

Syncretism and Cultural Resilience: The Coexistence and Evolution of Traditional *Itolimin* and Christian Burial Practices in Esanland, Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: This research aims to uncover how traditional second burial rites coexist with and have adapted to Christian funeral norms, reflecting the socio-religious negotiation in a postcolonial context. **Methodology:** Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with local chiefs, elders, and adults, alongside observations and an extensive review of related literature. Participants were selected based on their deep knowledge of Esan customs and involvement in the *Itolimin* practice. **Main Findings:** The study revealed that *Itolimin*, while embracing certain Christian elements, remains a vital cultural practice that reinforces the community's moral and social order. The rite's evolution showcases the Esan people's ability to blend traditional and Christian values, thereby preserving their cultural identity amidst religious changes. This syncretism illustrates the community's broader cultural resilience and adaptation approach in a rapidly changing religious landscape. **Applications of this Study:** Insights from this study apply to the broader discourse on funeral practices in postcolonial societies, providing a framework for cultural preservation amidst religious transformation. It is relevant for policymakers and public health officials regarding community health and burial practices. The findings also offer a basis for developing contextual theological education that respects indigenous beliefs within Christian teachings. **Novelty/Originality:** This study provides a unique contribution to the understanding of funeral rituals within African postcolonial societies by documenting the living tradition of *Itolimin*. It highlights how syncretism acts as a dynamic cultural force, shaping the way communities like the Esan negotiate identity and religious practice in a contemporary Christian-dominated context.

Keywords: Cultural resilience; *Itolimin*; religious practices; syncretism.

Introduction

The rituals and ceremonies surrounding death offer a profound insight into a society's intricate interplay of social, religious, and historical dimensions. Cultural rituals, as explored by various scholars (Fisher, 2003; Muslich Rizal Maulana, Hadi Untung, & Alfia Rosyidah, 2022; Singh, Singh, & Devi, 2019) are diverse and deeply rooted in the customs, beliefs, and traditions of different communities. These rituals serve as a way to honor the deceased and guide their souls to the afterlife, reflecting a holistic and culturally relative perspective (Muslich Rizal Maulana et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2019). In addition, death rituals can preserve biological ecosystems, as some traditional funeral practices promote replanting and maintaining natural habitats (Panda et al., 2024). Moreover, death rituals are not static but evolve, adapting to the dynamic nature of social life and undergoing changes in form and structure (Girsang & Sukmayadi, 2019; Pratama, 2023; R. Marak & Sharma, 2023). The significance of these rituals extends beyond the mere

commemoration of the deceased; they are symbolic acts that hold deep meaning and value within the cultural fabric of a society (Fisher, 2003). By examining death rituals, we can better understand the values, norms, and worldviews that shape a community's identity and provide a sense of continuity and connection with the past (Fisher, 2003; Singh et al., 2019). Through the lens of death rituals, we can explore the rich tapestry of human experiences and the ways in which different societies navigate the complexities of life, death, and the afterlife.

In Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria, the tradition of second burial, known as *Itolimin*, transcends mere cultural observance; it embodies a complex interplay of religious adherence, socio-economic dynamics, and public health considerations. Despite the predominant Christian demographic, traditional burial rites persist, reflecting a profound intersection of indigenous beliefs and contemporary religious practices. This phenomenon raises significant questions about the coexistence of traditional and Christian burial rites and their implications for community health, especially considering the potential public health hazards of improperly conducted burials.

Funeral rituals play a significant role in various aspects of individuals' lives, including their psychological adjustment, grief, and overall well-being. Research has explored different dimensions of funeral rituals, such as the impact of circumstances surrounding death on parents' grief (Meij et al., 2008), the relationship between funeral satisfaction and subsequent medical expenses (Becker et al., 2022), and the function of funerals in facilitating grief reactions (Mitima-Verloop, Mooren, & Boelen, 2021). Additionally, studies have delved into the influence of funeral practices on mental health, grief, and bereavement (Burrell & Selman, 2022), as well as the role of rituals in the grieving process (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

Moreover, the literature highlights the importance of culturally specific funeral traditions, such as the symbolic interaction of funeral traditions among ethnic Chinese in Lombok (Anggrawan & Mayadi, 2020), and the impact of gender stereotypes on Muslim funeral and burial rituals in Egypt (Tolba, 2022). Furthermore, research has examined the role of music in funerals (Bruin-Mollenhorst, 2020), the significance of post-funeral rituals in facilitating grief work (Bolton & Camp, 1987), and the relationship between commemoration practices and adjustment over time (Birrell et al., 2020).

Despite the comprehensive exploration of funeral rituals' roles in psychological well-being, cultural expression, and social interaction, a gap remains in the academic discourse concerning the adaptation and persistence of traditional burial practices, such as *Itolimin*, in predominantly Christian societies. Specifically, there is a scarcity of research on how these traditional practices coexist with, complement, or conflict with Christian funeral rites within postcolonial African contexts, where the dynamics of religion, culture, and colonial history interweave to shape contemporary social practices.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the *Itolimin* practice in Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria, where Christianity predominates, yet traditional burial practices persist. By situating the *Itolimin* practice within the broader spectrum of funeral rituals in postcolonial African societies, this research seeks to understand the socio-religious implications of maintaining traditional burial rites amidst dominant Christian influences. This novel contribution will enhance our understanding of cultural resilience, religious integration, and the complexities of identity in postcolonial settings, thereby enriching the academic dialogue on funeral practices and their significance in contemporary societies.

This research ventures into uncharted territory by scrutinizing the *Itolimin* tradition in Esanland, a practice that straddles the realms of cultural heritage and contemporary Christian beliefs. It aims to unravel the nuanced dynamics between these seemingly

years), ten elders (aged 60 to 85 years), and ten younger adults (aged 20 to 60 years). These participants were identified based on their deep-rooted knowledge and involvement in the customs and traditions of their communities, making them valuable informants for this research.

The research unfolded in several stages, starting with the identification and selection of participants. This was followed by the data collection phase, where semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information about the practice of *Itolimin*. Observational techniques were also employed, allowing for a richer understanding of the ritual's execution and its significance within the community. Additionally, a comprehensive literature search was undertaken to supplement the data obtained from interviews and observations, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of the subject.

Data analysis followed a systematic approach, beginning with the processing of collected data to organize and prepare it for in-depth analysis. This involved transcription of interviews, cataloging of observational notes, and compilation of relevant literature. The analysis then proceeded through data reduction, where the vast amount of information was distilled into key themes and patterns relevant to the study's objectives. This thematic analysis enabled a focused examination of how *Itolimin* is practiced and perceived within the Esan community, highlighting its socio-religious implications and the dynamics of cultural preservation amidst changing contemporary beliefs. Insights drawn from this analysis were then contextualized within the broader academic discourse on funeral practices in postcolonial African societies, contributing to a nuanced understanding of cultural resilience and identity negotiation in Esanland.

Results and Discussion

1. Burial Practices in Esaland

The burial practices in Esaland are deeply rooted in the community's sociocultural and spiritual life. These practices go beyond bidding farewell to the deceased and encompass beliefs, values, and historical consciousness of the Esan people. Death is categorized into honorable and dishonorable, which dictate specific rites of passage based on the social and moral standing of the deceased and the circumstances surrounding their death (E. O. Aluede & Aluede, 2012; Izibili, 2017).

The first burial is a significant moment of transition that honors the deceased's life journey and reinforces the community's moral fabric through ritualistic storytelling. It is part of a broader ceremonial expanse that culminates in a rite known as *Itolimin*, which is steeped in Esan spirituality and social-cultural obligations. The first burial includes all rites and observances associated with the interment of the deceased. However, there are some salient matters from previous segments that require clarification. For instance, if a kind of death begets a kind of interment, what is the relationship between a kind of interment and a kind of first burial?

In extreme cases, ashes are brought from the scene of an accident and placed in a casket or a trunk of plantain or banana stem for proper burial. If a native of Esan town A is buried in Esan town B or any place outside Esan, the deceased person's measurement is taken with Onyan and brought back to the hometown of the deceased for interment and proper burial rites.

Some kinds of death are not accorded Ujie music and dance, which has an exclusive place in the rites of passage of the deceased. During Ujie performances, the children, siblings, and friends of the deceased show respect for the dead. However, traditional

practices have been overshadowed in recent times, as corpses taken to the church for requiem mass or any form of church service are interred by members of the church (E. O. Aluede & Aluede, 2012; Bradbury, 1973).

In Esaland, the first burial ceremony is an elaborate affair that marks the beginning of the journey into the ancestral realm for the deceased. It is a profound moment that encompasses not just the sorrow of loss but also the celebration of the life that was lived. As part of this ceremonious passage, the community comes together, often signaled by the distribution of invitation cards as depicted in Figure 2. These invitations serve as a solemn announcement and a call for communal participation in the rites, reaffirming the social ties that bind the community together. It is through these shared rituals that the moral and historical narrative of the deceased is woven into the collective memory of the Esan people, thus honoring the life that has passed and the cultural lineage that continues.

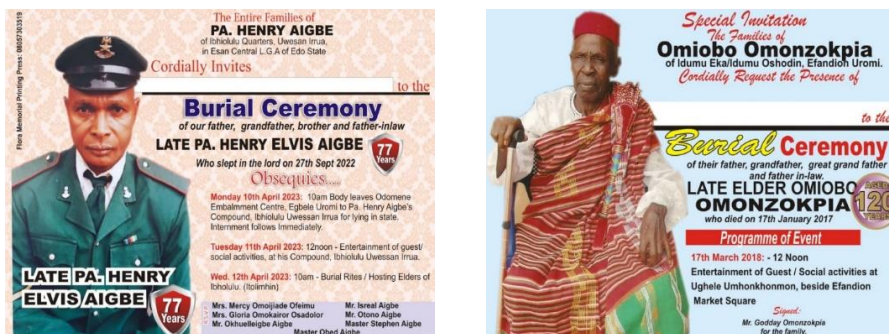


Figure 2 Photographs of invitation cards to the first burial ceremonies by their respective families

The intricate fabric of Esan burial practices is further woven with the rite of *Itolimin* (second burial or final burial), often seen as the final act of the burial process, serving as both a conclusion to mourning and a celebration of the transition. The etymology of *Itolimin* remains somewhat elusive, with its origins and significance deeply rooted in the socio-economic and mystical traditions of the Esan people. This second burial, as Iseghohimhen (Personal Communication, August 12, 2019) outlines, is more than just an act of farewell; it encapsulates a complex ritual that includes the preservation of the deceased's hair, fingernails, and clothing, signifying a preservation of spiritual heritage and a transference of the mantle to the next generation.

The role of the first son is pivotal in *Itolimin*, where he symbolically steps into the role of patriarch, intertwining religious rites with familial duties to secure the spiritual and physical legacy of the deceased. The ceremony, illustrated in Figure 3, with its evocative photographs of invitation cards to final/second burial ceremonies, emphasizes the communal and agnatic nature of inheritance in Esan society. As captured by the voices of Ojiefoh (2002), Iseghohimhen (Personal Communication, August 12, 2019), and supported by scholars like Okeke, Ibenwa, and Okeke (2017), *Itolimin* serves as a rite of passage for the first son, allowing him to claim rightful ownership over his father's estate, which is recognized and validated by the extended family and the community at large.

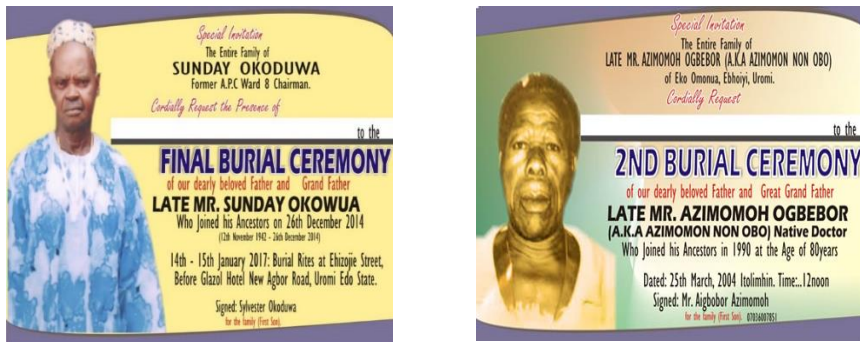


Figure 3 Photographs of invitation cards to final/second burial ceremonies by their respective families

The modern-day interpretation of *Itolimin* has evolved, reflecting changes in religious practices, with a notable incorporation of Christian elements, as described by Izibili (2017), transforming it from an ancestral rite into a ceremony that can be monetized, adapting to the economic realities of contemporary life. This monetization does not detract from its cultural significance but rather recontextualizes it within the current societal framework. Such adaptation speaks to the resilience and dynamism of the Esan cultural identity, navigating the intricate dance between tradition and modernity, the spiritual and the secular.

In this way, the *Itolimin* ritual is not merely a rite of inheritance; it is a reaffirmation of the enduring bond between the living and the dead, a testament to the ongoing conversation between the past and the present. It stands as a profound reflection of the Esan worldview, a community that honors its past while steadily facing the future.

2. Traditional vs. Christian Burial Practices

The coexistence of traditional and Christian burial practices in Esanland presents a fascinating study of cultural persistence and transformation within a postcolonial African context. Traditional Esan beliefs categorize death into either "good" or "bad," influencing the corresponding funeral rites deeply embedded in the community's social fabric (E. O. Aluede & Aluede, 2012). This categorization not only reflects the community's perceptions of death but also enforces social norms and values around honor, societal status, and moral conduct. For instance, the interment of individuals deemed criminals involves rituals believed to prevent the recurrence of malevolence, such as burying the deceased with their heads upside down—a practice symbolizing the community's collective moral judgment and its implications for the afterlife.

The burial practices in Esanland encapsulate a profound cultural dialogue between traditional beliefs and the encroachments of modernity, each with distinct approaches to death and the afterlife. Within this cultural milieu, the handling of deaths deemed criminal reflects a deep-seated belief in the sanctity of the land and the communal imperative to atone for acts of violence, such as murder. As Iseghohimhen (Personal Communication, August 12, 2019) elucidates, the land is believed to be polluted by such deaths, necessitating specific rituals to cleanse it. Izibili (2017) further illuminates this practice by describing how the deceased may be buried with their head facing downward, a symbolic gesture intended to prevent the soul from reincarnating among the living, highlighting a unique blend of justice and cosmology.

This intertwining of health, morality, and eschatology is also evident in the burial rites for those who succumb to illnesses like Anasakra and Ascites. Traditional Esan views, as corroborated by Izibili (2017) and discussions with Ojeaga (Personal Communication, June 2, 2019), attribute these conditions to supernatural causation, such as divine retribution or broken oaths. The traditional response, often involving the exclusion of the deceased from conventional burial sites, contrasts sharply with the uniform rites of Christian burials, which lack this dimension of moral and spiritual causality.

The treatment of twins in Esan burial practices further exemplifies the rich cultural tapestry of Esanland, where the death of one twin invokes rituals that ensure their reunion in the afterlife, signifying a deep-rooted belief in the spiritual continuity between this world and the next. This contrasts with the Christian emphasis on the salvation of the soul without specific rites based on the nature of one's life or death.

Moreover, the societal judgment on individuals deemed harsh during their lifetime leads to unique post-mortem treatments intended to soften their temperament in the afterlife, a practice that starkly contrasts with Christian doctrines of repentance and forgiveness. This belief in the possibility of posthumous character rehabilitation underscores the communal investment in the moral fabric of the society.

Similarly, the rites for warriors or those who died violently reflect a cultural effort to restore dignity and wholeness in the afterlife, diverging from Christian practices that prioritize spiritual over physical integrity at death. In cases of dismemberment or beheading, traditional Esan practices employ substitutes like calabashes or laterite to compensate for the missing parts, a practice rooted in the belief in the physical completeness of the soul's journey to the afterlife.

The burial of individuals who suffered from epilepsy or tuberculosis reveals a blend of medical understanding and traditional beliefs. The involvement of a morbid anatomist to remove diseased organs before burial, as noted by Aluede (2010), suggests a pragmatic approach to preventing the recurrence of the disease in the afterlife, illustrating an intricate understanding of health and spirituality.

These diverse practices, from the treatment of criminals to the specific rites for twins or those who died of diseases, reveal a cultural narrative where traditional beliefs and Christian worldviews coexist, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in contention. The ongoing negotiation between these paradigms in the face of modernity highlights the resilience of traditional practices and the adaptive strategies of communities navigating the complexities of global religious landscapes.

In contrast, Christian burial practices, introduced to Esanland around 1902, prioritize themes of salvation, eternal life, and collective worship, often sidelining the socio-cultural nuances of traditional practices (Izibili, 2017).

The integration of Christian burial rites has led to a significant cultural intersection, challenging traditional practices and prompting a reevaluation of cultural identity. As noted by Healey and Syberts (1997), the adoption of Christianity in African societies often results in a hybridization of religious practices, where elements of traditional beliefs are either retained or adapted to fit the new religious framework. This phenomenon is evident in Esanland, where traditional and Christian burial practices coexist, sometimes contentiously, within the same cultural landscape.

The persistence of traditional practices such as *Itolimin*, despite the dominance of Christianity, speaks volumes about the cultural resilience of the Esan people. *Itolimin*, a second burial rite steeped in socio-economic and religio-mystical significance, has been adapted to include Christian elements, reflecting a form of syncretism that is increasingly

common in postcolonial African societies (Ojiefoh, 2002). This adaptation demonstrates the community's ability to negotiate between ancestral customs and the tenets of their adopted faith, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage alongside religious conversion.

The transformation of *Itolimin* into a rite that accommodates Christian prayers and rituals highlights a broader trend of religious syncretism, where traditional African religious practices are blended with Christianity to create a unique cultural expression. This syncretism is not merely a survival strategy but a dynamic process of cultural negotiation and reinterpretation (Chitando, 2005). Through this process, the Esan people assert their agency in defining their spiritual and cultural identity in a postcolonial context, navigating the complexities of adhering to traditional customs while embracing the global Christian ethos.

The ongoing negotiation between traditional and Christian burial practices in Esanland raises important questions about cultural identity, religious belonging, and postcolonial dynamics. The adaptation of traditional rites within a Christian framework reflects an intricate balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modern religious practices. This balance is indicative of a broader postcolonial struggle to define identity in a world where colonial legacies and global religious movements intersect (Okoduwa, 1997).

The case of Esanland offers valuable insights into the ways in which African communities respond to the pressures of religious conversion and cultural change. The blending of traditional and Christian practices reveals a complex process of cultural hybridization, where traditional beliefs and customs are reinterpreted within a new religious context. This hybridization is a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of the Esan people, who navigate the challenges of maintaining cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world (Williamson, 1955).

The study of traditional versus Christian burial practices in Esanland contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-religious fabric of postcolonial African societies. It underscores the importance of cultural practices as sites of resistance, adaptation, and negotiation, revealing the dynamic interplay between tradition, religion, and identity in the postcolonial era. As such, this research enriches the academic discourse on funeral practices, offering nuanced perspectives on the ways in which communities grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the forces of modernization (Izunwa, 2016).

3. Cultural Resilience and Syncretism

The synthesis of traditional and Christian burial practices in Esanland exemplifies the profound resilience and syncretism inherent in the community's cultural identity. This fusion reflects an adaptive response to the complexities of a postcolonial, religiously diverse society, illustrating a dynamic interplay between enduring traditions and the influences of global religious movements.

In examining the different kinds of death within the Esan worldview, one notices a deeply ingrained tradition that categorizes deaths as either "good" or "bad," with each classification necessitating specific funeral rites (E. O. Aluede & Aluede, 2012; Izibili, 2017). This traditional approach underscores a societal mechanism for instilling moral and social order, juxtaposed with Christian practices that offer a more uniform ritualistic response irrespective of the cause of death. The adaptation of traditional practices within a Christian framework reveals an intricate process of cultural negotiation and accommodation.

The practice of *Itolimin*, a critical rite of passage in Esan culture, serves as a poignant

example of this cultural resilience and syncretism. Initially a deeply traditional practice aimed at transferring spiritual and material inheritance, *Itolimin* has gradually incorporated Christian elements, such as prayer and the monetization of rites, which align with broader Christian values while retaining its indigenous essence (Ojiefoh, 2002; Iseghohimhen, Personal Communication, August 12, 2019). This evolution of *Itolimin* underscores the Esan community's capacity to harmonize traditional and Christian practices in a manner that preserves the core values and identity of the community.

Furthermore, the handling of specific burial rites, such as those for individuals who have committed crimes or those who have died under circumstances considered inauspicious, highlights a traditional understanding of morality and purity. These rites, which often involve exclusionary practices and rituals of atonement, contrast with the more inclusive Christian approach to burials, reflecting a broader dialogue between indigenous beliefs and Christian doctrines on sin, redemption, and the afterlife (Izibili, 2017; Iseghohimhen, Personal Communication, August 12, 2019).

The burial of twins, individuals with specific ailments, and those judged harshly by societal standards reveals an intricate web of beliefs concerning fate, health, and moral conduct in Esan tradition. These practices, which aim to ensure the spiritual well-being of the deceased in the afterlife, exhibit a form of cultural logic that intersects with, and at times diverges from, Christian perspectives on illness, death, and moral judgment.

The introduction of Christian burial rites has not erased these traditional practices but rather led to a form of syncretism where both sets of beliefs coexist, sometimes seamlessly integrated, and at other times maintaining distinct boundaries. This coexistence is evident in the community's pragmatic approach to burial rites, where traditional and Christian elements are blended based on the circumstances of death, family preferences, and social status.

The agnatic nature of inheritance and the ritual significance of *Itolimin* within the Esan community further illustrate the interplay between tradition and modernity. While the rite has retained its traditional significance in conferring rights of inheritance, the manner in which it is performed has adapted to contemporary realities, including the integration of Christian elements and the monetization of certain aspects of the ceremony (Ojiefoh, 2002; Okeke et al., 2017)

This cultural resilience and syncretism are not unique to Esanland but reflect a broader trend across postcolonial African societies, where traditional and imported religious practices are continually negotiated and reconfigured. The Esan community's approach to burial practices offers a window into the complex ways in which cultural identities are maintained and transformed in the face of global religious influences.

The ongoing adaptation of *Itolimin* and other burial rites in Esanland underscores a community in flux, navigating the challenges of preserving traditional values while engaging with the global Christian community. This dynamic process of cultural syncretism reveals the inherent resilience of the Esan people, who have managed to forge a unique cultural identity that honors both their ancestral heritage and the realities of their contemporary religious landscape.

4. Discussion

In sum, this research examined trends in *Itolimin* (second burial) in Esan Land and its implication for the postcolonial Esan people of Edo State. Amongst its findings is that a people's eschatological vision fashions how they bury their dead. For the Esan people, the study revealed that death can be glorious or shameful (good or bad). Those who

conducted their affairs with honour while they were alive and died peacefully at an old age are thought to have died a joyous or glorious death (*Uumhin-eghohon*). “Burial rites for such persons are more or less a send forth to the world beyond.” Conversely, bad or abominable death (*Uumhin-oya*) does not attract a befitting burial. This consciousness of the reality of a good and bad death and its consequences greatly enhances moral and social order in Esan Land. The study unveils further that such terminologies as first and second burial exist in Esan traditional vocabulary. The latter is a socio-economic construct steeped in religio-mystical rite performed by the first son of a late man to confer on him the right to inherit his deceased father’s estate. The study also found that the Christian Church in postcolonial Esan society, through its *eurocentric* evangelism, attempts to change the postcolonial Esan people’s traditional orientation concerning *Itolimin*.

The study reiterates that burial rites exist in the church's rituals as well as under native law and custom. It is a moral and civic obligation that the living owed the dead. Most Churches in postcolonial Esan specifically frown at the word ‘second burial because it is believed to be enmeshed in fetish coloration.’ The study however observed that *Itolimin* in postcolonial Esan societies no longer has fetish colorations as almost everything about it in recent times has been translated into monetary value to which not only the Egbele (relatives) but the church and the civil society are now beneficiaries. Also, the act of parting with some money or items, as in *Itolimin* rites, to be able to inherit one’s father’s estate is not novel. It has only worn a new cloak and taken a new look in postcolonial Esan.

The emphasis on second burial as a criterion for succession is also stressed in other cultures. Sibani and Ehisienmen (2020, p. 154) reiterate this when they said that the performance of final burial rites by the eldest son of a deceased Benin man confers on him (the son) the right to inherit the title or properties of his late father. They explain that during the final burial ceremony, the successor places an “Ukhourhe” (carved staff representing the spirit of the deceased) in the family’s rogue edition (ancestral Shrine). At this point, succession to the titles passes to the deceased's eldest son. Similarly, among the Igbo, *Ikwa ozu* (second burial), also referred to as; celebrating the dead takes place anytime from weeks to a year after the first burial (Onyibor, 2019, p. 17)). From the Igbo context, however, anyone who doesn't conduct an "ikwa ozu" for their deceased family members is forbidden from being conferred with specific titles or holding key positions in the community. Nobody will be allowed to plan one for such erring children when they eventually die. Worse still, the spirit of the deceased is believed to torment such recalcitrant families (Onyibor, 2019). Commenting on the same practice among the Luo of Kenya, Thomas Ochieng Otanga (2013) explains that a second burial (more or less a memorial feast) is performed in honor of the deceased long after his burial (interment). This rite completes the act of separation of the deceased from the living. It alters the condition of the deceased, awakens him from his bad sleep, and enables him to live a secure social life again. It transforms him from a wandering shade into a “Father” (an ancestor).

The philosophy of eschatological immortality embedded in the Esan perception of death and hereafter accounts for the importance Africans placed in burying their dead. Africans (Esan Inclusive) believe death is not the end of human life. The Esan people believed that the dead protect the living from being harmed by unseen malevolent forces. This is why they usually consult with the departed by offering them food and drinks (libation) and naming them in prayers, et cetera. Children are obligated to care for their parents and also give them final burial rites for them to be admitted into the ancestral fold (Edogiawerie, 2007).

It may not be possible to exhaust all the aspects of a burial ceremony in a culture. However, the belief in an unending existence in the next life, which leads to elaborate burial rites, features conspicuously in the eschatological consciousness of the African people. Izunwa (2016, p. 142) puts this succinctly thus;

The right to a befitting burial is next to the right to life in the hierarchy of longings of the African spirit. It is the conditioning condition for afterlife destiny and social harmony here on earth. It has implications transcending mere rites of passage. Like church sacraments, they are epiphanies of inward meanings and are capable of affecting what they symbolize. Without a doubt, the fate of a man's afterlife destiny is substantially determined in proportion to how these rites are accorded to the dead. It is believed that this burial rite helps the dead person's spirit reach the spirit world, join his ancestors, and enable him or her to reincarnate.

The Esan people see *Itolimin* (second burial) and their other traditional practices as grounded in the traditions of their ancestors and, therefore, sacred aspects of their lives. However, the Church in Esan tended to brand those ceremonies and rituals as paganism even though it indirectly benefits from the practice in its contemporary (monetized form). Today, despite hypocritical claims to the contrary, many professed Christians in Esanland directly or indirectly partake in *Itolimin* and other Esan traditional rites. Indeed, Africans are gradually rediscovering Africa, one may say.

On the above note, this study suggests a need to delineate specific theological parameters within which Esan Christians may relate their ancestral beliefs to the salvific work of Christ. It is the position of this study that if Christian theology is to be at the service of the Church in Esan, then two crucial and related tasks must be reiterated. First, Christian theologians must face the challenge of integrating Christianity into the African people's worldview so that Africans re-discover the richness of their cultural values and traditions. Also, African theologians must work towards developing contextual theologies to help Christian believers live that theology in a way that is congenial to the African people's view of reality. Emphasis on in-depth study of African Traditional Religion and cultural studies in the curriculum of Church seminaries/theological schools would be beneficial in this regard.

Conclusion

The study has unearthed the robust persistence of the *Itolimin* ritual in Esanland—a second burial practice that aligns with a traditional eschatological vision and emphasizes the perpetuation of moral and social order. It reveals a culture where the deceased's journey into the afterlife is as significant as their life on earth, offering a dignified passage for those who led honorable lives. *Itolimin*, far from being a relic of the past, has adapted to modern sensibilities and embraced Christian elements, showcasing the Esan people's capacity to harmonize ancestral rites with their Christian faith. This confluence of tradition and religion provides a rich tapestry of cultural identity that navigates the dual demands of honoring ancestors and practicing Christian faith.

The study's primary contribution lies in its conceptual exploration of the coexistence and adaptation of traditional and Christian burial practices within a predominantly Christian postcolonial society. By uncovering the underpinnings of *Itolimin*, it provides a model for understanding how syncretism operates within cultural practices, offering insights into how traditional values can be sustained alongside the global influence of

Christianity.

While the research offers substantial insights into the burial practices of the Esan people, its scope is limited to a specific region within Edo State, Nigeria. Therefore, its findings may not be universally applicable across all of Nigeria or other African societies. Moreover, the focus on *Itolimin* means that other burial rites within the culture may not have been given equal attention. Future research could expand to include a comparative study with other burial practices across different African societies, exploring the broader implications of syncretism in postcolonial contexts. Additionally, there is a need for further research on how these practices impact community health and public health policies, particularly in regions where traditional and modern health practices intersect.

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