


Koinonia as Communion: Rethinking Communion in Igbo Traditional Society as *Oriko*


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ABSTRACT

The Greek term *Koinōnia* has been for everyday usage, contextually meaning many things—relationships, fellowship, participation, and communion in usages. This paper situates *koinonia* within the context of communion, evoking a special usage in Christendom. It applies an intercultural and interreligious linkage of the term to an age-long practice of *Ndi Igbo*, a practice that predates their encounter with Christianity. *Ndi Igbo* are people living in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, West Africa whose indigenous religion is the *Igbo* Traditional Religion—a subset of the African Traditional Religion. The encounter with Christianity introduced *Koinōnia* from the Christian perspective, not as a new idea because there is an already existing idea of *koinonia* in their traditional everyday social and religious life. This paper investigates the religious and social dimensions of *Koinōnia* from the Greco-Hellenistic period to the early Christian period, to the Pauline period, and the current usage of the term in the present time. This exploration is placed contextually to an age-long practice of *Oriko* in the *Ogbako Umunna* of the Igbo people that has the same meaning, effect, and practice model as the Christian communion, without an encounter between the two culture and religion. This paper explores the ontological, religious, cultural, and substantial relation of *Koinōnia* as communion as reflected in Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion. This investigation is an intercultural and interreligious exposé for enriching and fostering the ongoing mutual dialogue between Christianity and indigenous religions. A dialogue situated in bilateral and constructive exchange of experience for inculturation.

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1. INTRODUCING THE PROBLEMATIC

An attempt to conceptualize an intercultural and interreligious discussion on communion highlights a particularly important aspect that the term itself does not present at face value: it is both an act and a term. A realization of this begs both a semantic and contextual interrogation of the tenets and trends of the subject matter. An intercultural and interreligious discussion of the subject of communion requires a bifurcated multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach. This view is supported by the fact that communion as a subject matter lies at the intersection of theology, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, theology of culture and nutrition studies. In the realm of Theology, the subject matter is situated within an African Theology of Inculturation. Highlighting the important characteristics of this narrative reflects two particularly important expressions of local African narrative of Theology—African Christian Theology and Theology of Inculturation (Healey & Sybertz, 1996). These two expressions are important because an approach to the subject matter requires both an intercultural and interreligious dimension—this is because the subject of communion has deep rooted religious and cultural affiliations. These two dimensions as stated represents the most effective theological approaches in the second half of the last century (Magesa, 2004).



An interreligious and intercultural discussion of communion represents an encounter between faith and culture—an encounter that should be grounded in mutual enrichment and ongoing dialogue (Magesa, 2004). Further, an encounter that is mutually beneficial to the local African Christianity and world Christianity. This symbiotic encounter projects a bilateral and constructive exchange of experience where the “cultural values and grassroot experience of the local African Christianity expression” (Magesa, 2004) will be well equipped to enrich the world Christianity while the circumstances and significant discernment of the world Christianity will confront and complement the existing schemes of the local African Christianity (Magesa, 2004).

2. IDENTIFYING THE SUBJECT MATTER

The task of having an intercultural and interreligious discussion about any idea, say communion as being attempted in this paper requires a cross-referencing of ideas as it relates to the two cultures/religions in focus. The African cultural point of view in general and the Igbo perspective in particular has been disadvantaged with lack of documentation. However, the information and historical sources have been able to be passed down by oral tradition, a process that have ensured the survival of historical heritages and traditions. Oral tradition has from the last century being incorporated as a reliable source of information in research and the academia where written documentation is lacking. Orality which encompasses epistemic and pedagogical methods of oral tradition (Ikuenobe, 2018) has been legitimized as a historiographical method (Modupeolu, 1990). This has been defined as the transmission of ideas from one generation to the other using the words of the mouth and other means besides writing (Wiredu, 2009). The legitimacy and reliance on orality as a way of expressing and transmitting knowledge is based on principles of epistemic trust, epistemic communalism and epistemic dependence which are African’s surest way of retaining and justifying knowledge which have been passed down from the older generation without proof of documentation (Ikuenobe, 2018).

The understanding of the topic of communion requires a critical overview of the history, development and contextualization of the term, and a further isolation of the term from what it has been associated with in our everyday discussion. The discussion of the subject of communion within the context of this paper will be situated within the larger context of communion both as a social and religious phenomenon. This is important because the history and development must be situated within the context of the social and religious worldview of the Hellenistic world (Greco-Roman) of which both the Jews and early Christians were part of. In everyday usage and association, communion has been used to imply—a heritage of Christianity which connotes community of men brought together in one body by the spirit of Christ (Scott, 1921), group of Christian believers (LaCunga, 1991), holy people of God (Rausch, 2008), a group or unity of churches and many other connotations.

Significantly, the Christianisation of the term communion came to its apogee with Pauline letters in the New Testament where it was used to denote ‘participation’, ‘fellowship’, ‘contribution’ (Dunn, 2009), etc. It is important to note that even the fellowship of early Christians to share meals together (Alikin, 2010), does not stand for the entirety of the practice and idea of communion from the onset even though the Greco-Roman influence has planted it in the life of the early Christians. One can argue that communion evolved from being of gentile origin to being used in the Greek agora in philosophical debates to becoming a Christian heritage (Dunn, 2009). Evidently, tracing the origin of the earliest Christian gathering which were purely social and less religious as borrowed from the Greco-Roman era has been on the rise since critical biblical scholarship peaked in the 18th century. This is equally an interesting subject matter since it has become necessary to deconstruct the whole Pauline usage of the Greek term *koinōnia* to evangelize the Christian *kerygma*; especially his encounter with the Greek Christians when he visited Corinth in 50 CE. This dating seems plausible because the missionary journey of Paul to Asia Minor covered the regions of the present-day Greece and Turkey and parts of the Mediterranean. His conversion took place in Damascus (present day Turkey) in circa 34 CE. From here, his missionary journeys covered the major cities of Asia Minor.

The term *koinōnia* is not original to the Christians but the Greco-Roman secular world, and the idea of *koinōnia* is a universal concept since man by nature is a social creature (Basrun, 2020). In the different renditions of *koinōnia* as communion, participation, fellowship, the traditional Igbo society has practiced communion in the *ogbako Umunna* from the beginning of their civilization. The use of the term traditional Igbo society is used interchangeably with traditional Igbo Religion, and Igbo Christianity for the purpose of this paper. There are so many syntactical and hermeneutical nuances concerning the use of these phrases in different context. The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 1994 African Synod discusses the use of the phrase African traditional religion in the singular even there are traditional religions in Africa—the use of Igbo traditional religion in the singular can also evoke the same sentiment as to the duplicity of traditional religions. And these for the synod is not consequential as the different forms and expressions of religion in different ethnic groups of Africa (Special Assembly

for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, 1993). Kirwen (1987) argues that there is no African Traditional Religion, that what has always been is African Religion which is the source and root of the spirituality of Africans. Wijzen (1994) prefers African Indigenous Religion over Kirwen's African Religion and over African Traditional Religion. He argues that the word 'traditional' suggests that African religion is primitive, backward, and static whereas African Religion is truly dynamic.

Interestingly, some material ideas of communion have evolved since the early Christian times with the establishment of church building and designation of worship and liturgy in many ways starting from the gathering in Antioch. The substantial relation of these ideas of communion between the two religions will be explored, this is in a bid to establish the validity of communion practiced by the Igbo society in their religious and cultural context. The possibility of this exploration hinges on the fact that communal living, hospitality, and relation with the living-dead which are core representatives of deep African values (Healey & Sybertz, 1996) are all represented in the idea of communion.

3. KOINŌNIA: A HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The secular *koinōnia* which is claimed to be one of the most beautiful words used by the Greeks (Barclays, 1967) was appropriated by Paul to identify Community of people bound together in faith and the spirit of Christ. The term which is very rich and profound in the secular Greek usage as—all form of relationships (Sampley, 1980), marriage relationships—*pros biou koinōnian* in Aristotle's Politics (Shields, 2007), in business relationships (Shields, 2007), in education—Plato in his *Republic* (Book 5, 466 c) calls for *koinōnia* in education of the people (Barclays, 1967), in the social life of the people (Barclays, 1967), in politics (Taylor, 1995), in international relations and in friendship (Barclays, 1967), et cetera. Chester (2003) argues that the word *koinōnia* has no religious affiliation until Christianity appropriated it especially under the Pauline indigenization and enculturation. Paul whose mandate is to the gentile Greeks succeeded in using the originally secular term to delve fully into the service of the Gospel. The transmission of the Jesus mission and Christology as it were for Paul was different from the approach taken by Peter whose mandate was chiefly to Jewish Christians. In crossing the frontiers of semitic to Hellenistic thought, Paul adopted a language that was familiar to the Greco-Roman populace, a language that is both symbolic and important to the people.

In certain contemporary literature, the approach to the *koinōnia*—fellowship, gathering of the early Christians has taken a sociological dimension. Prior before this period, the study into the origin and development of the fellowship of the early Christians has been literary-critical and tradition-historical especially as related the events of the Lord's supper and the weekly gathering of the believers after the death of Christ (Alikin, 2010). This sociological dimension of the fellowship highlights that the gathering of the early Christians was not purely a religious activity rather a socio-cultural gathering (Alikin, 2010) just like the many associations prevalent in the Greco-Roman times of the 1st Century CE. Evidence from the Bible and Patristic writings show that the gathering of both Christian community and the Greco-Roman associations have the character of common meal (supper) and usually a symposium. While in Corinth, Paul compared the meal taken by the local Christian community in Corinth to the meal of the Pagan religious association (1 Corinthians 10:16–21) while Tertullian compared the meal of the *collegie salorum* and the Dionysus and Sarapic cults (both are pagan religious associations) to the meals eaten by the early Christian community (Tertulian *Apology*, 7 & 9).

These gatherings cannot be held without banquets especially on Sunday evening when the main gathering is held, up till the middle of the third century. This goes to show that the blend of Hellenistic tradition and Jewish traditions were still an inclusive part of the fellowship of the early Christians.

4. THE GRECO-ROMAN USAGE OF KOINŌNIA

Koinōnia has a very rich cultural background traced back to the early Greco-Roman times. It has been used by many Greek writers to describe various forms of relationship. The term signifies and encumbers varieties of relationships and commitments in the Greco-Roman everyday life and relationship and in their philosophy. The word *Koinon* expresses various forms of healthy and virtuous relationship between people (Nithyananda, 2010). In Aristotelian ethics, the term *konini* is used for marriage relationships to denote partnerships and commitment (Aristotle, 1977). This *konini/Koinōnia* occurs when two different people commit to each other *pros biou Koinōnian* in a contract to share their lives together (Barclays, 1967). The term was also used in business relationships where two people who are in a *Koinōnia* are expected to come together, align resources and work towards a common goal and profit (Shields, 2007). Subsequently, when the people deny in a contract that they are no longer in a *Koinōnia*, their business relationship/partnership has terminated (Shields, 2007).

One of the standout terms in Aristotle's *Politics* is the term *Koinōnia*, used to denote the fellowship of people living together and upholding a common unity and goal (Taylor, 1995). In so saying, the state is a *Koinōnia* (partnership) (Cooper, 2005) of clans and communities who agree to live together in *Koinōnia* (relationship) (Barclays, 1967) that results in *Koinōnia* (communal and shared life) (Nithyananda, 2010). For the Greco-Roman thinkers, *Koinōnia* is the foundation of community (Shields, 2007). For Aristotle, *Koinōnia* is the basis of communal life of the people of the ancient Greco-Roman society (Taylor, 1995). Plato's use of the term is based on the Stoic emphasis on humans as communal beings (Reumann, 1994). Furthermore, the term was also used in international diplomacy to express international friendship, alliance, economic partnership et cetera (Barclays, 1967). *Koinōnia* in this context depicts shared alliance for a common goal and purpose specifically between two independent nations. Beyond the alliance between nations or communities, *Koinōnia* is used to express alliance between friends in the form of friendship and relationships. It is used to express the very substance of friendship (Nithyananda, 2010).

Humanistic philosophers like Gorgias (Circa 483–375 BCE) used the term in strictly platonic sense in where it is expressed as the very essence of friendship. The Greco-Roman Christian writer Origen (Circa 185–254) used *Koinōnia* in a broader sense to include profanities and sharing in crimes. This use by Origen included erotic friendship of sexual nature, sharing and participation in bribery, injustices, persecutions, and illegal deals (Hartmann, 1968). The sexual connotation given to *Koinōnia* by Origen includes sexual intercourse both within and outside marriage and the general involvement with one's object of stimulation (Hartmann, 1968). The ambiguity of the use of *Koinōnia* by Origen leaves a room for speculative interpretation of the motive of Origen—if sex within and outside marriage (including with other people apart from partners) are to be weighted as the same both in context and demonstration. Far more speculative stances come with the expression of sexual involvement with one's object of stimulation which is not properly defined to be limited to only humans or other objects of stimulation.

The Greek writers used *Koinōnia* to express all forms of relationship which brought people together and in most cases for which people benefit from. Contrary to the view by Brown (1976) that *Koinōnia* did not have any religious connotation before Christianity, Barclays (1967) earlier argued that it has been used to express communion with god. It is important to clarify that this reference to religious communion was with Zeus as expressed by Epictetus (Discourses 2.19.27) and not about the Judeo-Christian religious God. In the *Discourses* of Epictetus, the theistic conception of god is different from what is obtainable in Judeo-Christian belief. Nevertheless, the gods have the same character of speaking to people, guiding the people accepting prayers from the people (Barclays, 1967). In Plato's Republic (Book 5, 466), *Koinōnia* was adopted as a partnership in education to eliminate the discrimination based on gender (Jowett, 1952). The elimination of this discrimination and extension of the benefit of education to both men and women will enable women to have more opportunities to enable them to share more privileges and responsibility to the state (Jowett, 1952). In his *Laws*, Plato also expresses how *Koinōnia* (dealings) between people irrespective of gender will contribute to social life of the community where issues will be handled and resolved fairly (Jowett, 1952). *Koinōnia* was an everyday language for the Hellenistic world for any term relating to togetherness for a shared common good. The ambiguous nature of the word made it difficult for a particular meaning and explanation to be attached to it.

The term remained relevant yet elusive for the writers of Greco-Roman origin. This is because every form of close human relationships is *Koinōnia* for the contemporary Greek (Drost et al., 2011). It was a way of living, a common mentality (Fitzmyer, 1998) for those who live such life such as the disciples of the Pythagoras who see it as a communal manner of living (Drost et al., 2011).

5. USAGE OF KOINŌNIA IN EARLY CHRISTIANS CONTEXT

As at the early Christian period, it was not 'fellowship' to pray and break bread in pure commemoration of Christ rather to pray and break bread in banquets as it were in other Greco-Roman associations and gatherings. Breaking of bread in this context is not particular to Christians alone but the opening act of a Jewish meal event (Witherington, 1998). Granted that breaking of bread is not particular to Christians, the term is also a technical term not used for just ordinary everyday meal but the beginning of a special meal (Witherington, 1998). This special status of breaking of bread forms the basis by which some early Christian scholars like Justin accused the Jews of copying the eucharistic process of the early Christians (Alikin, 2010). The pericope of Acts 2:42 presents four acts of the Apostles—*διδασκία* (teaching), *κλάσις τῶ ἄρτου* (breaking of bread), *κοινωνία* (fellowship) and *προσευχαί* (prayers). *Koinōnia* in the model of Kuhnke represents vertical and horizontal dimension where *κοινωνία* (fellowship) and *προσευχαί* (prayers) are in the vertical plane as relates the relationship of the early Christians with God while *διδασκία* (teaching), *κλάσις τῶ ἄρτου* (breaking of bread)

lies in the horizontal plane representing the relationship between the early Christians (Kuhnke, 1982). *Koinōnia* so saying has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, the reality of *Koinōnia* is concretized in horizontal relationship—breaking bread and sharing a meal together. Sharing of meal and breaking of the bread for the Jews is a substantial expression of spiritual fellowship (Drost et al., 2011) since the Jews do not just eat with anybody (Acts of Apostles 10 vs 28). For this paper, the horizontal aspect of *Koinōnia* which lays more emphasis on interpersonal communion will be elaborated and put in focus with the Igbo expression and understanding of communion.

To put the discussion in perspective, Meeks (2006) argues that there are differences with the gathering of the early Christians and the other Greco-Roman associations. There are documented gathering of voluntary associations like the *corpora*, *collegia*, *sodalitates* who gather in the houses of their members to dine together and hold feasts (Alikin, 2010). The meeting of voluntary associations which usually are less than fifty (50) in number comprises also of religious activities that are not necessary Christian-like, food is provided by the host, but participants contribute a certain amount to cover the cost for the host. There is a gathering of pagan cult associations who decide to meet in secret in the houses of their members as against open shrines and centres (Alikin, 2010). The cults have a plethora of activity for their gathering including feasting, worship, social intercourse, instructions and other rituals resembling the practice of the early Christians so much so that Justin accused them of copying the weekly sacrament of the Christians (Alikin, 2010). There are also documented gatherings of Jewish associations holding symposia and banquets in the writings of Philo, Josephus, Qumram and 3rd Maccabees. This involves feasting together starting with blessing of bread and wine, discussing of the Law (Taylor, 1995; Alikin, 2010), a long homily from the one presiding over the feast (Philo, *Contemplation* 40–63), formation and singing in choirs, singing sacred songs and performance of dances (Philo, *Contemplation* 66–90).

The fourth type of gathering highlighted by Alikin (2010) is the gathering of Christian communities. The gathering of the Christians has the character of the three above, however these members are strictly followers of Christ. Some scholars (Drost et al., 2011) argue contrary to Meeks (2006) that the early Christians practices were rooted in Judaism and borrowed from traditional Judaism practices as opposed to being different from it. This was periodical, apparently weekly sharing of joys, struggles and concerns. The early Christians fellowship as projected by Meeks has a blend of household, church, cult, philosophical school, club and so many others without taking the form or any blend. The views as stated above presents the idea that food and drinks were very important aspects of the fellowship of the early Christians (Alikin, 2010). This fellowship which has pragmatic focus on cultic and ceremonial rituals were held in the houses of believers which were the first churches of the early Christians (Drost et al., 2011).

6. THE PAULINE AND NEW TESTAMENT ADOPTION OF KOINŌNIA

The Pauline structure adopts both the word and eucharistic dimension of the gathering of the early Christians as *koinōnia*. It is important to analyse the usage of the term in The Pauline epistles and other New Testament pericopes. The importance of the term *koinōnia* in Christian ecclesiology have it appearing 19 times in the New Testament; 13 times in Pauline epistles, 4 times in John and once in Acts of the Apostles and Letter to the Hebrews (Reumann, 1994). Paul adopted *koinōnia* as ‘participation’ and ‘sharing’ in the Lord’s Supper as proclaiming the Lord’s death until *Parousia*. Paul assures the Corinthians that when they break the bread, they are in *koinōnia*—participating or sharing in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). This is the classical formulation of the Eucharistic formula of *koinōnia* by Paul, and this forms the basis and sense of *koinōnia* communion. Paul interprets the eucharist as enacted in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 as resulting in a fellowship in Christ when one participates in the body and blood of Christ (Panikulam, 1979). Furthermore, Panikulam argues that in Pauline theology, it is in the *koinōnia* in the Lord’s Supper that one experiences the true *koinōnia* in the person of Christ.

The vertical and horizontal dimension of *Koinōnia* finds synergy in Pauline teachings where Christ expressed it so powerfully in his *kenosis* (Oprean, 2021). The Pauline theology of communion as dissected by the use and allegory of the term *Koinōnia* explores the concept beyond the boundary of fellowship alone but deeper into associating the term with participation and union with Christ. This Christological grounding of the Christian life incorporates the vertical dimension with and in Christ; and the horizontal dimension with one another as members of the body of Christ and of the society. Paul expresses the background for his theology of fellowship in 1 Corinthians 1:7–9. He projects *Koinōnia* with Christ as the first determinant dimension of fellowship (Pink, 1971). The word was not liberalized in the New Testament before St Paul; hence it did not play so much part in the teaching of Jesus and the life of the early Palestinian Church (Nithyananda, 2010). Jesus did not use the word explicitly, the record usage of *Koinōnia* was in relation to sharing of goods and property among the believers in the early Jerusalem Church (Reumann, 1994). To administer to the Gentile Greco-Roman

world, Paul adopted a change of approach different from Peter whose audience were mainly Jews. Paul adopted the Greek term in service of the Gospel to penetrate the hinterland of the Greco-Roman world.

Paul adopts the term in different themes of his writings; the various context includes but not limited to eucharistic formula, participation, sharing, fellowship in prayers et cetera. Paul adopts the Eucharistic formula in 1 Cor. 10:16 where he expresses that the true *Koinōnia* experience happens in the last supper. In Panikulam's thesis, Paul interprets the Last supper as a true *Koinōnia* in the body and blood of Christ resulting in a new *Koinōnia* among participants in Christ. Paul also uses the term to represent the blessings and unity in the Holy Spirit as expressed in 2 Cor. 13:13 and Phil. 4:23. In this Biblical pericope, Paul reassures the people of the Grace of our Lord Jesus, the Love of God and the *Koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit (Panikulam, 1979). This is one of the places Paul used the Trinitarian exhortation. This sense of *Koinōnia* is also expressed in 2 Cor. 6:11–18 as the presence of the Spirit among the Christians making it a living Temple. The *Koinōnia* represented by the presence of the Spirit makes it impossible for the *Koinōnia* with the unbelievers to be established (Cf. Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:13). Paul also appropriated the use of *Koinōnia* in the Greco-Roman lexicology to mean solidarity, in the case of Paul, financial support. Paul referred to the financial support he was seeking for his mission in Jerusalem as *Koinōnia* (Nithyananda, 2010). Borrowing from the Aristotelian use of *Koinōnia* to denote business relationships and partnerships, Paul borrowed this sense of the word in Phil. 4:10–20. The Philippians were in *Koinōnia* (v. 14) with Paul by providing financial support and personnel.

Besides the corpus of Pauline letters, there are also Deutero-Pauline and New Testament letters where *Koinōnia* and related terms are used to denote some meanings in the Greco-Roman world and other ecclesiology related terms. Timothy in Chapter 6 vs 18 advises the rich to be generous and *koinonikous* (share) (Panikulam, 1979). This sharing is different from the *Koinōnia* (sharing) implied in Acts 2 where the common proceeds from sales of communally owned property are shared; this sharing implied by Timothy is one emanating from one's personal wealth and magnanimity. The single reference of the word in Acts 2:42 as used by Luke signifies the starting point of the use of the word in the New Testament—this is noted as the springboard for the spread of the word (Reumann, 1994). The use of the term in the New Testament and in Pauline corpus came to present far more reaching context than it was used in the Hellenistic sense. It represents the bringing together of God and humanity, more than merely bringing of humanity together in the Greco-Roman usage. Even in the usage in the Acts, its usage surpasses just sharing of goods among brethren, but this sharing has spiritual foundation which surpasses what was seen in the Greco-Roman usage (Panikulam, 1979).

Aristotle's implied use of the term to denote partnership was impressed in the New Testament usage of *Koinōnia* to mean 'partnership in Christian mission and service of the gospel' as seen in *koinonos emos* for Paul and Titus (2 Cor. 8:23) and *koinen pistin* alluding Titus as co-worker and partner. Nithyananda (2010) argues that *Koinōnia* usage in the New Testament and in the corpus of Paul is mostly used in the context of spread of the mission, hospitality, benevolence and partnership in the Gospel. Both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *Koinōnia* were impressed in the NT and Pauline works, it signifies communion with God which is at the heart of Christianity and relationship with fellow humans who are co-workers, partners and ministers of the Gospel. However, the Pauline *Koinōnia* is Christocentric but from a human point concretized in shared partnership in the mission.

7. AN IGBO KOINŌNIA EXPERIENCE: NZUKO UMUNNA; A WINDOW INTO THE IGBO KOINŌNIA EXPERIENCE

The egalitarian and republican nature of the Igbos made it imperative for there to be an ordered society where cultural norms and communal development are protected and championed. One of the structures put in place for this purpose, which can be found in every part of Igboland is the *Umunna* structure; a patrilineal institution that forms naturally for every community and kindred (Offor & Onyemelukwe, 2022). In attempting an etymology, *Umunna* is a bifurcation of two Igbo words—*umu* literally translated as 'children' and *nna* loosely translated as 'father'. This literal rendition is translated as 'children's father'. However, the Igbo lexicon translates this as father's children or children of the father. It is also translated as 'sons of the father' (Iwuh, 2020). It is translated contextually as kindred or kinsmen, a patrilineal member of the extended family of the ancestry of an individual (Iwuh, 2020). It extends to the immediate kindred and community (Offor & Onyemelukwe, 2022). It is strictly patrilineal and androcentric, usually a male line of descent from a common ancestor who is the founding ancestor (Iwuh, 2020; Uchendu, 2007). It is however problematic the extent of the ancestral linkage of people who should belong to the same *Umunna* lineage, it is usually a complex interrelationship of lineages or common agnatic ancestry (Orij, 2007; Osunwokeh, 2015).

Umunna which is the cornerstone of the Igbo socio-political structures is made up of elders and males of a common ancestry whose position is clearly defined in the *Umunna* structure. The structure of the *Umunna* operates in different levels—the mini level which is the immediate extended family; the mini-macro level which operates in the kindred level; and the macro stage which operates in the community level (Offor & Onyemelukwe, 2022). The membership of a higher level depends on membership of the lesser level, one cannot be a member of the *Umunna* in the clan level without being a member in the extended family level and subsequently in the kindred level. The scope of issues handled by the different levels of the *Umunna* hierarchy is dependent on the level where the issue arises (Iwuh, 2020). As the *Umunna* structure is the next socio-political structure after the family, the usual meetings are held in the house of the eldest member of the *Umunna* or a common place designated for such. The meetings are periodic and spontaneous when there are issues that need to be resolved.

The *Umunna* strictly speaking is the living members of the extended family, kindred, and community; not neglecting the living dead (ancestors) who are invisible part of the community. During each session of meeting, the first order of function is to pray over the Kola nut and the meeting which involves the invocation of all the ancestors to become part of the event. Ancestors are significant part of the Igbo cosmology both as guards of family traditions and mediators (Gehman, 1999). The ancestors are dead relatives of a family, kindred and community who maintained good relationship with the people while alive and are only separated from the people by death. In this understanding, the basic criterion of being an ancestor is death and physical separation from the living members of the community (Nwangwu, 2023). This death-criterion however is not definitive as scholars (cf. Nwangwu, 2023; Ofogebu, 2001) argue that death alone does not certify all the criteria. The linkage between dead relatives and the living is mostly possible because of the dualistic worldview of the Igbo society.

The Igbo conception of the cosmos is characterized as dualistic, the phenomenal world of people, animals, and other living things; while the other domain is realm of pantheon of deities, the ancestors, and the various spirits. The two worlds are in constant interactive relationship with each other, with the inhabitants of both worlds travelling back and forth the two (Whittaker & Msiska, 2007). This point of view appraises the fact that complementarity is at the heart of the cosmology of the Africans and reveal a stunning difference with Western cosmology in dualism. This dualism is entirely different from Cartesian philosophical dualism because this dualism permeates even to the level of the reality of all things, explicating the idea that nothing is sufficient by itself (Nwangwu, 2023). The abode of the good spirit of the dead is a perfect copy of the abode of the living, both only differing that one is visible and the other invisible (Metuh, 1985).

For the Igbos, every dead member of the family can be an ancestor, but not all get reverence and qualify to participate in the affairs of the living (Nwangwu, 2023). In this realm of ancestors are found spirit of elderly men and women, children, relatives in the extended family and members of the clan. Some of the qualities that qualifies a dead relative to join the rank of the ancestors who can participate in the affairs of the living include but not limited to: living a remarkable life, impacting positively in others, dying at an old ripe age and also getting a befitting burial which is an important rite of passage for the Igbos (Nwangwu, 2023). Added to this list are also living an exemplary and moral life, a married life with off-springs to the third and fourth generation, a ripe old age among others (Obiakor & Onuora, 2019). Therefore, the ancestors are members of the community and join the rank of the *Umunna* during consultations and meetings. This presents a horizontal dimension and a vertical direction to the *ogbako Umunna* as a lived *Koinōnia* experience.

8. THE IGBO KOINŌNIA EXPERIENCE

The present Igbo Bible was translated from the English Bible. This translation from the English Bible has effect on some of the words as have been translated into Igbo language. The English participation in the pericope of 1 Corinthians 10:16 was translated as *nweko*—literarily rendered as ‘to have together’. It is from the Igbo root word *nwe*—to have. It is difficult to separate *nwe* and *ko* since *ko* have no separate meaning without *nwe*. The three words that are *n-nwe-ko*: *n* is the pseudo pronoun that changes the verb *nwe* (have), and *ko* is the suffix that means ‘together’ in this grammar construction although *ko* cannot mean ‘together’ when standing alone. The English participation and the Greek *koinōnia* is translated in Igbo literarily as ‘having together’ although the closest should be *mmeko*—do together from the root word *mee* (do) which translates to ‘act together or share with one another.’ (Akubue, 2022). Other related compound words that are synonymous with *mmeko* are *mmekorita*—doing together/having a relationship, *nnoko*—staying together/solidarity. There is no direct translation of communion/*koinōnia* in the Igbo language. Communion can also be rendered as *idi-na-otu* (to be one) which can also be translated to unity or peace. This is because Igbo words are descriptive and lays more emphasis on a horizontal dimension than vertical dimension.

A material sign of *mmeakorita*, one of the Igbo derivatives of *Koinōnia* is *Oriko*/*Orikorolnrigbahlriko* which is loosely translated to eating together. All these action verbs represented are language variations of the same term translated in English as ‘eating together’. There are approximately 30 Igbo dialects with the variations being lexical and phonological (Mbanefo, 2017). In many parts of Imo state especially in Mbano, Ideato North and South, Owerri; parts of Abia represented in Ngwa and Arochukwu, the dialectical variance is *oriko*. In Parts of Enugu state and Anambra—Nsukka, Nri and Onitsha, it is *Nriko*. In parts of Igbo speaking Delta and Rivers state, it is *nrigba*. However, all the dialectical variations present the same understanding to the Igbo indigenous speakers. The common term present in all the language variations is *nri* (food) or *ori* (one who eats) from the root verb *ri* (to eat) which means to eat. *Oriko* as defined in the Igbo-English dictionary is a grand religious family meal, a meal of different varieties of food, compulsorily including Kola nut eaten together for the purpose of bond building and reconciliation (Echeruo, 1998). The kola nut is an essential part of the *Oriko* meal and every *Umunna* gathering, it is broken and shared among all the people in attendance according to seniority and order of title. The importance of Kola nut in *Oriko* meal highlights its indispensability being that it is the material object of any form of *Koinōnia* among the Igbos. After the prayers over the Kola nut, it turns from just mere Kola nut to a unifying and sanctifying object for all who will partake in it and others who are partakers by associations. (Eze, 2008). During the *Oriko* within the *Umunna*, the web of relationships already in existence are brought into one perfect spiritual and physical union (Eze, 2008).

In *Oriko*, the bond that the *Umunna* shares is ritualized by the breaking and sharing of Kola nut, a sacramental sign of unity. The *Oriko* is not just a uniting event for the living but also of the ancestors and the entire pantheon of gods (Egbuogu, 2006). The spiritual union represented in *Oriko* is a renewal of the path of peace, participation, association, and preservation of the community. All who takes part in the *Oriko* are bound by love, mutual respect, and a sacred renewed covenant. By taking part in the *Oriko*, an individual’s membership of the *Umunna* is renewed, and the individual becomes what they eat; one sacred people bound in a renewed covenant (Eze, 2008). All the Igbo words and phrases serving as connotations of communion/participation/*koinōnia* have all descriptive dimension to the relationship between humans (horizontal relationship), as much as the pre-Pauline meaning of *koinōnia* as relationships, fellowships, eating together etc. Also, in relations to the pantheons of gods, the *Koinōnia* experience presents a wholly vertical relationship between human and the divine.

9. CONCLUSION

The fellowship nature of the primordial idea of communion as expressed in the early Church is inclusivist while the idea of holy communion as practiced by Christians is exclusivist. This exclusivist approach is a possible interpretation of the Pauline letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 11, verses 27–29) where he warned young Christians not to get drunk on the communion and to examine their worthiness of participation in the communion. This singular interpretation has come to render the Eucharist as a meal of the sacred and the initiated (Patte, 2010). The exclusivity introduced in communion exercise begs a deconstruction—the fellowship exercise is inclusivist while the partaking of the fellowship meal is exclusivist. In deconstructing communion vis-à-vis the practices of the Igbos of Southeastern, Nigeria, the inclusivist nature of fellowship is also evident in all levels of the *Umunna* association. Further, the *oriko* meal is the rite of admittance of an excommunicated person into the *ogbako Umunna*, where through sharing of meal from the same plate with the other *Umunna*, one takes a vow to be responsible and to relate to the others in love and commitment. It is a meal of *koinonia*-participation in the affairs of the *Umunna*.

In conceptualizing communion and relating it to some of the practices of the pre-colonial Igbo society, the pre-Pauline and early Church practice of communion was interpreted. The people in the Greco-Roman world had communion as a daily Hellenistic practice which has very strictly horizontal dimension. The change and transformation continued with the Christological injunction of “do this in memory of me” introduced a vertical dimension to the weekly meeting of the early Christians. The communion experience of Christians had both vertical and horizontal dimension as the communion practice of the Igbo people evidenced in the *ogbako Umunna*, where the *oriko* meal takes place.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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