

**IFANGELISM: EFFORTS AT COUNTERING PROSELYTISM  
ACTIVITIES OF FOREIGN RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*The paper thematically discusses Ifangelism as a concept denoted in the efforts at countering the proselytism activities of the foreign religions practiced in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity). It is a known fact that making converts is a feature of nearly all the religions practiced globally and not an exclusive preserve of the so called “Missionary religions”. Though African Traditional Religion is indigenous to the people, the proselytism activities of the foreign religions have brought about massive conversions from it. Adopting practical and theoretical methods in gathering information from adherents of the Indigenous religion, the paper establishes the origin, goals, purpose and strategies of Ifangelism. It examines its positive aspects. The paper argues that African Traditional Religion is alive among the people despite several attempts to portray it in bad light. On a final note, the research work recommends that adherents of African Traditional Religion should be more zealous like those of the other religious traditions in Nigeria in their efforts at ensuring the continuous survival of the faith even in modern times.*

**Introduction**

Africans are highly religious. Thus, African Traditional Religion began by intuition from the cultural practices of the people and handed down from one generation to another. The advent of the foreign religions did a lot of harm to it. Western oriented missionaries and scholars employed derogatory and opprobrious terms like idolatry, fetishism, paganism, heathenism and many others to describe the religious practices of the people. This resulted into massive conversion from the so called “Pagan” and “Heathen” religions. Hence, the Traditional religion almost became exterminated. In contemporary times however, people have begun to appreciate the

values inherent in the indigenous religion, thereby resulting into syncretism and ambivalence.

For the Yoruba people, *Ifa* is probably the most important of their numerous divinities. As such, the *Ifa* cult is quite popular among them. In fact, it has been regarded as the wisdom of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being). According to a popular myth, *Ifa* descended from heaven. Since then, it became an integral part of their belief system. It is true that the people got to know about *Ifa*, otherwise known as *Eleri-Ipin*, by intuition and have a strong conviction in its power of clairvoyance.

Over the years however, the Prophets in the Christendom and Imams in Islam have usurped this noble role. To sensitize Africans on the significance of *Ifa* among them, there is the absolute need to *Ifangelise*, otherwise the significance of *Ifa* among them will in no distant time become moribund. In corollary, *Ifangelism* is the process of propagating or disseminating the prowess of *Ifa* to not only the nooks and crannies of Yoruba land but globally. There are those who are yet to hear about the potentials of *Ifa* in their locality. Thus, there is the absolute need for the propagation of his ideals.

The Abrahamic religions have taken over African Traditional Religion via evangelism and *Jihad*. This is because peripatetic movements of missionaries had always been the very hallmark of the new religions. To, therefore, create the necessary awareness in respect of *Ifa*, there is the total need to embark in earnest on *Ifangelism* that will awaken or arouse the interest of people on *Ifa* as the pathfinder of those in one challenge or the other via the instrumentality of clairvoyance.

### **Proselytism and Evangelism Defined**

To proselytize means to recruit or convert especially to a new faith, institution or cause. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*,<sup>1</sup> fourth edition, edited by Collin McIntosh defines the verb proselytise as “to try to persuade someone to change their religious or political beliefs or their way of living to your own”<sup>1</sup>. Thus, proselytism is the practice of encouraging or inducing people to join a particular religious movement. It also means to convert someone from a particular faith or belief system to another. Buttressing the above, *Encarta Encyclopedia* defines Religious Proselytizing as “working to encourage belief and practice of a religion”<sup>2</sup>.

Proselytism is a prominent feature of nearly all religious traditions in the world. Because the religion is new, the propagators want to popularize and make it acceptable. As such, several missionary movements, groups, organizations and individuals have been zealous witnesses through words and deeds so that those outside their own religious traditions can be converted to theirs. Scholars of

religion have identified Christianity, Buddhism and Islam as the principal missionary religions of the world. This does not imply that other religious traditions that do not fall within the purview of the above mentioned ones have been found wanting in this endeavour.

Evangelism means the “active calling of people to respond to the message of grace and commit oneself to God in Jesus Christ. While many think of evangelism as a New Testament phenomenon, profound concern for the salvation of all people is also obvious in the Old Testament”<sup>3</sup>. The *Webster’s Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus* also defines Evangelism succinctly as “preaching the Christian gospel, missionary zeal”<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the word evangelist (from which evangelism is derived) is from the verb meaning “to announce good news”, the noun “evangelist” is mentioned only three times in the New Testament<sup>5</sup>.

Christians have drawn great inspiration from the *Great Commission* which states unequivocally thus “go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Thus, the Apostles were the first to engage in Christian proselytism. As time went by, the Church spread her tentacles to North Africa, Asia Minor, India, China and other parts of the world. By the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Europe had been firmly established as a Christian continent. Till contemporary days, new mission fields are being opened by all denominations and sects, resulting into large converts to the faith.

Apparently because of the fact that virtually all religions globally have their origins in different places, evangelism constitutes their major hallmark. Since there is the absolute need to disseminate or propagate the religions in new locations, places or countries, evangelism is invariably inevitable. For instance, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) came to Nigeria via Badagry in 1842 through Henry Townsend and spread up-north to Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ijaye and many other places. What made this possible was doubtlessly aggressive evangelism on the part of the missionaries.

Islam as a prominent world missionary religion which began in the Arabian Peninsula has spread through the zealous activities of honest Arab merchants, travelers, clerics and preachers. This is because propagating the message of Islam is a religious duty and noble deed which attracts *Allah’s* blessings. Thus, many *Jihads* were embarked upon by the *Rashidun* Caliphs and other earliest Muslims and these resulted into making enormous converts to Islam.

### **Strategies for Proselytism Adopted by the Foreign Religions in Nigeria**

The Indigenous religions showed open-mindedness and tolerance towards the foreign religions. In fact, history has it that the *Ifa* oracle mesaged the advent of

the Christian Missionaries to Abeokuta. Similarly, the oracle supported the coming of Muslim clerics, traders and merchants to Yoruba land. It should be noted without any spirit of immodesty that the religions of the children of Abraham converted adherents of African Traditional Religion to their own faith and African Traditional Religion did not bicker.

Indeed, some practices of ATR like singing of choruses, drumming, clapping, and dancing were copied in order to probably woo or convert ATR adherents without much ado. The above listed attributes were not found even in the Bible and probably the *Quran*. As soon as these foreign religions gained footing among the people, intolerance, exclusivism and violence raised its ugly head in Nigeria.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Islam and Christianity have become the most prominent religions practiced by Nigerians. This is due to the strategies employed by the missionaries of these two religions. Some of these strategies employed in the propagation of Islam were trade as well as commercial relationship with North Africa, establishment of Quranic schools and *Jihad* which introduced the emirate system, most especially in Northern Nigeria with the *Shariah* as the legal code.

Christian Missionaries also used educational strategy to convert many people to Christianity. They established primary and secondary schools where the Bible and Catechism was taught paripassu with other subjects in the curriculum. Many pupils and students who attended these schools were baptized and took Christian names.

Another important factor which contributed immensely to the growth of Christianity in Nigeria was the fact that the colonial masters greatly supported the missionaries through their various policies, projects and programmes. In addition, hospitals, dispensaries, maternity centres and other health institutions were also established. Vocational centres where people learnt various skills were also set up in all nooks and crannies of the country. These strategies resulted into a large number of converts to Christianity.

### ***The Central Place of Ifa in Yoruba Traditional Religion***

*Orunmila*, otherwise known as *Ifa* is one of the divinities in Yoruba Traditional Religion. He was also known as *Eleri-Ipin*. Indeed, he was present when man was choosing his destiny. That is probably why he can proffer solutions to many problems or challenges of man no matter how seemingly intractable. He can unravel every mystery surrounding human existence no matter how cumbersome or clandestine they may appear and prescribe the necessary sacrifices that will terminate or put paid to the issues bothering or perturbing mankind.

Abimbola<sup>6</sup> explains that *Ifa* is undoubtedly the most important of the numerous divinities among the Yoruba people. He is also known as *Orunmila*. He also has

other appellations which are *Afedefeyo* (master of several languages) and *Akrefinisogbon* (the small man with a mind full of wisdom). In Yoruba mythology, *Ifa* is believed to be one of the major divinities who descended from heaven into the city of *Ife* by means of an iron chain. As we have noted earlier, *Ifa* is the Yoruba god of wisdom, knowledge and divination.

*Ifa* is believed to be present when the universe was created by God (*Olodumare*). Therefore, his vast knowledge transcends all times and space. Indeed, it is only through *Ifa* that one could reach the other divinities in the Yoruba pantheon. Through him, we can know when the divinities are angry with an individual or the community as a whole. There is no gainsaying the fact that he is the mouth-piece of all other divinities.

Bascom<sup>7</sup> explains that *Ifa* is a system of divination based on sixteen basic and two hundred and fifty-six derivative figures (*odu*) obtained either by the manipulation of sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*) or by the toss of a chain (*opele*) of eight half seed shells. He notes further that the worship of *Ifa* as the God of divination entails ceremonies, sacrifices, taboos, rituals, rites, paraphernalia, drums, songs, praises, initiation and many others which are comparable to those of other Yoruba cults. Only men are initiated into the mysteries of the *Ifa* cult. For the Yoruba, *Ifa* is the most venerated of all the gods. His priests form the first sacerdotal order among the people.

Awolalu and Dopamu<sup>8</sup> avowed that *Orunmila* or *Ifa* is the oracle divinity in Yoruba land. While *Orisa-nla* is the deputy of *Olodumare* with reference to the creation and ordering of the universe, *Orunmila* is his deputy in matters of wisdom, prognostications and foreknowledge. Both scholars noted further that “the priest of *Orunmila* is *Babalawo* (the diviner). *Orunmila* is worshipped everywhere in Yoruba land. His emblems include palm-kernels, cowries and some graven pieces of elephant’s tusk.

### **Origin of Ifangelism**

*Ifangelism* is a strategy of enhancing the values inherent in the indigenous belief system of Yoruba people which originated in very recent times due to the interaction between Indigenous and the foreign religions, especially Christianity. Since Christians obey the Biblical mandate of spreading the gospel message through evangelism (Matt 28:19) and Muslims do same through *da’wah*, ardent practitioners and devotees of *Ifa* engage in *Ifangelism* so as to spread the “gospel” of *Ifa*, thereby ensuring that the Yoruba Indigenous belief system does not go into extinction due to several attempts by the foreign religions to portray it as barbaric, fetish and idolatrous. Just as Christians give the nomenclature of *Evangelists* to those who engage in Evangelism, adherents of *Ifa* deity also refer to those who engage in *Ifangelism* as *Ifangelists*.

### **Major Goals, Purposes and Strategies of *Ifangelism***

1. *Ifangelism* seeks to ensure the continuity of the Yoruba Traditional Religion due to the challenges occasioned by the danger of extinction due to the incursion of the foreign religions.
2. It seeks to enhance the ethical values which are embedded in *Ifa*, who is widely regarded as the wisdom of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being).
3. In addition, it seeks to promote the indigenous cultural values of the Yoruba people as against the negative connotations ascribed to it by the West.
4. It also seeks to enhance the moral values inherent in Yoruba traditional religion which are widely cherished among devotees of *Ifa*.
5. *Ifangelism* seeks to correct the erroneous views of the populace about the Yoruba belief system.
6. It also seeks to show the areas of convergence and divergence between African Traditional Religion and the foreign ones (Islam and Christianity).
7. *Ifangelism* seeks to showcase and promote the social values which are epitomized by the Yoruba people and their religious practices.

A strategy has to do with a plan of action intended to accomplish specific goals. Eleuibon<sup>9</sup> explained that the indigenous religion was practiced before the advent of the foreign ones. As such, their proselytism activities resulted in massive conversion of adherents from the indigenous religion. However, some remained as ardent devotees of the traditional religion. He identified the following as strategies employed by *Ifangelists* as they go about in their onus of promoting the values inherent in the indigenous belief system.

1. Public lectures are regularly organized in Schools, Colleges, Universities, Institutes and many other places both at home and in the Diaspora on true worship of the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*). Through these lectures, moral values such as honesty, kindness, truthfulness, chastity, generosity and many others which are embedded in the religious practices of the Yoruba are showcased to the world.
2. Festivals are also veritable opportunities utilized by *Ifangelists* to showcase the spiritual values epitomized by *Ifa*, the wisdom of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being).



**Picture of a festival on High Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon's wall**

3. Furthermore, monarchs, chiefs and other custodians of African cultural values are regularly sensitized on the need to safeguard these cherished values which face the danger of going into extinction as a result of contact with western oriented civilization and religions.
4. In addition, *Ifangelists* also collaborate with government at all levels, international organizations as well as non-Governmental Organizations to showcase the hidden treasures in the traditional belief system of the Yoruba people. For instance, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) give adequate recognition to the Yoruba Traditional Religion.
5. The Mass media has also been used to advance the course of the Yoruba indigenous belief system. Several Radio and Television stations broadcast programmes featuring prominent clerics of the *Ifa* deity. This has gone a long way to educate and inform the general public about these cherished values.
6. *Ifangelists* have also made use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X handle and many others to advance their course.
7. The advent of the Internet has also assisted greatly to promote the course of *Ifangelism*. This is because several websites and blog pages contain valuable resources, materials and topics on *Ifa* deity and its divination system. For example, the *Ancient Philosophy International* (API) House of Culture in *Osogbo* which was founded by High Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon, a world renowned *Ifa* Priest makes good use of the internet in their activities. The API Website is <http://www.elebuibon.com>.



**Side view of the bus showing API's address and website**

8. Elebuibon also noted that many books have been written on *Ifa*. Notable among these authors are High Chief Yemi Elebuibon, Wande Abimbola, Ayo Salami Bogumbe and many others. Not only that, many songs, dramas, poems and many others have been composed, acted and written so as to advance the course of the indigenous belief system of the Yoruba people. Many of these plays and dramas have been widely applauded even in the Diaspora.



**Bus for *Ifangelism***

### **Positive Aspects of *Ifangelism***

*Ifangelism*, no doubt, has its own positive impacts which are highlighted below:

1. To a great extent, *Ifangelism* has succeeded in correcting the wrong perception of the populace about the traditional religious practices of Africans.
2. *Ifangelism* has assisted a great deal to showcase the spiritual and ethical values which are inherent in African Traditional Religion.
3. *Ifangelism* has assisted to portray the African Religion as a living faith which is reckoned with globally.
4. *Ifangelism* has helped enormously to showcase the African cultural traditions to the entire cosmos, thereby preventing it from going into extinction as a result of its encounter with western oriented values.
5. Through *Ifangelism*, adherents of the foreign religious traditions in Nigeria, most especially Christianity have started to appreciate the holy and true values inherent in the indigenous belief system of the Yoruba. In several theological seminaries and institutes where Christian clerics are trained, courses on *Ifa* and the traditional religion are offered. This has helped tremendously to foster the value of tolerance among them. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church's

document titled *Pastoral Attention to African Traditional Religion* details her attitude towards the African Religion.



Side View of API Bus

### Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to bring to the fore *Ifangelism* as a concept in African indigenous religious discourse. Just as Christians obey the *Great Commission* which is a mandate given to them by Christ and adherents of Islam embark on *da'wah*, a sacred duty to attract *Allah's* blessings, *Ifangelism* also seeks to enhance cherished values of *Ifa*, even in modern age and contemporary times. This has gone a long way to unfold the uniqueness and beauty inherent in traditional African culture cum religious practices.

However, *Ifangelists* need to put more efforts in their activities so as to ensure the continuity of the indigenous/cultural values. It is worth of note that many years of domination by the foreign religions have failed to wipe out the awe, devotion,

reverence and respect accorded to *Ifa* across Yoruba land. Also, practices within the indigenous belief system which appears to have been weakened or moribund should be revived, changed or transformed through *Ifangelism*.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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