

The Perception of Christians on the Doctrine of Trinity in Selected African Initiated Churches in Niger Delta

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Abstract

The question about the reality, nature and function of the Trinity in Christianity has evolved subjective theological and philosophical perspectives and debates among researchers, and more so is the issue of adapting the doctrine into African-initiated churches. The issue as it affects African Christianity in the Niger Delta has not been adequately addressed empirically. Thus, this study investigates and analyses the perceptions of Christians about the Trinity among selected African Initiated Churches. Quantitative research approach was adopted using a purposive sampling technique to explore the perceptions of selected church leaders about the concept of Trinity. Data were collected through the use of questionnaires from 50 selected church leaders from Celestial Church of Christ and the Apostolic Church in Niger Delta. The findings show that while most Christians understand the Trinity in terms of unity in diversity, some believe it is just mere normal church doctrine; whereas they all accept that there is timeless mystery of the Trinity beyond the mental construct of man from both churches. The study concluded that there is no consensus in the theological interpretation and conceptualisation of Trinity among African-initiated churches in the Niger Delta. Hence, the study recommends proper theological education as a means of addressing the problem wrong perception about the Trinity.

Keywords: African Initiated Churches, Christians, Niger Delta Region, Perception, Trinity

Introduction

The concept of the Trinity as a fundamental Christianity thought has been interpreted by many African-initiated churches in a way that suggests that the three persons of the Trinity are all objects of worship. This foothold motivates the need for a thorough investigation of Christian doctrines and understanding within African-initiated churches. The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity (Toon & Spiceland, 2020; Van de Beek, 2022) because it demonstrates that the God of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible is the same God who is active in the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit (Cunningham, 2011). The notion further illustrates the interconnectedness of Trinitarian God in the Old and New Testaments (Lasker, 2007). However, there is a liberal construct arguing against the sameness of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, which suggests that they represent different entities or ideas (Hale, 2019). The doctrine of Trinity, on the other hand, asserts that God is one being who exists in three different persons, revealing a

consistent and unifying personality in both Testaments (Cunningham, 2011; Hale, 2019). This perspective places special emphasis on the continuity and unity of God's nature and intent throughout the biblical narrative (Lasker, 2007; Feenstra, 2009; Hale, 2019).

The perception of the selected African-initiated churches about the Trinity is at variance with Christian Trinitarian orthodoxy. The study explores the conceptualization of the Trinity among selected African-initiated churches using the framework of Neo-Platonism to examine the historical, cultural, and theological influences on the subject of the Trinity. There have been several debates regarding the inclusivity of Trinitarian theology in Christianity. This has left the church grappling with uncertainty and the theological complexities emerging from the doctrine. However, Trinity among the selected African Initiated Churches has brought more challenging issues because of the misconceptions and misinterpretations of the concept by these churches. Christianity is typically recognised as a monotheistic religion, one

that affirms the existence of a deity as being superior to all else in the universe. However, this claim is challenged by sceptics due to the fundamental tenet of the Trinity, which claims that there is only one God who exists as three distinct persons that are coeternal. The problem of Christian polytheism has been brought up by Trinitarian meta-theism, which, from an intellectual standpoint, conflicts with the Christian doctrine of ontological monotheism. Anti-Trinitarians argue that this claim conflicts with the simplicity principle, which affirms the singularity and indivisibility of God. They claim that the argument resulted in theological complexity and inconsistencies.

The contention is that the God of the Old Testament is characterized by evil (Davis et al., 2001), with a strong reference to the book of Judges and 1 Samuel 15:3, where God ordered killings of both men and women, children, and infants, while the God of the New Testament is loving (John 3:16). Critics contend that the Old Testament God is wicked and evil in itself (Bitrus, 2017). The argument, however, continues that the New Testament God is love and therefore cannot be the God that is evil (Hillar, 2012). The Trinitarian idea stands as a powerful denial of this problematic argument of liberal thinkers (Barbee, 2020). The effect of the problem of Trinitarian monotheism in Christianity still lingers, and this is a critical issue that needs to be addressed among the African-initiated churches. The problem with Trinitarian monotheism is that God is one, and at the same time, the same God is addressed as three. This issue is critical because of some notational observations among the African-Initiated Churches. It is from this observation that this study investigates the perception of Christians on the Trinity among African-initiated churches in the Niger Delta Region of

Nigeria to correct some of the misconceptions among them.

The objectives of the study are to identify the factors responsible for the divergent belief in the existence of the Trinity; and examine the perception of the Trinity among African-initiated church leaders in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To uphold the integrity of Christianity, it is imperative to ensure that the central tenets and beliefs of the faith, mostly in terms of the Trinity, are accurately communicated and applied. On this premise, this study delves into the perceptions of Christians about the trinity in African-initiated churches in the Niger Delta.

Literature Review

Trinitarian theology is a subject that has sparked discussions and debates within Christianity for centuries, illuminating a wide variety of beliefs found within the faith (Davis et al., 2001; Sanders, 2005). Thus, Hillar (2012) stressed the importance of diverse interpretations of and beliefs in certain religions, including Christianity, by different people and denominations. The critique of anti-Trinitarian Christianity is based on their interpretation of the Bible and their theological philosophies (Radde-Gallwitz, 2022).

Trinity is a central doctrine of Christianity that is based on the conviction that one God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It provides a seamless narrative that spans both the Old and the New Testaments, bridging the gap between their teachings while also establishing a coherent understanding of God's nature (Barbee, 2020). The Trinity also provides Trinitarian Christians with a mental construct to understand God's redemptive notion while exploring the divine relationship within God Himself (Feenstra, 2009; McGraw, 2017).

The claim made by those who reject the Christian Trinity is that the Trinitarian theology did not originate in Christianity but was a spirito-philosophical construct that originated from pre-Christian religious and philosophical traditions (Davis et al., 2001; Olson et al., 2002; Lamborn, 2011). Although the Trinitarian idea, which represents a unified whole from the perspective of three distinct elements or entities, has its stance in different cultures and belief systems, which include the Hindu concept of Trimurti (King et al., 2005), the Osirian triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus in Egyptian mythology, the Greek triad gods of Athena, Zeus, and Apollo (Pilipovic, 2008), and the Roman triune gods of Minerva, Jupiter, and Juno, worshipped on Capitoline Hill (Davidson, 1988; MacKillop, 2004), However, Trinitarians argue that the Christian Trinity is not the same as the triad gods seen in other cultures and religious traditions because it would imply Christian polytheism (Wolfson, 1956). Trinity, as contended by Trinitarians, is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in distinct persons unified as a whole in one Godhead (Davis et al., 2001; Lee, 2010).

Early Christians were able to enter the intellectual arena of reasoning because of their inclusive philosophical ideologies (Corrigan, 2016; Clarke, 2022). Christianity spread across boundaries, becoming a religion beyond bounds, as a result of the efforts of early Christian thinkers who were cognitively tolerant (Prepotenska et al., 2022). Akinade (2010) opined that the Christian faith is presently more diffused and widespread ethnically, geographically, and culturally than at any other time in its long and tortuous history. Emphasizing that Christianity has been characterized by the interaction and involvement of people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds but does not pride itself on cultural conformity. Despite

the foregoing, the historical expansion and transformation of Christianity have reflected the hues and diversity of people all over the world. Furthermore, Akinade (2010) challenged the notion of African-initiated churches. It was the work of Christian intellectuals that ultimately allowed Christianity to spread throughout Africa (Ranger, 2007; Izu, 2023).

African Christian thinkers made the first move when African preachers had the idea of establishing a distinct church where Christianity would be decolonised (Öhlmann et al., 2016; Dabale, 2024). This consciousness and inquisitiveness yet face significant obstacles determining how African Christianity is in the twenty-first century. Countless problems necessitate a serious study of African Independent Churches, particularly in terms of how efficiently they perceive and interpret Christian meta-doctrines. A few instances of such Christian doctrines are the trinity, materialism, which integrates Christianity with wealth, the unusual emphasis on the prophetic gift over all others, and the grandeur of exorcism above the salvation theory for eternal life (Öhlmann et al., 2016).

African Initiated Church is a gathering of indigenous believers who aim to create spiritual experiences by fusing African traditions with Christian principles (Ranger, 2007; Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021; Masuku, 2021; Ngutu, 2021). It is a religious movement with African influences (Adamo, 2009; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Bowers-Du Toit., 2020), and fundamentally Africanist Church (Öhlmann et al., 2016; Izu, 2023; Dabale, 2024). The Africanised churches are determined to integrate African beliefs, customs, and ritualised practices with Christianity (Öhlmann et al., 2016). With indigenous dances, ceremonies, ancestral worship, and conventional methods of healing, the churches struggle to preserve the African identity (Daneel, 2004; Mbuvi,

2017). The majority of African-initiated churches left missionary churches (Ranger, 2007); for instance, Christ Apostolic Church splinters off from the Anglican Communion, and the Methodist Church gave rise to the Celestial Church of Christ. Prayers, visions, dreams, and prophecies define African Indigenous Churches. Rarely do these churches, in general, speak other languages. In their worship of God, they prefer the use of their languages and regional music (Mbuvi, 2017; Öhlmann et al., 2016; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Bowers-Du Toit, 2020). Christianity can be practiced irrespective of any culture or language (Daneel, 2004). The pioneers of African-initiated churches argue that Christianity is a global phenomenon (Öhlmann et al., 2016). The idea of a global phenomenon simply means that Christianity can adjust and align itself with any culture without any detrimental effect on what it stands for (Akinade, 2010). Christianity has the cultural flexibility to adjust to any culture without sacrificing its original content (Ranger, 2007; Granqvist, 2021). The primary purpose of initiating African Indigenous Churches is to make the Bible doctrines and narratives comprehensive for Christian adherents in Africa, and with this, it will improve their relationships with God (Mbuvi, 2017; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Gbode, 2021; Podolecka & White, 2021).

Christianity is a universal phenomenon that adapts to all languages and cultures (Barrett, 1968). Christianity has the adaptability to fit into any society and still upholds its underlying principles or doctrines, in contrast to some other religions that are rigidly methodical (Komolafe, 2004). The Pioneers of African Initiated Churches explored the adapted flexibility trait in addition to the political, historical, and cultural motivations to found African Initiated Churches. Preachers and parishioners in Africa still participate in the global phenomenon of

Christianity, but they have made adjustments and embraced traditional African ways of life (Daneel, 2004; Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021; Ngutu, 2021). However, this was not without opposition from mother churches, who mockingly dubbed these churches African Indigenous Churches due to the inclusive nature of Africanism (Daneel, 2004; Öhlmann et al., 2016). It was assumed that they were syncretic (Barrett, 1968; Pobee et al., 1998).

Around the world, widespread Christianity has been embraced by the rich inclusivity of intellectual power. The need for mental constructiveness to comprehend the metaphysics of Christianity in African pluralism (African heterogeneous society) is not new because it was an enlightened culture that allowed for the migration of Christianity into the Greco-Roman world (Akinade, 1999; Akinade, 2010). African Independent Church leaders ought to be cognizant of the fact that twentieth-century Christianity is a multi-centred reality made up of interconnected social networks and communities (Akinade, 1999). If the practice of Christianity among African-initiated churches is not given the construct of intellectualism, philosophy, sound theology, ethics, and history, it would be difficult for it to thrive in Africa (Rindermann et al., 2012; Kaplan, 2017). Because the Africa of today agitates for Critical consciousness, constructive leadership, and freedom of thought (Fatton, 1990; Gumede, 2017).

However, it is undeniable that the resonance of the existence of African-initiated churches with Africans has brought about significant changes in Africa (Pobee et al., 1998). The churches have promoted social cohesion through spiritual guidance and by emphasising the use of indigenous languages and cultural practices (Oosthuizen, 1996). Indigenous

language is significant because it brings about effective communication, leading to socioeconomic development in the native communities (Ashworth, 2003). It is also a plus for these communal churches as they push for grassroots initiatives that include enlightenment for educating, treating, and reducing poverty in indigenous communities. These community-based initiatives have helped the locals develop the communities, consequently fostering a strong sense of African identity among them (Turner, 1980; Öhlmann et al., 2016). In addition, there has been an increase in the resiliency and well-being among the indigenous followers of African Initiated Churches known to be among the pride of Africa (Muzorewa, 2000).

Background of Christ Apostolic Church

Christ Apostolic Church started in 1918 as a prayer group known as the Precious or Diamond Society and operated within St. Saviour's Anglican Church in Ijebu Ode, Nigeria (Nwadiakor, 2023). The prayer group led by Mr. D. O. Adebajo later became Faith Tabernacle under the supervision of the American Faith Tabernacle with Pastor A. Clerk. The group relied on the scriptural interpretation of the American Faith Tabernacle published in the *Sword of the Spirit* magazine (Oshun, 1983). As the body lived by the biblical teachings imprinted in this magazine, it began to express certain beliefs that were not practicable in the Anglican Communion. These beliefs, which include divine healing, reliance on dreams and visions, abstinence from orthodox medicine, drumming, dancing, debt, gambling, and mixing up with non-believers, still form the major structures of Christ's Apostolic Church. The name Christ Apostolic Church came after the prayer body was excommunicated from the Anglican Communion in 1928 (Meyer, 2004). According to Sundkler and Steed (2000), the church has since then operated

under three main features: prayer, divine healing, and prophecy. The popularity of Christ Apostolic Church came under a revivalist and evangelist known as Apostle Ayo Babalola (Oshun, 1983). His unusual demonstration of the power of God in the 1930 revival gave him an edge over other pioneering people.

Christ Apostolic Church is known for its strict biblical doctrines. A common belief in the Christ Apostolic Church is that no one who truly holds the tenets of Christianity should have anything to do with African traditional acts (Oshun, 1983) that are idolatry-inclined, especially the offering of blood sacrifices and obeisance to graven images. However, the Christ Apostolic Church emphasizes Trinitarians, the doctrine of grace, and the doctrine of water and fire baptism, divine healing, as well as the obligatory doctrine of tithing and divine providence.

Christ Apostolic Church cannot do without the concept of the Trinity. The doctrine is a major tenet of the church. Everything done is centered on the Trinity. Most of the services conducted, such as marriages, the dedication of properties, and the induction of church ministers, are done in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Much preference is given to the concept in that some senior ministers have built a prayer pattern around it. For example, during prayer sessions, the names of the Trinity are invoked and have become a pattern.

Historical Background of Celestial Church of Christ in Africa

The foundation of the Celestial Church of Christ in Africa is traced to Samuel Bilewu (Biléou) Joseph Oshoffa, and a mixed breed of Nigeria and Benin Republic (Akibu, 2023). He had a religious mix-breed (Fernandez, 1978). His mother refuted Christianity and strictly adhered to African traditional beliefs (Fernandez, 1978), but his father, once a Muslim,

became a Methodist Christian (Kunhiyop, 2009). Samuel grew up and became a choir master in the Methodist church and a church ward to the Methodist Catechist (Akibu, 2023). Although the CCC may have its own unique ways of dressing in white garments, burning incense, and using 'holy water' during church services and traditions, it has and shares common features with African-initiated churches (Nwadiolor, 2023). Some of these are strong belief in prayer, divine healing, unrecognition of women's leadership in the church, allowing the use of gifts and talents to promote the values of God's kingdom, strict adherence to spiritual things, and continuous pursuit of evangelism and revival (Izu, 2023; Dabale, 2024). The African Churches, which include the Celestial Church of Christ, attempt to build and maintain the Pentecostal form of Christianity that the Apostles of Jesus Christ handed over to the early Christians (Welbourn, 1961; Pauw, 2024) and adopt a different approach, such as the inclination of African worldview in the interpretation of the meta-thoughts of Christianity, whose goal pursuit remains the same as that of other African Churches (Ajayi, 2020; Akindolie, 2020).

Oshoffa pursued the revelation of founding the Celestial Church of Christ on divine healing, but his perception was connected with the provisions of God through the universe. Nature, to Africans, is God. Since God is believed to have created the universe, it is believed that everything, including herbs, is for the benefit of man (Probst, 1989; Ajayi, 2020; Akindolie, 2020; Alabi, 2020). This is what the African Churches strongly believe in: incorporating the African gifts of nature into the healing processes, which to them is the same as divine healing (Ranger, 2007). The foregoing explains the pattern of Africanising Christianity by putting the doctrines of Christianity in the African belief system. The doctrine of the

Trinity is orthodox in the Celestial Church of Christ (Sakupapa, 2019). It is a doctrine that is believed to make a complete service. It is believed that God's presence in all the services must involve God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that preferences are given to prophecies, revelations, and visions. The concept allows for freer worship where the Holy Spirit is allowed to express itself through any faithful worshipper (Sakupapa, 2019).

Trinitarian doctrine is a true revelation of God's relationship with man through the Son and the Holy Spirit (Boaheng, 2021). It is therefore a strong belief of the Celestials that anyone who must experience the wholeness of God must embrace the Trinitarian doctrine, in which God reveals himself to mankind. God, the Holy Spirit, has all the gifts mandated to outflow through faithful members to make known God's mind. So, whatever interpretation is given to the concept of trinity in the CCC, whether it is a theological or sociological feature of religion, the basic significance is the orthodox inclusivity of the concept. The doctrine is at the core of Christianity (Sanders, 2010). As a result, it remains part of the Celestial Church of Christ.

Materials and Methods

The study engaged primary and secondary sources of data collection. A social survey of leaders of selected churches in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria was conducted using a purposive sampling technique to administer a structured questionnaire for the primary data, and published and unpublished sources for the secondary data. Up-to-date data related to the study and extant documentation on African Initiated (indigenous) Churches from the Google Scholar database were also used. The survey was conducted on 50 participants purposefully selected (25 from

CAC and 25 from CCC) through phone calls and Google Forms, and the responses were transcribed, recorded, and thematically analysed, but forty-eight respondents (25 from CAC and 23 from CCC) returned the questionnaire. The data collected was used to identify patterns and trends and generate themes for discussion within the dataset.

The research adopted the theory of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism theory, also described as media imperialism theory (Gómez-García & Birkinbine, 2018), is all about 'imposition' of all kinds on underdeveloped or developing nations by developed and powerful nations (Mirrlees, 2013). The theory is argued to be rooted in the influential communication of the United States media commercial system and has many proponents from the United States and Latin America (Mattelart & Chanan, 1979; Mirrlees, 2013). Notable among the proponents and developers of the theory are Schiller, Armand Mattelart, Hector Schmucler, Rafael Reyes Mata, Luis R. Beltrán, and Elizabeth Fox (Mirrlees, 2013). However, the theory is contended to have started with Schiller in the 1970s in the context of the Cold War, amongst others (Gómez-García & Birkinbine, 2018). The United States of America aimed to influence its ways of life through media broadcasts to the developing colonies using political and economic tools (Mattelart & Chanan, 1979).

The scope of the study entails examining the concepts of the variables: Trinity, Neoplatonism, and African-Initiated Churches. The study is conducted

within two of the numerous African-initiated churches that cut across Edo and Delta States in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Determining the number of African-initiated churches in Africa is difficult because of the many definitions and the relative nature of the Africanized churches. Why were only two churches chosen out of a thousand? One thing that all churches have in common is that they all share the same traits and, notably, conceptualise Christian beliefs with African spiritualism.

Results

1. The factors responsible for the divergent belief on the existence of the Trinity

The factors responsible for the divergent belief in the existence of the Trinity were identified against the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed church leaders. They include age, occupation, gender, level of education, and theological educational level of the respondents.

i. Age Distribution

Table 1 presents the age distribution of the church leaders that were surveyed. The table reveals that 41.7% of the respondents were between 55 and 64 years old, 39% were from 45 to 54 years old, those above 65 years old were 13%, and 35 to 44 years old accounted for 6.3%. This result reveals that 41.7% of the respondents were between 55 and 64 years old, implying that the data elicited is reliable and usable for the study.

Table 1: Age of Respondents

Age of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18-24	0	0
25-34	0	0
35-44	3	6.3
45-54	19	39
55-64	20	41.7
65 and above	6	13.
Total	48	100

Survey Field

ii. Occupation of Respondents

From Table 2, the occupation of the respondent shows that clergy accounted for 100% of the survey. This indicates a strong and full representation of the church leaders who are custodians of biblical doctrines and have great interest in

the understanding and conceptualisation of the Trinity in the African-initiated churches. The full representation of the church leaders represents a strong influence in understanding trinitarian theology in the selected churches.

Table 2: Occupation of Respondents

Occupation of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Artisan	0	0
Civil Servant	0	0
Clergy	48	100
Business	0	0
Total	48	100

Survey Field

iii. Gender of Respondents

Table 3 reveals that 100% of the respondents were male, and this shows the gender disparity in the selected churches. Observably, the disparity may be occasioned by cultural and social factors,

which are common doctrinal inclinations in many churches. It might also be connected with the historical dominance of males over females and educational factors.

Table 3: Gender of Respondents

Gender of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	48	100
Female	0	0
Total	48	100

Survey Field

iv. Level of Education of Respondents

On the level of education of the respondents, 64.6% had an Ordinary National Diploma (OND) or secondary education, 27.1% had either a Higher National Diploma (HND) or a First Degree, and 8.3% were Master's or PhD holders. The high percentage level of

education suggests a high level of awareness that makes church leaders' opinions more challenging to appreciate the intricacies of Christian doctrine like the Trinity. This could lead to misconceptions and erroneous interpretations of the doctrine. However, with the background of basic knowledge that is formed by these respondents, there is a chance for the

pursuit of more knowledge that can aid in the interpretation and conceptualization of

theological nuances.

Table 4: Level of Education of Respondents

Level of Education of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary	0	0
Secondary/OND	31	64.6
First Degree/HND	13	27.1
Masters/PhD	4	8.3
Total	48	100

Survey Field

v. Level of Theological Education

From Table 5, the respondents that had diploma certificates were 77%, while 18.8% and 4.2% were calculated for those that had a Bachelor of Theology (B.Th.) or Master and a PhD, respectively. The foregoing is highly implicative of the conceptualization of complex doctrines like Trinitarian theology. The high percentage of lower-level educational

degrees poses a serious challenge to African-initiated churches because it tends to hinder the ability to dialogue on salient doctrinal issues in the Trinity using the tools of critical thinking and analytical skills. The need for theological education is very crucial, as it can keep the church from misguidance leading to misinterpretation of the Trinity.

Table 5: Level of Theological Education

Theological Education Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Certificate/Diploma	37	77
B.Th./Masters	9	18.8
PhD	2	4.2
Total	48	100

Survey Field

2. Perception of the Trinity among African-initiated Churches

i. The perception of Christians on the concept of Trinity in the selected African Initiated Churches

On the perception of Christians on the concept of the Trinity (Table 6), 56.2%

of the interviewees were of the Christ Apostolic Church, while 44% were members of the Celestial Church of Christ. This reveals their respective opinions about the impact of Neoplatonism on Trinitarian theology among African-initiated churches.

Table 6: The Perception of Christians on the Concept of Trinity

The perception of Christians on the Trinity	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Christ Apostolic Church	27	56.2
Celestial Church of Christ	21	43.8
Total	48	100

Survey Field

ii. The Perception of the Trinity

Table 7 presents the responses of the CAC and CCC surveyed. Out of the 50 copies of the questionnaire administered, 25 were for Christ Apostolic Church. The theoretical view of the Trinity which is God in three distinct persons was 52%, 28% was for the Trinitarian concept of unity in diversity, and 20 was for the

traditional doctrine of Christianity. In the same vein, 23 were administered to the Celestial Church of Christ. From the survey, 47.8% was calculated for the theoretical view of the Trinity, which is God in three distinct persons; the traditional doctrine of Christianity was 34.8%; and the Trinitarian concept of unity in diversity was 17.4%.

Table 7: Perception of the Trinity

Perception of the Trinity	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a. Christ Apostolic Church		
A theoretical view of the Trinity	13	52
Trinitarian concept of unity in diversity	7	28
Traditional doctrine of Christianity	5	20
Total	25	100
b. Celestial Church of Christ		
A theoretical view of the Trinity	11	47.8
Trinitarian concept of unity in diversity	4	17.4
Traditional doctrine of Christianity	8	34.8
Total	23	100

Survey Field

iii. God in three Distinct Persons at the Same Time

From Table 8, Christ Apostolic Church believes that the concept of trinitarian theology is a timeless mystery. Also, this

is seen in the 23 respondents in the Celestial Church of Christ, who accounted for 100% of the respondents of the respondents affirming the mysteriousness of the Trinitarian meta-thought.

Table 8: God in Three Distinct Persons at the Same Time

God in Three Distinct persons at the Same Time	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Christ Apostolic Church		
Yes	25	100
No	0	0
Total	25	100
Celestial Church of Christ		
Yes	23	100
No	0	0
Total	23	100

Survey Field

iv. The Role of Each Person in the Trinity

Table 9 shows that 88% of the Christ Apostolic Church and 82.6% of the Celestial Church of Christ hold the opinion

that each Trinitarian person contributes to the divine bond of the Trinity. However, 12% and 17.4% of the church leaders from CAC and CCC, respectively, had no idea of the individual role of the Trinity.

Table 9: The Role of Each Person in the Trinity

The role of each person in the Trinity	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a. Christ Apostolic Church		
Contributory to the divine	22	88
No idea of individual role	3	12
Total	25	100
b. Celestial Church of Christ		
Contributory to the divine	19	82.6
No idea of individual role	4	17.4
Total	23	100

Survey Field

v. The Bible Teaches Three Distinct Persons in the Trinity

Table 10 reveals that the Bible teaches three distinct persons in the Trinity. The Christ Apostolic Church stated 88% and the Celestial Church of Christ stated 73.9% on the implicit doctrinal inclusivity of the Trinity. However, 26.1% of the respondents from

CAC and 12% of the respondents from CCC held the opinion that there was a dearth of implicit doctrinal inclusivity of the Trinity in the Bible. This indicates that a greater number of the church leaders explained that Trinitarian biblical doctrine is not included and openly taught in the Bible.

Table 10: Bible Teaches Three Distinct Persons in the Trinity

The Bible teaches three distinct persons	Frequency	Percentage (%)
a. Christ Apostolic Church		
Implicit doctrinal inclusivity	22	88
No idea of implicit doctrinal inclusivity	3	12
Total	25	100
b. Celestial Church of Christ		
Implicit doctrinal inclusivity	17	73.9
No idea of implicit doctrinal inclusivity	6	26.1
Total	23	100

Survey Field

Discussion

From the result of the investigation, 41.7% representing an age group of 55 to 64 years solely from clergymen (100%) indicates appreciable limits of reliability, dependency, and usability of the data elicited for the study. It emphasises the concern of the African-initiated church leaders, who are custodians of biblical doctrines, and has an in-depth understanding and conceptualization of the Trinity and Trinitarian theology. Cultural and social disparities restricting women's leadership in the selected churches were occasioned by doctrinal inclinations connected with the historical dominance of

the male over the female as well as educational factors. The high ratio of the lower limit of both conventional and theological educational levels portrays a challenging complexity in the discourse and understanding of Trinitarian theology. This could intensify misconceptions, erroneous doctrinal interpretations, and conceptualisations of theological nuances.

On the perception of Christians on the concept of trinity, a larger percentage of both CAC and CCC leaders investigated were inclined to the trinitarian concept and valued the importance of the trinitarian doctrine as a resilient foundation for their faith and system of religious practices.

This suggests that these churches prioritise the Trinitarian meta-concept, indicating a commitment to practicing and upholding the doctrine of the Trinity.

The concept of the Trinity, according to the perceptions of the respondents, is divided into three categories: superficial, interpretative or theological, and passive opinions. The theoretical view that defines the doctrine is the most common, with 52% of CAC and 47.8% of CCC. This may perhaps lead to misinterpretations, misconceptions, and an inadequate understanding of the depth and complexity of the conceptual doctrine of the Trinity. Holding to a superficial view could hinder understanding of the complexities and nuances beneath an idea. Superficial inclination Findings on the theological or interpretative view showed 28% and 17.4% of the respondents from CAC and CCC, respectively, representing an inadequate interpretation of the Trinitarian concept. The orthodox value of the Trinity is seen in Victorinus' Trinitarianism, which argues from the inclusivity of the Roman-Greco interpretative system of wholeness or unity in diversity. This was also seen in the Saint Augustine Trinitarian argument, which used the concept of Neoplatonic wholeness as a framework to contend for the oneness of the Trinity. However, this closed-minded interpretation leads to the exclusion and judgement of those who do not share the same beliefs. These churches should promote an open and inclusive understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, respect different viewpoints, and foster unity and acceptance within the Christian community.

Christ Apostolic Church believes that the concept of Trinitarian theology is a timeless mystery (100%), and the Celestial Church of Christ, which also accounted for 100%, affirmed the mysteriousness of the Trinitarian meta-thought. The 'timeless mystery' of the concept of the Trinity has

been a strong debate among Christians over the centuries. This prompts an interrogation: Is Christianity a monotheistic or polytheistic religion? Many contemplative scholars continue to believe that God can exist in three districts. The fascinating aspect of this doctrine is its acceptance into Christianity as an integral doctrine. This is mysterious and a puzzle because what lacks human understanding now stands as a strong control tool. According to Barnes (1971), on the historicity of the Church, thinkers contended that one of the doctrines that the Church Fathers held as mysterious was the doctrine of the Trinity. Gallego (2020) and Buertey (2023) argued in the same vein that despite the mysteriousness of Trinitarian theology, its impact is felt in contemporary African society because it is used as a tool of ideal oneness to maintain the heterogeneity of the African people. In its mysteriousness, the Trinitarian construct is implicative to African society as it reflects interconnectedness and interdependence, which is what African heterogeneity truly represents in its idealism. This is shared in the African Trinitarian humanism of Counted (2019) and Gallego (2020), resonating with the African values of communal harmony and unitary dependence.

According to 88% of the leaders of CAC, every Trinitarian individual contributes to the divine relationship, and 82.6% of CCC corroborated the same context, but 4.45% (CAC) and 12.5% (CCC) were unsure. This agrees with the contention of Egbo (personal interview, September 30, 2023) and Osamaye (September 20, 2023) that it was the Father's role in the creation process, the origin of all that exists, and also being the Creator that originated notions and initiated unity in diversity. The Father is the authority and sustainer of the universe. The Son, according to them, is seen as the embodiment of God's love and redemption

for humanity, and it is explained further that the Holy Spirit is seen as the divine presence and power of God that keeps believers strengthened in their faith while also acting as their comforter in times of need. Their responses hold strongly to the unity in diversity and the delegated power of the Trinity, which are conspicuous in the roles the Trinitarian people play. Besides the roles of the Trinitarian persons, besides the diversified unity and delegated power that keep the Trinity, there is, according to Lee (2010), the economic interpretation that brings out God's expressing himself in economic bits for man to comprehend him. So, if the Trinitarian roles of the persons were not distinctively expressed, the Trinitarian value would have been discarded.

On the notion that the Bible teaches that only God exists in three distinct persons, a larger percentage of church leaders hold that Trinitarian theology is an implicit construct, which suggests that there is no convincing, detailed explanation of the Trinity in the Bible. This is a challenge to the interpretation and conceptualization of the doctrines in the African-initiated churches. The result shows that 80% of CAC and 86.96% of CCC leaders oppose the implicit representation of the Trinitarian doctrine. This argument risks potential deviations from the orthodox interpretation of the concept. The controversy could lead to "theological syncretism," as argued in the thoughts of Charsley (1987) and Biwul (2021). More so, this is obvious in the response of Ezijota (Personal Interview, September 21, 2023) who believes

'...that the Trinity is needed to fight and win battles, and that this is made possible with the involvement of all the three persons of the Trinity, especially Holy Michael, who is believed to represent

the Holy Spirit, the third divine personality of the Trinity.' However, this disputation about the Holy Michael representing the Holy Spirit was dismissed within the same indigenous denomination by another Church leader, Orhadalvwe (Personal Interview, September 20, 2023) who argued that *'...Holy Michael does not replace the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian context but a belief paradigm in the Celestial Church of Christ to fight battles within and outside Church services. So, the mentioning of Holy Michael is calling his presence as God's servant to protect the congregants.'*

Besides the theological syncretism the implicit argument for the Trinity has caused, there is the long-time debate and conflict that the inclusivity of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Christian fundamental principle is defamatory to the divine character of Christianity since the said doctrine was not taught by Jesus Christ or his disciples. So, the doctrine is concluded to be a schism and strange to Christianity. With this implicit contention for the Trinitarian doctrine, it would be difficult to condemn the conceptualization of the doctrine in the African-initiated churches because there is no laid-down biblical measure for it to be interpreted. This is disturbing to the conceptualization of the Trinity in these indigenous churches, as their worship system with the inclusivity of the Trinity seems to include the traditional theology of recognising the African deities. Although no African deity is publicly mentioned during church services, the way the Trinitarian doctrine is conceptualised points to a mentality

ingrained in the African identity of polytheism.

There is much danger in the claim for the implicit biblical nature of the doctrine of the Trinity in the sense that it can bring about significant confusion about how the nature of the three persons of the Trinity would be interpreted and conceptualized. And this is what is observed in the way that the Trinity is interpreted in African society. Since a majority of 81.3% of the collective respondents support the orthodox implicit inclusivity of the doctrine, there would be theological coherence or unity in the conceptuality of the doctrine. The doctrine suffers from divergent misinterpretations since it is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. It would be difficult to criticise any indigenous denomination based on how the doctrine is interpreted. In other words, there is freedom of relative interpretation among the African-initiated churches. More importantly, the interpretation of the Trinity by various African churches has significantly influenced their beliefs. Olumode (Personal Interview, July 19, 2023) and Fadare (Personal Interview, April 26, 2023) gave a comparative explanation of the Trinity with the Yoruba concept of the number three thus:

'... The Yorubas' significance in the number three can be traced back to the Ifa oracle, a sacred number found in the scriptures. This Oracle, like stones cast on the ground, has specific meanings and speaks to the Ifa Priest. When a number speaks of three, the Ifa Priest will perform a spectacular act. A pure Yoruba person cannot give out three things, as it is considered taboo. They can give out five, but not three. The

number three is seen as a strong number because there is the tendency that giving out three things can cause evil for the giver or receiver.'

The foregoing indicates that the 'trinity' is a belief system based on three conceptions: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which is in consonance with Christianity. In Yoruba, it is based on "Olodumare," "Orisa," and "Ori," the head. The Trinitarian concept has strong ground among the Deltans. This is seen in the opinion of Orode (Personal Interview, June 14, 2023) that:

'...the three-in-one deity is seen in the conceptualisation of the Urhobo, who hold that these deities are responsible for creation, fertility, and protection. The triad of systematic deities known as Edjo, Oghene, and Oru recognise the complexities and interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. So, man in the world needs the functionality of the Urhobo trinitarian concept to experience a meaningful life.'

The debate is that the 81.3% who accounted for the Biblical implicit of the Trinitarian doctrine risk interpretative freedom of the doctrine because of the relative Trinitarian background and attachment of the African-initiated churches. Again, the argument that the Trinity is implicitly biblical brings about the express use of the number three in many African-initiated Churches. This number is relative to the representation in the African region and the representation in other regions. This affects the

interpretation of biblical Trinitarian theology because of its implicative interpretation among the African churches, entrenched in their beliefs and practices. As Fadare (Personal Interview, April 26, 2023) said

'...The issue of trinity and Christianity is not solely due to trinity but rather to the traditional background of the people. Before Christianity, people believed in performing certain rituals three times, such as calling names and blowing into the air. If it was not done three times, they had to do it seven times. Many people still carry this traditional practice with them, not removing their clothes but integrating them into Christianity. Many people cannot separate their traditional attire from their Christian attire.'

The argument remains that the Trinitarian theological nuances pose incomplete and inaccurate beliefs about the nature of God that would be cultivated from the free-for-all interpretation and conceptualisation of the Trinitarian concept among African-initiated churches based on different ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The study explored the perceptions of African-initiated churches towards the Trinity. The findings revealed that the factors contributing to the divergent opinion of Christians on the personality of the trinity were socially, demographically, culturally, politically, and economically unbiased. Thus, the perception and conceptualization of Trinitarian theology among selected African churches in the Niger Delta region used the theoretical application of Neoplatonism to reconstruct the nuanced misconceptions. Trinitarian

theology is the concept of God as three distinct persons sharing the same essence. The study attempted to explain the Trinitarian mystery of the distinctive persons in one God through Plotinus' Neoplatonic hypostases, which recognise the ultimate One expressing himself in a hierarchical order of the Nous, or intelligent mind, and the world Sou through an emanative process. The idea behind the study is to know if the diversified unity or wholeness of being that the Trinitarian consciousness represents is conceptualised by the selected African-initiated churches of the Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church in the Niger Delta Region.

The study shows that the doctrine of trinity is crucial to understanding the nature of God, as he reveals himself through three distinct persons. It is also revealed in the study that Trinitarian theology is crucial to the salvation of mankind; therefore, it is a doctrine that is core and fundamental to Christianity. Again, the doctrine of the Trinity controls the ways and manners in which church services are conducted in African-initiated churches. This was seen in the responses of the forty-eight respondents from the selected churches of the Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church.

However, the study reveals that the conceptuality and integration of Trinitarian theology have some interpretative nuances that allow the deification of each of the three persons of the Trinity. This is seen in the calling of the names of the three persons of the Trinity during prayer. This attitude creates a mindset among the Indigenous worshippers that, without the mention of these Trinitarian names, prayers would not be answered. So, with this attitude, the concept of mixed polytheism seemed to be playing out in the church worship system.

The study shows that there is much to be done in terms of philosophical and intellectual construct among the African-initiated churches to put the Trinitarian meta-theory in the right framework and perspective of the unity in diversity or the wholeness of beings that the doctrine represents. One of these intellectual and philosophical blends is the use of Neoplatonism, a meta-construct of Plotinus that holds a hierarchical unity of divine beings from the One through the *Nous* and the World Soul.

The theory of cultural imperialism was adopted as a tool to explain colonial and missionary activities in African communities. The non-African masters enforced their cultural and belief systems on their indigenous societies in Africa. They succeeded in forcing Christianity on the indigenous people with the use of political and economic powers, annihilating the traditional doctrines of the land. The relevance of this theory to Neoplatonism and the Trinity in African-Initiated Churches is that it enables the research work to understand the main cause for a nuanced interpretation of the concept of the Trinity in African-Initiated Churches, as the religion itself was coerced on them, so they did not have a thorough understanding of doctrines. Trinitarian theology, a mental construct of early Christian thinkers was developed through deep reflection on the Biblical Old and New Testaments, and lack of historical context has led to misinterpretation and misconceptions among these indigenous churches, highlighting the need for better understanding and support for this doctrine.

The following recommendations are proposed in light of the findings from the study:

1. In African-initiated churches, theological education ought to be required of all church leaders, since accurate conception and integration

of Trinitarian theology within the church worship structure are essential.

2. Church leaders in African-initiated churches should prioritise the historical context of their doctrines, including the Trinitarian meta-theory. This is vital to avoid distortion and misinterpretation of the original teachings.

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