

## Interreligious Relations Among the Igala people

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### ABSTRACT

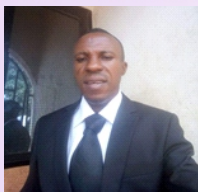
The three main religions practiced in Igala territory are Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion. Consequently, the study looks at the relationships between the Igala people's various religions. An approach to qualitative research was adopted in this paper. With some contribution from my own experience as an Igala and as a missionary who has served pastorally in the Idah Diocese, the study was mostly based on library research. The study's conclusions demonstrated that, despite their differing religious perspectives, there are numerous examples of cooperation, support for one another, and a single, coordinated effort towards a common goal. The nation's two main religions, Islam and Christianity, are mostly cooperating in the fight against religious radicalism, discrimination, and anti-religious sentiment. The mutual mistrust, hostility, and animosity that have marred Nigeria's past in addition to violence and bloodshed seem to have overshadowed the positive sides of contacts between Christians and Muslims. The study suggests that rather than placing blame, each religious tradition should focus more on fostering effective religious development. For this type of instruction to be effective, it may begin with religious authority and work its way down. First, this instruction will help one form a firm understanding of their own faith, which will subsequently enable them to adopt the proper perspective about it.

**Keywords:** Interreligious, Relations, Igala, People, Culture

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## INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, peace and togetherness are viewed as admirable ideals that should be pursued and embraced. Even the National Anthem, which is sung every day, expresses the wish for peace and harmony. Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, is recognized as one of the world's most religious nations based on the number of places of worship and adherents to the numerous religions that are known and practiced there. African Traditional Religion is the first indigenous religion, followed by foreign religions with fewer followers that are associated with certain countries, such as Buddhism in India, Hinduism in India, Shinto in Japan, and Judaism (Jewish). However, the dominance of Christianity and Islam—the two largest major world religions—is overwhelming and transcends ethnic and geographic boundaries. According to certain studies, African Traditional Religion receives extremely little or no weight, while Christianity and Islam are given high percentages. It may be misleading to rely solely on these figures. True, a lot of people openly declare their faith in either Islam or Christianity. An interesting glance at the underbelly of things, however, reveals that most religious observances for many Christians and Muslims are rooted in African Traditional Religion, suggesting that this may only be the case on the surface. As a matter of fact, "for many individuals, integrating traditional religion with either Christianity or Islam is also a way of life" (Aloysius, 2019). Real-world crises and challenging circumstances are when the genuine nature of a religion is revealed. It is accurate to say about Nigeria that "Indigenous Religions remain the foundation of most people's everyday lives, but there is a true war happening between Islam and Christianity to win the hearts of the 'untouched'." So, in my opinion, one of the main faiths practiced now in Nigeria is African Traditional Religion. It may seem silly, but former president Obasanjo's response to a query regarding the country's religious composition of its population addresses a reality: 50% are Muslims, 50% are Christians, and 100% are traditional African worshipers. This demonstrates how far objective statistics may deviate from reality.

There have been various eras in the relationships between Christians and Muslims, ranging from coexistence to ferocious conflict and back again. Some of these relationship phases are characterized by respect for one another, cooperation, conflict, real communication, but also violent disputes. When he says it, (Akinade, 2014, p.6) expresses it nicely:

the relationship between Christianity and Islam has undergone several iterations throughout history, and each one has been characterized by discussion, polemics, amicable disagreements, virulent confrontations, and, occasionally, war. Christian-Muslim interactions, in all of their manifestations, represent a significant

worldwide reality that has an impact on people all over the world.

Whatever perspective is taken, violence or conflict is in opposition to "the true nature of religion. It is the polar opposite of religion and aids in destroying it. Religious feelings are dividing some areas of Nigeria at a time when people of various ethnicities, tribes, and traditions are coming together to celebrate the humanity we all share. This has frequently resulted in disputes (commonly referred to as "religious violence"), which have damaged Nigeria's reputation as a notorious example of religious intolerance. This has in turn given rise to the erroneous belief that Nigeria is a nation where human blood flows due to religious strife. Additionally, unconfirmed information could give the impression that this threat affects the entire nation. In various parts of the country, violence has occasionally been greatly aided by religion. Due to the widespread damage of lives and property caused by these conflicts, there is now mutual hostility and suspicion among those who practice different religions. Serious action must be taken in this circumstance to help stop the violence from escalating further. The intensity of religiously motivated conflict and bloodshed has shown our frailty and created a disturbed world that is pleading for new and innovative models that would promote peaceful interpersonal and interreligious connections, as Akintunde eloquently puts it. It takes resources and insights from diverse worldviews, cultures, and beliefs to find a long-lasting remedy for harmony.

## Objectives

The three major religions practiced in Igalaland are Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religion. Despite differences in religious identification, no violence is done in the name of religion. The Igala people are without a doubt a good example of peaceful coexistence. This paper aims to answer the following primary questions:

- i) What quality of the Igala people enables them to live in peace and harmony in spite of their disparate religious beliefs? and
- ii) What lessons might be drawn from the Igala people by other regions?

## Methodology

An approach to qualitative research was adopted in this paper. This is being done to investigate the reasons for religious conflict, to gain a deeper understanding of Nigeria's religious landscape, and to find out more about the unique characteristics of the Igala People that allow them to live in harmony with other religious communities. With some contribution from my own

experience as an Igala and as a missionary who has served pastorally in the Idah Diocese (the home of the Igala people), the study was mostly based on library research.

### Literature Review

Nigerian society is heterogeneous with respect to both religious affiliation and ethnic composition. Hashim and *etal* (2017, p. 217), state that,

in the past, ethnicity served as a filter through which to view religion's social impact; however, in modern Nigeria, we are increasingly seeing the opposite occur, with ethnic groups being subsumed under a larger religious political identity, such as a Muslim North or a Christian South, or, in other cases, religion standing relatively alone as the source of conflicts. Religion is now plainly a developing gap over which the unity of the nation is more strained, but ethnicity hasn't quite lost its dominant place in the nation's politics overall.

However, any strict categorization or separation of geographical areas based on religion may be misleading. Islam and Christianity have spread throughout the nation's regions as a result of migration, trade, work, and other things. Those who speak of the "Muslim North" and the "Christian South," according to (Onaiyekan, 2013, p.88), frequently fail to see that the reality on the ground is considerably more nuanced than that. We are aware that Muslims are significantly more numerous in the South than Christians are in the North. We must all acknowledge that we live next door to one another and that religious diversity exists everywhere.

It is simple to consider pushing African Traditional Religion (ATR) to the side or perhaps ignoring it entirely given the prominence of Christianity and Islam in the public sphere. However, any discussion of religion in Nigeria that is significant must recognise the prominence of African traditional religion. Any effort to emphasize Christianity and Islam at the expense of ATR would only result in presenting a distorted view of reality. Wijzen, (2017, p.60), opines that, "indigenous religiosity persists under the surface of Islam and Christianity, on a personal or institutional level, in folk religiosity and African Instituted Churches." However, "despite the effort made by both Islam and Christianity, from the very beginning till now, to eliminate ATR, the faith tends to endure, suffering both losses and gains like its rivals" despite the overwhelming presence of both religions. In addition to adhering to various forms of Islam and Christianity, Nigerians do, in fact, extensively stick to their indigenous African religious traditions. Perhaps, this

results from the way in which African traditional religion was converted to either Christianity or Islam. In the past, many Africans were coerced (rather than truly converted) into Christianity or Islam, which were then accepted as the two main world faiths, and destroyed the faith of their ancestors. However, when faced with a crisis, there can occasionally be a sense of frustration or disillusionment, as Mbiti opines that, Christianity and Islam do not appear to alleviate the sense of frustration and uprooting under these circumstances. Learning and accepting a religion that is only active once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, with the rest of the week being essentially empty, is insufficient. Accepting a religion that is restricted to a church or mosque that is closed six days a week and only open once or twice is insufficient. Most converts to these faiths will continue to revert to their previous beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of need and disaster, unless Christianity and Islam completely consume the whole person as much, if not more than traditional religions do. (Mbiti, 2019, p.3).

The immediate and distant aspects that are related to the scenario must be taken into account for a proper analysis of any threat. This is true of religious violence as well because many distinct elements frequently interact to create this complex phenomenon. Anywhere in the world, Christian-Muslim interactions defy one narrative, as (Akintunde, 2014, p.6) correctly notes. It is a phenomenon that is influenced by additional elements and ideas. The Nigerian narrative follows this pattern exactly. The interactions between Christians and Muslims display a fluid quality that is influenced by numerous variables. Although it appears to be religious, what we refer to as "religious violence" in Nigeria is not solely motivated by religion; there are other causes at play. Religion, politics, and ethnicity are all entwined in Nigeria, according to a 2012 report by the World Council of Churches, and all three are tainted by corruption, poverty, and insecurity. In his analysis of this complicated facts, Rouley, 2014, p.361 states that; "Violence in the name of God is a complicated issue and over simplifying further jeopardizes peace because it obscures many of the causative causes. Bromley and Melton, (2012) agree to this when they explain that, violence raises a number of diverse difficulties, which include:

taking the form of individual acts, such as the murder of a member of one religious group by a member of another, or an insider by an outsider. In addition, it could entail collective action by or against a group, as in conflicts, uprisings, oppression, and terrorism. Religious goals may or may not be overtly referenced in violence... (p1)

Therefore, it is evident that there are numerous unique concerns and relationships that must be taken into account when attempting to understand the relationship between religion and violence. This necessitates the use of a

number of very diverse forms and levels of theoretical justification.

Religious intolerance is one element that contributes to religious violence in Nigeria. The reason for this is "hostility toward other religions as well as the failure of religious devotees to harmonise between the ideas and the practical element of religion." One can see how intolerance may contribute to religious violence in Nigeria when one considers that 23% of Christians believe Muslims are antagonistic toward Christians and 16% of Muslims feel the same way (as seen in the Pew Survey previously mentioned). This is due to the fact that in a nation of 180 million people, either 23% or 16% of persons with hostile tendencies are sufficient to obstruct peaceful coexistence. Religious intolerance thrives on prejudice and believes that one's beliefs are superior to others. This stubbornness breeds resentment and hostility toward people who follow different religions. Religious bigots who believe that followers of other religions lack faith should be either forced into conversion or exterminated are only produced through intolerance. These factors "are totally motivated by their own psychological difficulties or collectively by groups of people as part of their social, cultural, national, or communal expression and dominance" in their quest for violence, according to the study. People who have never genuinely interacted with the "other" are responsible for a large portion of the prejudice against followers of other religions.

### Summary of the Findings

Nigeria is blessed with a diverse population of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Despite their differing theological perspectives, there are numerous examples of cooperation, support for one another, and a single endeavour towards a common goal. The two largest religions of the nation, Islam and Christianity, are partially unified in the fight against religious radicalism, discrimination, and anti-religious attitudes. But the religious division that characterizes our age has made some Christians and some Muslims fierce enemies of one another. As a result, the benefits of Christian-Muslim relations seem to be outweighed by the distrust, hostility, and animosity that have marred Nigeria's history along with the violence and suffering. This violence, which is sadly labelled as "religious violence," takes many forms and has made life more difficult in certain regions of the country. Real religious theory has been undermined by these antagonistic impulses. There are places where people of different religious affiliations live in harmony despite the war and animosity. The fact that certain regions continue to be tranquil does not mean that the turmoil in other parts of the country has no effect on these regions. When one part of the country suffers, other parts of the country also suffer because anything that affects

one also affects the other. In one of these places, where there is a serene religious atmosphere, reside the Igala people. Using Igalaland as an example of a region that enjoys relative peace, the importance of this peaceful coexistence as well as ongoing efforts to prevent conflicts that could be based on religious affiliations are explored. Their cherished culture, which places a strong emphasis on the worth of human life and the moral implications of religion, holds the key. Although the Igala people might be able to impart important knowledge to other regions of the country, care should be taken to ensure that blood ties and ethnic allegiances do not lead to the marginalization of "outsiders," or those who are not consanguineous.

It is simple to dismiss any genuine discussion on peaceful coexistence in a nation where religious violence claims a significant number of lives. However, bringing up inter-religious ties among the Igala people of Nigeria is a method to highlight the reality that we may coexist in harmony despite our religious differences. Violence committed in the name of a religion is absurd because religion ought to be dedicated to tearing down barriers of enmity. It ought to be able to eliminate all forms of alienation. It is still possible to work toward restoring tolerance and peace in areas where religious conflict has left its imprint. A culture of religious tolerance is essential in a diverse community like Nigeria. People are capable of learning both hate and love. Mandela included the following evidence as part of his thoughts on his time spent in prison:

I have always believed that everyone has a merciful and generous heart. Nobody is born with the desire to hate someone else because of the colour of their skin, their family history, or their religion. People must learn to hate, and once they do, they can be taught to love since the human heart is more naturally inclined to the former than the latter. Even at the worst moments in prison, when many of my friends and I were at our breaking point, I would occasionally see a fleeting glimpse of humanity in one of the guards. This was enough to give me hope and motivate me to continue. The goodness of man is a flame that can be stifled but never put out." (Mandela, 1994, p.54)

### Conclusion

The purpose of the paper is to discover what enables the Igala people to coexist peacefully despite their religious diversity. Today's societies and communities have a diverse range of religious affiliations. However, while some people choose to live in peace, others use religious disagreements as a pretext for violence, and even conflicts brought on by other circumstances are frequently referred to as "religious violence," making religion one of the main

causes of violence in the world today. The Igala people are not the only ones making an effort to preserve a tranquil religious environment. But what distinguishes them from the others? The revered status of Attah Igala as a symbol of unity and the emphasis placed on the Ancestors are two characteristics that set the Igala people apart.

The Igala people are not the only ones who believe in the existence of the ancestors or who revere them. Almost many Africans think there is an afterlife and that ancestors still remain. It is a conviction that supports the idea that life does not come to an end with death or physical separation. This conviction transcends the boundaries of religion. Africans are also well known for their ancestor worship. The Igala people, however, do more than simply respect this belief; they also give the ancestors a prominent place in everything and treat them on a par with the Supreme Being. This is because the Supreme Being is so elevated in the eyes of the traditional Igala people that it is practically impossible to speak to him directly. The daily operation of earthly matters is thought to be directly under the control of the ancestors. They are thought to be strong enough to "do all things," playing the role of God in people's lives. As a result, they arouse respect and dread. Isaiah Negedu explains further that,

in Igala culture, the distinction between deities and ancestors is practically imperceptible. However, the Supreme Being is more powerful than the forefathers (Ibegwu). Some people praise the Ibegwu as having a direct connection to God. This may be a result of the Ibegwu's function as God's messengers or representatives. God is not even addressed when Ibegwu is the subject of conversation in inner villages where Igala culture is practiced to its utmost extent since it is assumed that they act in place of God." (Negedu, 2019, p.8).

Negedu makes the claim that, "if we equate the interaction of vital forces in the cosmos to a spider's web, then in day to day existence, the ancestors form the major strand without which the fabric collapses," emphasizing the importance of the ancestors once more. So, rather than being omnipotent, their superhuman nature of power is what makes them so valuable—and occasionally terrifying—to their offspring in every circumstance. Therefore, the ancestors serve as both the society's guardians and its source of punishment. The ancestors are the centre of life for the Igala people, and this influences how they see religion. The prohibition against losing one's relatives' blood is based on the fact that all Igala people have a common ancestor. The fact that "the Igala people view themselves as kits and kins" is emphasized by (Ebeh, 2015, p.132). People believe that they share a common ancestor, and as a result, they see connections between themselves. Therefore, it is impossible to simply reference

God and the ancestors in prayers or other religious rites while abusing their descendants. Such a prayer is said to bring curses instead of blessings to the people. Respect for the life of their descendants is one of the ethical implications of reverencing ancestors as a religious practice. Even though some of their neighbours occasionally criticize the Igala people for placing an excessive emphasis on the role of the ancestors in nearly every aspect of their lives, their respect (and fear) of the ancestors is essential to preserving peace among their descendants, who, despite being divided by religious affiliations, come from the same root. The reverence and terror of the ancestors, which are commandments thought to have been passed down by the ancestors themselves, are connected to all the other life-improving qualities that guarantee harmonious coexistence among the Igala people. Therefore, the Igala people believe that respecting human dignity is the best way to satisfy God (and the ancestors). For them, the sacredness of life and the dignity of the human individual are the ultimate goals of religion.

The Attah Igala's sacred position is the second characteristic of the Igala people that has contributed to the preservation of peace in the region. The Attah is Igalaland's highest human authority. He is the father of all Igala people in addition to being their monarch. There are other further tribes in Nigeria that claim descent (just like the Igala people do). For instance, it is thought that the Igbo people came from Eri, the Idoma people from Iduh, and the Yoruba people from Oduduwa. All of these ethnic groups have monarchs or other authoritative figures, but none of them have a living person whom they all recognize as a common parent. The Igala people alone are capable of this. This family connection forms the foundation of their identity and ties them together regardless of their religious preferences. A monarch and a parent are very different from one another. Even if a king's power is revered, sharing a father adds to the feeling of unity. Relationships amongst Igala people are greatly influenced by the notion that they have a common "father" figure. This is so because the word "Attah" evokes a sense of familial connection, and those who refer to the person seated on that lofty throne as Attah perceive themselves as sharing a kinship that cannot be severed by differences in religion. It is important to recognize what binds the Igala people together before asking what other tribes could learn from them. For them, there is at least one aspect that unites every ethnic group, even if it isn't necessarily the representation or status of Attah. The Attah unites and ensures the peace and harmony of the Igala people, just like a father unites his family and guards them from dangers. Therefore, one lesson to be drawn from the experience of the Igala people is the necessity of recognizing and upholding the unifying person or object

in a world plagued by religious conflict. Even on a global scale, rigid distinctions between races, ethnicities, and faiths that once divided peoples, countries, and territories are eroding. People pay more attention to the things that bring people together rather than the things that divide them as the idea of the globe as “global village” gains popularity. We need to cross religious barriers more than ever before in order to usher in a new era of religious tolerance and coexistence where hatred and division have set up camp.

### Recommendations

Advice or suggestions for improving interreligious interactions are included in this step. Above all, there is a need for a deeper comprehension of cultural values that enhance life quality. In a time like ours, when radical ideologies and intolerance are on the rise, a return to cultural norms could help heal the wounds of division and hostility. For example, the emphasis on Udamá Igala acts as a continual reminder of the unity and oneness of the Igala people. It is convenient to say, without going too far, that every African ethnic group shares a quality that highlights the unity of the continent. “Afrocentric studies emphasize communal spirit, neighbourly love, solidarity, respect for strangers, and so on, employing such names as *ujamaa*, “*Harambee & Ubuntu*”, 2017, p.81,” according to Frans Wijsen, which serves as evidence of this. Other terms that convey the same idea include *botho* (among the Sesotho), *koroy mma ahoden* (among the Twi of Ghana), and *igwe bu ike* (among the Igbo of Nigeria). These culturally ingrained principles have the power to put out the flames of conflict. Religious diversity can be a blessing rather than a cause of bloodshed, as the tale of the Igala people has demonstrated. According to (Marjorie, 2013, p.81), “differences, especially theological ones, need not be the catalyst for hostilities and wars, but they may instead become the catalyst for friendship, when we reach out to the other, the stranger. Instead of provoking fear, retaliation, or injustice, difference and otherness promote respect and friendship. This necessitates a more committed effort in valuing the things that bring people together.

Additionally, extending hospitality to strangers is advised since it may promote peaceful coexistence amongst those from various backgrounds. This applies to accepting belief systems that are foreign to one's way of thinking as well as accepting the other. The idea that no one is a stranger on earth is the foundation for hospitality to strangers. Being kind to strangers is regarded as a spiritual obligation. Because we view the stranger as an outsider and someone who is utterly different from us, there is occasionally a propensity to isolate them. But, as Marjorie asserts,

a theology of God's rule may inspire us to approach folks of different religions who

seem odd to us. This interaction will be a gesture of friendship, and that relationship will manifest itself in ways of conversation and deeds of kindness. In addition to helping us understand the other person, dialogue can also help us understand ourselves better. Interreligious conversation and, in fact, the diversity necessary for God's image and rule lead us to a deep Christianity rather than a superficial one. We must be aware of our cultural and historical roots so that we can befriend others by sharing the reality of who we are. We are obligated to be receptive to the sureness of the stranger as well because of the sureness of our Christianity (Marjorie, 2003, p.86).

We also learn to recognize and value individual differences by offering a hand of fellowship to individuals whose religious beliefs are different from our own. This makes it possible for us to relate rather than divide. Good religious training is necessary for this. Ignorance is a disease, and the only way to cure it is via adequate education. Religious ignorance is a factor in hostility toward other religions. The data from the interview demonstrates how important strong religious formation is in Nigeria. It is quite obvious that 63% of Muslims and 53% of Christians both have favorable opinions of one another. Additionally, it demonstrates that a higher majority of Christians (23%) than Muslims (16%) believe that Christians are the target of Muslim hostility. This study serves as a trumpet call for Christians to reevaluate their attitudes toward Muslims in a nation where Muslims are held responsible for all forms of religious violence. Everyone should be involved in religious education, but I believe Christians need to put more effort into it to dispel some false notions about Islam. Each religious tradition needs to spend more work on effective religious formation rather than assigning blame. This education could start with religious authorities in order to be effective, and it could then spread from the top to the bottom. This training will first assist one in developing a solid grasp of their own faith, which will then help them to establish a right attitude toward followers of other religions. It is imperative that we have a deeper understanding of the “other,” as this fosters respect for one another.

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