

**CHRISTIAN CULTURE IMPACT AND CHALLENGES ON KALABARI CULTURE
OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA**

BY

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APPROVAL PAGE

This research work has been read and approved by Dynamic Theological Seminary Kwale, Delta State, Nigeria, affiliated to Harvest Bible University, Los Angeles, California, the United States in fulfilment for the award of Post Graduate Diploma in Biblical and Theological Education

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God for his enabling grace

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ABSTRACT

Christianity is an Abrahamic, monotheistic religion that traces its origins to the faith tradition of Abraham. It is fundamentally rooted in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who constitutes the central and defining foundation of the Christian faith. His person and message remain the essential framework upon which Christian doctrine, practice, and identity are established. This study examines the impact of Christian culture on Kalabari culture. The specific objectives are to determine the influence of Christian culture on Kalabari traditional practices and to establish the relationship between both cultural systems. The study reveals that Christianity has made a significant and lasting impact on the Kalabari people, leading to an ongoing, though sometimes subtle, effort by individuals to balance Christian beliefs with traditional values. During moments of crisis or deep reflection, many Christians tend to revert to certain Kalabari traditional practices without experiencing internal conflict, indicating the coexistence of both cultures. A descriptive research design was adopted, and questionnaires served as the main instrument for data collection. Primary data were collected through field responses, while secondary data were obtained from textbooks, journals, newspapers, and online sources. The findings provide valuable insight into the relationship between Christianity and culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage within the Kalabari kingdom and exploring the possibility of their peaceful coexistence. This research will serve as a useful reference for future scholars and individuals interested in related studies.

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CHAPTER ONE

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

Christianity is an Abrahamic, monotheistic religion that traces its origins to the faith tradition of Abraham. It is fundamentally rooted in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who constitutes the central and defining foundation of the Christian faith. His person and message remains the essential framework upon which Christian doctrine, practice, and identity are established. According to Jaroslav Jan Pelikan (2022), the coming of Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) was foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures—referred to by Christians as the Old Testament—and documented in the New Testament. Today, Christianity is the largest and most widespread religion in the world, with over 2.38 billion adherents, representing about 31.2% of the global population (Pew Research Center, 2017). Christians constitute the majority of the population in more than 157 countries and territories.

The religion is marked by cultural diversity, expressed through its Western and Eastern traditions, as well as theological differences on issues such as justification, salvation, ecclesiology, ordination, and Christology. Although Christianity adapts to diverse cultural contexts, it often confronts values, beliefs, and practices that conflict with its core doctrines. In such cases, these cultural elements must be critically examined and, where necessary,

abandoned. This dynamic underscores the universality of the gospel and the inevitable distinction between Christianity and culture.

As an introduction to this research, the present chapter will provide the background of the study, outline the statement of the problem, and highlight the objectives of the study. It will also define the scope, discuss the methodology and sources of data, and present the theoretical framework that guides the research.

1.1 Background to the Study

Culture refers to the collective system of shared beliefs, values, worldviews, customs, practices, and behavioral patterns through which a particular group of people interprets reality and organizes social life. It provides a framework that shapes how individuals perceive their environment, how communities interact, and how societies define norms of conduct, morality, identity, and belonging. Within this broad anthropological and sociological definition, **Christian culture** emerges as a distinctive cultural and religious paradigm rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and centuries of ecclesiastical tradition and doctrinal development. Christian culture is not merely a set of religious practices; it encompasses moral reasoning, ethical expectations, social norms, leadership orientations, family structures, communal life, and patterns of behaviour common within Christian-influenced societies. As a result, it plays a significant role in shaping the worldview,

values, and every day practices of individuals and communities who identify with the Christian faith.

The **Kalabari people**, a major subgroup of the Ijaw ethnic nation in Rivers State, Nigeria, possess a vibrant and deeply historical cultural identity. Their heritage is expressed through language, extended family and kinship systems, religious worldviews, social institutions, artistic expressions, and political structures. Prior to the introduction of Christianity, Kalabari cultural life was anchored in indigenous religious systems that emphasized ancestral veneration, belief in water spirits (owu-dum), ritual sacrifices, and elaborate ceremonial festivals that shaped communal identity and regulated social behaviour. Traditional institutions such as the **Amayanabo** (king), chiefs' council, and age-grade systems structured governance and collective decision-making. Spiritual practices were closely intertwined with social life, ensuring harmony, protection, fertility, prosperity, and continuity of the community.

The arrival of European missionaries in the 19th century—particularly the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and later other Christian denominations—marked a period of profound transformation within Kalabari society. Missionaries introduced new systems of belief, literacy, Western education, and moral codes that challenged existing cultural practices. These interactions did not simply replace Kalabari traditions; rather, they initiated a long-term

process of cultural negotiation, reinterpretation, resistance, and adaptation. Over time, Christianity became a significant force in reshaping Kalabari social organization, influencing marriage customs, gender relations, leadership roles, community ethics, and forms of communal worship.

However, the relationship between Christian and Kalabari cultures has remained complex and multidimensional. While Christian culture has contributed to positive changes such as expanded educational opportunities, moral reforms, and shifts in social behaviour, tensions continue to arise particularly around **traditional religious rituals**, funeral and burial customs, festivals involving ancestral spirits, traditional oaths, and practices considered incompatible with Christian doctrine. These areas of conflict highlight the ongoing struggle between preserving cultural heritage and embracing new religious identities.

This study therefore seeks to examine the impact of Christian culture on the traditional practices of the Kalabari people, identifying areas of transformation, continuity, conflict, and adaptation. It explores how the encounter between Christianity and Kalabari culture has shaped contemporary Kalabari identity and the challenges emerging from this cultural interplay in the modern context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The encounter between Christianity and Kalabari culture represents one of the most profound socio-cultural transformations in the Niger Delta. From the late nineteenth century, Christian missionaries introduced new religious beliefs, moral frameworks, and social institutions that reshaped traditional ways of life. While Christianity contributed positively through literacy, Western education, healthcare, and new ethical standards, it also generated tensions by challenging long-established Kalabari worldviews, rituals, and communal structures. Many traditional practices—such as ancestral veneration, masquerade festivals, initiation rites, and certain aspects of marriage and burial customs—were condemned as “pagan” or incompatible with Christian doctrine.

As a result, Kalabari communities have continued to experience deep cultural dilemmas and identity negotiations. Issues such as the rejection of traditional festivals by Christian converts, conflict over participation in age-grade ceremonies, debates surrounding burial and widowhood rites, and the struggle to balance biblical teachings with indigenous authority systems have created a persistent atmosphere of contestation. These tensions often manifest at the personal, family, and communal levels, influencing social cohesion and the transmission of cultural heritage among younger generations.

Although extensive studies exist on missionary activities and cultural change in Nigeria, there is still limited scholarly focus on the **specific dynamics of cultural contestation, adaptation, and resistance within Kalabari society**. Much of the existing literature treats the Niger Delta as a homogenous field, overlooking the unique socio-religious identity of the Kalabari people, whose cultural practices are distinct within the Ijaw ethnic constellation. Consequently, there is inadequate academic engagement with how Christianity has reshaped Kalabari culture, the forms of resistance or accommodation that have emerged, and the long-term implications for cultural identity, continuity, and transformation.

This study therefore seeks to fill these gaps by critically examining the impact of Christian culture on the Kalabari way of life and the challenges that arise from the ongoing interaction between these two cultural systems. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Kalabari communities negotiate their dual heritage, and how this interaction continues to influence social, religious, and cultural realities in contemporary times.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is:

1. To examine the historical development of Christianity in Kalabari.
2. To analyze the impact of Christianity on Kalabari traditional religious beliefs and practices.
3. To investigate the influence of Christianity on social values, education, and governance in Kalabari society.
4. To explore the challenges Christianity faces in Kalabari, including resistance from traditionalists and internal conflicts within Christian denominations.
5. To assess the extent of religious syncretism and its implications for cultural identity.
6. To propose strategies for balancing Christianity and indigenous Kalabari traditions for sustainable cultural development.

1.4. Scope of Study

The study focuses specifically on the Kalabari ethnic group located in the present-day Rivers State of Nigeria, with particular attention to key communities such as Abonnema, Buguma, Bakana, and Krakrama. These towns serve as important cultural and historical centres of the Kalabari Kingdom and provide rich contexts for examining socio-cultural transformation. The research explores a wide range of cultural elements,

including traditional belief systems, religious rituals, festivals, kinship structures, and the social norms that have historically shaped Kalabari identity. It also investigates how these cultural practices have evolved under the influence of Christianity, especially following the establishment of missionary activities in the region.

The scope of the study spans from the late nineteenth century—marked by the arrival and early operations of Christian missionaries—through the twentieth century, and into contemporary times. This timeframe allows for a comprehensive analysis of both the immediate and long-term impacts of Christian teachings, institutions, and cultural values on Kalabari traditions. By covering this extended historical period, the study captures the dynamics of cultural change, continuity, conflict, and adaptation within Kalabari society.

1.5 Methodology and sources of data

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject in this research, the researcher employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research method. Primary data will be collected through structured interviews and survey with Kalabari artisan, cultural practitioner and community members. These interviews will focus on gathering insights into the divers' cultural practices, impact and challenges of Christian culture. Additionally, survey will be administered to a broader audience within the

Kalabari community to assess perception of the Kalabari culture, the impact and challenges of Christian culture.

Secondary data will be gathered through a review of existing literature, including academic article, books and culture records related to Kalabari cultural heritage. This will involve analyzing previous research on cultural practices and impact and challenges of Christian.

This was appropriately moderated. The respondents to the survey were administered with the questionnaires to complete, with or without disclosing their identities. The questionnaire was designed to obtain sufficient and relevant information from the respondents.

The following were some of the research questions raised in the study:

- What was your cultural beliefs before the advent of Christianity into Kalabari?
- What are your cultural festivals?
- What led to the advent of Christianity into Kalabari territories?
- How does people communicate with the divinity in you culture?
- What effect does Christian culture have on the Kalabari Culture?
- To what extent will Christianity rekindle your cultural Values?
- What are the causes and effects of cultural decay in Kalabari?
- What are the factors that gave rise to Cultural reinforcement in the Church?

1.6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens appropriate for this study is the functionalist theory of Max Weber. Weber argues that religion could be a catalyst to produce social change (Kendall 2016). Scholars have stated that social change brings development to society. For example, the religious teaching of John Calvin in the Protestant ethics was directly related to the rise of the capitalist economy (capitalism).

Before the practice of Christianity, culture has been in existence. Culture is the regimented way in which a set of human beings conduct their lives.

Culture represents a picture of a group of people. It highlights their traditions and achievements. While some aspects of culture are beyond the larger world like language, music, literature, technology, history, art, habits, etc. other aspects are unique to respective people. Literally, the word literature means acquaintance with letters.

The Holy Bible is not generally considered literature. However, the Bible has been treated and appreciated as literature. The King James Version in particular has long been considered a masterpiece of English prose, whatever may be thought of its religious significance. Several retellings of the Bible, or parts of the Bible, have also been made with the aim of emphasizing its literary qualities. Letters, theological treatises and other instructive and devotional works have been produced by Christian authors since the time of

Jesus Christ. In early Christian times, almost all writing would be non-fiction, including letters, Biblical commentaries, doctrinal works and hagiography (Dickerson, 2003).

Culture has various meanings. However, to generalize it all "Culture" is simply the way we do things that are important to us, whether clothe, cars, boats, food, church, sports, arts, whatever. Culture, as a way of defining one's self, needs to attract people's interest and persuade them to invest a part of themselves in it. People like to feel a part of a tribe and understand their identity within that tribe. This works well in small communities and people feel needed and special in their small world. Mass culture however lets people define themselves in relation to everybody else in mass society. In a sense it 'makes the ball park a lot bigger' and we have to fight harder to find and keep our identity. Within culture there is what we call the Christian culture. The Christian culture is that which prevails in any given society.

In modern urban mass societies, Christian culture has been crucially shaped by the development of industrial mass production, the introduction of new technologies of sound and image broadcasting and recording, and the growth of mass media industries, the film, broadcast radio, television and the book publishing industries as well as the print and electronic news media. Items of Christian culture most typically appeal to a broad spectrum of Christians. (Douglas, 2001; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

The universality of the gospel necessitated a difference between Christianity and culture. Christianity can continue living in any culture, but every culture will have a definite belief, values, or practices which say the opposite to Christianity and for that reason must be put aside. The Jewish stressed on peripheral uprightness by obvious compliance to rules had to be put aside, for salvation is obtained by faith alone, apart from works. The Gentile practices of idolatry and immorality also had to be rejected as contrary to one's calling in Christ. Any agreement with culture which obstruct the teaching of the gospel should also be abandoned. It all seems quite simple, doesn't it? However, history reveals the difficulty which the saints have had in constantly relating Christianity to culture.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Introduction

This chapter reviews the related literature on Christian Culture, Impact and Challenges in Kalabari, Rivers State, Nigeria. It focuses on the conceptual review of the topic, a Brief History of Kalabari Ethnic Group, and history of Christianity in Kalabari.

2.1. Conceptual Review

Christian culture refers to the collective moral, social, spiritual, and behavioral expressions that emerge from adherence to Christian beliefs and practices. It encompasses the values, norms, and patterns of life shaped by biblical teachings, ecclesiastical traditions, and the historical development of Christianity across different societies. Fundamentally, Christian culture is grounded in Scripture—particularly the teachings of Jesus Christ—and is reinforced through church liturgy, doctrines, and the lived experiences of Christian communities over centuries.

Scholars argue that Christian culture is not merely a set of religious rituals but a comprehensive worldview that influences how individuals perceive morality, authority, relationships, and communal responsibility. According to Sanneh (2014), Christian culture has played a major role in shaping social institutions

such as marriage, education, governance, and communal ethics in many societies. This influence stems from the religion's emphasis on values such as love, forgiveness, charity, honesty, humility, and service to others.

Historically, Christian culture has played a significant role in promoting intellectual and social development across various societies. One of its most notable contributions is the establishment of mission schools, which served as early centres of formal education. These schools introduced literacy, numeracy, and basic sciences to communities that previously relied primarily on oral traditions. Through the translation of the Bible and other Christian literature into local languages, missionaries advanced literacy and fostered a new culture of reading and record-keeping. Beyond education, Christian teaching also contributed to the development of moral and ethical frameworks that later influenced legal and political institutions. Concepts such as justice, equality before God, human dignity, and social responsibility informed early governance structures and helped shape emerging judicial systems in many regions.

In various communities—particularly within African societies—Christian missions introduced new cultural values and social expectations. These included ideals concerning family life, marriage practices, gender relations, public morality, worship styles, and models of community leadership. For

instance, Christian marriage emphasized monogamy, mutual fidelity, and formalized marital vows, which often contrasted with indigenous marital systems. Similarly, Christian teachings on leadership promoted servant-leadership, accountability, and structured church administration, which sometimes differed from traditional chieftaincy or clan-based leadership systems. In many cases, these Christian cultural norms interacted dynamically with indigenous cultures—complementing them where values aligned and creating conflict where practices diverged, such as in areas of polygamy, ancestor veneration, or ritual practices.

Consequently, Christian culture should be understood as a dynamic, evolving cultural system rather than a static set of beliefs. It continues to shape social behaviour, moral expectations, and the structure of community life across multiple societies. Its influence varies widely depending on how local communities interpret, adapt, or negotiate Christian values in relation to their indigenous traditions, historical experiences, and contemporary realities. In some contexts, Christian culture blends harmoniously with local customs, resulting in hybrid cultural expressions; in others, it produces ongoing debates, cultural tension, or transformation as communities seek to balance inherited traditions with adopted Christian norms.

2.2. Historical Development of Christian Culture

Christian culture began with the early church, shaped by Jewish traditions and the teachings of Christ. As Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, it absorbed elements of Greco-Roman philosophy and governance. The establishment of Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century marked a turning point, leading to the development of Christian art, literature, and institutions (Brown, 2013). The medieval period saw the rise of monasticism and scholasticism, further embedding Christian values into European society.

2.3. Key Elements of Christian Culture

1. Religious Beliefs and Worship: Christian culture is centered on beliefs in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Worship practices, including prayer, sacraments, and communal gatherings, form the core of religious life (McGrath, 2011).
2. Moral and Ethical Values: Christian ethics emphasize love, compassion, humility, and justice. The Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount, provide moral guidance (Lewis, 2001).
3. Art and Literature: Christian themes have inspired some of the greatest works of art, music, and literature. From Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to Dante's Divine Comedy, Christian culture has left a profound artistic legacy (Pelikan, 1997).

4. Education and Science: Christian culture played a significant role in the development of education and scientific inquiry. Universities, such as Oxford and Harvard, were founded on Christian principles (Grant, 2004).
5. Social and Political Influence: Christianity has influenced legal systems, human rights, and governance. Concepts like human dignity and social justice are deeply rooted in Christian teachings (Niebuhr, 1951).

Christian culture continues to evolve in the modern contemporary society, While traditional values persist in many communities, modern interpretations have led to debates on issues such as social justice, human rights, and interfaith dialogue. The global expansion of Christianity, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, has contributed to a dynamic and diverse expression of Christian culture (Jenkins, 2006).

2.4. Brief History of the Kalabari Traditional Culture

Kalabari traditional culture represents a highly structured and symbolic system that governs the social, religious, and political life of the people. Rooted in centuries of historical development, it encompasses a wide range of practices such as religious beliefs, festivals, kinship networks, artistic performances, and water-spirit devotion. Central to Kalabari worldview is the recognition of the spiritual realm, particularly the influence of the **water deities**

(Owuapu/Owuikoru) and a deep reverence for ancestors, who are believed to maintain continual interaction with the living. These beliefs shape the ethical codes, social behaviour, and cultural identity of the people (Alagoa, 2005).

Kinship and lineage play vital roles in Kalabari society. The extended family system (War Canoe Houses) is not only a domestic unit but also an economic and political institution that organizes marriage, inheritance, leadership, and communal responsibilities. The Kalabari people use these structures to preserve social order, transmit cultural values, and maintain unity within the community.

Kalabari festivals and masquerade traditions (Ekine and Owu), often linked to water-spirit worship, serve as expressions of identity, artistic creativity, and communal spirituality. These celebrations involve elaborate rituals, songs, dances, carvings, and dramatic performances that reinforce cosmological beliefs and collective memory. Through masquerades, the Kalabari communicate with ancestral spirits, celebrate historical events, and renew social bonds.

Furthermore, traditional rituals—such as libations, purification rites, and rites of passage—are central components of Kalabari cultural and religious life. These practices function as structured avenues through which individuals and communities maintain harmony between the physical and spiritual realms.

Libations, for instance, are offered to ancestral spirits and deities as acts of reverence, gratitude, and supplication, reinforcing the belief that spiritual beings play an active role in the welfare of the living. Purification rites are performed to cleanse individuals or spaces from perceived spiritual contamination, restore balance, and ensure continued protection from malevolent forces. Similarly, rites of passage—covering birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and burial—mark significant transitions in the human life cycle and affirm the community's collective responsibility in guiding individuals through these stages.

These rituals underscore the deeply held conviction that human survival, prosperity, and communal stability are inseparable from the proper observance of ritual obligations. Failure to uphold these traditions is believed to invite misfortune, illness, or social disorder, thereby emphasizing the moral and spiritual significance attached to traditional practices.

Overall, Kalabari traditional culture operates as a holistic framework that integrates religion, kinship relations, artistic expression, economic structures, and communal participation. It reflects a worldview in which every aspect of life is interconnected and spiritually meaningful. This integrated cultural system has enabled the Kalabari people to maintain a distinct and resilient

identity, even in the face of extensive contact with foreign religions, economic pressures, and modernizing influences over several centuries.

2.5. The History of Christianity in Kalabari

The history of Christianity in the Kalabari Kingdom is a story of cultural exchange, transformation, and resilience.

i. Early Contact and Missionary Work (19th century)

The Kalabari people, a subgroup of the Ijaw tribe, have a rich cultural heritage that predates Christianity. Their traditional economy was based on fishing and trade, and they were known for their expertise in navigating the Niger Delta. With the arrival of European traders and missionaries in the 15th century, the Kalabari Kingdom began to interact with Western cultures and the missionaries’

ii. Introduction of Christianity:

Christianity was introduced to the Kalabari people by European missionaries, particularly the Anglican Church and the Catholic churches respectively, which sought converts within the Kalabari communities, but had little success before 1890. However, they gained many converts from 1860 to 1912, which consequently spurred the development from 1912 to 1918 of a revolutionary Kalabari interpretation of Christianity.

This exposure led to the introduction of Christianity, which gradually took hold in the kingdom.

iii. Establishment of Christian Missions:

The Anglican Church established mission in the Kalabari Kingdom in the late 19th century. While the Catholic Church also established a mission in the Kalabari Kingdom in the early 20th century, Both Anglican and Catholic missions equally established schools and hospitals, providing education and healthcare services to the Kalabari people; which laid a major foundation for Christianity to thrive in the Kalabari kingdom.

2.6. Growth and Development of Christianity in Kalabari (Mid-20th Century Onwards)

The growth of Christianity in the Kalabari Kingdom gained significant momentum from the mid-20th century onwards. A major turning point occurred when the kingdom began to produce its own indigenous clergy, who played a crucial role in the effective propagation of the Christian faith across Kalabari communities. This development fostered greater acceptance and integration of Christianity into Kalabari society. Furthermore, the continued growth of Christianity was evident in the establishment of new churches and the expansion of existing ones, marking a sustained and deepening Christian presence throughout the region.

The spread of Christian influence, however, was not without its challenges. Factors such as the vast size of the Kalabari area, the complete absence of roads and proper means of communication, as well as harsh environmental conditions, limited the free movement of early missionaries and made it difficult for them to reach all corners of the kingdom.

Despite these limitations, the adoption of Christianity did not completely erase the Kalabari people's traditional practices and beliefs. Instead, they blended elements of their indigenous culture with Christian teachings, resulting in a unique expression of Christianity. Today, the Kalabari Kingdom continues to celebrate its cultural heritage, including the Alagba Masquerade festival, which showcases the kingdom's rich traditions and customs. Interestingly, some elites of the kingdom have emphasized that the Alagba Masquerade does not conflict with Christian faith and beliefs, highlighting the Kalabari people's ability to balance their cultural heritage with their Christian traditions.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON KALABARI CULTURE

3.0 Introduction

The arrival of Christianity in the Kalabari Kingdom marked a significant turning point in the social, spiritual, economic, and political evolution of the people. Before missionary contact, Kalabari society was governed by a rich tapestry of ancestral worship, water-spirit devotion, extended kinship structures, and complex ritual systems that shaped identity, morality, and communal life. With the introduction of Christianity in the late nineteenth century, new religious categories, moral expectations, and institutional frameworks emerged, gradually reshaping the cultural landscape.

This chapter critically examines how Christianity transformed Kalabari culture. Moving beyond simple descriptions of missionary activities, it analyzes the deeper **structural, ideological, and cultural consequences** of Christian penetration. The chapter draws upon oral histories, archival mission reports, and scholarly literature to explore the multi-dimensional impact of Christianity on spiritual life, social organization, economic participation, cultural institutions, and political governance

3.1 Historical Background: Establishment of Christian Missions in the Kalabari Region

Before the arrival of Christian missions, Kalabari society operated within a religious worldview centred on deities such as **Owemenakaso**, ancestral spirits, and sacred water spirits believed to influence fertility, protection, and community welfare. Traditional priests, diviners, and custodians of shrines held significant authority, and spiritual obligations were deeply interwoven with social order, political leadership, and economic life.

Missionary Penetration and Early Encounters

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) played the pioneering role in the introduction of Christianity in Kalabari territory. As documented through the oral testimony of Ven. Young-Harry (Buguma, July 2025), CMS missionaries expanded from their Bonny base and made exploratory visits to Kalabari towns from the 1860s. Notable missionary figures such as **Archdeacon Crowther**, **Rev. J. C. Taylor**, and **Rev. Decker** interacted directly with Kalabari leaders and attempted to undermine indigenous religious structures.

Founding of Mission Schools and Churches

The earliest Christian institution in Buguma was established in 1865, serving as both a school and a centre for evangelism. The school became a

transformative space for literacy, Western moral instruction, and Christian indoctrination. Access to Western education encouraged early conversions, particularly among youths and emerging elites who perceived Christianity as a gateway to influence and social mobility.

Indigenous Agency: The Role of Garrick Sokari Braide

Prophet **Garrick Sokari Braide**, a Kalabari native from Bakana, remains one of the most influential African religious figures in the Niger Delta. According to oral accounts from Sir Berembo S. Wariboko (Krakrama, August 2025), Braide blended Christian spirituality with prophetic healing, anti-idolatry campaigns, and charismatic leadership. His revival movement from 1912–1918 accelerated mass conversions, destabilized traditional priesthood, and entrenched Christian influence among the Kalabari.

Braide’s ministry represented an **African appropriation of Christianity**, demonstrating that the transformation of Kalabari culture was not solely missionary-driven but also shaped by indigenous religious innovators.

3.2 Gradual Cultural Transformation, Resistance, and Adaptation

Christian influence was met with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance. While many youths embraced Christian education, elders and

traditional priests initially opposed missionary interference in indigenous rituals, water-spirit worship, and ancestral rites.

Cultural Resistance

Missionaries condemned masquerades, sacrifices, and ritual consultation as “pagan.” Traditional leaders, fearing loss of authority, resisted the encroachment of Christian norms. Some converts faced ostracism or social sanctions for rejecting communal rites.

Cultural Syncretism

Despite missionary attempts to enforce strict boundaries, Kalabari Christians blended Christian worship with traditional cultural elements. Churches gradually incorporated:

- Traditional attire
- Indigenous music
- Local languages
- Community feasting

This syncretism allowed Christianity to become culturally intelligible, creating a hybrid religious identity.

3.3 Spiritual Impact of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Transformation of Belief Systems

Christianity introduced strict monotheism that directly challenged the indigenous pantheon of deities and ancestral spirits. Rituals such as river offerings, libations, and masquerade invocations were redefined as “idolatrous.” Biblical doctrines reframed spiritual authority, shifting legitimacy from shrine custodians to pastors and catechists. This transition significantly weakened the institutional power of traditional religious elites.

Displacement of Traditional Ritual Practices

Christian worship gradually replaced many indigenous spiritual practices:

- **Baptism** replaced purification rituals
- **Christian prayer** replaced incantations
- **Holy Communion** substituted ritual feasting
- **Funeral hymns and sermons** replaced ancestral rites

As the Bible became the central spiritual reference, indigenous cosmology declined in prestige.

Dual Religious Identity and Persistent Syncretism

Despite Christian dominance, many Kalabari Christians still secretly engage in:

- Traditional healing
- Consultation of diviners during crises
- Participation in certain communal rites

This “dual spirituality” reflects the resilience of indigenous belief systems and highlights ongoing negotiations between Christian doctrine and cultural heritage.

3.4 Social Impact of Christianity on Kalabari Society

Moral Transformation and the Church as a Social Institution

Christianity introduced new moral codes centred on holiness, sobriety, sexual discipline, and charity. Churches became centers for moral reform, promoting campaigns against alcoholism, violence, and witchcraft accusations.

Transformation of Marriage Practices

Christianity altered Kalabari marriage customs by:

- Promoting **monogamy** over traditional polygamy
- Encouraging church weddings with vows and rings
- Reducing elaborate bride-price negotiations
- Eliminating rituals involving ancestral invocation

These changes redefined marital expectations and family structure.

Transformation of Burial Rites

Traditional burials had involved masquerades, sacrifices, and extended mourning periods. Christianity replaced these with:

- Church funeral services
- Hymns, sermons, and prayers
- Emphasis on eternal life instead of ancestral transition

Over time, Christian funerals became widely accepted, though occasional cultural elements remain integrated.

Impact on Kinship and Communal Systems

Christianity's emphasis on individual salvation weakened communal obligations.

Youth converts often rejected traditional rites, causing **intergenerational tension** and in some cases diminishing respect for elders.

3.5 Educational and Structural Impact of Christianity

Introduction of Western Education

Mission schools fundamentally transformed the socio-cultural landscape.

They produced the first generation of Kalabari elites who later entered:

- Mission leadership
- Colonial civil service
- Modern professions

Education contributed to linguistic change, elevating English while suppressing indigenous linguistic dominance.

Transformation of Social Hierarchies

Church leaders increasingly replaced traditional chiefs as moral authorities. In many communities, pastors now hold more influence than traditional priests, shifting structural power dynamics.

Erosion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

As Christian education displaced traditional pedagogy based on:

- Oral history
- Environmental knowledge
- Ritual expertise

much cultural heritage became endangered.

3.6 Economic Impact of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Christianity reshaped economic life in various ways:

Shift from Ritual-Based Economies

Traditional religious occupations—masquerade craft, shrine service, ritual art—declined as these practices were forbidden or stigmatized.

Christian Work Ethic

Missionaries emphasized hard work, honesty, and stewardship. This encouraged diversification into:

- Formal employment
- Western-style commerce
- Small-scale industrial ventures

Church as an Economic Institution

Churches stimulated local economies through:

- Cooperative societies
- Women's fellowship initiatives
- Microfinance support
- Community development projects

Gender and Economic Participation

With increased female education, Christian social structures encouraged women to pursue:

- Teaching
- Nursing
- Small-scale business

This expanded the economic role of women beyond traditional boundaries.

3.7 Political Impact of Christianity in Kalabari

Disruption of Traditional Political Structures

Traditional governance—centered on the **Amanyabo**, chiefs, and age-grade systems—drew legitimacy from ancestral religion. Christianity displaced this foundation by labeling spiritual rituals as unbiblical. This weakened the moral and spiritual authority of traditional rulers.

Rise of Christian-educated Political Elites

Christian schools produced educated elites who rose to prominence in:

- Colonial administration
- Post-independence politics
- Modern public service

These individuals often promoted Western-style governance and democratic ideals, sidelining indigenous political philosophies.

Dual Loyalties and Cultural Conflict

Christian adherents in leadership face conflict between:

- Cultural expectations (e.g., libation, ancestral rites)

- Christian doctrine (opposition to spirit invocation)

This tension continues to complicate contemporary political participation.

Christianity profoundly reshaped the Kalabari worldview by transforming religious practices, social norms, economic life, and political structures. While it introduced literacy, new values, and modern institutions, it also challenged indigenous identity and destabilized traditional authority. The chapter demonstrates that Christian influence did not simply replace Kalabari culture; rather, it produced a long-term process of negotiation, resistance, adaptation, and cultural redefinition.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIANITY ON KALABARI CULTURE

4.0 Introduction

The spread of Christianity into Kalabari communities from the late nineteenth century marked a transformative period that reshaped the people's religious worldview, cultural framework, and social institutions in profound ways. Prior to missionary contact, Kalabari society was deeply rooted in traditional religious systems, ancestral worship, communal rituals, and long-standing socio-political structures that defined their identity and worldview. However, with the arrival of Christian missionaries, new belief systems, moral teachings, and institutional practices were introduced, leading to far-reaching changes in both individual and communal life.

While Christianity brought commendable developments such as literacy, Western education, new moral orientations, and expanded socio-economic opportunities, it simultaneously generated significant cultural tensions. Many long-established cultural norms, spiritual practices, and traditional values came under scrutiny, were reinterpreted, or in some cases, were abandoned entirely. According to Chief Engr. B. Tamunokuro (Krakrama, August 2025), Christianity disrupted or reshaped several indigenous systems—ranging from traditional worship patterns and ritual practices to authority structures,

communal festivals, and political institutions—as the new faith sought to replace traditional cosmologies with biblical teachings.

This chapter therefore offers a detailed examination of the primary challenges Christianity introduced to Kalabari culture. It highlights points of conflict in spiritual practices, social relations, economic livelihoods, structural organization, and political governance, demonstrating how the collision between these two cultural systems created complex layers of negotiation, resistance, adaptation, and transformation. Ultimately, the chapter seeks to show that the introduction of Christianity did not simply replace Kalabari culture; rather, it generated an ongoing tension in which the Kalabari people continue to navigate the delicate balance between upholding their ancestral heritage and embracing their Christian identity.

4.1 Spiritual Challenges of Christianity on Traditional Kalabari Worship

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Kalabari religious worldview operated within a highly organized polytheistic system that shaped every aspect of social, moral, and communal life. Religion was not a separate institution but an integral part of identity, governance, family structure, and cultural expression. The Kalabari people believed in a complex hierarchy of spiritual beings, with **Owemenakaso**, **Owuapumo**, and various water and nature spirits occupying central positions in their cosmology. These deities were understood as active

participants in daily life—guardians of moral conduct, protectors of families, providers of fertility, and mediators of communal well-being (Alagoa, 2005).

Ancestral reverence formed another foundational pillar of Kalabari spirituality. Ancestors were believed to maintain ongoing relationships with the living, offering guidance, protection, and moral oversight. Ritual obligations such as libations, sacrifices, songs, and festivals were performed to honor these ancestors and maintain spiritual balance. In addition, the Kalabari placed significant emphasis on **water-spirit worship**, owing to their maritime environment. Rivers and creeks were seen as sacred spaces inhabited by powerful deities whose favor ensured prosperity, protection, safe navigation, and communal harmony.

Ritual ceremonies, purification rites, initiation practices, and masquerade performances (such as Ekine and Owu) served not only religious purposes but also reinforced social norms, transmitted cultural knowledge, and strengthened kinship unity. These practices were embedded in communal consciousness and preserved through oral tradition, priestly lineages, and age-grade societies.

The advent of Christianity directly confronted these long-standing spiritual institutions. Missionaries denounced local deities as pagan, condemned ancestral rites as idolatrous, and discouraged participation in water-spirit festivals. As Christianity spread, it undermined the spiritual foundations of

Kalabari identity, delegitimized traditional religious authority, and introduced a new moral worldview that conflicted with indigenous beliefs. This produced deep tensions, cultural adjustments, and in some cases, resistance as the Kalabari people navigated between their inherited religious traditions and the doctrines of the new faith.

i. Suppression and Demonization of Indigenous Spirituality

Christian missionaries strongly condemned traditional Kalabari religious practices, frequently describing them as heathen, fetishistic, primitive, or even demonic. Their teachings portrayed indigenous spirituality as incompatible with Christian doctrine, prompting converts to renounce long-standing cultural rituals and beliefs. As a result, sacred practices such as libation to ancestors, masquerade ceremonies, divination sessions, water-spirit veneration, and ritual sacrifices to deities were either discouraged, openly discouraged from church participation, or in many cases completely prohibited (Kalu, 2010).

These prohibitions had far-reaching consequences. Libation—once a central act of honouring ancestral spirits—began to disappear from communal gatherings. Masquerade festivals, which served both religious and social functions, were stigmatized as demonic displays. Diviners and spiritual custodians lost authority and social relevance as their roles were replaced by pastors and Christian clergy. Likewise, the Kalabari reverence for water

spirits—integral to their cosmology and identity as a riverine people—was reinterpreted as idolatry, forcing many to abandon practices that had defined communal identity for generations.

As Christian converts attempted to align fully with the new faith, they distanced themselves from indigenous rituals, often destroying ancestral shrines, sacred objects, and ritual instruments in public displays of religious conviction. Over time, these actions led to the erosion of centuries-old spiritual heritage, disrupting the transmission of cultural memory and weakening the traditional structures that had sustained Kalabari religious life. The gradual abandonment of these spiritual systems marked not merely a change in religious allegiance but a profound transformation of cultural identity, worldview, and community cohesion.

ii. Conflict between Monotheism and Indigenous Polytheism

Christianity introduced a strict monotheistic framework, emphasizing the worship of a single, all-powerful God. This theological stance stood in sharp contrast to traditional Kalabari religious beliefs, which were characterized by a rich pantheon of deities, reverence for ancestral spirits, and intricate ritual practices. The introduction of Christian monotheism disrupted the spiritual equilibrium of Kalabari society, creating a tension between the new faith and longstanding cultural norms. Early converts often experienced profound

confusion and internal conflict as they sought to reconcile the exclusive demands of Christianity with inherited obligations to their ancestors and family deities. According to Peel (2000), this tension frequently resulted in what he terms “dual allegiance,” wherein individuals publicly embraced Christian teachings yet continued to participate covertly in traditional rituals. This duality was not merely a matter of personal belief; it reflected broader social pressures to maintain familial and communal harmony, as failure to honor ancestral expectations could invite social disapproval, spiritual misfortune, or both. Consequently, the spread of Christianity among the Kalabari did not entirely supplant indigenous religious practices but instead initiated a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and, at times, syncretism, as converts navigated the competing demands of faith, culture, and lineage loyalty.

iii. Redefinition of Moral Values and Ritual Significance

Traditional Kalabari spirituality emphasized communal well-being, ritual purity, respect for ancestors, and appeasement of spiritual forces. Christianity replaced these with doctrines focused on individual salvation, sin, and repentance (Nabofa, 1994). This shift created moral contradictions, especially among youths, who found themselves caught between ancestral expectations and Christian teachings.

iv. Spiritual Identity Crisis Among Younger Generations

Because Christian teachings discouraged participation in traditional worship, many young Kalabari Christians lack awareness of their indigenous spiritual heritage. Over time, this has created a spiritual identity crisis where individuals cannot fully identify with either system (Obara, 2018), leading to the weakening of cultural continuity.

v. Persistence of Syncretism

Despite Christian influence, traditional spiritual beliefs persist. Some churches—especially prophetic African churches like Aladura and Celestial—incorporate drumming, prophecy, fasting, healing, and symbolic rituals that reflect indigenous spirituality (Ukah, 2008). This syncretic blend illustrates attempts to maintain cultural identity while practicing Christianity.

4.2 Social Challenges of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Christianity brought new moral standards and social norms that clashed with existing Kalabari social structures and communal lifestyles.

i. Erosion of Traditional Social Values and Practices

Many cultural activities such as traditional dances, masquerades, ancestral rites, and communal rituals were labeled as unchristian (Ezenweke &

Nwadiolor, 2013). This resulted in a cultural vacuum where Christian practices replaced indigenous communal expressions.

ii. Weakening of Kinship and Extended Family Bonds

Kalabari society traditionally revolved around extended family units and communal obligations, especially during marriage, burials, and festivals. However, Christianity prioritizes personal faith and discourages participation in rituals that involve spirits or ancestral veneration. This has weakened the traditional sense of communal belonging (Iroegbu, 2005).

iii. Emergence of Intergenerational Conflicts

Conflict often arises between elders who maintain traditional customs and younger Christians who reject them. Since respect for elders is a core cultural value, this tension undermines social harmony (Nabofa, 1994).

iv. Decline of Traditional Festivals and Cultural Institutions

Festivals such as **Owu-Aru-Sun**, **Ekine masquerades**, and water-spirit celebrations have declined due to Christian opposition. These festivals, once central to identity and social cohesion, now struggle for relevance (Omoruyi, 2016). The decline of these institutions contributes to cultural loss and weakens the community's sense of collective history.

4.3 Economic Challenges of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Christianity also produced far-reaching economic implications, affecting occupations, financial systems, and cultural industries.

i. Decline of Traditional Economic Activities

Artisans such as carvers, drummers, masquerade performers, and shrine custodians depended heavily on traditional festivals and rituals for income. As Christianity discouraged these practices, artisans lost key economic opportunities (Dike, 1956).

ii. Redirection of Financial Resources to Christian Institutions

Tithes, offerings, seed sowing, and church levies became regular obligations for Christians. In some cases, individuals contributed heavily to church programmes while neglecting traditional communal support systems like **esusu** savings groups (Akpan, 2004).

iii. Undermining of Indigenous Economic Leadership Structures

Kalabari chiefs and elders, who once coordinated trade and economic distribution, lost authority as Christian converts rejected their spiritual and economic leadership (Alagoa, 1971). Mission-run schools and churches gradually replaced indigenous economic control with Western ideals.

iv. Loss of Cultural Capital and Indigenous Skills

Cultural industries such as masquerade costumes, drum-making, and heritage crafts lost economic value as Christian influence increased. This resulted in the decline of cultural knowledge and traditional skillsets (Nabofa, 1994).

v. Increased Dependency and External Control

Church institutions—especially foreign missions—introduced forms of economic support that created dependency structures. In some cases, church leaders had significant influence over local economic decisions, sometimes overriding traditional institutions (Onunwa, 1990).

4.4 Structural Challenges of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Christianity transformed the organizational structure of Kalabari society and disrupted long-established cultural systems.

i. Displacement of Traditional Religious Leadership

Traditional priests, diviners, shrine custodians, and elders lost authority as Christian clergy emerged as new moral and spiritual leaders (Alagoa, 2005). This weakened the traditional system of social discipline and cultural governance.

ii. Transformation of Marriage and Family Systems

Christianity introduced monogamy and nuclear family models, which conflicted with Kalabari polygamous systems and extended-family structures (Peel, 2000). Over time, this has created tension in families where traditional obligations remain strong.

iii. Decline of Communal Festivals and Collective Rituals

Christianity discouraged participation in essential cultural rituals such as masquerade performances and communal ceremonies. As these activities declined, the community's cultural structure weakened (Horton, 1971).

iv. Marginalization of Language and Oral Traditions

Missionary schools emphasized English literacy, reducing the use of the Kalabari language in formal domains. Oral traditions such as folktales, proverbs, and traditional history suffered massive decline (Echeruo, 1998).

v. Emergence of Syncretic But Conflicted Identities

Many Kalabari Christians blend Christianity with elements of traditional culture, but this often leads to internal conflict and confusion over identity and beliefs (Mbiti, 1991). This undermines cultural coherence and challenges efforts to preserve indigenous values.

4.5 Political Challenges of Christianity on Kalabari Culture

Christianity also influenced political authority and governance systems in Kalabari.

i. Undermining Traditional Political Legitimacy

Traditional rulers derived authority from spiritual roles tied to ancestral worship. Christianity rejected these practices, thereby weakening the foundation of traditional political power (Okorobia, 2010).

ii. Decline in Participation in Traditional Governance

Many converts distanced themselves from chieftaincy and age-grade institutions that required participation in ancestral rituals (Tamuno, 1991). As more Christians withdrew, the strength of traditional governance structures diminished.

iii. Rise of Western-Oriented Political Elites

Christian schools produced literate elites who gained political power under colonial administration. These elites often embraced Western political models and challenged traditional rulers (Peel, 2000).

iv. Political Fragmentation and Dual Loyalty

Some Kalabari Christians remain in traditional political institutions but struggle to engage fully due to conflicts with Christian doctrine. This dual loyalty leads to fragmentation, resignations, and reduced participation (Anele, 2014).

v. Redefinition of Political Authority

The Christian church introduced new leadership structures based on merit, literacy, and theological training. This reshaped the political landscape, sometimes sidelining elders who lacked Western education.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 SUMMARY

This study critically examined the influence of Christian culture on the traditional Kalabari culture, analyzing both the positive impacts and the accompanying challenges experienced by the Kalabari people following the advent and entrenchment of Christianity. It highlighted how Christianity influenced traditional religious practices, moral values, social institutions, language use, and cultural expressions such as festivals and attire.

The findings reveal that Christian missionaries and convert contributed to the decline of ancestral worship, traditional priesthood, and rituals considered "pagan" or "idolatrous." Traditional festivals, such as the Owu-Aru-Sun and Seigbein, have either been suppressed or transformed to fit Christian sensibilities. In addition, moral teachings rooted in Christian doctrine have reshaped gender roles, marriage practices, and attitudes toward communal responsibilities.

However, the study also identified significant tensions between the preservation of cultural identity and religious faith. While Christianity promoted literacy, healthcare, and Western-style education, it also created a rift between adherents and custodians of indigenous practices. This often led to cultural alienation among younger generations of Kalabari people.

5.2 Conclusion

The study concludes that Christian culture has had a profound and transformative impact on the social, moral, and spiritual life of the Kalabari people, reshaping many aspects of their society. Through the introduction of new moral frameworks, ethical codes, and social reforms, Christianity provided avenues for education, community development, and the promotion of values such as compassion, discipline, and social responsibility. These influences have contributed to modernization and have, in some cases, facilitated the Kalabari community's engagement with broader national and global cultural currents.

However, this cultural transformation has not been without tension. The fundamental differences between Christian monotheism and the traditional Kalabari belief system, which encompasses multiple deities, ancestral veneration, and ritual practices, have created areas of conflict and negotiation. The rejection or discouragement of indigenous spiritual practices by missionaries and Christian institutions often led to feelings of cultural loss or displacement among the Kalabari people. Many early converts experienced dual allegiances, publicly adopting Christian practices while privately maintaining traditional rites, reflecting the deep-rooted significance of ancestral and communal obligations.

Consequently, the intersection of Christian and Kalabari cultures has resulted in a complex landscape characterized by adaptation, negotiation, and sometimes outright conflict. While Christianity introduced new social and ethical paradigms, the persistence of traditional cultural elements demonstrates the Kalabari community's resilience and determination to maintain a distinct cultural identity. This dynamic interaction illustrates that cultural change is neither linear nor absolute; instead, it involves a continuous process of redefinition, where communities selectively integrate new influences while striving to preserve their historical and spiritual heritage.

Ultimately, the Kalabari people continue to navigate this intricate cultural terrain, negotiating the coexistence of Christian values with traditional practices. This ongoing interplay underscores the importance of understanding cultural change as a multifaceted process, where adaptation, resistance, and synthesis occur simultaneously. The study highlights the need for a nuanced appreciation of how external religious influences can shape indigenous societies, prompting both transformation and the reassertion of cultural identity.

5.3 Recommendation

1. Promote Contextualized Christianity

Churches should develop teachings that honor and integrate Kalabari cultural identity while maintaining the integrity of essential Christian doctrines. Contextualization allows the faith to resonate meaningfully within the local cultural framework.

2. Strengthen Cultural Education

Efforts should be made to incorporate the Kalabari language, history, and non-idolatrous customs into school curricula and community education programs. This ensures the younger generation retains a strong understanding of their heritage.

3. Encourage Dialogue Between the Church and Traditional Institutions

Regular forums and platforms should be established to facilitate open discussions on:

- Misunderstandings between religious and traditional practices
- Cultural concerns impacting the community
- Opportunities for collaboration and mutual support

4. Review and Adapt Traditional Practices

Traditional customs that conflict with Christian teachings can be

thoughtfully modified to preserve their cultural significance while removing elements incompatible with Christian doctrine.

5. Empower Cultural Researchers

Youth and scholars documenting Kalabari traditions should be supported through grants, mentorship, and academic initiatives to ensure cultural knowledge is preserved for future generations.

6. Promote Peaceful Coexistence

Christians and traditional practitioners should consciously avoid discrimination, stereotyping, or labeling. Mutual respect and understanding foster social harmony and community unity.

7. Preserve Non-Religious Cultural Practices

Aspects of Kalabari heritage such as clothing, dance, cuisine, folk stories, and crafts should be actively preserved. These elements can thrive independently of religious considerations, maintaining cultural identity without doctrinal conflict.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies can explore:

- ❖ The role of Pentecostalism in reshaping Niger Delta cultures
- ❖ Comparative analysis between Kalabari and other Ijaw subgroups
- ❖ Gender roles in Christian and traditional Kalabari societies
- ❖ Youth perception of cultural identity under Christian influence

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