

*Review*

# **The interface between Igbo traditional religion and christianity**

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**The first encounter of Igbo Traditional Religion with Christianity and Western culture was marked by antagonism and the rejection of Igbo traditional belief as “pagan” and “devilish.” A decisive overview by some scholars on belief and worship systems shows that Igbo traditional religion has components of monotheism, polytheism and pantheism. However, Igbo traditional religion proved resilient, even while Christianity grew rapidly in Igbo cosmology. This paper assesses the encounter between Christianity and Igbo traditional religion. It studies emergent issues in a dialogue between them. First, it asks questions like: Was there a notion or worship of the true God in Igbo-land before the arrival of Christianity? If so, who or what was this God (Chi/Chi-Ukwu/Chukwu) and what notion do people have about Christian God? How does the Igbo belief in God, the spirit world and the ancestors? The human relationship to these should be compared to the Christian faith. Contrary to antagonism and rejection that marked the first encounter between Christianity and Igbo traditional belief, this study argues for a relationship that needs to be identified with communal reverence, comprehension, acceptance, and some level of free will, emancipation and authenticity in this postcolonial era.**

**Key words:** Traditional religion, believe and worship of God, Christianity, salvation and dialogue.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid growth of Christianity in Igbo community and the revival of Igbo traditional belief amidst persistent tension, between them, call for an urgent need for dialogue. This paper is concerned with the encounter between Christianity and Igbo traditional religion in Nigeria. It is a study of the characteristics and necessity of Igbo traditional belief in God, human relationship, the spirit world, and ancestors' vis-à-vis the Christian religion. Unlike the colonial encounter, which was marked by antagonism and the rejection of Igbo traditional belief,

this study argues for a relationship that needs to be identified with communal reverence, comprehension, acceptance and free will, emancipation and authenticity in this era. The general motive of Western missionaries was in line with Jesus' mandate to his disciples: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:18-20, Mk 16:15; Lk 24:27; Acts 1:8). However, the historical overview of the activities of the first missionaries raises certain questions such as: Did they really

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understand Christ's injunction and how to relate it to their fellow human beings? The encounter of the Igbo in the Southeastern Nigeria with the first missionaries will be a focal point to concretely answer the above question.

In analytical form, this work is divided into five parts. Part one dwells on the brief history of Igbo people. Part two centres on the main beliefs and practices of Igbo Traditional Religion. Part three analyses the patterns of change in Igbo society through contact with Christianity. Part four treats the interface between early missionaries and Igbo values and institutions. Finally, part five emphasizes the dialogue of Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion: The way forward.

## PART I: BRIEF HISTORY OF IGBO PEOPLE

The origin of the Igbo people has been the subject of much speculation, and it is only in the last fifty years that any real work has been carried out on this subject. Igbo tribe is located in the Southeastern Nigeria and occupies a geographical area known as Igbo-land.<sup>1</sup> Igbo-land which is the habitation of Igbo people is divided by River Niger into two unequal parts: The Eastern region and the Midwestern region. The Igbo-land is also surrounded by other tribes like, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ogoni, Igala, Tiv, Yako and Ibibio. Elizabeth Isichei Alo in her book: *A History of the Igbo People* asserts that, there have been inhabitants in Igbo-land for at least five thousand years since the creation of the world. The first human inhabitants of Igbo must have come from the Niger confluence. The earliest cradles of human occupancy in the Igbo area were the Cross River and the Anambra Valley-Nsukka escapement, where later Stone Age sites have been excavated (Isichei, 1976). As one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, Igbo is associated with many dialects. In rural Nigeria, Igbo people work mostly as craftsmen, farmers, and traders, with some affluent government workers. They produce yams, cassava, maize, different kinds of leguminous crops and other food stuff. Chibueze Udeala citing Nwala said that "the word 'Igbo' means the community of people (Udeani, 2007). Igbo is a group of people working zealously to achieve individual and community goals, respectively.

Igbo people had first contact with Europeans in the mid-fifteenth century with the advent of the Portuguese. Starting with the Portuguese, the Niger coast served as a meeting point for slave trade among African and European traders, Dutch, and English, from 1434-1807. When the slave trade was abolished in 1807, the trade was shifted to industrial products like timber, elephant

tusks, spices, and palm products. The British at that moment began to mingle trading with hostile imperialism (Slattery, n.d.). Seeing the hinterland as productive, the British refused to be confined to the coast. As of 1900, the area that had been administered by the British Niger Company became the Protectorate on Southern Nigeria, also incorporating what had been called the Niger Coast Protectorate. Control of this area then passed from the British Foreign Office to the Colonial Office. Long before it had officially been conquered, Igbo-land was being treated as a British colony (Slattery, n.d.).

There had been twenty-one British military troops among the Igbo people between 1900 and 1914, when Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated. In 1928, Igbo men were made to pay tax for the first time in Igbo history (Slattery, n.d.). The rumours that the Igbo women were being reviewed for taxation, gave rise to the Aba women Riots of 1929.

Edmund Ilogu stated that the Igbo include people from other migrants. Some scholars believed that the present Awka division, which includes Nri clan, and the Orlu division, and another extensively travelled group of people of Nkwere and Amigbo (the main home of king Jaja of Opobo celebrity), is the centre of Igbo settlement. Thus, there came a spreading to the southern and the eastern part of Igbo tribe. The current archeological discoveries at Igboekwu which Professor Shaw tentatively ascribes to the court of the Priest Kings of Nri offer more credence to this theory (Edmund, 1974). Ilogu further stated that the different migrants came separately and settled in the closest geographical units which include Abakaliki, Onitsha, Enugu, Owerri and Umuahia regions in the Eastern Central State, and fractions of Benin, Warri, and other Delta regions in Midwestern Nigeria. The present Igbo population is above nine million.<sup>2</sup>

## PART 11: MAIN BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The Igbo world, in its entire ramification, material, spiritual, and socio-cultural dimensions are made comprehensible by their cosmology, which elucidates how everything came into being. Through it, the Igbo identify functions of the heavenly and earthly bodies and how to act with due reverence to the gods, the spirits, and the ancestors (Uchendu, 1965). The core of Igbo traditional religion is the belief in the spiritual being and an ultimate reality known as "Chukwu" or "Chineke" which is the same entity as God in Christianity. Although the proper name of God in Igbo is debatable as Aro-Chukwu, people claim that the name is coined from them; this study focuses on the name Chukwu or Chineke. Chukwu (high being or Omnipotent) or Chineke (creator being) in Igbo is

1. There are two different spellings in Igbo studies: "Ibo and Igbo". This is traceable to the colonial era, when the white people found it difficult to pronounce the word "Igbo". They finally ended up swallowing the 'g' by pronouncing and writing it as 'Ibo'. The technically more correct pronunciation, 'Igbo' is chosen in this work since many Igbos prefer it that way as contrary to the wrong 'Ibo' spelling of the colonial era.

2. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, 2.

believed to be the creator of the whole universe. To express their connection and emanation from Chukwu, typical Igbo parents always express their gratitude by the type of name they give to their children like Chukwuebuka "God is great", Chinyere "God's gift or God has given", Chibuikem "God is my strength", AkaNsoChwukwu "Holy hand of God", Ngozichukwu "God's blessing" and many others.

Immediately in rank after Chukwu are the small gods known as divinities, which are believed to be created by Chukwu and they serve as his agents. Ala (the Earth goddess) is outstanding among the divinities since she is the most powerful of all. She is the custodian of Igbo morality and a very merciful mother due to her provisions and intercession for her children. In Igbo culture, some moral offences that are committed by people are regarded as deification of the land (ilunso ala). Bearing in mind that Ala as a divinity can serve as an intermediary between people and Chukwu, a typical Igbo person often feels himself or herself secure when standing and being in touch with the Earth to ask for favors or make appeasements to Chukwu for some offences committed. Other Igbo divinities are comprised of Anyanwu (sun god), Amadioha (god of thunder sky), and Kamalu (god of Thunder).

Subsequent to the divinities are the ancestors who are the most cherished spiritual beings in Igbo traditional religion. The ancestors are the dead and departed elders of families (Umunna). They are consequently called Ndi nna anyi ha (our fathers or our forefathers).<sup>3</sup> Next to the ancestors are the oracles. The existence of oracles is still felt in most Igbo religious practices even in this modern era. Different Igbo towns and villages have local oracles associated with them.<sup>4</sup> There are also different types of spirits that the Igbo believe in. These spirits are believed to have the capability to harm or affect human lives. Amongst these spirits is chi, the individual god of each Igbo person that unites him or her with Chukwu. Chi who is believed to be either male or female could determine the future life of everyone. Igbo religion is rooted in the belief and worship of, Chi-ukwu, the 'Great Chi' or the 'Great God'. Chi is the fundamental nature of "Chukwu" which is known as divine essence. Chukwu is coined

3. Ancestors are respected by living Igbo family members through sacrifices and prayers. Additionally, living family members often request their ancestors through prayer for safeguard/protection, providence for life sustenance and general well-being. With constant veneration through sacrifices and prayers, the ancestors always remain alive in the family and can perform all that is expected of them by the inhabitants of their family. The cult of ancestor is very important in Igbo and not all people are admitted to that cult. For example, to be admitted into the cult of ancestor, the person must have been married with children while he was alive and noted with good life. Those who killed themselves, wicked and evil people are not admitted into the cult of ancestors. Good life is an essential criterion for the admission into the cult of ancestor in Igbo for it is regarded as a sacred cult by the Igbos.

4. Oracle is a prophecy that is often obscure or allegorical, made known through the instrumentality of a priest or priestess at the shrine of a god. A priest or priestesses acting as a medium through whom prophecy or advice was sought from the god.

from Chi and Ukwu which can be described as Supreme God.

Igbo Traditional Religion believes in moral righteousness as conserved in the *Omenala* or *Omenani*, which is the Igbo code of conduct. They also believe in the practice of medicine popularly called *ogwu* and in the sacred personages which include the priests, diviners, and medicine men.<sup>5</sup> The idea that Igbo traditional religious practices believe in different spiritual beings (gods), elicited an argument among scholars on the name to be ascribed to this religion. As earlier indicated, a critical analysis by the scholars that is centered on belief and worship systems portrays that Igbo traditional religion has constituents of monotheism, polytheism, and pantheism. Moreover, Igbo people traditionally believe that the earth is Chukwu's footstool; this is a typical pantheistic religious outlook. They often use some words in affirming Chukwu's greatness like Eze bi n'Igwe ogodo ya n'akpu n'ala (The King who seats on high and his clothes touches the ground). Igbo religion is polytheistic as the Igbo religious world is alive with many gods which the people worship. These gods serve as agents or messengers on behalf of the people in relation to Chukwu, the great God.

### PART III: PATTERNS OF CHANGE IN IGBO SOCIETY THROUGH CONTACT WITH CHRISTIANITY

Igbo emerged as a tribe which acknowledged and accepted the traditional religion of their forefathers. This religion remained intact and continued in existence prior to the arrival of Europeans. The foreigners who came from Europe were the explorers, the merchants, the administrators, the imperialists, and missionaries. They opened the country to Western development and civilization by initiating new systems of government and new religions. These foreign forces inflicted derision on the traditional religion, categorizing them as heathenism, paganism, uncivilized, and of the evil one.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the merchants, the administrators and the missionaries acted as a team to repress the traditional religion and to enforce Christianity.

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria were attracted to Christianity because of European ideas of establishment of schools, free education, and free medical care. The Western teachings in schools and in Christianity made Igbo children see the cultural practices of their parents as demonic. Western colonization of Igbo continued in 1914 before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. This colonization was well stabilized both in the social and economic life of the people. Many schools and

5. Good medicine people are often recommended and are consulted by the people for healing or any other health issues while bad ones are often feared since they make a medicine that can be detrimental to human life.

6. Council for World Religion, ed. Joseph Omosade, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 111-112.

colleges were built for the education and training of Christian children. The Second World War depleted the number of expatriate missionaries and this granted some Igbo Christians the opportunity to hold the educational and administrative posts which were formerly handled by European missionaries.<sup>7</sup>

Igbo educated elites then, started increasing in number and most of them were very cruel to the missionaries. For example, "*The West African Pilot*", a nationalistic newspaper founded in 1937 by Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo trained in the United States, became influential and was a ready medium for much critical opinion about the work of the missions."<sup>8</sup> Private individuals and the government started opening and owning schools which later transitioned from being the church's form of evangelization to a lucrative business. This led to the desertion of the efficient teachings of Christian doctrines until after the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war, when the schools were finally taken over by the government. Churches, mostly European based, then started acquiring ideas that made them appear more indigenous by adapting to certain cultures and some Igbo traditional practices.<sup>9</sup> In a bid to indigenize the churches, some personalities in the church were requested to take some bigger features of Igbo cultures like the Ozo title.<sup>10</sup> Christianity, therefore, is portrayed as an inductive forceful change in Igbo land.

#### **PART IV: THE INTERFACE BETWEEN EARLY MISSIONARIES AND IGBO VALUES AND INSTITUTIONS**

Igbo culture is a system in which traditional religion laid the basis of moral and social behaviour even before the arrival of Christianity. There was a clear understanding of social and cultural identification and the principles of socialization among people. This was diluted with the arrival of missionaries and traders from 1857 onwards. Plurality of religious beliefs and value concepts were recorded for the first time. Igbo traditional belief and social control methods like divination and consultation of oracles were challenged by Christianity. The cult of ancestors was also challenged.<sup>11</sup> Following the studies of Ilogu, some beliefs, values and institutions that were shattered by Christianity can be pointed out as follows:

##### **Twin killing**

Ilogu cited that it was an old Igbo custom to destroy twins because it was considered unnatural for human beings to

be born more than one at a time; only lower animals like hens, goats, dogs, and the rest should give birth to more than one at a time. The twin children would be destroyed; otherwise, the land that had been defiled would incur the rage of the ancestral spirits, which would cause an epidemic for the community, since the "natural" concord between human, the spirit world, and the universe, had been shattered.<sup>12</sup> The new converts to Christianity were advised to disobey this custom. It became a long-lasting war between Christians and Igbo Indigenes which even took some lives. However at the end, with the aid of Charles Taylor, Mary-Slassor and some indigenous converts, the killing of twins is now a historical event in Igbo cosmology.<sup>13</sup>

##### **Human sacrifice**

According to Ilogu, three types of human sacrifice had existed in Igbo culture before the arrival of Christianity. The first was the sacrifice of atonement when excessive abomination to the land had led to violation of concord between the spirit world and the community. The second was when chiefs and some noblemen holding the Ozo title were buried with their slaves. It was supposed that such slaves would also serve their masters in the life after death. The third was the use of human sacrifice to appease the gods of oracles. The missionaries suffered a great deal to convince people that human sacrifice is not good. Some even paid huge amounts of money before they were able to rescue somebody.<sup>14</sup> This missionary's struggle still occurs in the present century because some wicked people still engage in human sacrifice for their selfish gains.

##### **Burials**

Christians were taught to desist from paying the extended family and village levies for various activities since a piece is used in sacrifice to idols. Part of the levy is also for some activities that are related to burials, like the masquerades. There was a great pandemonium when many leaders of the family became Christians and were not allowed by the catechesis of the missionaries to carry out the second funeral of their fathers. Ilogu further stated that, "in a meeting held at Onitsha in May 1914, it was resolved and adopted after several sections that the government was asked to make a law that Christian heirs inherit the property, pay debts of the deceased (father or brother) and live out the burial."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, a valuable possibility was missed in incorporating this

7. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*, 55-60.

8. *Ibid.*, 60.

9. Ilogu, 62.

10. *Ibid.*, 62-63

11. *Ibid.*, 63-64.

12. *Ibid.*, 64.

13. Ilogu, 64-65.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Ilogu., 67-68. Cf. "Minutes of the Church and Native Customs Conference," May 12, 1914, C.M.S. Ozala, Onitsha Nigeria, typed script in the C.M.S. archives at Onitsha unpublished Mss,16.

native custom into the Church in a formal way. Christians in various Igbo communities still perform the second burial to maintain the traditional practice of past generations even without official approval by the church. Nonetheless, some do it in the form of a memorial service by going to the church to pray for the dead and later come home to eat and celebrate.<sup>16</sup>

### Etiquette

An additional Igbo value which the missionaries attacked through their catechesis, particularly through the school children, was the respect for seniors, parents and traditional rulers like kings and chiefs. According to Ilogu, an illustration can be taken from an incident at Onitsha in 1863 about which J.C. Taylor had made some comments. The King of Onitsha, his first son, and progenies were sitting by the King's square when a group parading through the town came closer. The Prince's son "Odita," stood up and bowed his head before his father and grandfather, the King. Odita was questioned why he did not do the customary courtesy to the king which was to kneel and bow the head to the ground in front of the King. He answered that he was taught at school that kneeling was only for prayer and bowing down in deep reverence was only done to God. They were perplexed by such an attitude, while Taylor was satisfied. This was reflected in Taylor's journal for December 29, 1863.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the children who went to school were deprived of the opportunity to engage in different activities with their peers, like initiation into the masquerade group, learning the social and cultic dances and the various assistant responsibilities that are linked to different celebrations, sacrifices and the community reverence of clan and family gods. The missionaries further initiated the idea of boarding schools which allowed the children to be socialized in Western values and customs.<sup>18</sup>

### Political and social control of institutions

Christians were taught never to swear an oath in shrines. New converts to Christianity started cutting down the trees in the various groves and religious shrines as an attestation of their religious belief (Ekechi, 1972). The issue of oath swearing was later treated in a conference held at Onitsha in May 1914. The government was told to find a way of adjudication for Christians and they finally ended up with the notion that Christians will only swear in the British colonial court on the Bible to be acquitted.<sup>19</sup>

This act is still in existence, but it is carried out in the church headed by the priest.

### The *Ọzọ* title

The *Ọzọ* title in Igbo-land is comparable to the peerage in English society, with the same social status of "Lord". A name with an insignia is given to the *Ọzọ* man at the successful end of the title taking. The converted *Ọzọ* title holders to Christianity were then encouraged to renounce their title and burn their insignia. The Roman Catholic Church has worked out some acceptable accommodations on the issue of the *Ọzọ* title. Father Shanahan who later became the Catholic bishop of Onitsha in 1911 recommended that Christians should be structured to outline their own kind of *Ọzọ*.<sup>20</sup> A system was finally worked out whereby Roman Catholics could take the *Ọzọ* title in a Christian way. Such practice was accepted in most catholic diocese among the Igbo people (Egbo, 1971). Although this is an achievement in an effort to incorporate cultural values to Christianity, but most Christian communities still detest the practice. This is because of untruthfulness among some of their members who claims to have done it in Christian way, but later went in secret to do it in pure traditional setting.

Conflicts often emerge between the cultural heritage of Igbo and Christianity. The quest for the authenticity of the doctrine often raises difficult questions for the messengers of Christianity. Does Christianity not emerge as a foreign body in Igbo culture and religion? Is God, who is the foundation of all positive things in Igbo cultural patrimony, not at the same time the author of the Christian revelation? In addressing this question, Paul VI (1965) in *Nostra Aetate* declares that, "the Catholic Church rebuffs nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She observes with genuine reverence ways of acting and living, rules and doctrines which, though may differ on many points from what the Church teaches but it often reflects a ray of truth enlightening all men. However, she proclaims and is bound to proclaim without ceasing Christ who is 'the way, the truth and life' (Jn. 14:6) (Paul, 1965). This work is of the opinion that respectful dialogue and accommodation is needed for the peaceful coexistence of Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion.

## PART V: THE DIALOGUE OF CHRISTIANITY AND IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE WAY FORWARD

Christianity has contributed a lot in modernizing some ethos in Igbo traditional religion through dialogue, like the issue of twins and burial of an elderly person. Yet it has deprived some younger minds of the opportunity to identifying with their cultural heritage through the school

16. Ibid., 68.

17. Ibid., 68. Cf. C.M.S. CA 3/037 Taylor's Entry for 29<sup>th</sup> December 1863.

18. Ilogu.,69.

19. Ilogu, 70. Cf. Conference Report, C.M.S. Archives Onitsha, unpublished Mss, 9.

20. Ibid., 72.

system and the general destruction of some shrines and other ethos that guides people's behaviour in the society. Since the Catholic Church has recognized rays of truth and salvation in other different religions, as was elaborated above, a dialogue which will be chiefly marked with respect and freedom will help Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion to exist peacefully in a collaborative ministry as worshippers of God.

The provisional approval given by the Roman Catholic Church to their members to take a Christian kind of the *Ọzọ* title as earlier indicated is a good sign of tolerance and accommodation among Christians and Igbo traditionalists in this present era. The general line of approach now is that all Christians who are capable should be allowed to take a common type of the *Ọzọ* title. In a bid to infiltrate Christian normative values into the cultural life of the Igbo, the *Ọzọ* title needs to be included in Christian value as part of the Christianization of Igbo life. This research suggests that the Christians need to provide suitable religious principles for their Indigenous Igbo members in that regard for proper collaboration, acceptance, and cohabitation.<sup>21</sup> This idea of dialogue between Igbo traditional religion and Christianity may sound unrealistic, but this paper believes in the power of human decision and action. Once there is a consensus to carry out such an innovation devoid of prejudice and selfishness, it will favour all groups.

A typical example is an incident that happened in Awka, Anambra State when late Archbishop A.K. Obiefuna was the Bishop of Awka diocese. An outstanding issue was the traditional celebration in Awka during marriage called "*Ọkụkụ onye Ụwa*". The Igbo Christians in Awka were not allowed to participate in this act. However the late Bishop A.K. Obiefuna still took up the lead by having a meeting with the traditionalists and some Christian representatives to investigate the matter. They finally came up with the agreement that the Igbo Christians would still do the traditional marriage without the killing of a hen and spreading the blood on the shrine<sup>22</sup> In line with the above-mentioned practical example, this study suggests that the reverence to the ancestors in Igbo Traditional Religion need to be well studied in Christian perspective. Since ancestors are regarded as those who lived good lives and are believed to be interceding on behalf of the people, there is also the possibility that there is Saint Nwachukwu (God's son), Nwuba, and many others in heaven. All these suggestions are the logical upshot of this paper which seeks to define Christian normative values by which Igbo people can live within their traditional culture and gradually transform, without compulsion, some of the main institutions of that culture, into an avenue for the

normal expression of Christian virtues. In this way, the Church in Igbo-land can hope to become an indigenous Church. Therefore, with due respect and acceptance, Igbo Traditional religious group and Christians in Igbo-land can select some representatives and dialogue some issues affecting them in order to live more peacefully as worshippers of the same God.

## CONCLUSION

By imbibing into its symbolic and cultural life, the living institutions of the people's way of life, there will be the elimination of the offensive practice of Christians being divorced from their own culture. The Church will then turn out to be the spiritual force from which those cultural institutions acquire new creativity. In this regard, Christians can then see how their accustomed traditions can serve as a new avenue for the exaltation of God in Jesus Christ. There may be opposition from non-Christians who are westernized, who despise religion as well as Christianity, since its tenets are contrary to their more positivistic way of thinking. In light of this, they will try to debunk such ethical guidance from the Christian perspectives. To this end, this study has already exposed how Christian moral catechesis should assemble its first lessons of moral instruction for the common good devoid of imposition. Nevertheless, as the incarnation and Christianity happened in a space, so does Igbo Traditional Religion. With due tolerance and understanding, both can cohabit in this era, in service to God and humanity.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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21. Ilogu, 225-226.

22. *Ọkụkụ onye uwa* implies that each Igbo girl has a chi from whom she was reincarnated. Therefore, before a girl will be betrothed to a man in marriage from one village to the other, a Hen must be killed for her Chi before she will be allowed to go and live in a new family.