

# Ethics and morality in Igbo society: Cultural foundations and religious interactions

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This study explored the foundations, roles and evolving nature of ethics and moral values in Igbo traditional society. It investigated the historical origins of the Igbo people from both external and indigenous perspectives, highlighting how these narratives shape cultural identity and moral systems. The research further examined the interaction between Igbo traditional values and Christian ethics, illuminating areas of alignment and divergence. The study focused on previously contentious practices such as twin killing, human sacrifice, polygamy and the Osu caste system, illustrating how these customs have been challenged and transformed through cultural and religious negotiation. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study relied on personal interviews as primary data and library resources as secondary materials. The findings reveal that despite the pervasive influence of modernity and religious shifts, core ethical principles within Igbo society continue to endure.

**Contribution:** This article asserts that traditional Igbo ethics represent a coherent and legitimate moral system rooted in indigenous cosmology, sustained by communal consensus and validated by historical continuity. Despite the disruptions caused by modernity and religious change, many of these moral principles continue to inform ethical reasoning and behaviour in contemporary Igbo society, revealing the enduring relevance of indigenous African moral thought.

**Keywords:** Igbo ethics; traditional morality; Osu system; cultural transformation; religion and culture; indigenous values.

## Introduction

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy that examines human conduct, right and wrong, duty, virtue and moral responsibility, has always found practical expression in every human society. In the context of traditional Igbo society, ethics was not merely a speculative discipline but an existential guide, deeply rooted in religious, social and cosmological foundations. This study focuses on situating and examining the role, function and enduring significance of ethics and moral values within the traditional Igbo framework, particularly before the influence of Western civilisation and Christianity. The objective is to articulate the moral universe of the pre-Christian Igbo, exploring how their indigenous ethical systems evolved, functioned and adapted in response to external cultural and religious forces.

The analysis is delimited to select aspects of Igbo ethical life, especially those that intersect with religious and cultural practices that were either challenged or transformed with the arrival of Christianity. These include, but are not limited to, beliefs surrounding the sanctity of life, social justice, communal solidarity, truthfulness and taboo systems. The study also highlights controversial practices such as the killing of twins, human sacrifice, polygamy and the Osu caste system, examining how these practices were ethically rationalised within the traditional system and how they have been renegotiated or discontinued under Christian and modern influence. For analytical clarity, the study defines 'Igbo traditional society' as the cultural and moral life of the Igbo people prior to European contact and Christian missionary enterprise, that is, before the introduction of Western ethical frameworks and modern institutions. The investigation into the historical foundations of this society becomes crucial, as the origin of a people often informs the development and trajectory of their moral and cultural values.

To that end, this research engages with two dominant hypotheses concerning the origin of the Igbo people: the external origin hypothesis and the autochthonous (ancient origin) hypothesis.

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The external origin hypothesis suggests that the Igbo migrated from outside their current geographical location, possibly from regions in the Middle East or North Africa. This perspective is largely speculative, supported mainly by anecdotal parallels and superficial cultural similarities and lacks sufficient archaeological or linguistic evidence. In contrast, the ancient origin hypothesis contends that the Igbo people are indigenous to their current homeland, having developed their culture and belief systems independently over centuries. This view is supported by a wealth of oral traditions, indigenous myths of origin and archaeological findings such as the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes, which reveal a sophisticated and long-standing civilisation. The study adopts this latter hypothesis as its foundation, arguing that the autochthonous nature of the Igbo validates the claim that their ethical systems are native, original and organically developed rather than imported or externally imposed.

This historical foundation has direct implications for the interpretation of Igbo ethics. If the Igbo are indeed autochthonous, then their moral systems must be understood as indigenous structures that reflect a deep philosophical engagement with concepts of justice, human dignity, social responsibility and metaphysical order. In this light, Igbo ethics emerge not as primitive or superstitious constructs as often portrayed by early Western observers, but as dynamic, coherent systems deeply embedded in cosmological thought and community life. Furthermore, the study explores the dynamic interaction between traditional Igbo ethics and Christian moral teachings, assessing how colonial encounters initiated ethical shifts, religious syncretism and, in some cases, moral dissonance. As such, this research contributes to broader discussions on the interface between religion, culture and moral change in postcolonial African societies. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design, supported by descriptive and interpretive analysis. Data collection draws on oral interviews with traditionalists, elders and cultural historians, alongside critical engagement with archival materials and scholarly texts. The goal is not only to document traditional Igbo ethics but also to interpret them through the lens of cultural continuity, transformation and resistance.

## Research methods and design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design, appropriate for exploring lived experiences, meanings and perspectives surrounding ethics in Igbo traditional society. The phenomenological approach is particularly suitable given the study's focus on capturing the subjective interpretations and moral reflections of individuals who have witnessed the transition from traditional Igbo ethical systems to the Christian-influenced moral framework. Data collection was primarily based on semi-structured personal interviews, which served as the principal means of gathering qualitative data. A total of 20 informants were purposively selected from five different communities, each representing four of the five major states in Igbo land. The selection of informants was based on

diversity in gender, occupation and religious affiliation, with particular attention paid to adherents of both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. This diversity allowed for a broad and representative understanding of ethical change across cultural and religious lines.

The informants were primarily elderly members of the community, many of whom had direct or second-hand experience with the initial incursion of Christianity and its ethical influence on traditional values. Their testimonies offer invaluable insights into the tensions, negotiations and transformations that occurred within their communities in the wake of religious and cultural contact. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol allowed the researcher to explore core themes consistently across all interviews while also providing the flexibility to probe deeper into relevant areas as they emerged from each respondent's unique narrative. Ethical research standards were strictly adhered to: informants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of the confidentiality of their responses and gave their consent for participation. In addition to primary data from interviews, secondary sources were consulted to provide theoretical and historical context. These included academic texts, journal articles, archival documents and relevant internet-based resources. The combination of first-hand experiential accounts and scholarly literature enabled a well-rounded and critically grounded exploration of the subject matter. Data were analysed using a descriptive-interpretive method, enabling the researcher to identify recurrent themes, patterns of thought and contrasting views among the participants. This method also facilitated a deeper understanding of how traditional Igbo ethics are constructed, experienced and perceived in light of religious transformation and cultural continuity.

## Geographical location of Igbo land

The Igbo people occupy a distinct and historically significant region located in the southeastern part of Nigeria (see Figure 1) (Anizoba 2024a). This geographical expanse primarily includes the present-day states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. However, because of administrative rearrangements following the creation of new states by successive Nigerian military regimes, often implemented without sufficient cultural or ethnographic consultation, Igbo communities have also become dispersed into parts of neighbouring states such as Delta, Rivers, Benue and Cross River. This fragmentation has led to what some scholars refer to as the gradual de-Igbonisation of certain border communities, who are now politically and linguistically marginalised within their non-Igbo host states (Nwankwo 2022).

Geography, in this context, plays a pivotal role in shaping Igbo traditional morality and ethics. The environmental features of the region, comprising forests, rivers, hills and relatively fertile soil, have contributed to a communal agrarian lifestyle, which in turn reinforces values such as hard work, reciprocity, communal solidarity and social

accountability. The present research holds the view that the moral code of the Igbo is inseparably linked to their environment, making it a foundational principle for interpreting their ethical worldview.

Studies on Igbo traditional society emphasise the centrality of kinship systems, which serve as the backbone of social organisation (Okafor 2021). These kinship ties regulate interpersonal relationships, marital customs, inheritance rights and intergenerational duties. Social structures are organised hierarchically from the nuclear family, to clan, village and then town, with each town often functioning as an autonomous community. This decentralised structure reveals the Igbo's preference for independent governance, a feature that sometimes contributes to the perception of a lack of cohesion or unity among different Igbo communities (Achebe 1984). This socio-political autonomy extends to the political organisation of the Igbo, which is characteristically republican and consensus-based. Unlike centralised chieftaincies seen in other Nigerian ethnic groups, leadership among the Igbo is often exercised through councils of elders, age grades and title holders. Decision-making is typically communal, and leaders act more as facilitators than authoritative rulers. As observed in this study, social behaviour is closely monitored through community-enforced ethics, with clear boundaries regarding acceptable conduct. Elders, as moral custodians, often make decisions that affect the wider group, reinforcing the notion that individual actions are accountable to the collective rules of the community.

In terms of economic life, the Igbo are predominantly peasant farmers and petty traders. Although contemporary Igbo society features individuals in diverse professions, subsistence farming remains a vital part of daily life because of the limited commercialisation of many agricultural products. The community strongly upholds the value of dignity in labour, considering idleness a serious moral offence. The maxim, '*onyekwe, chi yaekwe*' [when a person agrees, their personal deity agrees], underscores the belief in personal effort, hard work and responsibility as sacred duties (Ezeanya 2019). These socio-cultural structures, geographical rootedness, kinship systems, communal governance and labour ethics collectively shape the identity, behaviour and moral outlook of the Igbo people. Understanding this interconnectedness is essential for appreciating the native ethical systems within which the traditional Igbo worldview is embedded (Arinze 1970:20; Iroegbu, 2005:10).

## Religious worldview of the Igbo people

According to Ilogu (1974:12), the religious worldview of the Igbo is deeply holistic. Religion is not viewed as a separate domain of life but as an integral part of existence. Every activity, whether political, economic, educational or social, is anchored in religious belief. This deep religiosity influences how the Igbo understand reality, interpret events and regulate behaviour. God [*Chukwu*] is seen as the source of life, the

creator and the final arbiter of justice. This belief permeates daily interactions, communal decisions and social expectations. Scholars such as Mbiti (1975:10) capture this when he states that 'Africans are notoriously religious'. This religiosity forms the basis of the ethical and moral codes in Igbo society, which are not merely human constructs but are believed to be divinely sanctioned. In Igbo cosmology, *Chukwu* is the Supreme Being, but he is often approached through a hierarchy of lesser deities and ancestral spirits. These intermediaries serve functional roles as gods of harvest, justice and war and are approached through rituals and offerings. The ancestors occupy a special place. They are revered as moral exemplars who, having lived righteous lives, have transitioned to the spiritual realm and now act as custodians of morality. Their influence is not coercive but persuasive; their blessings and punishments are believed to shape daily life. Ancestral veneration fosters moral behaviour, as individuals act rightly not just for societal approval but also to honour or avoid the wrath of their forebears. This religious dynamic reinforces accountability and ethical conduct, especially within the extended family and lineage system.

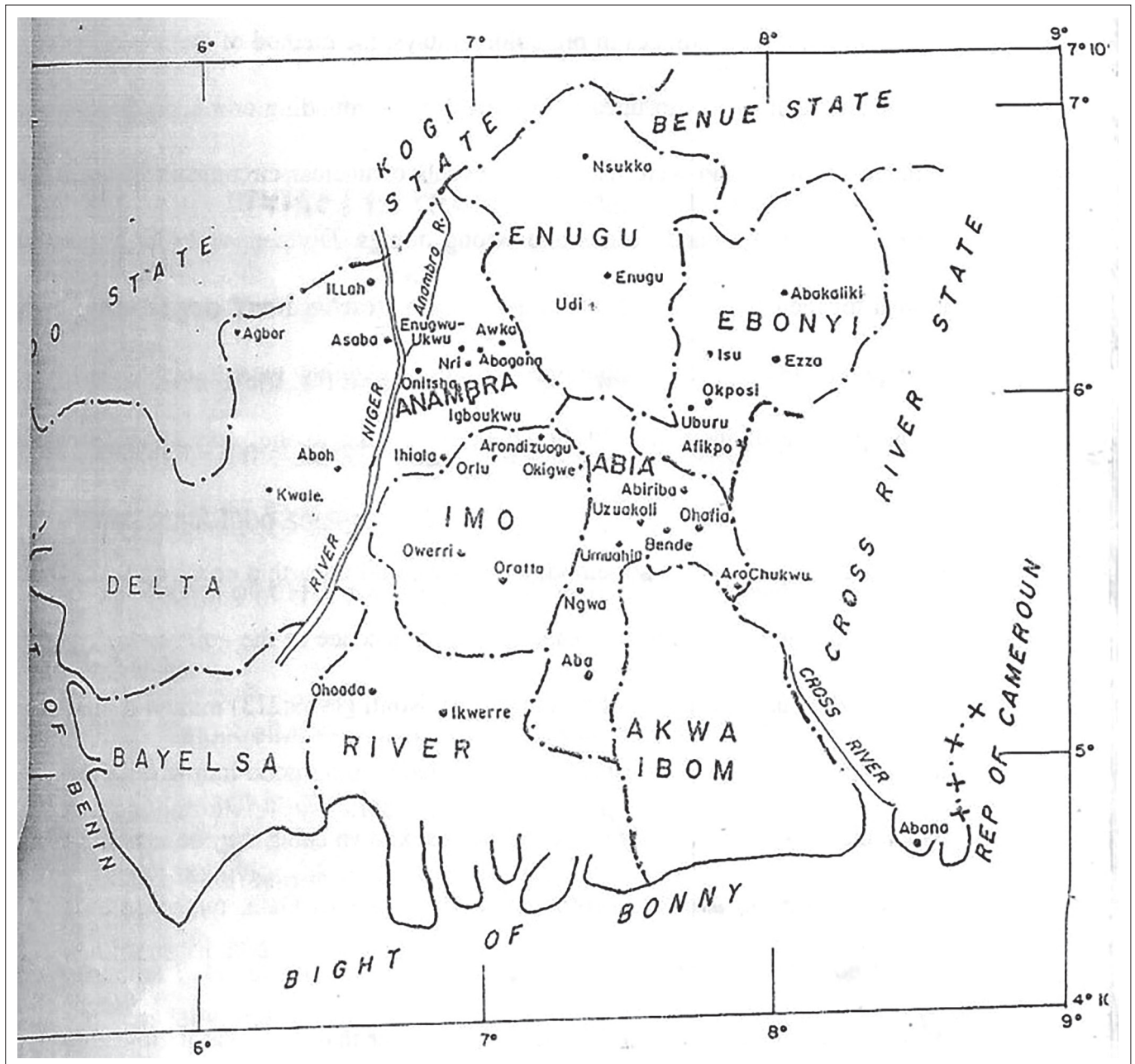
## Ethics as a societal necessity

Ethics, or the moral fabric of society, is indispensable for communal living. Iwe (1987) argues that no society can thrive without an ethical foundation. Ethics defines what is permissible and unacceptable, ensuring order, justice and human dignity. In traditional Igbo society, ethics is not abstract; it is embedded in everyday practices, laws and communal expectations. Children are raised with proverbs, folktales and rituals that convey moral lessons. Elders serve as moral compasses, and community structures such as age grades and councils enforce ethical conduct. Social cohesion depends on this moral architecture. Offences such as theft, adultery and murder are not just crimes; they are moral failures that disrupt communal harmony and require both legal and ritual redress. In today's rapidly changing world, especially with globalisation, urbanisation and religious pluralism, the relevance of indigenous ethics remains critical. The modern Igbo person often finds themselves at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, grappling with conflicting values from both systems. Questions of morality, family structure, leadership, justice and communal responsibility continue to draw from indigenous foundations. Christianity, modern laws and Western philosophies offer new frameworks, but they often clash or blend with traditional ethical norms. Understanding the structure and logic of indigenous ethics helps to navigate these complexities. Moreover, reasserting the value of traditional ethics can contribute to national discourse on morality, governance and cultural identity (Anizoba 2024:20).

## Philosophical foundations of ethics

Ethics, in its broader philosophical scope, is a rational inquiry into the rightness or wrongness of human actions. It is normative, dealing not with how people act, but how they ought to act. Omoregbe (1993) defines ethics as the science





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FIGURE 1: Map of Igbo land.

that prescribes moral principles and evaluates human behaviour. This prescriptive nature is also found in Igbo ethics, though not in written form. The Igbo moral system contains clear prescriptions and prohibitions, which are justified by appeal to divine will, ancestral wisdom and communal welfare. While Western ethics often emphasises autonomy and individual rights, Igbo ethics stresses communal obligations and relational responsibilities. Both aim for human flourishing, though through different epistemologies and moral theories. Moral character in Igbo society is formed through socialisation, mentorship, religious rituals and constant community feedback (Uka 1991a:5). Iwe (1987) emphasises that developing moral character involves training the conscience to recognise good and evil, exercising virtues such as honesty, courage, self-control and disciplining

desires. From an early age, individuals are taught the importance of '*imamma*' [being good] and '*ibonyeeziomume*' [being a person of good behaviour]. Storytelling, proverbs, communal sanctions and rewards shape behaviour. Transgressors are often shamed or ritually cleansed, reinforcing the idea that good character is essential for social acceptance and spiritual balance.

Igbo ethics is profoundly practical. Morality is evaluated not in abstract terms but by its impact on the individual and the community. Acts are considered good if they foster peace, unity, fertility and prosperity. Acts are condemned if they bring misfortune, illness, infertility or communal strife. This pragmatic view aligns with the Igbo saying: '*The mere onye ka o mee ibeya*' [Do unto others as you would have them

do to you]. Justice is key, not in legalistic terms, but in distributive and corrective dimensions. Traditional leaders such as the '*Ndichie*' [elders] and '*Obi*' [chiefs] settle disputes not merely to assign blame but to restore social equilibrium. Thus, morality serves both ethical and therapeutic functions. Uka (1991:23) defines '*Omenani*' as the totality of customs, traditions and laws that guide life in Igbo communities. It encapsulates expected behaviours, ritual obligations and social norms. '*Nso Ala*', on the other hand, refers to serious moral and religious taboos that violate the sanctity of the land (Ala). Examples include incest, murder, stealing sacred objects or violating oaths. Such actions are believed to desecrate the Earth goddess and invite communal misfortune. Rectifying these offences requires confession, ritual cleansing and sometimes exile. The moral code, though unwritten, is widely known and serves as the ethical constitution of traditional society.

## Diverging views on the source of African morality

The source of African morality has sparked academic debate. Some scholars argue for a divine origin, suggesting that moral rules are revealed by God through religious experience and upheld by deities. Omoregbe (1993) proposes that African morality is based on empirical experiences of what promotes social welfare and harmony. According to this view, moral principles arise from the community's accumulated wisdom and are justified by their usefulness in preserving life and ensuring social order. For example, telling the truth is valued not just because a god demands it, but because it sustains trust and peace in relationships. This divergence invites philosophical reflection on the nature of morality, whether it is transcendent, immanent or both.

The encounter between Christianity and Igbo traditional ethics has led to both synthesis and conflict. On one hand, Christianity affirmed many traditional values such as justice, charity, honesty and respect for elders. On the other hand, it condemned practices such as ancestral veneration, polygamy and ritual sacrifices. The result is a moral hybrid in many Igbo communities, a blending of Christian teachings with indigenous beliefs and principles. For example, Christian converts may still honour their ancestors symbolically during family gatherings, even if they no longer offer libations. This intersection raises questions about moral continuity, religious identity and cultural adaptation. How can Igbo Christians remain faithful to their religious beliefs while preserving cultural values?

Understanding traditional Igbo ethics is vital for scholars, theologians, educators and pastoral workers. For scholars, it offers insights into indigenous epistemologies, moral systems and African philosophy. For pastors and missionaries, it helps in contextualising Christian teachings and engaging meaningfully with local cultures. Ethical instruction that ignores traditional values may alienate communities or appear irrelevant. Conversely, integrating indigenous ethics with Christian morality can foster holistic formation and

deeper moral transformation. Moreover, in a society battling corruption, injustice and moral decay, revisiting traditional ethics can contribute to national moral renewal.

## Ethics and culture

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with the principles of right and wrong, good and bad, and the moral conduct of human beings. In both traditional and modern societies, including among the Igbo people of Nigeria, ethics plays a fundamental role in maintaining order, fostering interpersonal harmony and guiding individuals towards a fulfilled life. The objective of ethics remains universal: to cultivate the moral character of individuals and, by extension, ensure the wellbeing of the entire society. This is evident in the works of prominent philosophers and scholars, both Western and African, who have consistently emphasised the significance of ethical living. Frankena (1992:15) treats ethics as a practical science concerned with human happiness [*eudaimonia*]. According to him, ethics deals with the rational capacity of human beings, their ability to deliberate, choose and act in ways that promote their ultimate good. Dzurgba (2000:1) aligns with Aristotle in this regard, arguing that 'humans have the capacity for rational behaviour, which is the basis of ethics'. This highlights the fact that ethics is rooted in reason, and only beings capable of rational thought – namely humans – are subject to moral evaluation. Irrational beings, such as animals or inanimate objects, cannot be judged ethically because they lack the ability to make moral choices.

Although Uka (1991:180) provides further clarity by describing ethics as 'a systematic attempt to consider the purposeful actions of mankind to determine their rightness or wrongness, their tendency to good or evil'. Here, ethics is not merely theoretical but practical, addressing real-life decisions and behaviours. It evaluates human conduct based on moral standards and societal values, thus helping individuals make choices that contribute positively to themselves and their communities. Omoregbe (1993:ix) adds to this discourse by emphasising the critical nature of ethics in discerning 'what is right and wrong, good and bad in human conduct'. He insists that human nature inherently resists actions that are detrimental to personal wellbeing and fulfilment. Consequently, actions that align with human nature promote happiness and self-realisation, while those that contradict it lead to moral decay, suffering and societal disorder.

In a similar vein, Peschke (1996:3) asserts that the goal of ethics includes the 'formation of character, development of action patterns, adoption of a proper vision of life, and establishment of core values and convictions'. This underlines the transformative power of ethics not just as an intellectual pursuit but as a way of shaping who one becomes. If a person wishes to live a good and meaningful life, they must live according to moral principles that stem from human nature and the moral law. Brennan et al. reinforce this view by declaring that 'the ultimate standard by which we judge moral actions and ideas has been called

the principle of morality' (p. 18). In this sense, the principle of morality becomes a compass for human action, guiding individuals towards decisions that promote the common good. Iwe (2002) explores the ethical ideal further by linking moral character to human excellence. He writes, 'the development of moral character consists in the development of man's potentials for moral goodness and excellence' (Iwe 1987:161). A sound moral character, according to Iwe, is the cornerstone of a meaningful and virtuous life. It is marked by attributes such as a clear conscience, moral consistency, strong willpower, courage and honesty. These qualities are not only admirable but necessary for the sustenance of a healthy and morally upright society. Dzurgha (2000), adopting a utilitarian perspective, acknowledges the role of pleasure and pain in moral discourse. He (Dzurgha 2000:15) notes that 'the terms good and bad are used in contrast senses. Good is for pleasure and bad is for pain'. This suggests that human beings naturally pursue what they perceive as beneficial and avoid what causes harm. Therefore, ethics must guide people in discerning true pleasures, those that enhance human dignity and societal harmony, from superficial ones that lead to vice and destruction.

From an African perspective, Mbiti (1969:175) offers profound insights into the role of ethics in traditional African societies. He argues that morality is necessary for societal harmony and that its absence leads to chaos and confusion. According to him, morality in African religion is communal, guiding individuals not merely for personal benefit but for the collective welfare of the community. In this light, ethical behaviour is seen as a civic duty that upholds peace, justice and social order. Kanuaji (personal communication, 08 August 2023) underscores this further in his advocacy for an ethical revolution in Nigeria. He calls for a return to justice, discipline and ethical integrity as remedies for the nation's moral and social collapse, a collapse largely attributed to corrupt leadership and moral negligence. Ethical reformation, in his view, is not optional but essential for national integration and progress. Uduigwomen (2001:2) reflects on ethics as a framework that enables human beings to regulate their conduct through informed choice. He asserts that 'the possession of freedom enables human beings to make genuine choices between alternatives'. With freedom comes responsibility; thus, ethics provides the moral compass needed to navigate the complexities of human existence. Despite these differences, the need for an objective standard of morality remains central. Mbiti (1969) also observes that traditional African societies, including the Igbo, possess a rich body of moral codes comprised of customs, taboos, laws and set forms of behaviour. These codes are often believed to have divine origins and are deeply revered. Some moral laws are attributed to God, while others are traced to ancestral spirits or community leaders. What is considered morally good is often what aligns with the divine or ancestral will, and what is bad is what contradicts it. Thus, morality in traditional Igbo culture is both religious and social in nature.

Within the Igbo worldview, Ala, the Earth goddess, plays a significant role as the enforcer of moral law. Odoemene (2005:82) notes that 'the goddess of the earth (Ala) is regarded as the promulgator of moral laws'. Ala is believed to reward those who uphold moral standards and to punish those who violate them, either directly or through social sanctions. This belief reinforces the sacredness of moral conduct in Igbo society and instils a deep sense of accountability among its members. This leads us to a long-standing philosophical question: Are actions morally right because the gods or leaders approve them, or are they approved because they are inherently right? While this question invites deeper philosophical introspection, it also reflects the dynamic interplay between divine authority and moral objectivity, especially within traditional societies where religion and ethics are tightly interwoven. Uka (1991) reiterates that in traditional African ethics, the focus lies in determining whether human actions tend towards good or evil. The core of ethics, therefore, is the evaluation and regulation of human behaviour in accordance with societal and spiritual norms. Ethics becomes a tool for moral reasoning, guiding individuals towards the good life through principles that resonate with truth, justice and communal welfare. For the researcher, ethics within both traditional Igbo culture and the broader African and Western traditions serve as a compass for human behaviour. It addresses fundamental questions about how one ought to live and interact with others, aiming always at personal development, communal peace and human flourishing. Whether expressed through rational reflection, divine ordinance or cultural norms, ethics remains essential for the sustenance of society and the realisation of authentic human existence.

## Environmental impact on the character formation of the Igbo

Understanding the geographical location of Igboland extends far beyond the confines of cartography or mere statistical interest. Its relevance lies in the profound influence that geography exerts on the socio-cultural, economic and moral development of its people. In line with this perspective, Odoemene (2005) rightly observes:

Man's environment determines, to a large extent, his reactions, his history, and culture in that environment. The geography of his environment not only attracts his settlement in a particular area but also challenges him not only to adapt but also to bring under control whatever he can. (p. 58)

This statement underscores the intricate relationship between human beings and their environment, suggesting that the character, identity and moral disposition of a people can be significantly shaped by their ecological surroundings. Igboland, located in the southeastern part of Nigeria, is predominantly a flat region, interspersed with rivers such as the Imo, Anambra, Oji and Njaba. These natural features contribute to varying environmental experiences across different Igbo communities. While some areas are endowed with ample water sources, others experience water scarcity, and this ecological disparity influences not just the economic



and agricultural activities of the inhabitants but also their social and moral adaptations. Communities facing environmental challenges are often compelled to adjust their lifestyles, cultural practices and even moral priorities to meet the demands of survival and coexistence. Such adaptations gradually form part of their character and value systems.

Moreover, the Igbo experience two major seasons in a year: the rainy season (April–October) and the dry season (November–March). The rainy season is brought by moist maritime winds from the southwest, while the dry season is characterised by the Harmattan dry, dusty winds from the northeast, originating from the Sahara Desert. These climatic variations have direct and indirect implications on the daily life and behavioural outlook of the people. For instance, during the rainy season, farming activities dominate rural life, reinforcing communal values such as cooperation, diligence and sharing. In contrast, the dry season, especially during the peak of Harmattan, is associated with limited agricultural activities, leading to increased engagement in trade and other forms of labour. These seasonal changes subtly influence time management, interpersonal relationships, economic ethics and even religious expressions. Hence, environmental conditions, including weather patterns, not only impact livelihoods but also mould behavioural tendencies and moral orientations. It is important to note that environmental disruptions such as floods, droughts or land degradation can lead to social dislocations, shifts in traditional norms and changes in collective moral attitudes. For example, a region experiencing prolonged drought may witness increased competition for resources, which in turn could challenge existing ethical norms related to sharing, hospitality and honesty. Conversely, regions blessed with abundant natural resources may evolve communal systems based on generosity, mutual support and shared responsibility.

Therefore, the character formation of the Igbo people cannot be examined in isolation from their physical environment. The interplay between land, climate and human adaptation fosters a dynamic ethical landscape, where moral principles are not fixed but evolve in response to environmental realities. The cultural, economic and spiritual life of the Igbo has, over time, been conditioned by their geographical setting, contributing to a distinctive identity that balances tradition with adaptability. The environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethos of the Igbo. It influences how communities organise their lives, solve problems and define what is morally acceptable or condemnable. As such, the environmental factor must be taken seriously in any comprehensive study of Igbo moral and cultural identity (Iwe 1987:14).

## Discussion and findings of the research: Igbo traditional morality

Across the various scholarly works and informant testimonies consulted, there is a general consensus that ethics is fundamentally concerned with questions of right and wrong in human behaviour (Informant 1, Interview 01 January 2023).

Similarly, Informant 2 (Interview 20 January 2023) affirms that in both philosophy and religion, commendable behaviours are typically labelled as *virtues*, while condemnable ones are known as *vices*. Peschke (1996:3) defines ethics or moral theology as ‘that part of theology which studies the guidelines a person must follow to attain his or her final goal in the light of Christian faith and reason’. This definition introduces the concept of moral guidelines, which suggests the necessity for ethical norms or standards to provide direction in human life. Ethics, therefore, serves not only Christians but all of humanity by offering principles that guide moral decisions and human purpose. Dzurgba (2000:12) traces the origin of the word ‘ethics’ to Aristotle’s use of the Greek term *ethos*, which initially meant ‘a dwelling place’ but later came to signify customs, character, temperament and behavioural tendencies. Aristotle argued that rationality is central to human behaviour and thus to ethics. As Dzurgba (2000) recounts, Aristotle held that:

A moral man gets pleasure from moral activities and makes a prudent choice from available pleasures and pains. A moral choice is the one which a person makes in accordance with a mean that is, a principle of choice between two extremes. For example, in the case of danger, there should be a balance between cowardice and courage. (pp. 1–2)

This principle of moderation or *the golden mean* underlies much of Aristotle’s ethical philosophy. Prudence, according to him, is a fundamental moral standard. Aristotle, therefore, explicitly condemned vices such as malice, envy, shamelessness, adultery, theft and murder. Dzurgba also notes that the term ethics in Latin mirrors its Greek origins. The Romans adopted the Greek understanding, translating *ethos* with the word *mos*, which evolved into *mores*, signifying customs, behaviour, laws and even styles of living. From this root, Tillich (1909:9) coins the term *moralis*, and subsequently *moralittas*, giving rise to the modern terms *morality* and *moral philosophy*. As Dzurgba (2000:3) observes: ‘Both Greek ethics and Roman *moralittas* did not originate from the people’s popular consciousness. They were artificial terms created to define a particular field of academic inquiry ethics’.

Thus, ethics and morality, though etymologically distinct, have come to be used interchangeably. As Frankena (1992) states, ethics is ‘a philosophy that is concerned with moral problems and judgments’ (p. 4). Morality, in turn, is often considered the practical expression or application of ethics. These norms served as behavioural guidelines for individuals and communities. According to Uka (1991):

Ethics is the science which enquires into the meaning and purpose of life and conduct. It represents a systematic attempt to consider the purposeful actions of mankind, to determine their rightness or wrongness, their tendency to good or evil. (p. 118)

This ethical inquiry into human action naturally leads to the classic moral question: What ought I to do? Such a question arises from the need to distinguish between right and wrong in decision-making, prompting individuals to seek the best course of action, ideally one that does not harm others. Uka (1991) further asserts:

Ethics in traditional African society seeks to determine the sources of purposeful action, its rightness or wrongness, and its tendency toward good or evil. Ethics is concerned with ideal human character and action. It is the science of moral duty. (p. 180)

Contrastingly, Omoregbe (1993) challenges the notion that African traditional ethics is rooted in religion. He argues that African ethics is founded on rational reflection rather than religious dogma. According to him, one does not need religious affiliation to discern right from wrong; such moral insight is accessible through reason and common human experience. In his view, traditional morality is rooted in personal conviction and the social principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated. However, Informant 5 (Interview, 02 April 2023) offers a nuanced perspective by arguing that while traditional morality may operate on reason and personal conviction, these elements are not absent in religious ethics such as Christianity. Even in Christian moral thought, rational reflection plays a vital role in ethical decision-making. Importantly, Omoregbe (1993) himself acknowledges divine authority in two of his six reasons for living a moral life: (1) that God commands it; and (2) that man is a spiritual being. In practical usage, *morality* is often employed to denote the moral code or normative standards of an individual or group. Therefore, Igbo traditional morality can be understood as the collective moral code of the Igbo people, shaped by culture, reason, experience and in some interpretations, divine expectation. It is both a personal and communal ethical system that governs behaviour and defines the social ideals of right living.

## Summary

This study set out to explore the relationship between Igbo traditional morality and Christian ethical values, focusing on areas of convergence, divergence and transformation resulting from their interaction. It began by clarifying foundational concepts of ethics and morality from both philosophical and religious perspectives, highlighting definitions from scholars such as Peschke, Dzurgba, Uka and Omoregbe. Informant-based insights further illuminated the real-life interpretations and applications of these moral frameworks among the Igbo people. A key focus of the research was the influence of geography and environment on Igbo cultural behaviour and moral codes, emphasising how environmental challenges shaped ethical outlooks. Furthermore, the work examined Igbo traditional morality rooted in customs, character, laws and communal life and evaluated how it has been affected by the introduction of Christianity. The study showed that while some aspects of Igbo morality align with Christian teachings (such as respect for life and truthfulness), there are significant points of divergence, particularly concerning practices such as polygamy, human sacrifice and the Osu caste system. These divergences have prompted moral evolution within the Igbo society.

## Recommendations

There is a need for ongoing dialogue between traditional custodians of Igbo culture and Christian leaders to foster mutual understanding and respect. This will help preserve valuable cultural heritage while upholding universal moral values. Educational systems, both religious and secular, should incorporate a balanced moral curriculum that teaches the ethical principles of both Igbo traditional morality and Christian ethics. This will guide the younger generation in forming a well-rounded moral compass. Cultural practices should be continually re-examined in the light of human dignity and ethical standards. Harmful traditions should be reformed or discarded, while beneficial values such as communalism, respect for elders and truth-telling should be preserved. Religious institutions and traditional institutions should work together to promote ethical behaviour at the grassroots level through community programmes, cultural festivals and public discourse. More studies should be undertaken to explore the interaction between other indigenous African moral systems and global religions to further enrich the field of comparative ethics and inter-religious studies.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the interaction between Igbo culture and the Christian faith has significantly influenced ethical thought and moral practice within Igboland. It reveals that while both traditions aim to promote good conduct and social harmony, their approaches and principles can differ. Examples such as the abolition of twin killing, human sacrifice and the re-evaluation of the Osu caste system highlight the transformative impact of Christianity on traditional Igbo practices. Similarly, polygamy and ancestral veneration have been points of tension and negotiation between the two worldviews. These areas of divergence and convergence have reshaped moral consciousness among the Igbo people, resulting in an evolving ethical landscape that blends traditional values with Christian ideals.

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## Author's contribution

E.C.A. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.



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## Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and its findings are available in the article and its references.

## Disclaimer

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