

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT OF UKA DI N'OBI AMONG THE IGBO AS A POSSIBLE PUSHBACK TO RELIGIOUS EXPOLITATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

With the growing trend of abuses of religion, particularly in Christendom, where issues of fake miracles, gospel commercialisation and deceit are gaining ground, there has also been growing disillusionment among Christians, particularly those of the younger generation. This disillusionment can be seen in their outright criticism of many churches and men of God, whom they consider deceptive, a lack of interest in church matters and their general uninterest in religion. This leads to a situation where you hear statements like, “Church na scam”, “I believe in God, but not in the church”, “I don’t do church, but I am spiritual”. This position is strongly reminiscent of the old saying among the Igbo, Uka di n’obi. It means that the church is in the heart. It is then not surprising that we hear chants of “Let’s go back to our roots” among Igbo youths. This development is likely a push back to organised religion, particularly Christianity, which some of them have come to believe to be deceptive. It is in light of this that this paper, adopting a critical analytical approach, is focused on the exploration of the Igbo concept of Uka di n’obi and how it reflects the sentiments of Nigerian youth’s possible pushback to the religious manipulations and exploitation.

Keywords: Religion, Uka di n’obi, Self-spirituality, Christianity, Exploitation.

Introduction

The social, political, and economic dimensions of life in Nigeria are deeply enmeshed with religious consciousness. Religion, in this context, is not merely a private affair but a pervasive force that saturates virtually every aspect of people’s lived experiences. As Adamo (1985, in Oko & Umana, 2022) affirms, this assertion aligns with the perspective that religion constitutes one of the most significant inheritances of the Nigerian people. Oko and Umana further argue that Nigerians are not only profoundly religious but also deeply spiritual and superstitious. This disposition imbues their cultural, political, social, and economic engagements with a distinctly religious character. Consequently, the boundary between the sacred and the secular has become increasingly blurred. The enduring religiosity of Nigerians is also reflected in the rapid

proliferation of religious sects, denominations, and worship centres across both urban and rural spaces, evidencing a society where faith and spirituality remain integral to public and private life.

With Nigeria largely being a deeply religious country, where religion is squeezed into everything, it is a given that religion would always find its way into public discourse. Hence, it is no longer uncommon in contemporary Nigeria to be bombarded with news of religious abuses and manipulation, particularly in Christianity. If it is not news of fake miracles, it will be that of gospel commercialisation, or a man of God hoodwinking members of his church. Religion has become one of the most effective means of exploitation in Nigeria. The Nigerian people's proclivity towards the religious, spiritual and superstitious has made them susceptible to cheap manipulation. They have become easy prey to religious heads who weaponise this proclivity to exploit and deceive them.

If one is observant, they would notice that currently, more than ever, there have been growing criticisms against the men of God, churches and organised religions. A little scroll through social media platforms and one is already swimming in the ocean of posts "calling out" churches and men of God who have erred. Just recently, a popular social media influencer and activist, Martins Vincent Otse, popularly known as Very Dark Man, who has become a sensation among Nigerian youths, because of his known fierce criticism against public figures, politicians and celebrities or anyone who defraud people, has been on a spree on his official social media platform (Facebook) calling out men of God and the exploitation going on in the Christian fold.

Some of the men of God called out were Pastor David Ibiyemi of Salvation Ministries, whom have been in the news in recent times due to his controversial statements that many consider unchristian, manipulative and exploitative; Pastor Tunde Bakare, the founder of Citadel Global Community church, and Prophet Jeremiah Omoto Fufeyin Owomowomomo of Christ Mercy land Deliverance Ministry. The issues for which these men were called were not unrelated to the issue of the exploitation of Christians and misconduct.

Very Dark Man's call-out of these men tells a lot about the sentiments of many Nigerian youths. In the comment section of these posts, one could easily pick up the dissatisfaction of many youths and their criticisms and perceptions of Christianity. One user, Amara Maribe, on the post that called out Prophet Jeremiah, commented: "Body of Christ only in Nigeria, biggest yahoo

people cashing out in the name of Jesus Christ. Judgment day is coming, thank God nobody knows the day, time and hour Jesus will catch you people red-handed. Oyibo carry the head una come carry the body” Another user, Chidiebere Rex, commented: “I don’t see this man as a Christian...I see him as someone using Jesus' name to hustle.” questions.

The above gives insight into the fact that one major reason behind the recent religious disinterest among youths is the constant demand for tithes and offerings, especially when many are jobless, hustling or just trying to survive. It feels unfair, even exploitative, when people see churches growing richer while their members stay poor. It raises serious questions. There is a prevalence of exploitation and other forms of abuse. These exploitations and manipulations abound and run deeper than meets the eye.

These issues have bred disillusionment and discontent among some members of the church, such that they now engage in outright criticisms of some of the abuses that go on. Some become so disillusioned, lose faith in the church and stop going altogether. They resort to self-spirituality. This kind of spirituality finds perfect expression in the Igbo saying, Uka di n’obi (the church is in the heart) Although this saying has always been in existence among the Igbo since the advance of Christianity (a testament to their pushback against organized religion), with the current trend of religious abuses in Christianity it has become more pronounced.

It is in light of this that this paper, adopting a critical analytical approach, is focused on the exploration of the Igbo concept of Uka di n’obi and how it reflects the sentiments of Nigerian youth’s possible pushback to the religious manipulations and exploitation.

Conceptualisation of Religion

Religion, as a term, is subject to numerous interpretations, making it difficult to arrive at a universally accepted definition. Nigosian (1981) acknowledges this ambiguity when he states that:

In modern usage, religion covers a wide spectrum of meanings that reflect the enormous variety of ways the term can be interpreted. There are diverse ways religion is understood, including emphases on the intellectual function, emotional, worship, individual experience and social functions of religion. Religion could therefore be defined as man’s attempt to commune with supernatural force(s) as part of man’s search for meaning, understanding and explanation of life. By defining religion as a sacred engagement with

what is taken to be a spiritual reality, it is possible to consider the importance of religion in human life without making claims about what it is or ought to be. It is not an object with a single, fixed meaning, or even a zone with clear boundaries. Religion is an aspect of human experience that may intersect, incorporate or transcend other aspects of life and society. It cannot be reduced to any single aspect of human experience. It is a part of individual life but also of group dynamics. Religion includes patterns of behaviour, thought and culture(pp.2-3).

Etymologically, the term "religion" is rooted in three Latin words: *ligare* (to bind), *relegare* (to link together), and *religio* (relationship). These linguistic origins suggest that religion fundamentally denotes a form of relationship, specifically, a connection between humanity and a higher, divine reality. It reflects a profound belief in a supreme being responsible for human existence. From this perspective, religion can be understood as a relational bond between humans and the divine. Omoregbe (1999) underscores this notion, asserting that “religion is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, a human person and a divine person believed to exist” (p. 3). Similarly, Corrigan (2004) affirms that religion functions both vertically, binding humanity to the divine, and horizontally, connecting individuals through a sense of fraternity and love. Ede (2020), citing Bouquet (1941), further defines religion as a “fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply God.” These interpretations collectively reveal that religion is fundamentally grounded in belief and an intense emotional conviction—one that often exerts a more compelling influence than rational knowledge, shaping and directing human life across time.

Conceptualisation of Exploitation.

Exploitation is generally understood as the act of taking advantage of another person's vulnerability for one's benefit. To exploit, therefore, is to derive benefit in a manner that is considered unjust or inequitable. However, not all instances of benefiting from another's weakness are inherently unethical. For example, in the strategic game of chess, a player may capitalise on the flaws in an opponent's defence, a practice that is not morally objectionable. Exploitation can be categorised into two primary forms: transactional and structural. Transactional exploitation refers to an unfair exchange between individuals or parties. An example would be a pharmaceutical company conducting drug trials on impoverished

populations in developing countries, actions widely criticised as exploitative (Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022). Structural exploitation, on the other hand, occurs when systemic arrangements are inherently skewed to favour one group while disadvantaging another. While exploitation may, in some instances, yield mutual benefit or harm, the present study is concerned with its normative dimension, specifically, the unjust manifestations of exploitation, particularly within religious contexts.

A Historical Overview of Religion in Nigeria

Nigerians are often described as deeply and persistently religious, a characteristic that cuts across adherents of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion. This religiosity is visibly expressed through the proliferation of religious edifices, the prominence of sacred symbols, and the widespread display of religious zeal, fervour, and ritual practices (Ediba et al., 2021). Isomkwo and Njor (2019) affirm this observation by aligning with the position of various religious scholars who assert that Nigeria and Africa more broadly possessed a rich and elaborate religious tradition before the introduction of foreign faiths. Nwaghghi (1998) reinforces this view, describing traditional religion in Nigeria as the most profound spiritual legacy bequeathed by the ancestors to their descendants.

These perspectives underscore the deep-seated role of religion in Nigerian society. Dyaji and Kajom (2018) corroborate this claim in their findings, which show that, despite the influences of civilisation, globalisation, and modernisation, religion remains an integral part of Nigerian life. This assertion is further supported by Gorny (2008), who notes that Nigerians demonstrate their commitment to religion through active participation in the practices and observances of the three dominant faiths. These include Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) (Faleye, 2013). Importantly, it must be recognised that before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, Africans were primarily traditional worshippers. This religious system is often centered on the veneration of ancestors, typically involving ritual animal sacrifices. As Isomkwo and Njor (2019) observe, ATR predates the introduction of the Abrahamic religions and served as the foundational spiritual framework of indigenous African societies.

Islam made its entry into Nigeria as early as 1000–1100 AD (Enwerem, 1995), primarily through the northern borders into the present-day Northern region of the country. Isomkwo and Njor

(2019), referencing Trimingham (1962), note that Islam first gained a foothold in the Bornu area before gradually spreading to other parts of the North during the 14th and 15th centuries. Initially, it was received as a peaceful religion and was predominantly embraced by the elite, who were drawn to it for economic, political, and social benefits (Ekeopara, 1996). However, the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria took a more forceful turn through the jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio. Following his military victories, Dan Fodio enforced Islamic law and governance upon the conquered territories. The Islamic tradition in Nigeria, now considered part of the mainstream religious landscape, has since given rise to various New Religious Movements (NRMs). These include the Shia Islamic Movement, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement, the Ansar-ud-Deen Society, the Zumratul Islamiyya Movement of Nigeria, and, more recently, radical movements such as Boko Haram (Isomkwo & Njor, 2019).

Religious historians have delineated three distinct phases in the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria. The first occurred in 1485, when Portuguese Catholic missionaries arrived in Benin at the behest of Oba Uzolua. A subsequent invitation was extended by Oba Esigie of Benin (Agha, 1999). These missionaries established their presence in Benin and Warri; however, their efforts to entrench Christianity were ultimately unsuccessful due to the people's strong adherence to traditional religious practices (Baur, 2009).

The second phase saw Christianity enter Nigeria from the West, particularly through Lagos, which at the time was a hub for slave-trading under King Kosoko (Dike, 1957). Meaningful missionary activity only commenced after King Kosoko's deportation by the British authorities. In 1842, the first mission groups to arrive were the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, led by Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman, and the Church Missionary Society (CMS), led by Catechist Henry Townsend. During this period, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, himself a freed slave and convert from Sierra Leone, played a significant role in evangelising the Yoruba people (Oduyoye, 1969).

The third phase involved the Scottish Presbyterian Mission, which began its evangelical work among the Efik people in 1846. The mission was spearheaded by Reverend Hope Waddell, who baptised the first Efik convert, Essien Ukpabio. He was later joined by Mary Slessor, renowned for her efforts in ending the practice of twin infanticide among the Efik. The King of Creek Town, Eyo Honesty, also contributed to the dissemination of Christianity among his people. From there, the Presbyterian Church expanded into other parts of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria

(Kalu, 1978).

From the above historical overview, it is obvious that religion is deeply rooted in Nigeria. Its deep-rootedness in every facet of the lives of the people, it seems, makes its use as an instrument of manipulation easier.

An Exploration of Religion Exploitation in the Contemporary Nigerian Society

Faleye (2013) contends that corruption has been a persistent feature within religious circles since antiquity. He argues that this corruption is often driven by fear, hatred, and at times, deliberate falsehoods, all employed as tools for manipulating and controlling adherents to serve the self-interests of a select few. According to Ediba et al. (2021), the trajectory of Nigerians' religious experience has been significantly reshaped—particularly in the post-colonial era—by the systematic manipulation and politicisation of religion. This exploitation is not confined to any single religious group; rather, it cuts across all dominant religious traditions in Nigeria. In various sects, religion has been transformed into a commercial enterprise, with financial gain taking precedence over spiritual purpose. Ogara (2011) substantiates this claim, stating that:

Religious corruption in Nigeria is the commercialisation of religion. It is perceived that establishing a church today is an easy way towards wealth. Thus, Nigeria, since the 1980s, has witnessed the proliferation of religious institutions and the rise of religious functionaries, some of whom have abandoned their original vocations and training in fields such as teaching, medicine, and banking, among others, to be heads of churches. Similarly, religion has transmuted into a lucrative business venture as sundry charges in different forms are believed to attract blessings. Sunday Bobai Agang posits that the commercialisation of religion is also at the center of economic corruption in Nigeria because it has further impoverished the already poverty-stricken religious adherents. This goes to buttress Mahatma Gandhi's assertion that "oppression of people in the name of God is the worst form of oppression" (p. 7).

Examining the trend and pattern of religious corruption (abuses) in Nigeria, John Egbeazien Oshodi (2012), Secretary-General of Nigeria Psychological Association, asserts that:

In theory, the understanding of what could be termed Religious Corruption Syndrome should be seen as a function of both the chronic abuses of religious practices and the impact of pervasive dishonesty in individuals and across various faith communities in Nigeria... The toxic aspects of Nigerian-oriented religions appear to have a deep impact on the psychological connection to the deep sense of dishonesty... With further attachment to one's religion, some Nigerians appear to see enormous personal conforming behaviours which could include cycles of

dishonesty, being defensive and blaming others for one's confusion... There appears to be emotional/spiritual satisfaction from being religious and committing oneself to a corrupt lifestyle and living.

Consequently, many religious leaders are willing to go to extreme lengths to achieve their aims, often at the expense of their followers' well-being. This reality has left numerous adherents not spiritually fulfilled but rather psychologically entangled in cycles of fear, disillusionment, and indoctrination. Such individuals are frequently subjected to manipulative controls that transform their pursuit of the divine into an exhausting and legalistic experience. Instances of this form of exploitation and manipulation abound, often impairing the critical judgment of followers.

A striking example was reported by *The Guardian Newspaper* on April 14, 2025, which documented the public outrage that trailed a sermon by Pastor David Ibiyeomie of Salvation Ministries. During the sermon, Pastor Ibiyeomie controversially claimed that Jesus detests poverty and never associated with poor people. Citing biblical figures like Zacchaeus and Lazarus, he argued that remaining poor after embracing Christianity reflects a spiritual failure. In his words:

Jesus never visited any poor person in his house. Check your Bible. That means he hates poverty. When he visited Lazarus, they were not poor; they were giving him food...He visited a sinner, Zacchaeus, who was rich. Tell me, one poor man, Jesus entered his house. He hates poverty, that's the meaning. He hates poor people. He died so you would not be poor. How can you now come to church with some kind of mentality?... You can come poor, but you're not permitted to remain poor. There's nothing wrong with you coming to Christ as a poor man, but it's wrong for you to remain poor (Guardian News, Adewole, 2025).

This statement exemplifies a manipulative interpretation of scripture, distorting biblical teachings to align with a particular ideology. Contrary to Pastor David Ibiyeomie's assertion, scriptural evidence overwhelmingly portrays Jesus as a compassionate advocate for the poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed. The core message of Christ's mission centres on spiritual redemption rather than material prosperity. Unsurprisingly, Pastor Ibiyeomie's remarks provoked widespread criticism on social media, with many Christians deeming his interpretation unbiblical. In response, numerous individuals cited passages such as Luke 4:18, Matthew 5:3, and Luke 6:20, all of which affirm Jesus' solidarity with the poor. Among those who publicly challenged

Pastor Ibiyeomie's claim was Reverend Dr. Rotimi Ashafa of Christ Kingdom Baptist Church in Ogun State. Speaking on the matter, Ashafa stated:

"The statement that Jesus hates poor people is not right. Maybe he wanted to say Jesus hates seeing people poor. Jesus was a friend of poor people, he came for the downtrodden and the downcast....Whenever he saw a sick person at the temple, he healed such. Even those who were hungry, he fed them. So why should he say Jesus hates poor people?"

In response to the controversial claim that Jesus never visited the home of a poor person, Reverend Dr. Rotimi Ashafa of Christ Kingdom Baptist Church, Ogun State, offered a direct rebuttal by referencing the Gospel of Matthew. He cited Matthew 8:14-15, which records Jesus' visit to the house of Peter, a humble fisherman, where He healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. The scripture states: "And when Jesus was come into Peter's house, he saw his wife's mother laid, and sick of a fever. And he touched her hand, and the fever left her: and she arose, and ministered unto them" (Adewole, 2025). This passage contradicts the earlier assertion and underscores the pastoral care that Jesus extended to individuals of modest means.

This instance has been interpreted by many as a clear case of scriptural manipulation and theological exploitation. Barely a month after the initial sermon sparked widespread backlash, the same preacher delivered yet another controversial message. This time, he claimed that a believer would never experience financial lack if their offering exceeded their tithe (Olarinre, 2025). He further advised that tithes should be paid immediately upon receiving money, rather than waiting until the end of the month. Such proclamations have drawn criticism for promoting a transactional theology that links divine favour to monetary giving, raising concerns about the commodification of faith within contemporary religious practice. Olarinre (2025) quotes him in his exact words:

Tithe is the foundation of your covenant to prosperity. Don't wait until month-end before you pay your tithe. Anytime you get money, pay 10% back to God as a lifestyle...In a month, your offering should be bigger than your tithe. My offering, for instance, I don't give less than 20 per cent. That's why I'm not poor. Increase your offering more than your tithe, and you'll never be broke."(Olarinre, 2025)

In the above instances, one sees a deceptive pattern of making ridiculous claims and backing them up with the bible. This is manipulation.

In a series of deeply troubling incidents highlighting the exploitation of religious belief in Nigeria, Oyetade (2018) documents several cases from Kaduna that underscore the extent to which religious manipulation can endanger lives and infringe upon personal dignity. One such account involves a young fashion designer who, upon being instructed to fast to miraculously acquire fluency in English, continued the fast until she collapsed from exhaustion. In another instance, a child suffering from a treatable illness died after his parents, adhering to their church's doctrines, refused to seek medical intervention. Such occurrences reveal how religious indoctrination can override rational decision-making, with tragic consequences.

Further illustrating this pattern of manipulation, Oyetade recounts a case in which a self-styled pastor, revered by his congregation as a spiritual patriarch, threatened congregants with death and eternal damnation should they fail to participate in a mass public baptism. Through prophetic intimidation, he claimed that a "death angel" would orchestrate fatal car accidents for the defaulters, an alarming example of psychological coercion cloaked in religious rhetoric. The commercialisation and falsification of religious experiences have also become increasingly prominent. In 2016, Enugu State police apprehended a fraudulent syndicate in collaboration with pastors to stage fake miracles (Iwuagwu, 2018). In this elaborate scam, individuals were recruited to simulate health conditions; the pastor, having been informed of these fabricated ailments, would "prophesy" the conditions publicly, offer prayers, and the actors would then declare themselves healed before the congregation. This form of spiritual theatre, intended to reinforce the pastor's credibility and attract more followers, reveals the calculated orchestration behind what many assume to be divine interventions.

A similar episode was reported by *The Punch* on March 14, 2020. A video surfaced online showing a pastor allegedly healing a woman. However, a second video later emerged featuring the same woman reenacting the same affliction in another church setting, raising doubts about the authenticity of both claims (Folarin, 2020). These incidents collectively highlight a growing crisis in religious practice where deception and coercion are used to manipulate faith communities, often to the financial and psychological detriment of vulnerable followers.

On January 13, 2024, the BBC African Eye released a revealing investigative documentary by Charlie Northcott, Helen Spooner, and Tamasin Ford, which exposed the orchestrated deception behind the purported healing miracles of the late televangelist T. B. Joshua, founder of the

Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN). Drawing on testimonies from over twenty-five former church insiders across multiple countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, the United States, South Africa, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the documentary detailed a complex and systematic operation used to fabricate miraculous healings that drew millions of followers to Joshua's ministry (BBC Africa Eye, 2024).

The investigation identified six primary methods employed to sustain the illusion of supernatural healing: the use of emergency departments, the manipulation of medication, brainwashing, bribery, counterfeit medical documents, and sophisticated video editing. Central to this fraudulent enterprise was a private emergency section within the church, designed to stage-manage healing scenarios. Patients seeking divine intervention were screened by this internal team, which determined who would be showcased. According to Paul Agomoh, a senior disciple who supervised the department for over a decade, the team operated under T. B. Joshua's direct instructions and received training from licensed medical professionals. Agomoh disclosed that individuals with terminal illnesses such as cancer were systematically excluded, while those with more visibly dramatic yet medically manageable conditions—such as ulcers or wounds—were featured and falsely portrayed as having been healed of life-threatening diseases.

Additionally, the BBC uncovered a disturbing practice involving international visitors who travelled to the Synagogue Church for healing. These guests were required to submit medical documentation and disclose ongoing treatments. According to Agomoh, they were then instructed to stop taking their prescribed medications. Unbeknownst to them, however, Joshua allegedly covertly arranged for the same medications to be acquired, mixed into fruit juices, and administered to them under the guise of "anointed" drinks. This practice ensured that the visitors' health remained stable, thereby reinforcing their belief in the efficacy of the prophet's healing powers. Crucially, the spectacle of divine healing was amplified through carefully choreographed media broadcasts. Medical reports were manipulated or falsified, and the church's production team edited footage to support narratives of miraculous cures from ailments such as HIV/AIDS and cancer. In some cases, medical professionals were presented on camera affirming the authenticity of these healings, further cementing the illusion. The documentary thus casts a critical light on the convergence of religious manipulation, media spectacle, and medical deceit in the commodification of faith healing at SCOAN.

In 2000, Nigerian investigative journalist Adejuwon Soyinka uncovered evidence indicating that the medical certificates presented during T. B. Joshua's widely televised healing sessions were fabricated. However, efforts to publish the findings were thwarted, as Joshua reportedly exerted influence to suppress the investigation, effectively silencing public discourse on the matter (BBC Africa Eye, 2024). Despite the damning revelations, many adherents continued to believe in the authenticity of their healings. Former insiders, however, maintained that these so-called miracles were meticulously choreographed performances, designed and executed under Joshua's strict supervision.

Paul Agomoh, a former senior disciple of Joshua, described the late preacher as an "evil genius," asserting that "the whole thing is stage-managed and faked." According to Agomoh, nothing occurred within the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) without Joshua's explicit knowledge and direction. He affirmed that the entire healing spectacle was a manipulation orchestrated by Joshua to perpetuate his divine persona. This claim was further corroborated by Bisola Johnson, who served as the church's Chief Video Editor. She revealed that the miracle sessions were not only staged but also heavily edited to fabricate the illusion of instantaneous healing. According to her, the church's media team routinely combined footage taken months or even a year apart to create deceptive before-and-after sequences. "All you see on TV is the before and after; you don't know the time and space," Bisola explained, exposing the extent of the visual manipulation involved (BBC Africa Eye, 2024). These revelations point to a sophisticated strategy of religious exploitation, media distortion, and emotional manipulation that sustained Joshua's global spiritual empire.

The above are instances where religion is weaponised as an instrument of manipulation and exploitation. Religion becomes a terror when it is used to incite fear, brainwash and manipulate in a bid to exploit. It is when religion becomes transactional and commercialised, even to the detriment of the sharers of the belief. It is when religious leaders prey on the vulnerability of their followers in a bid to exploit them.

Towards an Exploration of the Concept of *Uka di n'obi*

Within the framework of this study, the concept of *Uka di n'obi* integrates two Igbo terms: *Uka* (church) and *obi* (heart), and is commonly translated as "the church is in the heart." As a cultural

expression, it underscores the idea that religious devotion is ultimately a matter of personal conscience and inward conviction. This perspective positions spirituality as an intimate and individualised experience, rather than one strictly mediated by institutional or ritual observance. As Omeike (2017) notes, "Divine worship is subjective, personal, and should not be influenced by any orthodox regulations" (p. 133).

Ndubuisi and Onwudinjo (2020) further argue that *Uka di n'obi* bears both metaphysical and physical implications. Metaphysically, the idea resonates with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, particularly his assertion that "religion is what an individual does with his solitariness"; if a person has never been solitary, then he has never truly been religious. This alignment highlights the primacy of the individual's internal relationship with the divine over communal or doctrinal expressions of faith. Physically, the concept implies that the true site of worship is not the church edifice, but the human heart, which becomes a sacred space for cultivating virtue, ethical conduct, and compassion. Thus, *Uka di n'obi* affirms an understanding of religion that prioritises moral integrity and spiritual authenticity over external conformity.

Uka di n'obi is firmly rooted in Igbo spirituality and is notably reflected in the indigenous religious traditions of the Igbo people. In traditional Igbo society, the idea of spirituality and a personal relationship with one's *Chi* (personal god) existed long before the introduction of Christianity. Terms such as *Odinala*, *Odinani*, *Omenala*, *Omenana*, and *Omenani* represent cultural patterns and belief systems that integrate spiritual principles with everyday life. In the pre-Christian Igbo worldview, each individual maintained a personal place of worship within their *Obi*, referring here to the family compound or residence, not the metaphorical heart. There was no central place designated for communal worship. While some communities had central shrines overseen by a Chief Priest or *Dibia* (also called *Eze-mmuo*), these shrines were typically devoted to major deities revered by the entire community. Despite the presence of such sacred spaces, communal worship was not held on specific days such as *Orie*, *Afor*, *Nkwo*, or *Eke*. Instead, larger gatherings usually occurred during festivals or at the behest of the Chief Priest, particularly when important spiritual messages needed to be conveyed, often in response to crises or in anticipation of communal celebrations (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

The Igbo expressions, *onye na Chi ya* (one with his/her God), *mụ na Chi m so aga* (I walk with my God), *Chi m zuru m ókè* (my God is enough for me), and *ihe onye na Chi ya kpatara*

(whatever one discusses with their God), among others, highlight the primacy of an individualised relationship with the divine in traditional Igbo spirituality. These sayings reflect a religious worldview that privileges personal communion with one's *Chi* over collective religious experience, underscoring the centrality of the self, the “I” in spiritual matters, rather than a communal “we.” In Igbo cosmology, *Chi* is understood as possessing unique attributes particular to each individual. Within this framework, religious experience is conceived as deeply personal, with each individual guided by a distinct *Chi* that shapes their destiny and life trajectory. Thus, the belief in a personal *Chi* reinforces the notion that spiritual experience is not homogenous but uniquely tailored to the individual (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

The individual holds the central role in the Igbo relationship with the Divine, not through communal worship but through a deeply personal engagement. Each morning, an Igbo man may visit his family shrine, either alone or with immediate family members, to perform the *igbo ofo* ritual. This practice is a form of prayer directed to the gods and ancestors, seeking blessings for daily activities, the family, fruitful harvests, and overall well-being, specifically long life and physical strength (*ogologo ndu na aru-isi-ike*). The introduction of Christianity into Igbo lands significantly disrupted these traditional practices (*omenala*). Sunday was established as the official day for Christian worship, and because it marked the start of the week, it became known as *izu-uka*, meaning “the beginning of the week.” By the early 20th century, the Igbo were widely identified as regular churchgoers, having largely abandoned their indigenous customs in favour of Christianity. Consequently, Sunday was regarded as sacred and dedicated exclusively to church attendance (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

Fundamentally, *Uka di n'obi* asserts that genuine religious experience is personal and continuous, woven into daily life rather than restricted to particular days, locations, or rituals. It insists that true spirituality resides in the heart, not in physical structures, monuments, or superficial observances. Whether expressed through communal or personal devotion, what ultimately matters is the disposition of the heart. In this framework, the individual becomes the architect of their spiritual journey, independent of external religious authorities. The emphasis lies on internalised belief rather than external displays, reflecting a prioritisation of personal spirituality over institutional mediation (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

Exploring Possible Reasons for the Present Surge of Uka di n'obi Spirituality/Mindset

With the advent of Christianity, *Uka di n'obi* spirituality receded into the background, as the majority of the Igbo population embraced the Christian faith. However, in recent times, *Uka di n'obi* has re-emerged as a significant force within the religious landscape of the Igbo. Comparable to the counter-cultural movements that accompanied the rise of the New Age Movement in the 1960s, movements which resisted institutionalised belief systems, particularly those rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Parapally, 2004), *Uka di n'obi* has begun to resurface with similar undercurrents of anti-institutional sentiment.

A major catalyst for this renewed prominence was the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic introduced a level of disruption unprecedented in modern history, and its impact was deeply felt across Igbo society. In response, the Nigerian Federal Government enforced a nationwide lockdown, significantly limiting religious gatherings to a maximum of twenty people. This restriction prompted a shift in religious practice, especially among the Igbo, from communal worship in churches to individual and family-based worship at home. As church buildings were rendered vacant, digital and home-based worship practices, once regarded as unconventional, became normative. This transition prompted a reconsideration of the essence of religious engagement, suggesting that physical gatherings might not be essential to spiritual experience. What emerged was a renewed emphasis on the heart as the true locus of worship, thereby reaffirming the core principle of *Uka di n'obi*: that authentic spirituality is internal and personal rather than dependent on physical spaces or institutional structures (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

Similarly, the pandemic brought to light growing disillusionment with religious institutions increasingly perceived as materialistic. While certain churches complied with government restrictions on public gatherings, others openly flouted them, continuing services despite the risks. It later emerged that such defiance was driven more by financial interests than by spiritual imperatives. The financial model of many modern churches, heavily reliant on tithes, offerings, first fruits, and other monetary contributions, rendered them vulnerable during the lockdown, when physical attendance and giving declined significantly.

Although some churches made commendable efforts to support their congregants and local communities during the crisis, others faced severe financial strain, with some nearing insolvency. This situation exposed the underlying commercial motivations of certain religious bodies, which appeared more invested in wealth accumulation and public visibility than in fostering genuine spiritual growth. For many observers, especially among the younger generation, this crisis validated the principles of *Uka di n'obi* spirituality. Disenchanted with institutionalised religion, they began advocating a return to more personal and authentic forms of spirituality—ones grounded in individual conviction rather than dependence on formal religious structures (Ndubuisi & Onwudinjo, 2020).

Secondly, there has been a notable resurgence of indigenous beliefs and customs, particularly among the youth in Igbo society. This is increasingly reflected in the rising prominence of traditional religious movements such as *Odinani* and *Uka Odinala*. This shift signals a gradual movement away from Christianity, as many young individuals begin to question its influence on their cultural and religious identity. Christianity is often perceived as having eroded traditional values and spiritual practices, prompting a renewed interest in reconnecting with ancestral heritage (Njoku, 2023, in Chukwudebelu, Molokwu & Osigwe, 2024). The growing appeal of *Uka Odinala* among young Igbo people underscores a desire to embrace religious systems they see as more authentic and culturally resonant. For some, Christianity is regarded as a foreign imposition, leading to its rejection in favour of indigenous spirituality (Njoku, 2023; Chukwudebelu, Molokwu & Osigwe, 2024). This revival of interest in traditional religion represents a significant challenge to Christianity in the region, as it reflects a deepening curiosity among the younger generation regarding the religious traditions of their ancestors (Chukwudebelu, Molokwu & Osigwe, 2024).

Thus, the resurgence of indigenous beliefs and practices, particularly among the younger generation in Igbo society, reflects a multifaceted movement driven by a desire to reconnect with ancestral heritage, reclaim cultural autonomy, and address the enduring legacies of colonialism. This trend presents a significant challenge to the continued dominance of Christianity in the region, highlighting the complex interplay between religion, culture, and identity in contemporary Igbo society (Chukwudebelu, Molokwu & Osigwe, 2024). A visible manifestation of this revival is the notable decline in church attendance. As more individuals gravitate towards

traditional religious customs, the influence of Christianity has weakened, leading to a measurable decrease in both church participation and religious identification among the Igbo. This trend is especially evident among the youth, as reflected in the synod reports of the Anglican Diocese of Awka, which note a consistent decline in youth involvement in church activities (Awka Diocesan Synod Report, 2022 & 2023).

The appeal of cultural traditions appears to resonate more deeply with younger generations seeking to re-establish a connection with their roots. This cultural and spiritual reawakening signals a broader societal shift away from Christian hegemony toward the re-embrace of indigenous religious identity. As a result, the Christian church in Igbo land is increasingly confronted with the challenge of preserving its relevance and authority in the face of rising interest in traditional spirituality and cultural restoration.

Similarly, the revival of traditional religious practices in Igbo land has led to the emergence of syncretism, a phenomenon marked by the fusion of diverse religious traditions, which often results in a state of doctrinal ambiguity and conflict, where core Christian principles risk being diluted or misrepresented (Okoro, 2018). As observed by Chukwudebelu, Molokwu, and Osigwe (2024), this syncretic tendency is evident in the growing influence of the Uka Omenala movement, which has gained traction in several Igbo communities, including Agulu, Mbaukwu, Nibo, Nanka, and Nnewi. This movement aims to revitalise and safeguard Igbo cultural identity by integrating traditional customs into contemporary life and, in some cases, Christian worship.

A Critical Evaluation of Ukadin'obi as Pushback to Religious Exploitation in Nigeria.

At present, there is a growing wave of irreligious consciousness across Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where increasing numbers of youths are becoming disillusioned with religion and exhibiting a marked indifference toward religious affiliation. In an article published on June 29, 2021, in *Modern Ghana*, titled *Na Scam: Why Young People Are Abandoning Religion in Nigeria*, Leo Igwe explores this phenomenon. Drawing from over fifty responses to a Facebook post he made on the subject, Igwe identifies five primary reasons behind this trend. The first reason, as reflected in the comments, is the perception that religion has become obsolete and irrational. Many of the respondents argue that religion belongs to a bygone era and is no longer relevant in the contemporary world. According to this view, religion fosters illusions rather than addressing

present realities, offering instead a false hope of an afterlife to the poor and emotionally vulnerable. It is perceived as a tool that pacifies the masses with promises of a better life after death while failing to improve their material conditions, thus reinforcing the idea of religion as an opiate for the poor. The sacrifices, such as fasting and other rituals, are viewed by this group as ultimately futile.

The second reason cited by Nigerian youths for their disillusionment with religion is the belief that it is a scam. From this perspective, religion is seen as exploitative and manipulative. Several young people voiced frustration, describing religion as the only legal Ponzi scheme, one that sells a product which, when it fails to work, blames the failure on the customer. They argue that religion primarily serves to enrich clerics while offering no tangible improvement to the lives of ordinary citizens or the broader Nigerian condition, despite the proliferation of prayers and religious observances. For these individuals, their rejection of religion stems from what they describe as an awakening to a long-obscured truth.

The third reason revolves around the perception that religion is a mixture of illusion and contradiction. This view aligns with the previous critique but places stronger emphasis on the incoherence within religious teachings. Respondents pointed out that many religious narratives appear detached from reality and are riddled with contradictions. The doctrinal inconsistencies across various religions, each claiming divine origin, are seen as troubling and indicative of deeper flaws. Some respondents questioned why, despite the volume of prayers offered across the country, little has changed socially or economically. Others highlighted how religion fails to fulfil its promises, accusing it of perpetuating lies, sowing division, and disseminating scientifically inaccurate information.

The fourth reason for the growing disillusionment with religion among Nigerian youths stems from the belief that religion functions as a mental trap. For this group, departing from religion represents a form of psychological liberation. They argue that religion acts as a tool of mental enslavement, dulling critical thinking and suppressing intellectual curiosity. In their view, it has successfully subjugated previous generations—particularly their parents—by eroding autonomy and enforcing unquestioned obedience. Leaving religion, therefore, is seen as an act of reclaiming personal agency and mental clarity. Some among this group also point out that they

were introduced to religion by default through parental influence, but having reached maturity, they now seek to form their own beliefs through independent thought.

The fifth and final reason is attributed to the rise of the Internet. For many, the availability of online information has played a decisive role in challenging religious doctrines and exposing perceived falsehoods. With unprecedented access to diverse perspectives and critical scholarship, the internet has empowered young Nigerians to scrutinise religious teachings more rigorously. It has also diminished the exclusivity once held by religious authorities, making once-guarded theological interpretations and historical contexts broadly accessible. As a result, the digital age has equipped a growing number of youths with the tools to question and ultimately distance themselves from institutional religion and its influence.

Going by the above, it has become glaring that there is a wave of irreligiosity spreading through young Nigerians, such that the idea of Nigerians being notoriously religious is gradually being pushed off the cliff. In the sentiments shared above, one could easily pick that the major culprit being referred to is Christianity and the exploitation that often comes with it. One could argue that the exploitation is not general, that there are still churches and men of God who are not exploitative. While this argument is tenable, it does not invalidate the overarching sentiments of exploitation shared above.

The reality is that the Nigerian religious landscape has become increasingly dramatic and controversial. From viral clips of pastors engaging in bizarre miracle performances to high-profile money laundering cases and contentious theological claims, many young Nigerians have grown sceptical of institutional religion. Trust in spiritual leadership is now difficult to establish, especially when religious leaders are perceived as exploitative or insincere. As a result, the church is no longer widely viewed by many youths as a sanctuary for spiritual growth, but rather as a commercial enterprise.

On social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok, religion is frequently the subject of parody and satire. While older generations often interpret these acts as irreverent or disrespectful, members of Generation Z and younger millennials typically see them as coping mechanisms or critical reflections of their disillusionment. These expressions should not necessarily be dismissed as mockery; rather, they often reveal a sense of deep disappointment and an effort to

make sense of a shifting moral and spiritual landscape. Importantly, this trend does not signify a wholesale rejection of faith. Many young Nigerians still express belief in God but resist formal religious affiliation. Phrases such as “I pray, but I don’t do church,” “I believe in energy and the universe,” or “I just try to be a good person” have become common. This emerging orientation points to a redefined form of Christianity, one that privileges personal spirituality, moral autonomy, and emotional honesty over institutional allegiance and doctrinal rigidity.

What we see currently is likely a pushback against traditional monotonous forms. It is a bold questioning and challenging of the relevance of the status quo in contemporary times. At the heart of this seeming disinterest among youth is something deeper: a search for truth, purpose, connection and peace. By staying away from the church and not being concerned with it, by going back to their root and seeking to reconnect with it, we see the Uka di n’obi mindset playing out. Uka di n’obi is centered on the irrelevance of organised religion. Although it does not dismiss a moral life, it dismisses the fact that one needs to be in church for salvation. Its tenets hold that one could lead a moral life without necessarily belonging to any religion. With the different cases of exploitation going on in Nigeria, it becomes easy to understand why youths readily turn back to their root, where they believe there are no pastors to exploit them, or give up on church going altogether. In all of this, what we see is a pushback. We see the recent disillusionment as an undercurrent of the Uka di n’obi’s mindset, where people step away from congregational worship to personal spirituality. Whether this pushback is loud or quiet, the religious ambience in the country shows that a new air has seeped in.

Conclusion

One of the greatest disservices that religious exploitation and manipulations do, particularly in the psyche of Nigerian Christians, is that it pushes forward the narrative that all about Christianity is a lie. It is with this mindset that they begin to turn away from Christianity, on the pretext that they were deceived from the outset to abandon their culture for the white man's religion. It also pushes the narrative that the church cares only for its pocket and not about the people. It is this situation that pushes people to turn back to their roots, where they believe they will not be lied to. It is from this that the recent surge of Uka di n’obi emerges. A kind of disenchantment with the church. With the incident of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing presence of Uka Odinani, one sees a kind of trauma response playing out. This does not in any

way criticise people who want to identify with their roots. It is, in fact, a good move. However, the growing uninterest among Nigerian youths with regard to church activities and their criticism of pastors who are deceiving the people are clear instances of the Uka di n'obi movement. It has become a kind of new age spirituality where people are concerned about their relationship with God and not their association with any church. Going by the above explorations, we have successfully shown that the Uka di n'obi spirituality or movement among the Igbo, an attitude that also finds expression among other Nigerian youths, is likely a pushback to (Christian) religious exploitation and manipulation in Nigeria.

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