have the greatest vital force of all

54 Paul VI., “Closing Discourse to All Africa Symposium,” *Gaba Pastoral Papers* 7 (1969), 51.

55 Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (eds.), *African Theology En Route* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 193.

56 We are talking about the Latin Church Fathers of North African origin.

57 Odomaro Mubangizi, “Philosophy and Theology in Africa,” in Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology* (London – New York: Routledge, 2020), 26–41.

58 Mayanja, “Biblical and Dogmatic Theology on Personhood,” 462–76.

creatures and therefore dominate over other creatures. In the Niger-Congo languages, there are three elements in relation to the human being: (1) *okra*, the essence of the person, where *okrateasefo* refers to the living spirit (or soul), which contains the spark of divinity, (2) *sunsum*, which gives the individual a unique character, individuality and uniqueness, and (3) *nipadua*, the body.⁵⁹ Moreover, according to the Igbo, the personal deity *chi* is a part of an individual's complex identity.

In the *Bantu* languages,⁶⁰ it is said that a good *umuntu* has *ubuntu*, that is, that a good person has humanity, openness to relationships, meaning that they are forthcoming towards others, not secluding themselves and actually meeting others and giving their all in a relationship.⁶¹ *Ubuntu* is what makes someone a human, i.e. their humanity, but not what is understood to be human nature (species essence), but rather an individual essence, i.e. a person. However, Africans do not distinguish it in this way. Aristotelian categories are distant from them and do not conform to their thought patterns. *Umuntu* is not a given, *umuntu* evolves with the individual, especially through key rites of passage. African theologians like Desmond Tutu postulate that *umuntu* must become an integral part of African Christian theology.⁶² While *umuntu* might correspond to our concept of the person, *ubuntu*, according to African theologians, is a concept analogous to the biblical "love thy neighbour". *Ubuntu* means stepping out of yourself to help others. *Ubuntu* is a concept that is very difficult to translate into Western languages – even in contemporary Africa, an originally understandable term has been alienated from the people by the influence of colonialism, the slave trade, the dehumanization of black life by the whites, cultural and religious abuse, paternalistic Christian mission, humiliation, and last but not least, contemporary materialism imported from the West. L. N. Mbefo says that all this has made originally rich African cultures into deformed hybrids where the original concept of *ubuntu* no longer makes sense.⁶³

59 Again, it must be admitted that this is only one of the approaches in the diverse African palette. Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology* (London – New York: Routledge, 2020), 20.

60 Bantu languages are a sub-branch of Niger-Congo languages, according to linguistic classification.

61 Mayanja, "Biblical and Dogmatic Theology on Personhood," 462–79.

62 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 31.

63 Luke N. Mbefo, *Towards a Mature African Christianity* (Enugu: SNAAP Press, 1989), 8.

In Igbo philosophy, the human person is not an ontological given inherent in every human being; becoming a person is a long process: a human being goes through development, social rituals, rites of passage, and ethical and moral maturation – all with the help of the personal *chi* – before becoming a person.⁶⁴ Initiations and rites of passage teach the initiate social rules so that their socially responsible “self” emerges. It is only with the distinction between morality and ethics that the human being becomes, in the traditional African conception, a person to some extent. John S. Mbiti says that in the African conception, being born into this world is not enough to be a person: it is only through rituals that integrate one into society that one gradually begins to acquire this ontological quality. It is being acquired over a long period of time by living an ethically and morally mature life, by rites of passage, and by being active in society. (According to some African religious traditions, one reaches the final level of person only at death, or more precisely at the ritual burial, when one is introduced among the ancestors.)⁶⁵ However, death alone does not guarantee that one becomes an ancestor – it is related to an ethically mature life for the benefit of family and society. It is only ethical maturity and acceptance into the community that makes one a person, at least to some extent, and that is why exclusion from society is *de facto* a death sentence for an African; for such people cease to be persons and are more like animals than human beings. In this African conception, an evil, immoral, self-centred individual who contributes nothing to society is not a person and need not be treated as such. Such an understanding of the person can certainly lead to very tragic ends: for example, during the ethnic genocide in Rwanda, Rwandan Christians were pitted against each other on both sides, but one ethnic group did not consider the other to be complete persons, and vice versa. They acted on the basis of their myth, which is sacred and dehumanizes “the others”. In the understanding of traditional African societies, the sacrament of baptism does not interfere with, replace or surpass ethnic, clan and family affiliation.⁶⁶ African moral philosophy is really strict in granting or not granting the status of a person: an immoral, evil, or self-centred individual is purely and simply not a person as traditionally

64 Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in Richard A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 172.

65 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1969), 141.

66 Mayanja, “Biblical and Dogmatic Theology on Personhood,” 462–79.

understood in Africa. Igbo society plays a vital role in being a person for the individual – it must accept the individual.⁶⁷ One becomes a person only after a successful process of socialization, acceptance into the community and flawless completion of the initiation ritual and other rites of passage. One must conform to community manners even if they are not in accordance with one's conscience (morality). Otherwise, although the individual would be morally good (i.e. in accordance with the goodness identified in their conscience), they would be ethically wrong (i.e. contrary to the customs and rules of the society) and would risk exclusion from the society, which is a very serious stigma in traditional African society.⁶⁸ While in Western theological ethics we tend to place the individual above the whole and defend their individual rights, in traditional Igbo society it is the other way around: the group takes precedence over the individual.⁶⁹

There is a famous saying in Africa: I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.⁷⁰ John S. Mbiti points out that the human person owes their existence to society, including their ancestors; they are part of a greater whole.⁷¹ Desmond Tutu adds that, in African terms, it is not I am a person because I think, but because I belong, participate and share.⁷² Family and tribal affiliations are immutable – one cannot abandon an ancestral tradition and switch to another. This is also why African Christians and Muslims often do not abandon ancestral traditions, including traditional religions; multiple religious identities and diverse syncretisms and eclecticism are quite common in Africa. A person in the Igbo concept is created by the society into which the individual is ritually initiated.⁷³ Traditional African religions usually also believe that each individual has a given destiny (which the individual can partly influence) and that this also plays a role in shaping their person and the search for identity.⁷⁴ According to the Igbo, one follows their destiny

67 Ibid., 140–43.

68 Havelka, "Synkretismus katolického křesťanství," 149–74.

69 Ibid.

70 Mubangizi, "Philosophy and Theology in Africa," 26–41.

71 Ibid., 141.

72 Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31–39.

73 Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 172.

74 Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 104–05.

through the guidance of the personal *chi*, which also co-creates their identity and supports their personal development in relation to it.⁷⁵

A person in the Igbo conception is thus understood in a very relational way – without strong relational ties (family, clan, ethnicity) one is not and cannot be a person. Furthermore, successful completion of rites of passage and ethical and moral growth are essential, with morality subordinate to ethicality. Society takes precedence over the individual. A child who is incapable of moral judgment, who does not know the manners of the society into which they are born and who has not undergone initiation rituals is not seen as a person. Someone who is excluded from their community for whatever reason ceases to be a person, because the strong relationships that made them a person have been broken, and most often they have also transgressed against the sacred ethics of the community. Being a person in Igbo society is not a given right from birth, but a process by which one acquires the status of a person.⁷⁶ The granting of full personhood status to other ethnicities – i.e. “the others” – is arguably the most pressing issue in sub-Saharan Africa, with visible consequences.

Conclusion

For the Igbo Catholic Christian, the traditional religion of Odinala, through which they belong to the family tradition, acquire personal *chi*, belong to their society and through which they gradually acquire the status of person, plays a very crucial role. By embracing Christianity, the Igbo do not cease to revere the Odinala religion, even though it is a polytheistic religious tradition. Christianity gives them the perspective of eternal life, connects them with other Christians, elevates their dignity in a way, but it does not replace Odinala in the formation of their essential identity, their person. The Igbo Christian is oneself because of Odinala and its conception of the world, man and society. He (or she) is also a full Christian, which, however, does not mean he has to isolate himself from the tradition he grew up in. When looking at the fact that many Africans profess Christianity as well as a traditional

75 Chinaka S. DomNwachukwu, “Indigenous Igbo Worship in Nigerian Churches: Reconfiguration of Worship and Spiritual Encounters,” in William R. Burrows and R. Daniel Shaw (eds.), *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship: Dangerous Syncretism or Necessary Hybridity?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 141–57.

76 Mayanja, “Biblical and Dogmatic Theology on Personhood,” 462–79.

African religion, it is emphasized that while Christianity gives the believer a meaningful future and a promise of afterlife existence, traditional African religion helps the believer in the actual here and now of this world because it is focused on the present. The Igbo do not see the so-called multiple religious belonging as an existential problem, much less a contradiction. Both religions give the Igbo a certain desirable and welcome quality, provide social belonging and synergistically shape a unique Igbo identity.

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