

# The Concept of *Igbandu* in Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria: A Discourse Analysis

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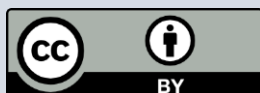
This article presents a research project in the field of spirituality that investigates the impact of Christianity on the indigenous concept of *Igbandu* in Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria.

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## Abstract

*This study examines the meaning, reasons, and impact of Christianity on Igbandu in Nnewi, Anambra State. Igbandu in Nnewi takes many forms. In Nnewi, starting from their traditional society, red oil, salt, and Ogirisi leave are mostly used in Igbandu. Blood is used in some cases, and most often ritual meals are used. Various scholarly attempts have been made to explore the resilience of Igbo cultural practices in spite of the impact of Christianity; there is a dearth of studies on Igbo cultural practices of Igbandu, its meaning, reasons, and impacts by Christianity. This study is a qualitative study. Data was gotten from secondary sources and personal observations. The data was analyzed using discourse analysis. Findings show that Igbandu in Nnewi is about people using blood, oil, salt, hot drinks, kola nuts, etc., to make covenants. It further shows that some of the reasons for the Igbandu are that it is used for marriage, business, and conflict resolution. It was largely due to the understanding that Igbandu promoted transparency, truth, and togetherness more than it discouraged them. The interaction between Christianity and Igbo traditional religion was marked by antagonism, with missionaries labelling indigenous beliefs as "pagan" and "devilish." Despite this, Igbo traditional religion demonstrated resilience, maintaining its presence even amidst the spread of Christianity. Over time, a form of religious syncretism emerged, wherein elements of Igbandu and other traditional practices were integrated into Christian worship. This blending led to unique expressions of faith that reflect both Christian and indigenous beliefs, illustrating the dynamic interplay between the two religious systems.*

**Keywords:** *Igbandu; Nnewi; Anambra; Nigeria; covenant; culture; christianity*

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Christianity in Igbo land, undoubtedly, had a great impact on the lives of the Igbo, especially their culture and religion. Beyond the obvious positive impact, this "insertion of the Christian message" into the Igbo culture saw the relegation of most traditional Igbo rituals, practices, and values to the background (Odozor, 2008, Shorter, 1988). The missionaries did not see anything good in Igbo culture and taught their converts to despise their traditional culture. In the bid to achieve this, Igbo culture was tagged as uncivilized, fetish, pagan, and satanic by the missionaries. The

concept and practice of *Igbandu* were not spared. *Igbandu* in Nnewi is about people using blood, oil, salt, hot drinks, kola nuts, etc. to make covenants. Ekejiuba mentions that *Igbandu*, a ceremonial alliance between two people or groups of people, is an essential component of the traditional Igbo social and political structure (Ekejiuba, 1971). The African-Igbo concept of a covenant as *Igbandu* (or joining lives together) encapsulates equally the idea of being a unifying force, something bonding people together (Obinwa, 2019). Considered the most powerful and significant bond that can exist, it was used to ratify community agreements on a group level and to establish the ritual bond required for social and commercial interactions or to bring about a sincere reconciliation between individuals for whom frequent contact was essential due to familial ties or shared neighborhood residence (Ekejiuba, 1971).

Such an attitude towards Igbo traditional culture and religion persists today and has been exacerbated by the rise of Pentecostalism in Igboland, which regards its mission as the liberation of Christians from the bondage created by unholy alliances rooted in *Igbandu* entered into by their forebears or themselves. Njoku and Uzukwu, citing Okwu, observed that the decisions of the first Catholic Congress in 1915 held in Onitsha deliberately condemned Igbo political, social, and religious practices; and further asserted that, The problem was that the missionaries considered the socio-religious practices of the Igbo as an extension of the kingdom of Satan (Akuma-Kalu & Elochukwu, 2014; Okwu, 2010, p. 12). Today, Pentecostals, even some Catholic priests and bishops, and some members of the Catholic and Protestant Charismatic movements still consider Igbo (African) religious rites to be diabolical.

Due to the fact that the first encounter between Christianity and a new culture is important and affects the ensuing relationship, the derogation of Igbo traditional practices poses a dilemma for a true understanding of *Igbandu* and how it has fared since the advent of Christianity.

There is a problem of “double allegiance” among Igbo Christians. Ottenberg alludes to this when he maintains that despite the impact of Christianity, among other factors, “paradoxically, of all Nigerian peoples, the Ibo [sic] have probably changed the least while changing the most (Ottenberg, 1959). “Igbo Christians have been known to pay allegiance to Christianity and the traditional religious culture that predates Christianity. Okoronkwo captures this unstable behavior among Igbo Christians: Such (Christians) are raised in Christian homes, attend Christian school, and are taught Christian movies. From the outset, they are taught to regard traditionalism with arduous profanity; an ungodly practice that must be avoided. It is often said that it is in times of serious personal crises that true Christians are distinguished from mere hypocrites. They visit traditional shrines, take oaths from traditional priests, and enter into a covenant relationship with a divinity (Okoronkwo, 2001, p. 67).

Reasons have been adduced to explain this phenomenon. One, the inability of Christianity to satisfy the yearnings of Igbo converts in the long run, especially during crises of life, made them revert to or blend their Christianity with the traditional religious practices that resonated more with them, such as *Igbandu* (Ibenwa, 2014; Onyeidu, 1999). Onwu attributed the rise of ambivalent Christianity in Igboland to the false start in communicating the Christian message to the Igbo occasioned by the impatience and unwillingness of the white missionary

to educate the traditional Igbo on the person of Jesus and what he can do for them vis-à-vis their gods (Onwu, 2002).

Today, self-professed Christians in Igboland fall back on traditional methods of social control, such as *Igbandu* in order to elicit compliance and loyalty. Ele affirmed that “politicians, businessmen and women, captains of industries, and ordinary citizens, on many occasions, opt for *Igbandu* in shrines to ensure that they will abide by the rules of their social mentors, economic bosses, employers and political godfathers” (Ele, 2017). This is reminiscent of the use of *Igbandu* in statecraft, diplomacy, and socio-economic stabilization in pre-colonial traditional Igbo communities. Nnewi society, for example, during the pre-colonial period, used *Igbandu* and other mechanisms to ensure social harmony, peace, and progress. From the utilization of the practice among individuals to its adoption by clans and communities, Nnewi people have relied on the efficacy of *Igbandu* to deal with inter- and intra-family crises and build and strengthen relationships between people entering business partnerships (Ottenberg, 1959). However, the advent of Christianity in Nnewi in the 1900s greatly watered down the significance of *Igbandu* as the practice was discouraged among the new converts (Elechi, 2003). Ironically, attempts to wipe out the practice of *Igbandu* among the people have not been entirely successful, as they continue to resort to the practice during deep-rooted conflicts and other weighty matters involving life and death. This necessitates the question: what informs the resilience of *Igbandu* practice in spite of the influence of Christianity on other aspects of the cultural life of Nnewi people? Scholars have written on the phenomenon of *Igbandu* in Nigeria and in some communities (Chukwudike & Eminue, 2017). However, literature on the impact of Christianity on the concept of *Igbandu* in Nnewi is difficult to find. This study intends to provide a synopsis of *Igbandu* in Nnewi and its clash with Christianity.

Studies on the Igbo cultural practice of *Igbandu*, its meaning, causes, and the effects of Christianity are scarce, despite numerous academic attempts to examine how resilient Igbo cultural practices have been in the face of Christian influence (Asogwa, 2022; Chukwunonso, R. D., Nosike, J., Odey, O. J., & Chike, 2024; Nwaka & Osuji, 2024). The study is qualitative research into the impact of Christianity on *Igbandu* in Igboland with specific reference to Nnewi. This is a qualitative study using discourse analysis. Data for the study was collected through secondary sources. This include journals, textbooks and extant Igbo literatures. The place of personal observations cannot be underestimated, as the researchers provides important narratives on the phenomenon of *Igbandu* that are yet to be captured in literature by scholars.

This study investigates the meaning, underlying motivations, and the influence of Christianity on the cultural practice of *Igbandu* in Nnewi, Anambra State. The research begins by analyzing the various interpretations and contextual significance of *Igbandu* within the broader framework of Igbo traditional culture. It then proceeds to examine the specific rituals and ceremonial procedures associated with the practice in the local context of Nnewi. Furthermore, the study identifies and categorizes the different types of *Igbandu* as well as the social groups and individuals who participate in or are affected by the practice. Lastly, the research explores the rationale behind the continued observance of *Igbandu*, the methods by

which it is conducted, and critically assesses the extent to which Christianity has transformed or challenged this indigenous tradition. Through this comprehensive approach, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interaction between Christian beliefs and indigenous Igbo religious-cultural systems.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the influence of Christianity on the indigenous practice of *Igbandu* within Igboland, with particular emphasis on the Nnewi context. Utilizing a phenomenological research design, the study also integrates historical and sociological perspectives to explore the multifaceted nature of this influence. Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through oral interviews conducted by the researcher with selected indigenes and residents of Nnewi, including figures such as Igwe Orizu, community elders, practitioners of traditional religion, pastors and clergy, and adherents of both mainline and Pentecostal churches. These participants were purposively sampled based on their familiarity with Igbo traditional culture and religious practices, as well as Christian doctrine, to ensure the authenticity and depth of the information gathered.

This approach is particularly pertinent given that much of Igbo cultural and religious knowledge is preserved through oral transmission. Secondary sources comprised scholarly books, newspaper articles, academic journals, unpublished theses, archival records, and relevant online materials. The data were subjected to descriptive and analytical interpretation, through which the researcher synthesized respondents' perspectives to critically examine the extent to which Christianity has influenced the cultural tradition of *Igbandu*.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Meanings and Contexts of *Igbandu* in Igbo Culture**

*Igbandu* in Igbo culture refers to making sacred covenants or agreements, often sealed with rituals, sacrifices, or symbolic actions. It can be between individuals, families, or even communities to ensure peace, loyalty, and mutual support (Anigbo, 1982). Some of these covenants were believed to have spiritual consequences if broken. In some cases, *Igbandu* is used to describe the binding of a couple in marriage, symbolizing a lifelong commitment. It also represents the unity between in-laws and extended families (O. C. Eze, 2023). In pre-colonial times, people could engage in *Igbandu* through oath-taking to affirm honesty, settle disputes, or create lasting friendships. This practice was considered sacred and often involved ancestral spirits as witnesses.

The process of *Igbandu* in Nnewi is a common ritual performed by indigenes and non indigenes residing in Nnewi, no wonder they often say, '*Obighi na inu iyi, Obie na Igbandu*. This means that when a problem or case is not settled through oath taking, it ends in *Igbandu*. Different reasons necessitate the covenant rituals in Igboland as a whole and Nnewi communities in particular. Infidelity, conflict, marriage, land dispute, lack of trust, business,

etc. compel people to follow the processes of *Igbandu*. A husband and his wife also go into covenant. However, marriage by nature is itself a covenant. And so, processes of marriage are naturally processes of covenant which lead to marriage in actuality (Ebubechineke, Ifeyinwa & Aniago, 2021; Ifeanyi Okeke, 2023; Okeke, Charles & Anedo, 2024; Paul & Ezesoukwu, 2025).

**Infidelity:** Most lovers resort to *Igbandu* so as to ensure trust in their relationship. A husband/wife who accuses the spouse of infidelity can only go for *Igbandu* to ensure fidelity among themselves. In Uruagu, a woman called Obiamaka Okafor died mysteriously because she entered into *Igbandu* with her husband, who is suspected of having a sexual relationship with other men. After some time, the woman felt sick and died mysteriously. Following the tested unreliability and failure of humans in keeping to their commitment, our ancestors resulted in *Igbandu*.

**Business:** Nnewi people mostly do business as an occupation. Most often, two or three people can decide to start a combined business. Before contributing money to the business, they engage in *Igbandu*, which they take as an agreement. Onyeka (oral interview) confirmed that people often disobey sealed agreements and live in the country in order to take other people's money, but in *Igbandu* such behaviour is not seen as there is a fear of the unknown.

**Conflict:** *Igbandu* serves as a big tool in conflict resolution, when families, kindred, communities, or towns are having conflict or disagreement that the court or government cannot settle. Such disputes resort to *Igbandu*. This can be done at family or village levels. Catholics most often call their priest to officiate a holy mass whereby the Eucharist and holy water can be used as 'Orikonso' to install *Igbandu* among the conflicting people or groups. In August 2004, Rev. Fr. Chidolue organised Orikonso to install *Igbandu* among Nwaboluche kindred in Akamiri Umudim Nnewi at St. Marthins de Pore Catholic church Umudim Nnewi.

**Marriage in Nnewi is more of *Igbandu*.** It is referred to as *egbunahi*, *ewenahi*, meaning that a spouse who hears that his or her spouse will be killed and keeps quiet is an accomplice to the evil plan. Marriage in both traditional and Christian ways is symbolized through a ritual called marriage rites, In traditional, the two are to drink a wine in one cup under the watch of people promising to live with each other till death. In Nnewi, just like in other Igboland, bride prizes are paid before the marriage is certified. Marriage can only be dissolved when the bride's prize is returned to the groom. There are processes that are generally accepted by Nnewi communities, bride prizes are not returned in secret, the traditional middleman is called *onyeakaebe*, he must be available for the return of bride prizes. The two families are to assemble at the *obi* of the bride's kindred, where another *Igbandu* takes place. Oil is missed with salt, and the oldest man in the kindred makes some incantations, saying that as this marriage is ending today, may evil befall any of them who plan, hear, or participate in harming each other without notifying the other. Both of them will repeat the incantation, deep-fry the kolanut in the oil, salt, and then eat. They will also use one cup to drink. After this ritual, the middle man will collect the bride's prize and give it back to the groom's family. This is called *ikwu ngo.*, meaning, returning the bribe prize,

Fr. Okezie, in his homily at a mass wedding at Saint Mary's Assumed into Heaven Ukpokor on June 8, 2023, advised the intending couple to examine their consciences to see whether

they will leave with the expectations of this matrimony; he maintained that many people suffer today as a result of deviating from the promises made at the altar. He stressed that this wedding at the altar is a typical example of two people (man and woman) entering into *Igbandu* to live and respect each other in good health and in sickness, richness, poverty, e.t.c. But later, some forget these promises and start to harm each other,

Nnewi people so much believe in *Igbandu* when it comes to marriage. In traditional marriages, the intending couple eats and drinks on one plate and one cup, and their parents offer prayers before breaking the kolanut, sprinkle the wine on the ground, calling their ancestors to partake in the ceremony and begging them to protect the couple. This is followed by another rite called *Ogo bia mara ulo*, meaning, in law should come and know there in law house, It is only when this ceremony is performed that the father of the bride is qualified to eat in his in law house, especially when he is a titled man.

The Igbo people are widely recognized for their high mobility and enterprising spirit, often migrating to various regions in pursuit of better economic opportunities. As Anozie asserts, it is rare to encounter a location across the globe where an Igbo individual is not present, and equally uncommon to find an Igbo household that does not engage in some form of commercial activity. In the context of these entrepreneurial pursuits, the practice of *Igbandu*—a traditional covenant—emerged as a means of fostering trust and strengthening business relationships. However, social and economic interactions among families, groups, or communities have often led to conflicts, which manifest in various destructive forms such as hatred, disputes, violence, loss of life and property, deception, theft, betrayal, poisoning, and general mistrust. In response to these persistent tensions and to promote social harmony, the institution of *Igbandu* became a culturally embedded mechanism for restoring peace and mutual confidence. Within the Igbo socio-cultural framework, the concept of covenant (*Igbandu*) is categorized into two principal forms: the suzerain covenant, which implies a hierarchical relationship, and the parity covenant, which denotes equality between parties involved.

### *Suzerain Type*

The *Suzerain Covenant* refers to a form of agreement characterized by an imbalance in status between the contracting parties. It is fundamentally hierarchical, involving a superior and a subordinate party. A classic example of this arrangement is the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. In its ancient formulation, the suzerain—typically a king or deity—extends promises such as protection or provision, contingent upon the subordinate party's adherence to stipulated obligations or commands. This type of covenant is inherently unilateral, as the dominant party determines its terms while the subordinate party is expected to comply. Within traditional Igbo society, such covenants are frequently established between individuals, families, kindreds, or entire communities and a deity. In these arrangements, the human party is bound to honor specific duties or rituals, while the deity, in turn, assumes responsibility for their protection and welfare.

Moreover, this covenantal structure closely parallels the biblical covenantal tradition, particularly in the Old Testament, where covenants initiated by God reflect the suzerain model. However, in the biblical context, these covenants carry profound theological weight, given that one party is the divine Creator. As such, the implications of the covenant often extend beyond the immediate context to encompass universal or redemptive dimensions, underscoring God's sovereign initiative and gracious commitment to humanity.

### *Parity Covenants*

This is a type of covenant that occurs between two parities of equal status. It is the most common type of covenant because people who share a lot in common can easily engage in this type of covenant. It can also be a covenant between nations, tribes, groups, and organisations of equal social and economic status. This type of covenant can be negotiated by the parties as a means of cementing an already existing relationship. Speaking on this, Ezeja in a (personal communication: 2018) argues thus, when a group or people of equal socio-economic status build a relationship for a period of time, they can decide to solidify it into a covenant. Such a covenant is entered into without prejudice, and it is meant to last for a very long time.

### **Rituals Involved in Igbandu in Nnewi**

*Igbandu* in Nnewi take many forms. In Nnewi starting from their traditional society, red oil, salt and *Ogirisi* leave are mostly used in *Igbandu*. Blood is used in some cases and most often ritual meals are used. The blood ritual sealed or ratified the covenant which God made with the Israelite at mount Sinai, the day the Israelite were constituted into the assembly of God; a special 'people' of God (Okeke, Charles & Anedo, 2024). One of the most important facts about *Igbandu* in Igboland and Nnewi for example is the issue of blood relationship. This is often called natural covenant. The family members are consanguineous in such a way that it is the same blood that is flowing in them, there is what is known as 'Ibenne' holding them together; *ibenne* literally means blood-related or of the same mother.

Obinwa highlights a central belief in Igbo cosmology: that any individual who belongs to a consanguineous group and seeks to harm another member—whether overtly or covertly—will face retributive consequences. The harm, it is believed, will inevitably return to the perpetrator, since both the aggressor and the intended victim share the same ancestral bloodline. In the Nnewi context, one of the ritual mechanisms for establishing covenants (*Igbandu*) is through a practice known as *Nligba* or *Oliko*, which involves the communal consumption of a symbolic meal composed of salt and red oil (*nnu na mmanu*). These two ingredients, which naturally blend harmoniously, symbolize the expected unity and mutual goodwill among covenant participants. Breaching this covenant is believed to invite divine or ancestral punishment (Obinwa, 2019).

Traditionally, this ritual meal is consumed in the presence of a village deity, who functions as a spiritual witness to the covenant. In communities such as Ukpok, refusal to partake in this communal meal, especially within a kindred setting, is interpreted as a sign of

malice or hidden wrongdoing. The individual is ostracized and may be compelled to undergo ritual purification, such as the symbolic act of purchasing matches. Conversely, one who has nothing to hide is expected to partake freely in the communal meal, which includes tasting the soup and drinking the water. A notable historical instance occurred in Umunnelam, Umudim-Nnewi, where Obi Anaeto was excommunicated for his refusal to eat food prepared for a village-wide gathering.

A particularly significant occasion for covenant renewal in Nnewi is the New Yam Festival. During this event, the *Obi* (traditional leader) of the kindred, village, or town initiates the ritual by consuming roasted yam with red oil and salt following prayers. This act, followed by members of the community in hierarchical order, is interpreted as a collective reaffirmation of the annual covenant. Similarly, in Nnewi funerary traditions, especially for adults, the burial rites are considered incomplete without the communal sharing of a final meal, referred to as *olisara*.

In some instances, a blood covenant is also enacted, whereby participants make incisions, extract blood, and mix it with liquid—such as water or juice—which they then drink. This act symbolizes a permanent, inextricable bond between the parties involved. Regardless of the specific ritual form, the Igbo understanding of *Igbandu* functions as a powerful means of social cohesion, comparable in its unifying effect to the biblical notion of covenant. As Obinwa observes, the African-Igbo covenant operates both at the familial level—where it is grounded in consanguinity—and at the extended kindred level (*Umunna*, meaning "descendants of a common ancestor"), reinforcing communal identity (Obinwa, 2019).

An example of this communal solidarity is found in Umuezike Ohiamem village in Umuahama, Ukpok, where the 30th of December is designated as an annual day of covenant renewal through communal feasting. During this celebration, members contribute food, drinks, and ingredients, although cooking responsibilities are reserved for the *Iyomdi* (young women), who prepare the meal at the residence of the eldest male in the kindred. Married and unmarried daughters return home for the event, emphasizing the enduring familial bond. The meal is initiated with a prayer and blessing by the eldest man, accompanied by libations poured onto the earth in honor of deceased relatives and ancestors, thus reaffirming the covenantal relationship between the living and the dead.

### **Types of Igbandu in Nnewi**

Nwosu argues that, recognizing the inherent vulnerability and frequent failure of human beings to uphold their commitments, the ancestors of the Nnewi community devised several mechanisms to ensure adherence to agreements and social contracts. Among these mechanisms are various forms of covenant-making, notably: (i) *Igbandu*, (ii) *Idoagbata*, (iii) *Igbaoliko*, and (iv) *Agbamono* (Nwosu, 2019).

The practice of *Igbandu*—a covenantal agreement—is typically undertaken by two or more individuals who pledge not to violate a promise, disclose a confidential matter, or betray mutual trust. Participants voluntarily accept that any violation of the covenant will invoke a predetermined calamity or punishment, thereby reinforcing the seriousness of the oath. While

this form of covenant primarily functions at the interpersonal level, involving individuals, family members, friends, business associates, or married couples, it is also used in broader communal disputes. For instance, families in conflict or communities experiencing tension over issues such as land disputes, character defamation (*mgbachu*), or abduction, may engage in *Igbandu* to restore trust and foster peace.

Moreover, *Igbandu* is not restricted to human-to-human relationships. It can also be established between humans and deities. In this context, individuals, families, kindreds, villages, or entire towns enter into a covenant with a deity, typically seeking divine protection, longevity, or fertility, in exchange for loyalty, ritual observance, or sacrificial offerings. A notable example is the annual New Yam Festival, which in many Igbo communities is dedicated to the earth goddess *Ala* (or *Ani*) as a gesture to sustain agricultural fertility.

There also exists the theological dimension of *Igbandu*, manifesting as a covenant between God and humans. Biblical examples include God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18) and with David (2 Chronicles 21:7). Contemporary expressions of this type of covenant may involve clergy or devout individuals who make solemn personal commitments to uphold divine laws, irrespective of life's challenges.

In more personal settings, romantic partners may engage in *Igbandu* to express loyalty and prevent betrayal—particularly when one partner is leaving for a long journey. This may involve the symbolic act of licking each other's blood, a ritual intended to bind them to their vows.

Additionally, several social and clandestine groups also utilize *Igbandu* as a binding mechanism. Secret societies and occult groups often require initiates to undergo *Igbandu* rituals to ensure lifelong membership, with severe consequences such as insanity or death for those who attempt to withdraw—especially when such withdrawal contradicts group loyalty or sacrifices. Robbery syndicates similarly employ *Igbandu* to guarantee secrecy and non-betrayal, especially under legal threat. According to Nwoye, members take oaths to protect each other even when confronted by law enforcement (Nwoye, 2011). Vigilante and local security groups also utilize *Igbandu* to prevent internal betrayal, ensuring that members do not collude with criminals or expose operational secrets. As Okolo (oral interview, 2022) attests, the fear of spiritual or communal retribution often dissuades members from disclosing sensitive information to external threats, thereby preserving group integrity.

An illustrative case is that of Donatus Okeke, a night guard at Ukpok High School in Nnewi South L.G.A., who entered into an *Igbandu* agreement with his colleague, Nnaji, in the presence of the PTA chairman, known as the First White Obi, on March 20, 2020, to prevent potential harm arising from personal conflict.

Finally, *Igbandu* is also practiced among business groups. In joint business ventures where individuals contribute capital, some prefer traditional covenantal agreements over formal legal contracts. These covenants are perceived to offer spiritual assurance and communal accountability, especially in settings where trust is paramount and legal enforcement may be perceived as insufficient or impersonal.

### *Ido Agbata*

*Ido Agbata* is a customary covenantal practice commonly observed among relatives who share a common ancestry or maternal lineage. It is particularly invoked in contexts where there is heightened suspicion that some family members may be engaging in malevolent acts—either in thought or deed—against their kin. This covenant is typically enacted at the *Umunna* level (a group of extended patrilineal families) or within *Imenne* (a subgroup within the *Umunna* descended from the same maternal ancestor).

Although the fundamental objective of *Ido Agbata*—to preserve harmony and mutual trust among relatives—remains consistent, the ritual forms have evolved over time in response to changing religious convictions, particularly under the influence of Christianity. The following represent commonly observed variations:

First, Licking Salt and Palm Oil Mixture (*Nnu na Mmanu*): Participants are required to dip a finger into a container holding a mixture of salt and red palm oil (or in some cases, kola nut and oil), place a portion on their tongue, and recite an oath that renounces any form of conspiracy, intention, or execution of evil against family members. The declaration symbolically marks a new beginning, and violators invoke upon themselves premature death. Refusal to participate in this ritual is interpreted as a sign of malice or spiritual danger, and such individuals may be socially ostracized.

Second, Christianized Rituals: Drinking Holy Water or Anointed Oil, and Swearing on the Bible: In communities where Christian beliefs are predominant, traditional ritual forms are often replaced or supplemented with Christian elements. A Christian minister is typically invited to oversee the covenant ceremony. Family members recite the *Agbata* oath and then symbolically seal it by drinking holy water or anointed oil, or by swearing on the Holy Bible. Notably, many families periodically re-enact the *Ido Agbata* ritual, believing that previous covenants lose their spiritual efficacy over time.

Third, *Igba Oliko*: Closely related to *Ido Agbata*, *Igba Oliko* is a broader communal covenant grounded in the Igbo belief that when individuals consume food or ritual substances from the same pot, any violation of the accompanying vows will result in severe consequences. This form of covenant is sometimes used to curb social vices such as prostitution or marital infidelity by women within the community.

Fourth, *Ibe Nne* (Sibling Covenant): *Ibe Nne* refers to a sacred familial covenant that forbids siblings—those who have suckled from the same maternal breast—from harboring or executing evil against one another. It is grounded in the belief that maternal kinship creates an indissoluble spiritual bond. A relative who violates this covenant, especially through acts of violence, is expected to suffer disgrace and extreme suffering, as the *Ibenne* spirit (a familial ancestral force) metes out retributive justice on the offender.

Fifth, *Agbanano* and Its Statutes: The historical *Agbanano* covenant was instituted by Ikenga, the progenitor of Isu and Nnewi, out of fear that his sons, along with their relatives from Ifite (Oraifite) and Ichinwa (Ichi), would fall into unending conflict. In response, he established a spiritual treaty among these four groups—Isu, Nnewi, Ifite, and Ichinwa—to preserve peace and unity. The terms of this covenant included: (a) a prohibition against

warfare among the signatories and their descendants; (b) a ban on any form of oppression; (c) a mutual agreement not to sell one another into slavery or cast one another into servitude (*osu*); and (d) the requirement to convene and resolve communal matters at a designated sacred site—*Okwu Oyo*, located behind *Okwu Ulasi* along modern-day Igwe Orizu Road in Okpunyo Otolu.

Through these diverse forms, *Ido Agbata* and its variants illustrate the complex interplay between traditional Igbo spiritual systems, social ethics, and evolving religious worldviews. These covenants not only serve as mechanisms of conflict resolution and social regulation but also reinforce communal bonds rooted in kinship, spirituality, and collective identity.

#### *The Four Fundamental Components of a Covenant*

A covenant is constituted by four primary elements: the covenant itself, the covenanter, the covenantee, and the witnesses. Firstly, it involves two or more parties who mutually commit to a binding agreement, often formalized through promises or oaths. Secondly, such covenants are typically accompanied by a tangible sign or physical symbol that signifies the agreement. Thirdly, the presence of witnesses is customary to legitimize and validate the proceedings. Fourthly, covenants are commonly sealed through a ceremonial act, a ritual designed to affirm and solemnize the agreement.

#### **Underlying Motivations for *Igbandu* in Nnewi**

In the context of Nnewi, the practice of *Igbandu*—a traditional covenant—typically arises as a response to social tensions such as disputes over land, interpersonal mistrust, conflict, or warfare. It is often initiated in situations where trust has eroded, serving as a mechanism either for preventing future discord or for facilitating reconciliation. The covenant provides psychological reassurance, as it is widely believed that entering into such a binding agreement alleviates fear and establishes peace of mind.

Furthermore, the aspiration for communal harmony and unity is a significant impetus behind *Igbandu*. Among covenant partners, it is understood that acts of aggression, betrayal, or exploitation—such as enslavement (*Ohu*) or ritual dedication (*Osu*)—are strictly prohibited. Historically, the Agbawo shrine, referred to as *Agbanano Ikenga*, was erected at Nkwo Edo (now the Nkwo Triangle) to commemorate such covenants. A notable ritual occurs on Nkwo Akwu Day, during which a priest of Edo performs a public purification bath at the shrine while observers witness the rite.

Additionally, *Igbandu* functions as a means of restoring severed relationships. When interpersonal or familial bonds are damaged due to conflict, the ritual of *Igbandu* serves as a culturally sanctioned method for reconciliation. It is particularly effective in resolving intense disputes, as the covenantal process dissuades individuals from harboring malicious intentions or engaging in harmful actions toward others.

### **How *Igbandu* is Done**

The Chief Priest of the shrine where the *igbandu* will take place is invited, visited, and informed by the people or groups intending to enter the *Igbandu*. He gives them a date using the four market days. As said earlier, kola nuts, hot and soft drinks, oil, salt, fowl, goat, and ogiris leaves are used.

The two people or groups entering *Igbandu* will be present in the shrine, and the chief priest or elder who is presiding will tell them what they are entering. It is an agreement and a covenant. He tells them that whoever violates it will surely be attacked by the deity who is present at the occasion, although the deity is not seen.

The oil is mixed with the *inu*, and it is mixed with the *kolanut*. Break one *kolanut*, share it among two, mix it with salt, and both parties will eat it. They will drink from one cup that contains hot, soft, or even palm wine. This is the *Igbandu* in it. The priest or elder will pour the drink on the ground, calling the ancestors or deities who are witnesses in the *Igbandu* to take it. Every object used in the *Igbandu* is given to them by throwing it on the ground. It is interesting to know that when they want to nullify the *Igbandu*, they have to come to that same shrine, and some incantations will be made by the elders or the chief priests. They will unsay what they have agreed upon, especially if they do not want to agree again.

In the case of marriage and divorce, the two couples will go to the house of the eldest man from the bride family and tell him that they do not want to continue the marriage again. They will then use the oil or kola nut, as they did in the traditional wedding. The incarnations are done by the eldest man, and if any of them harm another, that person will die. They are warned not to harm one another.

### **Impact of Christianity in Nnewi**

The introduction of Christianity to Nnewi, a prominent town in Anambra State, Nigeria, significantly influenced traditional practices, including the concept of *Igbandu*—a covenant or bond integral to Igbo spirituality and community cohesion. Christian missionaries often perceived indigenous rituals associated with *Igbandu* as incompatible with Christian teachings, leading to efforts to suppress these customs (Nwuba & Grace, 2021). This suppression resulted in the abandonment of certain traditional practices as Christianity gained prominence in Nnewi.

The interaction between Christianity and Igbo traditional religion was marked by antagonism, with missionaries labeling indigenous beliefs as "pagan" and "devilish." Despite this, Igbo traditional religion demonstrated resilience, maintaining its presence even amidst the spread of Christianity. Over time, a form of religious syncretism emerged, wherein elements of *Igbandu* and other traditional practices were integrated into Christian worship. This blending led to unique expressions of faith that reflect both Christian and indigenous beliefs, illustrating the dynamic interplay between the two religious systems (Nwosu, 2019).

The advent of Christianity in Nnewi led to the suppression and transformation of the *Igbandu* concept. While some traditional practices were abandoned, others adapted through

syncretism, resulting in a complex religious landscape that encompasses both Christian and indigenous elements (C. Eze, 2024).

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations are proposed. Firstly, individuals should exercise caution before entering into *Igbandu*, as breaking such covenants often leads to severe and irreversible consequences. Secondly, conflicts should preferably be resolved through Christian principles rather than resorting to traditional shrines, as many of these deities are perceived to act with vengeance rather than mercy. Christians are also strongly advised to avoid syncretism by refraining from making covenants at shrines and instead uphold their spiritual commitments using the Bible. Furthermore, those who breach such covenants must recognize the grave risks involved—not only to themselves but also to their descendants. It is alarming that many youths, despite identifying as Christians, continue to frequent shrines during ritual rites, often lured by the promise of food and drink. Therefore, the government is urged to implement youth empowerment initiatives, as unemployment has been identified as a major factor driving young people towards shrine-based activities, particularly on Sundays. Lastly, while *Igbandu* has demonstrated effectiveness in curbing social vices among the Igbo people, its application must be critically assessed to align with contemporary Christian values and human rights.

### CONCLUSION

The concept of *Igbandu* in Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria, represents a deeply rooted traditional covenant system that embodies the values of communal bonding, accountability, and spiritual commitment. Historically, *Igbandu* served as a mechanism for fostering trust, resolving conflicts, and maintaining social harmony within Nnewi society. However, the advent of Christianity and modern socio-political transformations have significantly influenced the perception and practice of *Igbandu*, leading to its gradual decline or adaptation within contemporary religious and legal frameworks. Despite these changes, elements of *Igbandu* persist in certain cultural and social interactions, reflecting the resilience of indigenous traditions in the face of external influences. A nuanced understanding of *Igbandu* within its historical and contemporary contexts highlights its relevance in discussions about identity, morality, and social cohesion in Nnewi and Igbo society at large. There is a need for systematic documentation of *Igbandu* and other indigenous practices to ensure their preservation for future generations. Scholars and cultural institutions should collaborate to record oral histories and traditional practices associated with *Igbandu*. Given the tension between traditional beliefs and Christianity, fostering dialogue between religious leaders and cultural custodians can help create mutual understanding and reduce misconceptions about indigenous practices. While *Igbandu* is primarily a traditional covenant, its ethical principles, particularly in conflict resolution and social accountability, can be integrated into modern alternative dispute resolution mechanisms within the community.

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