

Noting the specifics in African Cosmology: Who is God in the indigenous beliefs of Abanyom communities in Cross River State, Nigeria?

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Abstract

The current research investigates how the Abanyom community views God as the world's creator and preserver, challenging long-standing Western assumptions that Africans lack the capacity to conceptualize a God. While the notion of God within African cosmology has received limited empirical attention, it has not been examined specifically from the perspective of the Abanyom people. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected from 15 participants and analyzed thematically. The findings highlight key themes, including God's role as the creator and sustainer of the natural world, the dearth of an Abanyom creation myth, and God's involvement in ancestral ceremonies. The finding also reveals Abanyom peoples reliance on the Christian Bible to clarify aspects of divine sovereignty where traditional Abanyom beliefs lack specificity, indicating the presence of religious syncretism. These findings underscore the need for revitalizing indigenous religious education to preserve and transmit African traditional beliefs to future generations.

Keywords: Africa-Abanyom-God-Cosmology-indigenous-beliefs-Community

Introduction

The concept of God is fundamental to many, if not all, religious traditions (Naik, 2007:2). However, the role and recognition of a Supreme Being within African Indigenous Religions remain subjects of debate. Scholars such as Emil Ludwig (cited in Awolalu, 1976: 2), Awuah (2012: 77), Pere Noel Baudin (1885, cited in Ugwu, 2014: 11), and Leo Frobenius (1913: xii, noted by Awolalu, 1976: 2) have argued that African Indigenous Religions do not accommodate the concept of a Supreme Deity. Notably, this perspective is not solely upheld by foreign scholars; it has also been endorsed by some African scholars. For example, Indigenous African scholars such as Donatus Ibe Nwoga and Christopher Ezekwugo, among others, have similarly contended that the idea of a Supreme Being was not an inherent aspect of African belief systems prior to the introduction of Western religion and civilization. They assert that the concept of a singular, all-powerful God was absent from African traditions before the advent of Christianity (see Nnaemeka, 2022: 124–125). This position suggests that traditional African religious thought, as interpreted by these scholars, is fundamentally disconnected from the notion of a Supreme Being.

Western scholars were the earliest to document African Traditional Religion, thereby establishing their dominance in its study. However, their writings were often influenced by prejudice or, perhaps, a lack of thorough engagement with the broader meanings of the words they used to define the faith practices of the African (Abanyom) communities. It's important to note that, at one point, European scholars characterized Africa as an "uncivilized land," portraying it as lacking advancement. Western scholars actively sought to diminish African achievements, including her religious traditions (Bonsu, 2016: 113). Consequently, African Indigenous Spirituality, as an integral part of the continent's civilization, was subjected to the same racially biased misrepresentations that undermined the cultural and intellectual heritage of African societies.

In clear terms, the prevailing perspective among early writers was that Africans were devoid of any knowledge of God. This raises the question: do Africans (Abanyom) possess a comprehensive grasp of the Imago Dei ("image of the Divine")? If so, how as well as from where would such knowledge originate? Unlike the biblical traditions rooted in Mount Sinai or Horeb, or the vast, open pastures of the Near East, Africa was often characterized by early scholars as a land dominated by dense forests, where divine revelations could only manifest through lesser deities associated with fertility, large rock formations, and trees (Bewaji, 1998). Within this framework, African Traditional Religion was frequently misrepresented by missionaries, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and archaeologists through racially charged and misleading terminology. Labels such as magic, primitivism, animistic belief, heathenism, Barbarism, paganism, fetishism, juju, idolatry, and ancestor veneration were employed to diminish its significance. The consequences of these derogatory characterizations of African religious beliefs are profound and difficult to quantify, yet they warrant critical examination.

In response, a significant number of scholars, primarily of African origin, have asserted that long before the arrival of Western religion, African societies possessed a distinct conceptualization of the Supreme God (Ekeke, 2011). They attributed to Him the qualities of omnipotence and omnipresence and recognized Him as the creator of the universe. Consequently, these scholars argue that Africans accorded a special reverence to this Supreme Being, thereby bestowing a distinct preference for Him over their idols (Igboin, 2011). While previous studies conducted in this region (Ikwaugwu, 2006, Ajang 2016, Adetunmbi, 2017, Eko & Ekpennyong 2020) have not directly addressed this specific concern on "the person of God in the indigenous beliefs of Abanyom people in Cross River State, Nigeria,"

The present research aims to offer a clear and thorough exploration of how the Abanyomits conceptualize God in their indigenous beliefs. This circumstance inherently validates emphasis placed on this current research endeavor. Primarily, the investigation reveals Abanyomite to possessed genuine understanding of God prior to the advent of Christian and Islamic missionaries. This is evidenced by the Abanyom creation theology, which attributes the creation event and the organization of the natural world exclusively to the Divine entity known as God (*Osowo*).

Study Context/Area

In 1967, after the division of Nigeria's former Eastern Region, Cross River State was created as part of the Nigerian federation. Geopolitically, the state is situated in the southern region of Nigeria, bordering Cameroon to the east and Benue State to the north (Nche & Ogar 2024: 2). The region consists of eighteen local government areas, which are grouped into three distinct geopolitical zones: North, Central, and South. Each zone contains six local government areas, which include various political wards, clans, and villages (Ikeji et al., 2013). Ikom, situated in the central part of Cross River State, is divided into eleven wards: Abanyom, Ololumo, Akparabong, Ofutop I, Ofutop II, Nde-Afi, Nnam, Ikom Urban, Nta-Nselle, Yala and Ikom ward II, (Iwuoha & Arokoyo, 2014).

The Abanyom political ward, the focus of this study, is situated along the Ikom-Ogoja-Katsina Ala highway in Cross River State. It shares borders with Nde-Afi to the south, Mbork to the north, Eso-Bendeghe and Arangha to the east, and Nta-Selle to the west. Positioned centrally within Abanyom, between the villages of Abankang and Etikpe, is the Nnam ward (Nche & Ogar 2024: 2). The population under consideration is approximately 23,806 individuals (Iwuoha & Arokoyo, 2014). The Abanyom people have historically formed a culturally, politically, and religiously cohesive community. Traditionally, they were the custodians of significant shrines, including *Nfam*, *Keshi*, and *Ojumwol*, which served as sacred worship sites where *Osowo* (God) was the central deity in all rituals. However, the introduction of Western civilization in the early 20th century led to a decline in indigenous religious observances (Enor et al., 2019). Today, Christianity and Islam have largely replaced traditional religious practices, reducing them to a minority belief system. Administratively, Abanyom is divided into two clans: the Abanyom clan in the northern region and the Abangork clan in the southern region. Together, these clans comprise a total of forty-four officially recognized villages (Cross River State of Nigeria Gazette, 1996).

The Abanyom people inhabit an area marked by lush vegetation, falling within the tropical rainforest belt. The region's landscape features streams, rivers, rock formations, mountains, and valleys, all of which significantly contribute to the community's livelihood, primarily grounded in agriculture. Consequently, their main economic activities involve farming staple and cash crops such as yam, cassava, rice, plantain, palm trees, and cocoa. In recent years, the impact of Western modernization has prompted many Abanyom individuals to pursue formal employment in various fields, including government, trade, transportation, and skilled labor. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the population still relies on extracting resources from the surrounding forests and rivers, engaging in activities such as fishing, hunting, logging, and palm wine tapping (Ogar, 2023).

The Abanyom people maintain deep-rooted connections to their traditional governance systems, which are evident in institutions such as age-grade organizations, priesthood, and kingship structures. Historically, before the community was divided into two clans in more recent times, authority was centralized under a paramount ruler known as the *Ntol Emang*. This leader commanded unparalleled

respect, honor, and privileges, surpassing those of present-day clan heads. As the guardian of Abanyom's cultural heritage, the *Ntol Emang* ascended the throne through established traditional rites (Nche & Ogar 2024: 2).

The Abanyom people are renowned for safeguarding historical artifacts, particularly monoliths—intricately carved stones that preserve records of their ancient civilization (Ajoma et al., 2021: 1). These monoliths commemorate notable figures, including revered warriors, accomplished dancers, and esteemed kings (Lekan, 2017: 10). Prominent monolith sites include Akishora Old Settlement, *Aferanfe* Village, *Efunambala*, and *Nkarasi* Village. Beyond monoliths, Abanyom culture is reflected in a rich array of artifacts, such as the *Ogelle* wooden gong, *Elap*, *Akata*, *Ekarem* masquerades, *Monikim* drums, *Agranya*, *Ojumwol*, and *Mfam*. The *Ogelle* wooden gong and *Monikim* drums primarily accompany ceremonial dances, while the *Etankara* and *Agranya* artifacts are reserved for royal performances honoring traditional rulers and distinguished individuals known for their bravery. Similarly, artifacts like *Ojumwol* and *Nfam* shrine relics are linked to warfare and hunting, whereas *Ntim* artifacts play a vital role in traditional judicial proceedings. The *Nyamgbe* artifacts, representing royal queen masquerades, signify the opening and closing of the traditional year. The *Agurubea* wooden gong and *Efereon* artifacts serve as sacred communication tools, particularly in situations where spoken words are restricted or inappropriate.

The Abanyom people observe a five-day traditional week, with each day corresponding to a market day that serves multiple villages. This cycle includes *Nkum* market day (*Ebolcum*), *Abankang* market day (*Ekpe*), *Nkarasi* market day (*Nkor*), *Edor* market day (*Ebe*), and *Nkonfap* market day (*Ndek*). The Abanyom calendar comprises a total of 73 weeks in a year (Nche & Ogar 2024: 2).

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design as its methodological approach, recognizing that the most effective way to understand the concept of God within the Abanyom cultural context is through an in-depth exploration of their religious practices, individual experiences, perceptions, and the motivations that underlie them. Cobb and Forbes (2002: 197) describe qualitative research as a method focused on examining human behavior by analyzing narrative data to interpret the significance of these behaviors within the social context of the participants. This approach requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the lives of the participants, gaining insight into their viewpoints, absorbing their stories, and unraveling the complex meanings behind them. Through interviews, participants express their experiences and thoughts, providing rich, detailed data. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study goes beyond surface-level observations, delving into the layers of meaning, cultural influences, and social interactions that shape the Abanyom's unique understanding of the Supreme Being, God (*Osowo*), prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Africa. This method is especially beneficial for uncovering the deeper causes of particular behaviors or addressing topics that have been underexplored in previous research. As Choy (2014: 102) argues, the key strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to examine fundamental values, beliefs, and assumptions. Additionally, this approach provides a platform for participants' voices, allowing their perspectives to be recognized and heard.

Participant Recruitment

For this study, the researcher employed a purposive sampling method to select a total of fifteen (15) participants. Qualitative research often utilizes relatively small sample sizes—typically between 6 and 12

participants, as suggested by Guest et al. (2006), or within the range of 5 to 25 participants, according to Creswell (1998), as cited in Bekele and Ago (2022: 48). This approach allows for in-depth analysis and a thorough exploration of the subject matter. The chosen sample size was deemed sufficient to provide meaningful insights into the Abanyom people's indigenous conceptualization of God in Cross River State, Nigeria. The participant pool consisted of traditional village leaders, including women (n=12), clan heads (n=2), and a chief priest (n=1), representing both Abanyom (n=8) and Abangork (n=7) clans. Although leadership and ritual roles within these clans are predominantly held by elder males due to the patriarchal nature of Abanyom society, the researcher intentionally included two female leaders—one from each clan—in the interviews.

This deliberate inclusion acknowledges the vital role women play in transmitting cultural beliefs, values, and norms that uphold the sacred status of God within the Abanyom tradition. A referral sampling technique was utilized to systematically identify individuals who possessed the necessary knowledge and willingness to contribute valuable perspectives to the study. Participants who met the eligibility criteria were subsequently invited to take part in the research. Initial communication was conducted via telephone, followed by in-person interactions. The selection criteria required that participants:

- Hold a leadership position such as village head, women's leader, youth leader, or traditional chief priest.
- Be at least eighteen (18) years old and affiliated with one of the two clans.
- Have been born, raised, and matured within the respective clan.
- Have resided within the clan for at least ten years if they had relocated.
- Be directly involved in traditional rituals or practices aimed at preserving ancestral heritage and cultural continuity within the Abanyom communities.

Data Collection

The data for this research was gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. This approach was chosen to allow for direct observation of participants as they expressed and explained their perspectives in a practical and interactive manner. The interview questions underwent validation by two senior scholars from the Department of Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Before the interviews commenced, participants were given detailed information sheets outlining the study's objectives and scope. All fifteen individuals who agreed to participate provided formal consent by signing an informed consent form. Notably, none of the participants requested anonymity. Furthermore, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Johannesburg, and all research procedures adhered strictly to ethical guidelines. The interview process explored participants' ontological perspectives, focusing on themes such as the origins of the natural world, the entity governing nature, and the central deity in the *Abanyom* belief system, along with related religious practices.

With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation. In instances where a participant opted out of recording, the researchers relied on handwritten notes, which were later transcribed. All data collected was handled with strict confidentiality, securely stored on a password-protected laptop, and used solely for research purposes. To facilitate clear communication, the interviews were conducted in languages most comprehensible to the participants, including English and Nigerian Pidgin. When necessary, the researchers also employed the *Abanyom*

language, which was their first language (L1). The duration of each interview varied, ranging from 1 hour and 30 minutes to a maximum of 3 hours. The length of each session was determined by the participant's willingness to elaborate, as the researchers ensured an open and flexible environment that encouraged free expression of thoughts and experiences.

Data Analysis

The researcher employed Colaizzi's analytical framework (as cited in Nche et al., 2019; Nche, 2020) to conduct a structured thematic analysis of the collected data. This process was carried out through the following systematic steps:

- Each interview was carefully transcribed by the researcher. After transcription, the accuracy of the text was meticulously verified by cross-checking against the original audio recordings.
- The researcher conducted a thorough review of the transcripts to develop a deep and holistic understanding of the content.
- Key phrases and statements relevant to the research topic were systematically extracted from the transcripts. These excerpts were documented along with the corresponding participant details, page numbers, and line references.
- The researcher then assigned meaning to these significant statements, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives.
- The extracted meanings were categorized into structured themes and subthemes for clearer organization and interpretation.
- The final stage involved synthesizing the findings into a comprehensive description that encapsulated the essence of the investigated phenomenon.
- To enhance the validity of the study, participant feedback was sought, allowing them to review and confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the research findings.

Findings

God, the Natural World's Creator and Organiser

Six participants in the study shared their belief that God is the creator and designer of the natural world. However, they admitted that they do not have in-depth knowledge about the specific creation events in the Abanyom tradition. For example, when asked about the origins of the natural world, Samuel from the Osibi-etikpe community said:

The being that created this world is invisible to us, but we call it 'Osowo' (God). This being took many actions and sustained them for us, creating different kinds of people. It also assigned names to individuals. It uses English names, which we hear, and speaks in Abanyom, which we understand. It gave names to every person, every animal, every tree, and everything in existence, even to body parts like the human eyes" (O. Samuel, personal communication, January 4, 2022).

Samuel elaborated that the very substance from which God fashioned the world is inherently a part of God's own being. Philip, a traditional leader from Akumabal (II), reinforced this belief, asserting, "God directly brought the world into existence. He then assigned different groups and cultures to humanity, each with its own distinct characteristics." Similarly, Stanley from Licy Etikpe supported this perspective, emphasizing that the belief in God as the universe's creator has been preserved through generations via oral tradition. He pointed out that this tradition itself originates from God. Expressing this notion in his own words, he stated, "Ah! Tata (father), the one who brought all of us into existence is also the origin of traditions,

just as my parents taught me that God is the creator of the natural world."

Additionally, several other participants in the study affirmed their belief in God as the creator of the universe. Daniel, the leader of Ekpatala village, emphasized this conviction, asserting that the notion of God's role in creation is universally accepted—extending beyond humans to even natural elements such as the wind. This assertion reinforced the idea that God is indeed the origin of all existence. Similarly, when questioned about the creator of the natural world and the manner in which creation occurred, Ndom from the Ekonde community provided the following response:

My understanding that God is the creator of the world comes from what I have been told by others. Since childhood, I have frequently heard people say that God brought the world into existence. Even my elders have consistently affirmed that this world was formed by God's own hands (J. Ndom, personal communication, January 8, 2022).

Ndom's conviction that God is the creator is deeply rooted in the long-standing tradition of passing down religious knowledge through oral teachings. His understanding of God's role as the creator was shaped by the wisdom imparted by elders and knowledgeable members of his community during his formative years. When asked whether this knowledge originated from church teachings or traditional society, he firmly stated that "these teachings have been passed down from my ancestors," reinforcing the earlier statements made by Stanley from Licy Etikpe.

Similarly, Victor, an elder from Nkonfap, has never doubted God's role as the creator, emphasizing that "everyone speaks of God, and no one has ever attempted to claim the position of the creator, as it solely belongs to God, who has existed since the beginning of time." This perspective aligns with Awolalu's (1976: 1) argument that the belief in God as the creator serves as a bridge connecting past generations, the present, and the future. Aderibigbe (2015: 8–9) also supports this view, highlighting that ancestral traditions have safeguarded Africa's rich cultural heritage over time. Essentially, the African worldview encompasses both philosophical and lived experiences that have been preserved and transmitted across generations. These findings align with Mndende's (1994: 25) assertion that knowledge and belief systems are absorbed both formally and informally from an early age and gradually become ingrained over time.

Overall, the results of this study align with Kanu and Ndubisi's (2021: 199) assertion that the belief in God as the creator of the universe is widely embraced across African societies. It is commonly held that God's very essence is inseparable from the act of creation, as divine authority would be incomplete without the ability to bring the cosmos into existence. Likewise, in his exploration of the concept of God in African Traditional Religion, Edet (2009: 125) reinforced this idea by highlighting that among the Yoruba people, Olodumare (God) utilized Ase—an immensely powerful force—to create the universe and sustain its natural order. This force is also invoked in prayers for divine intervention.

Similarly, Ushie (2022) emphasized that God's creative power is deeply ingrained in Yoruba spirituality, which is why the Yoruba refer to God as "Eleeda," meaning the creator or owner of all creation. Alolo (2007: 18) further expanded on this perspective by positioning God at the pinnacle of the African religious hierarchy—an all-powerful origin from which all life emerges and to which all life ultimately returns. Collectively, these insights reinforce the notion that the belief in a divine creator is a fundamental principle within African religious traditions.

Beliefs undeniably serve as the foundation for specific practices, making it impossible to separate human actions from the life circumstances that gave rise to those beliefs (Made 2016: 20). These life circumstances are often interpreted through the lens of a worldview, which functions as the central framework guiding human activities. This is particularly evident in the African worldview, including that of the Abanyom people, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding and explaining the complexities of creation. It serves as the basis for interpreting both temporal and spatial events. Within the spiritual domain of African societies, a diverse array of spiritual beings coexists, encompassing spirits, the living, and the deceased. At the core of this spiritual understanding is the concept of the Supreme Being, regarded as the creator of the cosmos and all that it contains (Onyedinma 2008). Among the Abanyom people, as demonstrated in this study, this belief is particularly prominent. The recognition of God as the creator of the world holds a central place in their cosmology, shaping their perception of existence and the divine order.

The Enigma and Lack of Abanyom Creation Story

Beliefs are fundamentally the basis for certain practices, making it difficult to disconnect human actions from the life circumstances that shaped those beliefs (Made 2016: 20). These life circumstances are often viewed through a particular worldview, which acts as the main framework guiding human behavior. This is especially clear in the African worldview, including that of the Abanyom people, which offers a conceptual structure for understanding and explaining the intricacies of creation. It forms the foundation for interpreting events in both time and space.

In the spiritual realm of African societies, a wide variety of spiritual beings coexist, including spirits, the living, and the deceased. Central to this spiritual perspective is the idea of the Supreme Being, seen as the creator of the universe and everything within it (Onyedinma 2008). Among the Abanyom people, as shown in this study, this belief is particularly significant. Their acknowledgment of God as the creator of the world is a key aspect of their cosmology, influencing their understanding of existence and the divine order.

Emmanuel, a leader in Nkarasi, also asserts that according to Abanyom tradition, "God created, but the specific method of creation remains unknown" to him. Nevertheless, he maintains that the fundamental and unquestionable belief is that God is the creator. Similarly, Florence from Akumabal (i) upholds this view, affirming that it is self-evident that God created the world. Within Abanyom culture, the belief in the world's creation by a supernatural being, referred to as God, remains deeply ingrained. She underscores the profound commitment to this belief, likening it to the bond of marriage. This strong attachment to the notion of God as the creator highlights the way in which Africans introduce their children to religious experiences from infancy, followed by initiation processes that reinforce their belief system. However, the inability of these participants to clearly articulate a traditional or indigenous creation narrative suggests a gap in the initiation processes of children within African traditional religion, as well as in the transmission of cultural knowledge.

While these participants found it challenging to express the Abanyom creation narrative, they showed a strong familiarity with the Christian creation story. For instance, when asked about the origins of the natural world, Odo, the leader of the Ekpailagil community, heavily referenced Christian beliefs, particularly the Genesis account, which describes how God created the world and the first humans, Adam and Eve. Similarly, Emmanuel from Nkarasi indicated that their understanding of life's origins is largely influenced by the biblical

narrative, especially God's creation of Adam and the events that unfolded in the Garden of Eden. Florence, a leader from Akumabal (i), also mentioned the Genesis account, highlighting that God created the world in seven days and that humanity was meant to govern the earth. The remarks from Odo, Emmanuel, and Florence point to the presence of syncretistic elements within the indigenous religion of the Abanyom people.

It's crucial to recognize that Nigeria is a secular state marked by religious and ethnic diversity. The country's experience with Western colonialism has created significant challenges for the preservation of many cultural traditions. Although colonial powers introduced their religious beliefs, they could not completely eliminate deeply ingrained indigenous practices. This has resulted in religious syncretism, where elements from different religious traditions blend to create a hybrid belief system. Syncretism is a global phenomenon that arises when two religious traditions interact or when differing worldviews converge. The Abanyom people are no exception to this trend, as syncretic influences have infiltrated their indigenous religious practices. Followers of the traditional faith integrate aspects of the newly introduced religion into their existing belief system, showcasing the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity.

These findings align with the conclusions reached by Nwosu (2021: 1–2) on the phenomenon of religious syncretism in Nigeria. Nwosu asserts that no religion remains entirely untouched or wholly original once it absorbs elements from other belief systems. Even when individuals embrace a new faith, such as Christianity or Islam, they do not entirely discard their indigenous religious traditions. Instead, these ancestral beliefs endure across multiple generations and, in some instances, for centuries.

God's Central Role in Ancestral Rituals

The views shared by three participants align with findings from various studies (e.g., Mbiti 1990; Taringer 2006; Onyedima 2008) that portray God as the Supreme Being, holding the highest rank in the hierarchy of beings among numerous indigenous African communities. According to Anthony, a leader from Eshekende village, this belief is deeply rooted in the ancestral rituals of the Abanyom people. In these rituals, God is acknowledged first, prior to recognizing the forest fairies and local deities. Victor from Nkonfap echoes this sentiment, noting that in the rituals conducted by their ancestors, God is always mentioned before the stone deities. This illustrates a consistent practice of honoring God's primacy in their ancestral traditions. Philip from Akumabal (ii) also supports this, stating that when they make sacrifices, they invoke the name of Osowo (God) first. This further reinforces the idea that God occupies a central role in their ancestral rituals.

In conclusion, these insights underscore the central theme of "God's Primacy in Ancestral Rituals." They highlight the consistent recognition of God as the most powerful and significant being in the ancestral practices of the Abanyom people. This acknowledgment of God's primacy is evident across various villages, reaffirming His importance in their cultural and religious traditions.

Implication for African Religious studies/ orientation

The results of this study hold significant relevance for the ongoing discourse in African religious studies regarding the knowledge of God that existed before the introduction of Western religions. While Nigerian scholars have previously explored this subject through empirical research (Ikwaagwu, 2006: 22–23; Adetunmbi, 2017: 12), no study to date has specifically examined the role of God within the indigenous belief system of the Abanyom ethnic nationality in Cross River State, Nigeria. This highlights the significance of the present

research. Notably, the findings indicate that the Abanyom people possessed a clear and well-established understanding of God long before the arrival of Christian and Islamic missionaries. This is reflected in their creation theology, which attributes the formation and organization of the natural world exclusively to God (*Osowo*) the supreme. The belief in God as the creator is deeply embedded in Abanyom culture and is preserved through songs, proverbs, and myths. These elements form an essential part of their traditional religious teachings, which are meticulously passed down orally by elders from one generation to the next. Moreover, in Abanyom theology, the conviction that God is the creator extends beyond humanity to include all aspects of existence, both human and nonhuman. This fundamental belief places God at the pinnacle of their spiritual hierarchy. Consequently, He is always acknowledged first in ritual practices before any other deities are recognized, reaffirming His supreme position within their religious framework.

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that, due to the cultural background of the Abanyom people, some respondents in this research attribute the creation of the universe onto God. However, they demonstrate limited knowledge regarding the specific sequence of creation or the materials involved in the process. As a result, many participants relied primarily on the biblical account of creation. This observation suggests that Abanyom Traditional Religion, like other African indigenous religious traditions, has been influenced by external religious beliefs, leading to the phenomenon of syncretism. This finding aligns with Nwosu's (2021: 1–2) assertion that no religion remains entirely original once it incorporates elements from other faiths. Similarly, Nnaemeka (2022: 119) argues that no culture or worldview can remain in its purest form while simultaneously staying relevant to the people it serves. Given these realities, there is a pressing need to revitalize indigenous religious education through community-based initiatives and curriculum integration. Such efforts would help preserve and transmit the spiritual heritage of the Abanyom people to future generations.

Western missionaries and scholars have often depicted African traditional religion using pejorative terms such as fetishism, ancestor worship, juju, and primitive, among others. These misrepresentations have consequently led to a distorted perception of African traditional religious practices. However, the African worldview is deeply rooted in a cosmological system that recognizes a supreme deity as the ultimate source of existence, alongside other spiritual beings closely linked to this supreme God. Religious beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the ways different communities engage with the divine. In the African context, the understanding of God is primarily conveyed through proverbs, concise statements, storytelling, religious ceremonies, prayers, songs, myths, and various oral traditions, despite the absence of a formalized sacred text. This explains why Africans, including the Abanyom people, regard God as the creator and give Him precedence in all ancestral rituals. The attributes of God—His oneness, supremacy, omnipotence, omniscience, eternal nature, and ultimate wisdom—are deeply embedded in the traditional beliefs of the Abanyom people. Fundamentally, their religious knowledge and convictions are anchored in the belief in a singular, all-powerful deity.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the Abanyom people of, Nigeria, possess a well-defined understanding of God as the Supreme Being, challenging scholarly assertions that African Indigenous Religions lacked such a concept. The findings show that the Abanyom people acknowledge God as the Creator and Sustainer of the natural world, with this belief being safeguarded and transmitted through oral traditions long before the arrival of Islam and Christianity. While the

Abanyom do not have a distinct creation myth, they consistently attribute the act of creation to a Supreme Being called Osowo. This reflects a broader African theological perspective that affirms God's omnipotence and omnipresence.

Additionally, the study underscores the central role of God in Abanyom ancestral rituals, where He is honored before any other spiritual entity, reaffirming His supreme status within their religious framework. This finding challenges colonial-era misinterpretations that sought to undermine African religious traditions by portraying them as primitive or inherently polytheistic. The research also identifies elements of religious syncretism, as some Abanyom individuals incorporate biblical creation narratives into their understanding of divine origins. However, this does not erase their indigenous knowledge of God; instead, it illustrates a fluid religious environment where traditional beliefs continue to coexist with external influences.

Conflict interest(s)

The authors declare that they have no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The authors declare that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

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Biography

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