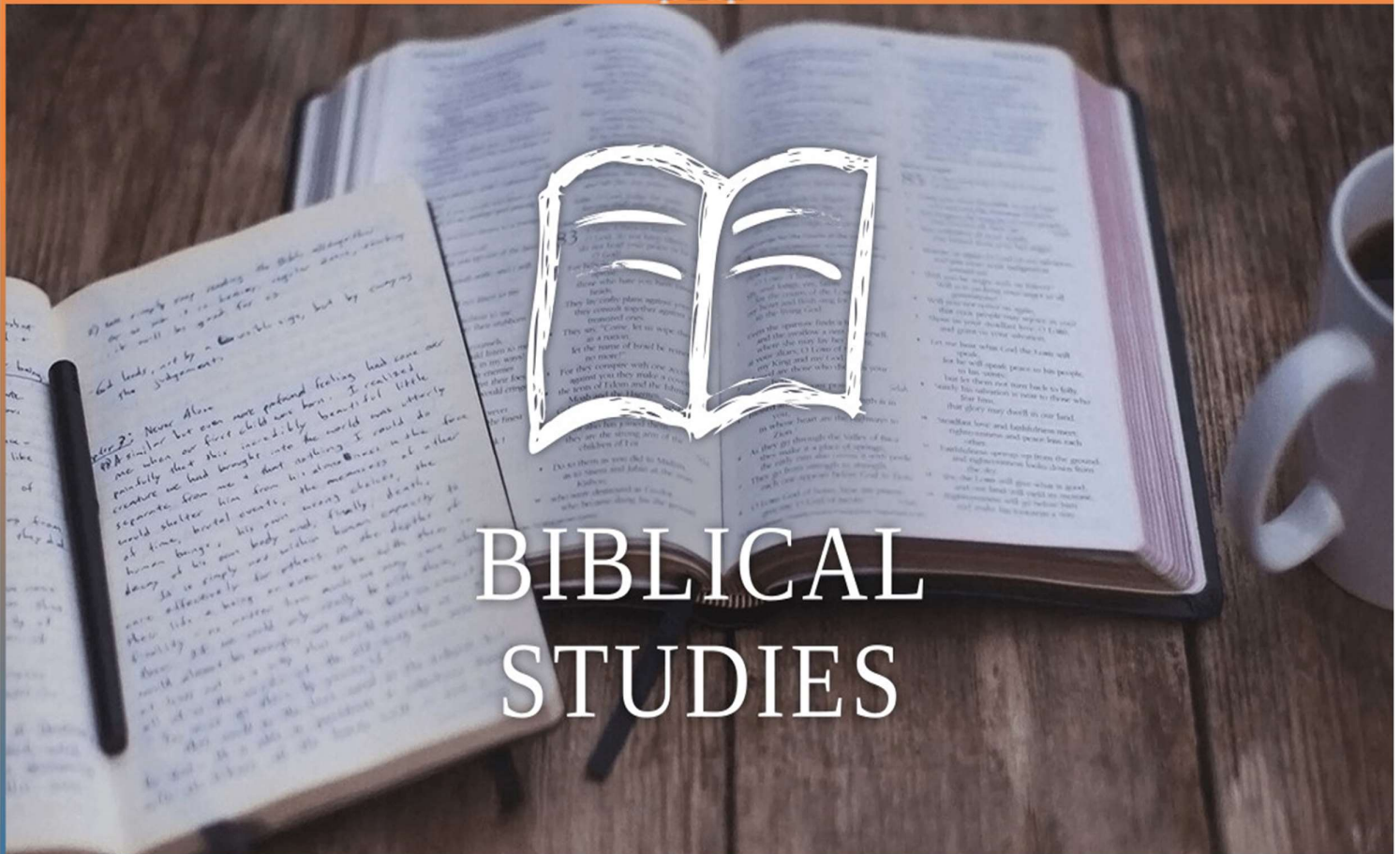


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## IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Nigeria has developed into a thriving centre for Christian groups, ranging from the historic mainline churches to the newer Pentecostal and charismatic movements. With different ethnic groups in the Country, the relationship between Christianity and cultural variety creates a complicated environment influenced by social, religious, and historical factors. Worship styles have become lively and varied as a result of the merging of Christian doctrine with cultural traditions. This paper investigates how the diverse ethnic and cultural make-up of Nigeria influences how Christians express their faith in worship and interact with their communities. A distinctive fusion of worship methods and cultural manifestations has resulted from the growth of numerous denominations, including traditional, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic movements, along with the Indigenous religious movements, with almost half of the Nigerian population being Christians. The paper emphasises how churches can bridge the gap between cultural diversity and Christian doctrine while also acting as agents of social transformation and cultural preservation. It also looks at the conflicts brought on by doctrinal disagreements and how cultural customs affect Christian views, especially when it comes to some rites of passage like marriage and burial. The purpose of this study is to better understand how Christianity and culture interact in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic community by examining these relationships and shedding light on how cultural variety affects Christian identity and unity in Nigeria. To obtain thorough insights into the topic, the research uses a document analysis methodology, examining academic journals, church publications, and media sources. To investigate inculturation and the reciprocity between culture and the gospel, the study also employs a descriptive research design. Comprehending the ramifications of this phenomenon is essential to understanding Nigeria's intricate relationship between Christian fellowship and the different cultures in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Impact, Cultural Diversity, ethnicity, Christian Fellowship, and Worship

### Introduction

Cultural diversity in Nigeria plays a significant role in shaping Christian fellowship, influencing practices, beliefs, and community dynamics. As a country characterised by over 270 ethnic groups and a complex religious landscape, the interaction between Christianity and indigenous cultures presents both opportunities and challenges for followers of the faith. Christian fellowship assemblies now include indigenous songs and arts, which helps various ethnic groups relate to Christianity in a more natural way, creating opportunities for local people to become Christians. In multi-ethnic churches, it is not uncommon also to see a church divides along the ethnic cleavages, as some members

prefer some leaders because of their ethnic inclinations. This paper explores the impact of cultural diversity on Christian fellowship in Nigeria, examining historical contexts, contemporary practices, and the ongoing interplay between various cultural identities. This paper hinges on the belief that Christian fellowship is a relational, dynamic, multifaceted, and fundamentally open practice, characterised by its embeddedness in culture, its struggle to engage with cultures constructively, and its intentional effort to encounter the different culture dialogically in an act of witnessing Christ.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the world can learn a lot

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<sup>1</sup>. Pavol Bargar. "Christian Identity in a Pluralistic Society: Culture, Power, Witness." Conference Paper· October

about faith, religion, and humanity from this African Christianity Christians are united.

Christian fellowship is where true faith and unity are defined and expressed in a way that is real, sincere, and true. Faith cannot be truly articulated and God cannot be approached, experienced, and profoundly enjoyed until worship of God may be sincere and spontaneous.<sup>2</sup> And such naturalness is common in the context faith demonstrated in one's culture. The purpose of this study is to better understand how Christianity and culture interact in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic community in Nigeria, by examining these relationships and shedding light on how cultural variety affects Christian fellowship in Nigeria. In order to obtain thorough insights into the topic, the research uses a document analysis methodology, examining academic journals, church publications, and media sources. In order to investigate inculturation and the reciprocity between culture and the gospel, the study also employs a descriptive research design. This paper seeks to address some questions such as: How can Christian fellowship be both culturally relevant and biblical? In what ways should people from different cultures share their fellowship according to biblical principles? Why is it crucial for Christians to fellowship in ways that are appropriate for one's culture rather than using a one-size-fits-all method? How does worshipping in one's cultural context make Christian fellowship more significant?

### Conceptual Definition

**Christian Fellowship** - The term "fellowship" in the New Testament is derived from the Greek word *koinonia*, which means "partnership," "sharing in common," or "communion." This concept embodies a deep, spiritual connection between Christians, emphasizing that true fellowship can only exist within the body of Christ. It involves a unity of purpose and

agreement among believers, as they share common beliefs, values, and goals.

Christian fellowship is two-dimensional, firstly vertical, which involves giving to God, receiving from God, and communicating with God. In this case, Christian fellowship is about Christian worship of God as well. It entails having a right relationship with God, and then horizontal relationship with believers. Christian fellowship with God is instantaneous and genuine. They are connected to Christ as a result of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Christ. With the horizontal fellowship, Christians find strength, refreshment and instruction. At this level, Christian fellowship involves a sharing of friendship among believers. It involves mutual love and trust. Practical sharing is a component of Christian friendship (Rom. 15.26; 2 Cor. 8.4; 2 Cor. 9.13; Heb. 13.16). It entails collaboration in Christ's work (Phil. 1.5). It entails joining a believing organization rather than being alone or separated (Eph. 3.9). It entails becoming a member of the Spirit's living fellowship (2 Cor. 13.14; Phil. 2.1). It entails being a member of a Christian group that supports and encourages one another.<sup>3</sup>

Although the availability of multiple Christian denominations makes it difficult to determine what exactly qualifies as real Christian fellowship, it is however undeniable that the development of Independent African churches throughout the colonial era was significantly influenced by the demand for cultural freedom and identity in their worship of God.<sup>4</sup> Despite the different cultural background, Africans feel more at home when left to practice Christianity in their own context. The basic idea in Christianity is the belief that Jesus Christ, is the Son of God. But each denomination lives this faith according to its understanding of the demands of the Gospel. Different Christian groups decide for itself what to practice as act of inclusive fellowship. Even though this in a way

(2019): 265, 265-74.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336210496>

<sup>2</sup>. Anselmo Vilanculo. "African Cultural Issues and Christian Worship – A Pastoral Perspective." *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, (2009): 246. Accessed March 16, 2025,

[https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/14385/Vilanculo\\_African%282009%29.pdf?sequence=1](https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/14385/Vilanculo_African%282009%29.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>3</sup>. Anonymous. "Christian Fellowship and the life of the Church." Accessed February 20, 2025.

<https://www.maranathacommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Koinonia.pdf>. January, 2012.

<sup>4</sup>. Ajana Clinton Metala. "Christianity and African Culture in Nigeria." *Journal of Religion and Theology*. Vol. 3, Issue 2, (2019): 27



presents challenge of non-uniformity to Christian fellowship, African Christians enjoy their Christian fellowship more when faith is exercised freely in their own context. This is because African of the influence of African Indigenous Religions that has an inclusive nature of belief. No belief is objectively wrong in African Indigenous Religious system.

African-initiated churches (AICs), which were founded on their own initiative by Africans to incorporate Christian doctrine with African cultural customs, are a prime example of this phenomenon. In order to help African Christians reconcile their faith with their native worldviews and customs, these churches arose in response to the restrictions placed on them by missionary-led churches during the colonial era. AICs place a strong emphasis on independence, cultural significance, and spiritual activities that fit in with regional traditions, like chanting, dancing, and interpreting the Bible in the vernacular.<sup>5</sup>

**Culture** - Culture is defined as “the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values.”<sup>6</sup> Idang defines culture as the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It encompasses everything that sets them apart from other groups of people, such as their customs for greeting, attire, food, songs, dance, social taboos and conventions, traditional occupations, religious and philosophical beliefs, and rites of passage from birth to marriage and death.<sup>7</sup> This definition has implication for this paper in view of the fact that Christian fellowship is integrated and intertwined with some cultural ideas, sharing of things, greetings, singing, feelings, and values. Because of this blending of cultural norms, the biblical teaching must have an impact on many areas when someone is converted to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Culture

represents an indispensable and indeed fundamental part of human life. It is through culture that people make sense of their lives.<sup>9</sup> A group of people's culture is a representation of them. It draws attention to their accomplishments and customs. The getting hold of cultural practices is a result of the socialization process.<sup>10</sup> People acquire different cultural practices and values as they grow up in their environment. While some elements of culture, such as language, music, literature, technology, history, art, customs, etc., are universal, other elements are specific to each individual.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the multi-cultural nature of Nigerian societies, there exist in the church, especially in urban areas, different ethnic groups. Yet because of the performative role of culture through its ritualized action, people bound together endorse their shared stories and values.<sup>12</sup> The integration of local languages, customs, and values into its Christian practices makes fellowship among different ethnic groups enjoyable.<sup>13</sup> This creates a sense of oneness and inclusiveness during Christian fellowship.

### Historical Context of Christianity in Nigeria

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there was attempt by the Portuguese missionaries to penetrate the Benin area, the nonchalant attitude of the Oba of Benin

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*content/uploads/2018/03/Christian-Worship-and-Cultural-Diversity-A-Missiological-Perspective-by-Bruce-Bauer.pdf*

<sup>9</sup> Bargar. “Christian Identity in a Pluralistic Society: Culture, Power, Witness.” Conference Paper · October (2019): 268.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336210496>

<sup>10</sup> Ajana Clinton Metala. “Christianity and African Culture in Nigeria.” *Journal of Religion and Theology*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, (2019): 26

<sup>11</sup> Flourish Itulua-Abumere. “Christians and Culture.” (2013), np, Accessed 21 February, 2025.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259692374>,

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Chreiter. “Communication and Interpretation across Cultures: Problems and Prospects.” In: *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 85, No. 337, (1996): 230, 227-239, especially 230

<sup>13</sup> Matsobane J. Manala. “The impact of Christianity on Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. 39 no. 2 (Feb. 2013): np, Accessed March 14, 2025, [https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S1017-04992013000200016&script=sci\\_arttext](https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S1017-04992013000200016&script=sci_arttext)

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous. “African Initiated Church.” (2019).

Accessed March 20, 2025,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-initiated\\_church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-initiated_church)

<sup>6</sup> Paul G. Hiebert. *Anthropological insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, (1985), pg 30

<sup>7</sup> G. E. Idang. “African Culture and Values.” *Phronimon* (UNISA), Vol. 16, No 2, (2015): 99.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce L. Bauer. “Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective.” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, (2001): 1. 1-7, Accessed February 18, 2025. <https://africansdahistory.org/wp->

made it difficult for the missionaries to succeed.<sup>14</sup> Christianity was introduced to Nigeria through missionary activities in the 15th century, but it gained substantial traction in the 19th century with the arrival of European missionaries.<sup>15</sup> This period marked a significant transformation in the religious landscape, as many Nigerians were converted from traditional African religions to Christianity. The establishment of schools and educational institutions by missionaries played a crucial role in this conversion process, fostering a new cultural identity intertwined with Christian teachings. The Missionaries believed that manual labour and the rod were the panacea for all evils, including idleness, laziness, slow learning, truancy, disobedience, and irregular attendance. They were also generally strict disciplinarians.<sup>16</sup> In the sixteen century the Efik people of Old Calabar embraced the culture of the Europeans so much so that they were bearing English names and learning the English social manners, but the Igbo people maintained their customs and traditions.<sup>17</sup> In the Western Nigeria, among the Yoruba ethnic group, Christianity was gaining attention because of the effort of freed slaves. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther who was the first African Anglican black Bishop also started the translation of the English Bible to Yoruba.<sup>18</sup> This made the missionaries to introduce Yoruba language in School, so that people could learn to read their Bible. The Bible was taught in Yoruba language, which caused many people to understand the concepts of Christianity. The converts began to see

Christianity as their own religion not a foreign belief system.

According to Aghotor, the British colonization significantly altered Nigeria's cultural and social landscape. The country's cultural fabric was also altered by the arrival of Westernized Christianity. Ethnic disparities and fragmentation were also brought about by this colonial imposition; this is especially clear in the ethnic tensions and wars that resulted from the division of Nigeria's northern and southern regions.<sup>19</sup> The recognition of some ethnic groups as superior over others came as a result of the colonial masters. Nigeria continues to face issues with ethnic superiority and conflicts, religious inequality, and insecurity in the 21st century.<sup>20</sup> From the ethnic divides created by the colonial master and the westernized Christianity, which tried to impose the western practices on Africans, inter-tribal wars persisted in some parts of Nigeria for some times. This historical context contributed to a complex relationship between Christianity and indigenous cultures, where conversion often meant a shift away from traditional practices.

### Positive Impact of Culture on Christian Fellowship

From the Old Testament history, the children of Israel were frequently instructed to resist the cultural influences of the neighboring nations in order to preserve a unique identity based on their covenant with God (Lev. 20:26). As seen by events like the worship of the golden calf (Exod. 32) and the adoption of Canaanite customs (Judg. 2:11–13), they constantly battled with integration in spite of the warning God gave to them. People like Daniel served as examples of how to balance cultural engagement with fidelity to God during their Babylonian exile (Dan. 1:8). In the New Testament, as the gospel reached

<sup>14</sup>. Adewale O. Ogunrinade and Ogbole Friday Abu. "Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 2 num. 2, (July 2013): 122. 121-129

<sup>15</sup>. Ogunrinade and Abu. "Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 2 num. 2, (July 2013): 122.

<sup>16</sup>. Anonymous. "History of Christianity in Nigeria." September 19, 2022. Accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.schoolsoftware.com.ng/history-of-christianity-in-nigeria/>

<sup>17</sup> Ogunrinade and Abu. "Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 2 num. 2, (July 2013): 122. Doi:10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n2p121

<sup>18</sup>. J. F. Ade Ajayi. *Patriot to the Core: Bishop Ajayi Crowther*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, (200). Pg 76

<sup>19</sup>. Princess Aghotor. "Effects of Major Religions on Ethno-Cultural Identity In Nigeria From 1900-2020." 2023, Accessed February 16, 2025. <https://globalhistorydialogues.org/projects/effects-of-major-religions-on-ethno-cultural-identity-in-nigeria-from-1900-2020/>

<sup>20</sup>. Ibid

Gentile areas, early Christians had to negotiate a variety of cultural environments. The universality of the gospel was highlighted by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which confirmed that Gentile converts did not have to follow Jewish practices. However, the church continued to grow in different cultural settings. Paul the apostle in his ministry placed a strong emphasis on flexibility without sacrificing the essential characteristics of Christianity. His declaration, "I have become all things to all people," in 1 Corinthians 9:22, emphasizes this strategy. The emphasis on reconciliation and a common identity in Christ in Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:14-16 demonstrates how unity in Christ overcomes cultural differences. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, the apostle mentions that to the Jews, he became a Jew, and to those not under the Law, he became as one not under the Law, so that the Gospel will spread. This establishes the idea that there is no one culture that is superior to another, and hence, none should subsist to the other because of value placement as far as Christian fellowship is concerned.

Nigerian culture existed before the adoption of Christianity. Culture is the structured manner in which a group of people live their life. The gospel's creation, dissemination, and adaption were influenced by culture right from the Bible time. However, for some time, African Christianity was faced with the challenge of how to reconcile their cultural practices with the Christian faith they have embraced. The reason for this was that the early missionaries who introduced Christianity to Africa portrayed it as completely incompatible with the indigenous cultural practices of the African people.<sup>21</sup> Those missionaries prohibited many of the African cultural practices because they were blanketed pagan and heathen.<sup>22</sup> Even African names were changed to European names upon accepting to be baptized. Some people therefore saw Christianity as a foreign religion that came in to

dominate indigenous cultures. Till date, some people who want to engage in cultural practices are looked down upon as barbaric, and are rejected by some churches. The blanket categorization of African cultures as evil made some people therefore to reject Christianity, and some pretended to be Christians in the day but return to traditional practices in the night. As African Christians, the cultural and traditional ideas that arise during Christian fellowship are important to their beliefs and how they worship God. In fact, these kinds of problems go right to the heart of their identity.<sup>23</sup>

Even though African cultures are widely diverse, they are also, when closely studied, seen to have many similarities. Examples are seen in the morals they uphold, respect for the elderly among them, their love and respect for their culture, even the respect they hold for their beliefs.<sup>24</sup> African cultures have strong belief about the existence of evil, which are believed to be inimical to life, strength, health, fertility and prosperity.<sup>25</sup> It remains a fact that one cannot worship God without the involvement of his/her culture. When individuals worship, they use words and imagery influenced by cultural meanings, emotions, and values to declare their faith in God and to honour their Lord and Saviour. The values Nigerian Christians share give them common identity that serves as a cohesive factor for the group fellowship. Example is seen when a Christian celebrates a rite of passage like marriage ceremony, naming ceremony, burial, etc, Christian community come together to either rejoice or mourn as the case may be fulfilling. They will leave their home to stay with the mourner or the celebrant as the case may be.

<sup>21</sup>. Matsobane J. Manala. "Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae." vol.39 no. 2, (Feb. 2013): np,

<sup>22</sup>. Sunday Paul Chinazo Onwuegbuchulam. "Christianity and African Culture: A Question of Either...Or?" 2021. Accessed: February 27, 2025, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/32191>

<sup>23</sup>. Vilanculo. "African Cultural Issues and Christian Worship – A Pastoral Perspective." *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, (2009): 246. Accessed March 16, 2025, [https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/14385/Vilanculo\\_African%282009%29.pdf?sequence=1](https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/14385/Vilanculo_African%282009%29.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>24</sup>. Ajana Clinton Metala. "Christianity and African Culture in Nigeria." *Journal of Religion and Theology*, Volume 3, Issue 2, (2019):26

<sup>25</sup>. Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony. "African Traditional Religion and Christianity: A Comparative Analysis of Values." *Journal of Nigerian Language and Culture*. Vol. 13, no. 2, (2011): 179, 177-188.

Cultural diversity in Nigeria has facilitated the spread of Christianity as missionaries adapted their methods to align with local customs. This inclusivity has enabled Christianity to penetrate various ethnic communities across Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> The diverse cultures profoundly impact Christian fellowship by shaping interaction norms, enhancing communal support systems, and influencing personal identities within the faith community.

Understanding these dynamics help Christians foster more inclusive environments that resonate with diverse cultural backgrounds while promoting holistic well-being among Christians. Family and community ties are highly valued in Nigerian culture. This feeling of group support enables people to rely on their networks for support, direction, and encouragement during trying times.<sup>27</sup> The concepts of orphanage and Old People's home are foreign to Nigerian culture. Orphans were integrated into home where they feel the warmth of a family living. Old people within the society were taken care by their immediate family members, in the absence of them, the Christian fellowship groups took turns to administer to their needs. There is what is called Christian culture, which prevails in any given society as far as Christianity is concerned (Acts 5:29). It becomes easy for Christian culture to weld people from different ethnic and cultural identity into a common group following the value placement on community living in African culture. It is this kind of understanding that existed among the early church, where people learned to have everything in common (Acts 2:44). Even though the universality of the gospel creates distinction between Christianity and other non-biblical cultures, yet it allows the incorporation of non-harmful cultures into Christian fellowship to form an inclusive entity.

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<sup>26</sup>. George Asadu. "Christianity and national development: The Nigeria experience." *Herv. Teol. Stud.* vol.77 no. 1 Pretoria (2021): np, Accessed March 20,2025, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i1.6307>

<sup>27</sup>. Lazarus Irakpo. "Amazing Story About Nigerians Creative and determine to succeed." <https://vocal.media/history/amazing-story-about-nigerians>

The interplay between Christianity and Nigeria's diverse cultures has led to unique expressions of faith among Nigerian Christians. Many Nigerian Christians incorporate elements of their ethnic traditions into their worship practices making fellowship more natural. For example, music, dance, and local languages are often integrated into Christian fellowship, creating a vibrant worship experience that reflects both Christian and indigenous identities. Songs in different languages are brought during multi-ethnic worship, and everybody sings with joy in his/her heart, even the people do not know the complete meaning of the songs still enjoy the fellowship of singing. This fosters unity among the different ethnic groups, creating a one family irrespective of their ethnic cleavages. Nigerians Christians have drawn strength from their diverse cultural backgrounds to overcome adversity. The variety of perspectives within the country fosters adaptability, resilience, creativity and problem-solving capabilities in challenging circumstances.<sup>28</sup> It is amazing how some songs in one dialect are sung across the other dialects during Christian fellowship without missing the rhythm of the music.

The Bible has been translated into many Nigerian languages, and interesting enough, even the soft copies of the translations are made available to the young people who now prefer having Bible in their phones and tablets. Everyone understands the message of the Bible in the same way: the commands, the promises, the prohibitions, and encouragements, while there is no claim of superiority of language. The integration of cultures into Christian fellowship helps in overcoming ethnic divides and promoting more togetherness among various ethnic groups in various states, as Christianity has been a unifying force in Nigeria in that regards. Its effects on Nigerian ethnicity and culture, however, differed throughout the nation. Nigeria's rich multi-cultural and multi-religious civilization is a result of the distinctive customs and reactions to Christianity of ethnic groups

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<sup>28</sup>. Lazarus Irakpo "Amazing Story About Nigerians Creative and determine to Succeed." Accessed March 20, 2025. <https://vocal.media/history/amazing-story-about-nigerians>



such as Hausa-Fulani, Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, Fulani, Ijaw, Yoruba, and Igbo.

### Negative Cultural Interaction and Christian Fellowship

Despite the good side of Nigerian culture impacting the growth of Christianity in Nigeria, the blending of cultures is not without tension. In contemporary Nigerian societies, the relationship between cultural diversity and Christian fellowship is sometimes complicated by socio-political factors. Bruce L. Bauer correctly notes that while God can communicate through local culture, that same society can also distort Christian fellowship and beliefs by forming Christians in ways that are cultural rather than biblical.<sup>29</sup> This is because culture is also in charge of warping people's view and comprehension of God. This is clearly seen in the practice of exorcism in some Christian fellowships. Exorcism is highly valued in African Christianity as a means of liberation from spiritual bondage.<sup>30</sup> People believe that nothing happens naturally. Sickness and death are caused by negative spirit whose influence needs to be deactivated.

Additionally, in event of disagreement in the church, it is not uncommon to experience ethnic loyalties to leaders, which sometimes lead to divisions within Christian fellowship, undermining the sense of unity among Christians. That idea of belonging to a particular ethnic group, when brought into the Christians fellowship creates challenges, especially when a particular ethnic group makes up the majority and influential membership of the church. In small Christian fellowship groups, people feel needed and special, and fellowship is more natural among Christians. But in a multi-cultural group, people define themselves in relation to everybody else as each ethnic tries to establish their dominant presence. The minority has to

work harder to define their identity. This sometimes causes friction in the Christian fellowship, making it difficult for peace to be maintained within the church community.

In Exodus 20:3, the Bible commands against having other gods beside the Almighty God. Conversely, African culture permits the polytheistic religious life style. It is not surprising when African Christians participate in Christian fellowship for the future life and also participate in pagan practices for immediate challenges. Itulua-Abumere mentions that as a means of self-definition, culture attracts people's curiosity and convinces them to devote a portion of themselves to it. Individuals prefer to identify with and feel a sense of belonging to their tribe.<sup>31</sup>

Traditional Christians allows the infiltration of some cultural traditions,<sup>32</sup> including some cultures that are abrasive to ethics of Christianity into their Christian fellowship. Example is seen in the practice of caste system in the Eastern Nigeria, which prohibits complete harmonious relationship among certain class of people. It promotes inequality between human beings among the Igbo race in eastern part of Nigeria.<sup>33</sup> Such cultures create a negative distinction among Christians, thereby affecting their fellowship. Beside the distinction created by the belief in the pagan practice that sustains the cast system, such practice is a belief in idol worship. But Christian fellowship on the hand is weakening the strict observation of such cultural practice.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup>. Bruce L. Bauer. "Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Vol. 5 No. 2, Art. 5 (2009): 2.

<sup>30</sup>. Sampson M. Nwaomah. "Reading Mark 5:1-20 In The Context Of Exorcism In African Christian Theology: Implications For The Seventh-Day Adventist Church." *BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS Implications and Application in Africa*. Theological Seminary, Adventist University of Africa, (2019): 206

<sup>31</sup>. Itulua-Abumere. "Christians and Culture." (2013), np, Accessed 21 February, 2025.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259692374>,

<sup>32</sup>. Bauer. "Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, (2001): 2, Accessed February 18, 2025.

<https://africansdahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Christian-Worship-and-Cultural-Diversity-A-Missiological-Perspective-by-Bruce-Bauer.pdf>

<sup>33</sup>. Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo. "The Implications of Galatians 3:26-29 on the Osu Caste System in Igboland." *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, Vol. 18. No.3, (September, 2020): 313.

<sup>34</sup>. George Odafe and Ibe Julian Chukwuemeka. "Ut Omnia Unum Sint": Examining The Osu-Caste System In



Tienou mentions that African Traditional Religions, which forms part of African cultures, are generally concerned with insuring that people have good health and prosperity, and are enjoying fulfillment, honour, and progeny.<sup>35</sup> African indigenous religions assert that they can provide answers to the questions of what led to a family's suffering and who bears the blame.<sup>36</sup> Influenced by such understanding, some Christian fellowships, instead of focusing on praising God during their fellowship, have claimed to provide solutions to man social problems. Christians fellowship programs are now occasion for miracles to take away poverty and sicknesses. Therefore, there is an increase in the number of fake "men of God." The recent happening in one Pentecostal church at Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, where some fetish items were removed from Christian meeting place raises questions concerning the activities of such people. Such people claim to be channels of blessing to the people, causing people to focus on them instead of looking up to God. By so doing, they rather degrade Christian fellowship, turning Christian fellowship into platform of syncretistic practices.

### Biblical Principles for Christian Fellowship

In order to avoid falling into the trap of adopting syncretistic cultural worship forms, church leaders need to critique the some culturally adapted models of fellowship they use, asking whether each form enhances or degrades biblical Christian fellowship,<sup>37</sup> bearing in the mind the need for Christian fellowship to be culturally relevant and at the same time biblical in form. Biblical accounts of Christian fellowship place a

strong emphasis on unity, spiritual development, and common life in Christ (e.g., Acts 2:42, 1 John 1:7). It is more than just interacting with others; it also entails praying together, supporting one another, and sharing biblical principles. Cultural relevance involves adapting fellowship activities and expressions to align with local customs and values, provided these do not conflict with biblical teachings.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, fellowship must remain countercultural by challenging sinful aspects of culture and offering a Christ-centered alternative.<sup>39</sup> Christian fellowship must therefore stand on the Bible principle of God the only object of worship. The idea of seeing man as a channel of blessing from God must therefore be discouraged. In Acts 3:6, the apostles after healing the cripple at the Gate of the Temple did not direct attention to themselves. Paul the apostle refused to be worshipped at Lystra (Acts 14:19-23). The fear of witchcraft has caused some Nigerian Christians to revere the so-called prophetic workers.

True Christian fellowship involves getting together for spiritual purposes - for sharing needs, for praising God, for prayer, for discussing and sharing the Word to encourage others, comfort, and edify one another (Acts 2:42). Christian fellowship was not occasion for demonstration of power, but for building up of one another and praising God. Acts 2:42 highlights four concepts, which when placed in the Nigerian cultural context, makes fellowship more meaningful.

Firstly is the concept of Relationship. The early Christians shared things in common because there was a common relationship. Apart from being Jews, they were spiritually connected in Christ (Acts 2:41). While the earthly fellowship, which was founded upon just common interests, human nature, physical ties like in a family union, was important, Christian fellowship went beyond those physical boundaries to connection with God. The principle is that any activity that follows should come out of the relationship

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<sup>35</sup>. Tite Tiénou. *African Traditional Religions*. In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, Ed. A. Scott Moreau, (2000): pg 47

<sup>36</sup>. Bauer. "Christian Worship and Cultural Diversity: A Missiological Perspective." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, (2001): 2, Accessed February 18, 2025. <https://africansdahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Christian-Worship-and-Cultural-Diversity-A-Missiological-Perspective-by-Bruce-Bauer.pdf>

<sup>37</sup>. Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger. "Here We are to Worship: Six Principles That Might Bring A Truce To The Age-Old Tension Between Tradition and Popular Culture." *Christianity Today* 53, no. 8 (2009): 34,

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<sup>38</sup>. Mark David Brumagin. "The Cultural Relevance Model of Worship." A Thesis Presented In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Worship Studies." Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, (July 2021): 108-09

<sup>39</sup>. Ibid.

already established.<sup>40</sup> It is easier for people of the same cultural heritage to blend together than blending with strangers. No wonder Jesus in his plan of the spread of the Gospel, designed that it will begin at Jerusalem, before expanding to other places. African culture, which Nigeria is a part, already promotes community living. Christian fellowship is those fostered by the culture of community existence in Nigeria, believers helping one another, often in the context of meeting physical needs.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly is the concept of Partnership. As sharers together of the person and life of Christ, the early Christians were automatically co-partners in Christ's kingdom here on earth. In 2 Corinthians 8:23, Paul the Apostle called Titus, his partner in the sharing of the Gospel,<sup>42</sup> and yet Titus was a Greek while Paul was a Jew. The early Christians shared their meal together without discrimination. That sharing made it easy for Paul to move across the different ethnic groups of the first century and received acceptance in the church. Nigerian Christians should demonstrate their oneness by sharing of food among other things without discrimination because they are partners in the business of the Kingdom of Christ. A business partnership is always established to achieve a goal, such as making money for the partners while offering a service to the general public. Similarly, the idea of a spiritual partnership suggests that its purpose is to advance God's glory. Christians are all joined in a partnership created to exalt God, just as all believers are united in a community relationship.<sup>43</sup> This is better accomplished in the context of the people's culture.

Thirdly is the concept of Companionship. The communication between companions, those connected by a shared relationship is known as companionship. Communication is the essential

component of companionship. "Interchange, communion, sharing" are some of the key ideas that characterize companionship. The exchange of concepts, sentiments, ideas, information, wants, etc. through words or other symbols, such as body language and behaviours that all relationship participants share is known as communication. Culture plays a key role in understanding of words and symbols that facilitate communication. Even though in Christian community, companionship includes communicating on spiritual levels, yet the concept of spirituality cannot be understood without a background in what is common. Example is seen in the Christian sharing during Lord's Supper. The eating of common meal in a family helps people understand the significant of sharing in the Lord's Supper. It is therefore crucial for Christians to fellowship in ways that are appropriate for one's culture as this fosters accommodation and makes worship more natural.

Fourthly is the idea of Stewardship. Believers were willing to share their material possessions for the promotion of the gospel and to help those in needs (Acts 2:44-46). Good stewardship stems from recognizing one's relationship with Jesus Christ, but it also means recognizing one's partnership in Christ's kingdom on earth. As the cornerstone of how Christians handle their assets, connections, and obligations in accordance with God's intentions, stewardship is essential to Christian fellowship. Christian Fellowship focuses on praising God, teaching the pure word of God rather than trying to attract attention to them. The attitude of competitive in worship is uncommon in African religious culture, everything is rather complimentary. The church is concerned with the improvement of life through meeting the needs of the less privilege in the fellowship and in the society. All these four concepts work better in the context of proper understanding fostered by right communication and common interest.

## Conclusion

Following the enormous contributions of cultural diversity to the development of Christianity in the areas of Gospel expansion, unity in the church, maintenance of moral values, and

<sup>40</sup>. Anonymous. "Christian Fellowship." Accessed March 13, 2025, <https://bible.org/article/christian-fellowship>

<sup>41</sup>. Ben Stubblefield. "What Counts as Christian Fellowship?" March, 2018, Accessed March 19, 2025. <https://radical.net/article/what-counts-as-christian-fellowship/>

<sup>42</sup>. Anonymous. "Christian Fellowship." Accessed March 13, 2025, <https://bible.org/article/christian-fellowship>.

<sup>43</sup>. Ibid.

promotion of spiritual and natural worship, the researcher makes bold to say that Nigerian cultural diversity is a blessing to Christian fellowship. Its contribution to the enhancement of vibrant worship has also proven that Nigerian cultures, though diverse can be a good tool to promotion of spiritual fellowship and Christian unity. Making worship more natural is possible when Christian fellowship is set in the context of the worshippers.

It is also true that while cultural diversity enriches Christian fellowship in Nigeria by fostering inclusivity and creativity, it also poses challenges such as ethnic divisions and external pressures that require strategic navigation for sustained growth and unity. While engaging the positive values of the cultures, there is need for church leaders to be aware of the negative aspect in order to guide against Satan using them to destroy the good work already done.

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