

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC APPEALS IN MAKING IGBO CONVERTS: PRIORITIZING INDIVIDUAL CHOICES OVER COMPULSION

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Abstract

Making the “right” choice in religion is a deeply personal journey, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. It involves exploring different faiths, understanding their teachings, and ultimately choosing what resonates with one’s values and beliefs. When it comes to choosing between Christianity and African Traditional Religions, many Igbo converts appear to find it difficult to make clear decisions, which may have contributed to the high rate of syncretism in Igboland. The researchers also discovered that hundreds of thousands of Igbo converts embraced Christianity from their indigenous religion due to the psychological and aesthetic appeals employed by European missionaries. Furthermore, some Igbo Christians today have not fully decided whether to commit to Christianity or continue practicing African Traditional Religion. Some attend church merely out of compulsion. This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine how compulsion, personal life events, and religious influences shape Africans’ decisions to convert to Christianity. The researchers recommend exploring the teachings and values of both Christianity and African Traditional Religions, as well as engaging in mutual dialogue with the leaders of these faiths. Such engagement is considered crucial in making informed and personal religious choices. Above all, fostering open and respectful dialogue between Christians and practitioners of African Traditional Religions can promote mutual understanding, respect, and the freedom to make personal choices.

Key Words: Right Choices, Psychological and Aesthetic Appeals, and Igbo Converts

Introduction

Choosing between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a complex, personal decision, often involving a blend of faith, culture, and history, as both offer unique perspectives on spirituality and the world. Ajagwu (2021) achieves a breakdown of key considerations for choosing a religion; the core beliefs in which Christianity focuses on a monotheistic God, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and salvation through faith in him. ATR; often involves a belief in a supreme being, along with lesser deities, spirits, and ancestors, and emphasizes rituals, ceremonies, and community practices. ATR is deeply intertwined with African culture, providing a sense of identity, connection to ancestors, and guidance for daily life. Christianity, which has spread across the globe, can also be seen as a foreign religion, and some Christians may feel a need to maintain their cultural identity while practicing their faith. From the historical context, Christianity has a long history in Africa, with some regions experiencing a significant influence from Western missionaries. ATR preceded Christianity in many parts of

Africa and continues to be practiced by many communities (Isichei, 1971). For Nduka (2018), the emergence Christianity in Africa brought about syncretism. Syncretism which is the blending of Christian and ATR beliefs and practices is common in Africa, leading to unique forms of religious expression (Nwufu ,2020).

Ultimately, the decision of which faith to follow is a personal one, based on individual beliefs, values, and experiences. Some individuals may choose to embrace Christianity, while others may remain committed to their ATR traditions, or find a way to combine elements of both. Madu (2003) illustrated how these factors play out in Igbo Religion whereas the Igbo people, who profess traditional religion, worship the Supreme Being through many minor gods or divinities, while those who profess Christianity worship God directly through church services, prayers, songs, meditation, and through other various services.

Apparently, conversion, real or superficial, is essentially a radical change of a person's religious views and attitudes from one religion in favour of another. The missionary's strategies in Africa/Igboland was calculated to influence the attitudes and responses of the people. However, one of the issues with missionary history in Igboland is that the wheel of conversion, for most people, does not give room for a choice (Ogbu, 1982). The change from ATR to Christianity for the majority of converts is, to a large extent, superficial. The root cause of this being the contradiction inherent in the theory and practice of the missionary ideology. When this contradiction is perceived as problematic for, and by a believer, his doubts begin to build up and if not dispelled, the backsliding process commences (Ozigbo, 1982).

Aesthetic appeals were employed by the missionaries to gain the attention and interest of people so as to win or maintain them in the Christian faith. These appeals operated more directly on the religious psyche of the people who are mostly youths of school age through the material aids given by the missionaries. Ozigbo (1982) observed that the appeals belong more to psychology than sociology or economics, but they have value for the historian because of their influence on people's behavior. The current historiography on the missionary enterprise in Africa has not emphasized this dimension of missionary history. Emphasis has been on the social and political aspects, yet missionary enterprise is essentially spiritual. However, the concerns raised above, touched on the essentially salient issues that affected making a "right" choice of religion especially amongst the Igbo converts. The missionaries applied dogmatic teachings as a distinctive method of attraction to Christianity. It has been thought necessary to translate and synthesize the elements of the Christian message in philosophical and abstract forms (Dogma and Theologies). As these are not easily assimilated by neophytes, an attempt is made to initiate them through a process of indoctrination, whose most potent vehicle is the catechism. This explains the missionary bias in favour of children, youths, the ignorant and gullible. This study, however, addressed these identified challenges so as to restore the place of "choice" and not "compulsion" in religion.

Literature Review

Religious conversion and theories of religious conversion, encompassing a change in an individual's religious affiliation, has been a central topic in various scholarly disciplines. This area of study has evolved significantly over the years, with seminal works by Tracey (2012), Snow (2004), and McGuire (2008), who have explored the motives, processes, and influencing factors behind religious conversion. The theoretical frameworks for understanding religious conversion are diverse. Psychological and sociological theories, prominently advocated by scholars such as Snook (2019), suggest that conversion often occurs as individuals seek to cope

with personal issues or integrate socially. This viewpoint is complemented by cognitive and developmental theories, as proposed by Valsiner (1999) and Simpson (1974), which view religious conversion as a natural element of human development, driven by mental and social factors that shape how individuals process information and experiences. Furthermore, social influence theories, represented by the works of Fry (2003) and Sherkat (1997), argue that social factors, including the roles of family, friends, and religious leaders, largely influence the decision to convert. In contrast, rational choice theories, such as those posited by Spickard (1998) and Frank (2000), suggest that conversion decisions are based on a calculated cost-benefit analysis. Transformative and deconversion theories offer additional perspectives. Molouki (2020) and Paul (2014) elucidated that transformative theories describe religious conversion as a profound experience that fundamentally alters an individual's beliefs, values, and behaviors. On the other hand, deconversion theories, highlighted in the works of Fazzino (2014) and Streib & Keller (2004), focus on the motivations and processes behind leaving one's religion. Empirical studies have demonstrated that conversion motives vary significantly across religious groups and cultural contexts. Conversion to Christianity may be more influenced by spiritual seeking, as found in studies by Sandage and Moe (2013). Additionally, these motives can differ between Western and African societies, suggesting a cultural dimension to the conversion experience. Despite the extensive research, gaps in the literature still need to be discovered. These include a need for more focus on specific religious traditions and cultures beyond Christianity and an underrepresentation of studies on the impact of technology and the Internet on religious conversion. Furthermore, there is a need for more comprehensive research on the long-term effects of conversion, mainly concerning personal relationships, values, and overall well-being. In conclusion, while the existing literature offers a broad understanding of the motives and processes behind religious conversion, it also highlights this phenomenon's complexity and multifaceted nature. As such, only some theories can fully explain all aspects of religious conversion, underlining the need for continued and diversified research in this field.

The Conversion of Igbo Christians Through Psychological and Aesthetic Appeals

These appeals are two fold: the dogma-bound and the non-dogma-bound. The dogma-bound appeals are the dogmatic teachings and message regarded as the distinctive attributes and attraction of Christianity. The personality of Jesus Christ, his captivating message of love and forgiveness and the mystique of his martyrdom and death have always been the great attraction of Christianity. The reassuring doctrine of an all-knowing and all-powerful God in heaven, has a way of capturing the imagination (Ozigbo, 1982). The consolatory teachings about heaven, hell, demons, when not adulterated with evil, can generate a good deal of interest in the inner recesses of the human heart (Udogu, 2017).

Evidence indicates that these, in fact, strongly impinged on the psychology of many Igbo people in many personal religious choices. Many Catholic doctrines and practices rhymed with and confirmed many traditional Igbo beliefs and practices. The missionaries were often not aware of this, just as many Igbo converts then, hardly understood the ethnocentricisms (demon of Africa, god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) or the jagons (paganism, heathenism, idolatry) so rampant in missionary language and literature (Ogbu, 1982).

The sacraments with their cultural associations exercised great charm on the symbol-loving Igbo. The current Aladura and spiritist movements derive much of their momentum from the psychological satisfaction which they induce in people. Some of the Christian moral demands which many converts found irksome or unintelligible (polygamy, obsessive sexual casuistries,

celibacy etc) would seem to have been accepted largely because they were felt to be co-related with these dogma-bound appeals (Mgbemene, 1992).

The influence of the non-dogma-bound appeals was also, crucial in the people's response to the missionary message. The letters and reports of the missionaries show that deliberate efforts were made to exploit these appeals, either to arouse and sustain the interest and curiosity of the people or simply play on the aesthetic sense and the Igbo-Ibibio love of pageantry (Okediadi, 2014). It is necessary to emphasize that these appeals are purely cultural excrescences which Christianity has gathered through the centuries. The church does not regard them as emanating from Jesus Christ. This is why they are referred to here as "non-dogmatic".

The emphasis on the dignified and meticulously executed rubrics of the church were very captivating to the Igbo people. The older catholics for example still remember with nostalgia the "Missa Cantata", and the "Missa Solemis" of their earlier years. Though the latin texts unintelligible to the converts, the heart-throbbing refrains and rythms of the Gregorian plain chant transmitted a compelling aesthetic pleasure (Ozigbo, 1982). In the Anglican services, the harmonium accompaniment of an organist to hymn singing attracted much attention. The liturgical vestments of priest and other ministers, rich in their variety of colours were a wonder for many converts (Isichei, 1971). The missionaries adopted vestments for such occasions as Baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation. The wedding gown, complete with shoes, stockings and hand-gloves, came to be associated with church weddings, were rareties which the early converts enjoyed (Ogbu, 1982).

The second group of non-dogma appeals are the sacramentals. These are usually religious symbols, objects or practices to which some religious meaning is attached. Because of the close resemblance to Igbo traditional symbols and practices, they exercised great appeal for the people. Sometimes the people put their own interpretations on the sacramentals without the missionaries ever suspecting it. Some of these sacramentals are commemoration of saints, baptism names, Holy Communion, bells, burial rites and so on (Nduka 2018). These sacramentals became a focus of attraction for the people. Crowds of converts and non-converts of Catholics and protestants came repeatedly in admiration of the rich tradition of the church. Chief Idigo of Aguleri was very proud of the conspicuous crucifix which the missionaries gave him after his baptism. Nnatuanya (2015) reported how Fr. Lutz brought him down to Onitsha for the Christmas of 1891 and his first Holy Communion.

The third group of appeals were social in their connotation, but they too satisfied the aspirations of the people. Some were directly lifted from the peoples' own social practices like the use of cannon shots to announce an important event (death, festival etc.). Though the protestant missionaries were reluctant in adopting these practices, Fr. Lutz and Fr. Shanahan made a great use of them in their public relations with the people especially with the "warrant chiefs". (Isichei, 1971). The clerical dress of the priests had very striking effect on converts and non-converts alike. Even today, members of the Aladura and spiritists churches take great delight in this form of attire. The most impressive of these are the regalia and paraphernalia of a bishop which also attracted the admiration of the people in a great deal. The impact of these psychological and aesthetic appeals on the Igbo people was indeed great, but failed to give room for a sense of choice and reason in religion. The reports by the missionaries extolled the fervor of the converts and their children with the enthusiasm of their liturgy and pious devotions to the sacraments without an in depth understanding of the church (Nwufu 2018). This appears to have been the major reason for syncretism as experienced in Igboland today especially amongst the youths. Syncretism, the blending of Christian and African traditional religions,

has become a complex and sensitive issue, especially in a culturally rich and diverse region like Igboland (Obiagaosogu, 2021).

Factors Affecting Religious Conversion

Religious conversion represents the process wherein individuals alter their religious affiliation or beliefs. This transformation may involve a shift to a different religious group or a change in personal beliefs and practices within the same religious tradition, as outlined by Christensen (1963), Buckser & Glazier (2003). Religious conversion has garnered significant attention in religious studies due to its implications for the individual convert and the religious community they join or leave, as highlighted by Turner (1979) and Rambo and Farhadian (1999). The motives for conversion are diverse, ranging from an attraction to the teachings and practices of a particular faith to seeking a sense of community or connection with a larger spiritual purpose (Bass & Dykstra, 2011). Social or cultural factors such as marriage or immigration can also play a role in religious conversion (Chantler, 2009), as can personal spiritual experiences or crises (Pitt, 1991; Dawson, 1996). Religious conversion studies encompass psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). Researchers have delved into understanding the motives behind conversion and the social and cultural factors influencing the decision to convert (Akhter & Sumi, 2014). Moreover, the experiences of converts and the impact of conversion on their lives and relationships have been key areas of exploration (Rambo & Farhadian, 1999). Religious conversion among the Igbo youths, the focus of this study, presents a unique case. The Igbo region, influenced by westernization and African Trado-religious contexts, has shaped Igbo diverse religious landscape. African Traditional practices and Christianity form part of Igbo religious landscape (Nwude, 2023). Thus, studying religious conversion among the Igbo converts offers insights into how religion shapes the African minds (Uchendu, 2016). This section aims to unravel the factors that drive the Igbo converts to change their religious affiliation or beliefs, exploring the diverse reasons and influences that contribute to the decision-making process in religious conversion. Below are some of the factors affecting the motivation of religious conversion especially among the Igbo converts.

Socio-Economic Factor

Inkeles (1975) and Collar (2007) have laid the groundwork for exploring how socioeconomic conditions impact religious conversion. Nwokoye (2013) noted how indicating the dynamic relationship between an individual's economic situation can influence religious conversion. McCleary (2008) addresses explicitly how financial circumstances can drive conversion, especially if the new religion is perceived as offering better economic opportunities. This aspect suggests that pragmatic considerations of financial well-being of the European missionaries influenced the Igbo people's decision to convert to Christianity. The influence of education and occupation on religious conversion is another critical aspect. Thornton (2010) highlight how these factors can broaden or limit an individual's exposure to different religious beliefs and practices, subsequently affecting their decision to convert. This indicates that higher levels of education and certain occupations may provide more opportunities for exposure to diverse religious ideas, potentially facilitating the conversion process.

Nwekeoti (2003) noted how the vulnerability of individuals in challenging socio-economic conditions in Igboland/Africa, such as poverty, unemployment, and limited social mobility, to the appeal of religious conversion. These conditions can make the promises or support offered by religious groups more attractive, catalyzing conversion. However, the motivation for religious conversion is not only driven by economic or material benefits. Seul (1999), Rambo

(1993), and Cottrell (2009) point out that social pressures and the desire to belong to a particular community can also be significant factors. This aspect emphasizes the human need for social connection and acceptance, which can be fulfilled through religious affiliation.

However, the points above suggest that socio-economic factors, including financial status, education level, occupation, and broader socio-economic challenges, significantly influenced religious conversion in Igboland/Africa. While these factors can directly motivated the Igbo converts, the decision is often also shaped by their desire for financial stability which they believed will earn them social belonging. This complexity indicates that religious conversion is not merely a spiritual or personal choice but is deeply intertwined with socio-economic realities and the human need for social integration.

Personal Experiences

In religious conversion, personal experiences are pivotal in influencing an individual's decision to adopt a new faith. This conversion aspect has been extensively studied, revealing many personal factors that can lead to such a significant life change. Greil (1977) and Albrecht & Cornwall (1989) have highlighted the profound impact that personal experiences can have on an individual's inclination towards a particular religion. These experiences can range from deeply spiritual encounters to life-altering crises. King (2019), for instance, underscores the potential of a profound spiritual experience to drive a person toward seeking a new religious community. Similarly, as Taylor (2007) discussed, life-changing events or personal crises often prompt individuals to reassess their beliefs, leading them to explore new religious traditions that they perceive as offering comfort and guidance. Direct exposure to a religion's teachings and practices is also crucial. Paloutzian (1999) and Vaughan (2002) suggest that individuals might be drawn to a religion due to their experiences with its specific doctrines and cultural practices. This exposure can resonate deeply and personally, attracting individuals to the religion. Beyond spiritual experiences and life events, a person's family background, cultural identity, and personal values influence the conversion process. Hirschman (2004) and Wolin (1984) point out that an individual's alignment with the beliefs and practices of a religion, or their desire to explore new perspectives distinct from their upbringing, can be a substantial factor in their conversion. McLeod (1986) furthers this perspective by emphasizing the role of personal values and beliefs in finding resonance with certain religious teachings.

Furthermore, connections with religious community members or a particular spiritual leader can be crucial in motivating religious conversion. These relationships often provide a sense of belonging and understanding, which can motivate conversion. Personal experiences and motivation for religious conversion underscores the complexity and diversity of factors that influence this profound life decision. From individual spiritual experiences and crises to the influence of family background, cultural identity, personal values, and relationships, each element contributes uniquely to the journey toward religious conversion.

Religious Influence

Studies by Graham and Haidt (2010) emphasize the significant role of religious influence in an individual's decision to convert. A crucial component of this influence is the role played by religious leaders. Priests, ministers, imams, and other spiritual leaders are often key figures in introducing individuals to new religious traditions, as highlighted in the works of Toni (2009) and Akinloye (2018). The impact of these leaders can be profound, offering guidance, knowledge, and a sense of community to those exploring a new faith. Religious texts, teachings, and practices also play a pivotal role in the conversion process. Shanneik (2011) and Cahill (2005) have explored how exposure to the doctrines and rituals of a particular religion can

profoundly influence an individual's decision to convert. This exposure often occurs through interactions with friends, family, or other community members, as Gombrich (2006) and Cahill (2005) noted. The appeal of a religion's message and the sense of belonging within its community can be powerful motivators for conversion. Moreover, the influence of religious media is an increasingly relevant factor in religious conversion. Hjarvard (2012) and Baffelli (2016) shed light on how books, movies, and websites common among the youths, introducing different religions and their practices can spark curiosity and lead to deeper exploration, potentially culminating in conversion. The impact of social and political events on religious conversion is another significant aspect. Njoku (2017) points out that some individuals may be drawn to a particular religion due to its perceived role in promoting social or political change. This aspect underscores the complex interplay between religion and broader societal dynamics. It is important to note that religious conversion is often the result of a confluence of factors. Personal experiences, social interactions, and various religious influences intertwine, making the conversion journey unique for each individual. This complexity is reflected in the literature, which acknowledges that conversions are rarely attributable to a single factor. Instead, they result from a combination of personal, social, and religious influences, each contributing to the individual's decision to embrace a new faith.

Psychological Factors

The role of psychological factors in the motivation for religious conversion has been a subject of considerable interest in the psychology of religion. Scholars have proven that a spectrum of psychological elements that can significantly influence an individual's journey toward embracing a new religious faith. Central to this discussion is the work of scholars like Gorsuch (1988) and Roberts (1965), who have highlighted the influence of psychological states and traits in the decision to convert. A key aspect identified is the search for meaning and direction. Roberts (1965) elaborates on how individuals grappling with uncertainty, insecurity, or a perceived lack of purpose may find solace and direction in a new religious tradition. This search for meaning often leads to a profound reorientation of life's goals and values. Another important psychological aspect involves dealing with negative emotions. Roberts (1965) and Vergote (1993) discuss how guilt, shame, or disconnection from one's religious tradition can drive individuals toward new faiths that offer forgiveness, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. This transition often represents a quest for emotional healing and spiritual fulfillment. Personality traits, coping mechanisms, and cognitive styles are also pivotal in the decision to convert. McCrae (1984) and Saroglou (2013) have explored how individual differences in personality, such as openness and a propensity for self-transcendence, influence religious exploration and conversion. For instance, a curious minded individual is more likely to delve into various religious traditions and potentially find a new spiritual home. Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, or trauma, also play a role in religious conversion. Pargament (1988) discussed how conversion can be seen as a coping mechanism to deal with these psychological challenges. For some, adopting a new religious tradition provides a framework for understanding and addressing their mental health struggles. An individual's mental and emotional state, combined with their personality traits and coping styles, can profoundly influence their inclination to explore and ultimately adopt a new religious tradition. This body of work suggests that the journey of religious conversion is not just a cultural or social phenomenon but also a deeply personal and psychological one.

Socio-political Factors

The influence of socio-political factors on the motivation for religious conversion is a complex and multi-dimensional aspect of religious studies. Scholars of African church history reveals

how these factors shaped individual African decisions to adopt the new religious traditions, often intertwined with personal, psychological, and socioeconomic considerations. Socio-political contexts have been crucial in understanding religious conversion, as scholars like Ozigbo (1982) and Isichei (1971) reveal how the missionary policies and programmes in Africa have been characterized as the deployment of strategies to promote evangelization and conversion. These policies and tactics were pragmatically adjusted to suit the revolutionary changes unleashed by the formal assumption of direct colonial rule by the British government. Living in a society where a specific religion is dominantly in power can significantly influence an individual's decision to convert. This decision may be driven by the desire to gain social, political and economic opportunities or, in some cases, to avoid persecution. This phenomenon demonstrates how religious affiliation can be closely linked to societal status and personal safety. Mitchell (2006) and Greeley (1989) highlight another dimension where a significant minority might influence individuals following a particular religion. The appeal of a minority religion's message and community can be a powerful draw, leading to conversion as individuals seek a sense of belonging and identity within these communities. Historical events such as wars, colonialism, and forced migration have also played a critical role in shaping religious landscapes and influencing conversions. Clarke (2004) and Castles (2003) explore how these factors have historically compelled or encouraged individuals to convert, either as a means of survival during wars and colonial conquests or as a way to assimilate into new societies following migration. Furthermore, researchers understood that political motivations were very pivotal and a driving force behind religious conversions in Africa.

African converts to Christianity may have been drawn to certain religions' social or political messages, converting to promote change in their society or align with specific political movements. This aspect of conversion highlights how religious beliefs can be deeply intertwined with political ideologies and social justice movements.

Conclusion

The mass exodus of youths from Christianity to ATR can be attributed to the factors above. It appears that the mistakes of the past are still affecting the present age. Many Igbo Christians are seeking to reconnect with their African heritage and cultural roots, which they feel have been eroded by colonialism and westernization. Some Igbo Christians are disillusioned with Christianity, citing its perceived failure to address their spiritual and emotional needs, as well as its historical association with colonialism and oppression (Njoku, 2017). Guiding the people in making a right choice in religion resonates with exposing them to diverse spiritual traditions and worldviews by ensuring inclusive decision-making processes devoid of sentiments and emotions. The factors investigated above underscore the significant impact of societal and historical contexts on individual decisions to adopt new religious traditions. These factors are often interconnected with personal experiences, psychological motivations, and socioeconomic circumstances, contributing to religious conversion's complex and multifaceted nature. Despite extensive research in this area, gaps still need to be found, particularly in understanding converts' deeper motivations and experiences and the role of religious organizations and leaders in the conversion process. This indicates a need for more comprehensive and nuanced research to grasp the myriad factors influencing religious conversion fully.

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