

The Revitalization of Indigenous Religion in Nigeria: A Crisis-Driven Phenomenon and a Challenge to Christian Formation.

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Introduction

Nigeria is home to the second-largest Christian population in Africa, yet it is also witnessing a different and more radical religious development: a growing number of individuals who are not merely supplementing Christianity with African Traditional Religion (ATR) but fully abandoning Christian identity and returning exclusively to ATR. While dual and multiple religious belonging are well documented in African contexts, this paper examines a distinct phenomenon that emerges in moments of deep crisis — a complete reorientation of religious commitment away from Christianity and toward ATR as an exclusive spiritual home.

Beyond Dual Belonging: The Phenomenon of Full Return to ATR

Nigeria today offers a vivid portrait of what it means to sustain faith in fractured times. The country is marked by political instability, economic hardship, cultural dislocation, and widespread insecurity. These fractures do not remain external; they press directly upon the religious sphere, testing the credibility, resilience, and relevance of Christian faith, especially under critical conditions such as poverty, unemployment, sickness, infertility, sudden death, or other existential crises.

While dual and multiple religious belonging are common in Nigeria, this paper argues that the full return to ATR is driven by a convergence of historical, political, economic, religious, sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual pressures. These factors together reveal the depth of Nigeria's fractured state and generate instability, disillusionment, identity crises, spiritual searching, and distrust in institutions. However, these fractures also create an opportunity: they challenge

Christianity to rediscover its mission, renew its witness, and respond more faithfully to the needs of the people. By examining the causes of this full return to ATR and the responses available to the Christian community, this paper demonstrates how Christian faith can endure, adapt, and offer hope amid uncertainty, fragmentation, and life-altering crises.

The Convergence of Fractures: Catalysts for Religious Realignment

Historically, the return to ATR is inseparable from the legacy of colonialism. Christianity in Nigeria was introduced through missionary movements that were deeply intertwined with colonial administration. Mogaj and Motadegbe argue that missionary Christianity often displaced indigenous culture and created a sense of foreignness that still shapes African Christian identity today. Early missionaries — particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries — frequently labeled some aspects of ATR as “fetishistic,” “primitive,” or “inhumane”. This historical suppression alienated and marginalized African peoples from their indigenous religions, altering their identities and creating a cultural vacuum that many young Nigerians now seek to fill by reclaiming ancestral practices.¹

Economically, Nigeria’s hardships have intensified the search for spiritual systems that offer practical help. High unemployment, inflation, and widening inequality create a climate of desperation. In such conditions, religion becomes a coping mechanism, a source of hope, and a means of navigating uncertainty. ATR is often perceived as more “results-oriented,” offering rituals for prosperity, protection, and success. Some Christian leaders in Nigeria, especially in their prosperity-gospel expressions, have sometimes contributed to disillusionment. When blessings are tied to financial giving, people begin to question the integrity of Christian leadership.

It is important to note that, amid the movement to return to ATR, some hide behind that guise to commit criminal activities, hoping to achieve financial stability through malevolent spiritual practices, often referred to as witchcraft, sorcery, or the misuse of spiritual forces. As Nnanna Nwogu describes, in a communiqué from 2023, the Catholic Bishops of Owerri Ecclesiastical Province

¹ Ridwan Ishola Mogaji and Adewale Oluwaseun Motadegbe, “Reassessing African Religion: Misconceptions, Marginalization, and the Impact of Western Thought,” *Philosophical Meditations* 15, no. 34 (2025): 89-105, <https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2025.2055755.2662>.

“lamented over what they called the alarming rate at which our young people are relapsing into neo-paganism. They are lured into fetish rituals in their quest for money, demonic powers, and false assurances of protection. In the same neo-pagan spirit, some even create their own rituals and cults with similar intent to intimidate others, and as a cover for other criminal activities.”²

Politically, Nigeria’s instability is a major fracture of trust—trust in the State’s ability to protect, provide, and uphold justice—which contributes to shaping this movement of return. Chronic insecurity, corruption, and weak institutions leave many citizens feeling unprotected and unheard. In such a climate, people turn to spiritual systems that promise agency and protection, making ATR appear more responsive than institutional Christianity to daily fears.

Psychologically, Nigeria is a traumatized society. The constant threat of violence, the pressure of economic survival, and the breakdown of social structures create chronic stress. ATR provides rituals of healing, cleansing, and restoration that speak directly to trauma. John Mbiti notes that African religion is deeply concerned with maintaining harmony between the individual and the community, the living and the ancestors, the physical and the spiritual.³ In fractured times, this emphasis on harmony becomes especially attractive. Christianity has rich traditions of healing, but it is not always emphasized in contemporary practice. Many Christians focus on celebration, victory, and breakthrough, leaving little room for grief, fear, or vulnerability. When people cannot bring their wounds into the Christian community, they seek spaces where those wounds can be acknowledged and addressed.

Spiritually, the return to ATR reflects a hunger for depth, mystery, and power. Many Nigerians feel that Christianity has become overly rationalized or Westernized, disconnected from the spiritual realities they encounter daily. ATR offers a spirituality that is embodied, experiential, and integrated with the rhythms of life. It acknowledges the presence of spiritual forces, the influence of ancestors, and the need for ritual engagement.

² Nnenna Nwogu, “Insecurity, Neo-Paganism, Other Worries of the Catholic Bishops,” *Nigerian Tribune*, August 9, 2023, <http://tribuneonlineng.com/insecurity-neo-paganism-others-worry-catholic-bishops/>.

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), 67-69.

A Call to Missionary Conversion: The Church's Invitation to Renewal

Yet the return to ATR is not simply a critique of Christianity; it is also an invitation. It reveals the places where Christian faith must deepen, adapt, and rediscover its mission. In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis calls the Church to a “missionary conversion,” a renewal that makes the Church more attentive to the cries of the poor, more rooted in local cultures, and more open to the Spirit’s work in unexpected places.⁴ This moment of religious realignment in Nigeria is precisely an invitation. It challenges Christianity to listen more deeply, engage more honestly, and respond more courageously to the fractures of society.

A Multi-Layered Remedy: Pathways for Contemporary Christian Formation

Addressing these crises requires a remedy that is as multi-layered as the problem itself. Historically, Christianity must confront and heal its colonial legacy. Christianity can correct colonial mistakes by embracing inculturation, acknowledging past harms, strengthening culturally rooted formation, engaging ATR respectfully, standing with the poor, and offering healing for historical and spiritual wounds.

Politically, Christianity must regain credibility by standing with the people rather than aligning with political elites. This requires prophetic witness, advocacy for justice, active participation in peacebuilding, and speaking truth to power. Pope Francis warns that when political structures fail the poor, the Church must not retreat into silence but reclaim its prophetic voice on behalf of those who suffer.⁵ When Christians perceive Christianity as distant from their political realities, or too aligned with power, they may seek spiritual grounding elsewhere. The political fracture, therefore, directly contributes to the turn toward ATR by exposing gaps in Christian witness during times of instability.

Economically, Christianity must respond to the suffering of ordinary Nigerians with integrity and compassion by practicing financial transparency, rejecting manipulative prosperity preaching, and

⁴ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of The Gospel In Today’s World], Holy See, November 24, 2013, sec. 30, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁵ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 183-185.

investing in community development. Pope Francis addresses this dynamic directly, warning against a Christianity that becomes entangled in “worldliness” or “the pursuit of power and human glory.”⁶ He critiques forms of religion that exploit the poor or reduce faith to a transactional exchange. In Nigeria, where economic suffering is acute, such distortions of the Gospel can push people away from Christianity. Francis insists that the Church must be a “poor Christianity for the poor,” one that stands with those who suffer and offers concrete solidarity.⁷ When Christianity fails to embody this mission, people look elsewhere for spiritual and emotional support. The return to ATR, in this sense, is a response to economic fracture — a search for a spirituality that feels close to the struggles of daily life.

Religiously, Christianity must strengthen its intellectual and spiritual foundations through robust catechesis that addresses Scripture, doctrine, suffering, and spiritual warfare. Socioculturally, Christianity must offer a sense of belonging and identity that resonates with Nigerian realities by celebrating African heritage within Christian worship. Psychologically, Christianity must address trauma, fear, and existential anxiety through counseling ministries and trauma-informed pastoral care. Spiritually, Christianity must recover the depth, mystery, and power of Christian spirituality by reclaiming its rich traditions of healing, deliverance, contemplation, and sacramentality. Pope Francis warns that when Christianity becomes “a disembodied spirituality” or “a set of ideas,” it loses its transformative power.⁸ The Gospel must touch the whole person — mind, body, community, and spirit. When Christianity fails to do this, people seek spiritual depth elsewhere.

Conclusion

The return to African Traditional Religion in Nigeria is not a marginal phenomenon but a revealing sign of the fractures shaping contemporary life. It reflects a search for meaning, identity, protection, and spiritual depth in a world marked by uncertainty and fragmentation. Rather than interpreting this moment as a failure of Christian faith, we can understand it as a summons — a call for Christianity to rediscover its cultural rootedness, its pastoral tenderness, and its prophetic courage.

⁶ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 93.

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 198.

⁸ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 90.

Faith in fractured times is sustained not by defensiveness or nostalgia but by honest engagement with the wounds of the people and a renewed commitment to the Gospel's power to heal and transform. If Christianity can respond to these fractures with integrity and imagination, then this moment of crisis may become a moment of renewal, allowing Christian faith to speak again with credibility and hope in the lives of those seeking meaning in a broken world.

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