

Africanisation of Christianity in Nigeria: A Historical Appraisal from Missionary Liturgy to Indigenous Worship

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Abstract

Christianity in Nigeria emerged within a missionary framework in which European forms of worship, church organisation, music, language, and liturgical practice were frequently presented as normative expressions of the Christian faith. Over time, Nigerian Christians increasingly appropriated, modified, and reconstructed these forms through indigenous languages, music, dance, ritual expressions, prayer practices, preaching styles, and theological categories. This study examines the historical process through which Christianity in Nigeria moved from predominantly missionary-controlled liturgical forms towards increasingly indigenous expressions of worship. The study employed a qualitative historical-documentary design. Relevant scholarly literature, historical accounts, theological studies, and recent research on Nigerian Christian worship were critically examined and interpreted thematically. Particular attention was given to missionary Christianity, African agency, denominational developments, indigenous churches, inculturation, and contemporary Pentecostal worship. The study found that Africanisation was neither an instantaneous rejection of missionary Christianity nor a simple return to traditional religion. Rather, it developed through a gradual process of translation, negotiation, appropriation, resistance, and theological reconstruction. Indigenous musical forms, local languages, African leadership, Aladura spirituality, Pentecostal practices, and culturally meaningful symbols became significant vehicles through which Nigerian Christians expressed Christian faith. Africanisation demonstrates the capacity of Nigerian Christianity to appropriate Christianity within local cultural worlds while retaining its Christian identity. It also reveals continuing tensions concerning the boundaries between cultural adaptation and the incorporation of indigenous religious elements.

Keywords: African Christian Agency, Aladura Christianity, Inculturation, Indigenous Liturgy, Missionary Christianity, Historical Appraisal.

Introduction

Christianity has become a major religious tradition in Nigeria, developing initially through nineteenth-century European missionary activities involving evangelisation, education, Bible translation, church organisation, and Western forms of worship. Missionary Christianity often presented European liturgical practices as normative, while indigenous music, dance, ritual forms, and other cultural expressions were sometimes regarded as incompatible with Christian faith (Bediako, 1995; Sanneh, 1989; Walls, 1996).

Consequently, early Nigerian Christianity reflected a substantial missionary cultural imprint.

The encounter, however, was not a one-way transmission. Nigerian Christians increasingly interpreted Christianity through their own languages, cultural experiences, and religious worldviews. Bible translation facilitated this process by enabling African Christians to engage Christianity within indigenous linguistic contexts (Sanneh, 1989, 2003). Gradually, indigenous music, drumming, dancing, call-and-response, spontaneous prayer, healing, prophecy, and culturally meaningful forms of preaching entered Christian worship. The emergence of African Independent Churches, Aladura movements, and Pentecostal Christianity further strengthened African participation in shaping Christian worship.

The research problem arises from the tendency of some accounts to emphasise either missionary expansion or the later growth of indigenous and Pentecostal Christianity without sufficiently connecting the processes that produced this transformation. Consequently, the gradual movement from missionary-controlled liturgy to indigenous worship has not always been examined as a continuous historical process of African appropriation, negotiation, and theological reconstruction. Recent studies on indigenous music, symbols, and spiritualities confirm the continuing importance of cultural adaptation in African Christianity (Ademiluka, 2023; Apaah et al., 2026; Fasipe, 2022).

The gap in the literature therefore lies in the need for an integrated historical appraisal linking missionary liturgy, African Christian agency, indigenous cultural expression, and contemporary worship. This study addresses the gap by examining the historical characteristics of missionary liturgy, the factors that facilitated Africanisation, the contributions of indigenous Christian movements, language and music to worship, and the theological implications of the transformation.

The study is guided by four research questions: What characterised missionary liturgy in Nigeria? What factors facilitated its Africanisation? How did indigenous Christian movements, language, music, and African leadership transform Christian worship? What theological implications arise from the transition to indigenous worship? Addressing these questions contributes to African Christian historiography and inculturation theology by demonstrating that Nigerian Christians were not merely recipients of missionary Christianity but active agents in its cultural and theological development.

Theoretical Framework: Inculturation, Christian Translatability, and Cross-Cultural Transmission

This study adopts inculturation theory, complemented by Lamin Sanneh's concept of Christian translatability and Andrew F. Walls's account of cross-cultural transmission, as its analytical framework. Inculturation explains how Christianity engages with local cultures, incorporating meaningful cultural expressions while critically evaluating practices in the light of Christian beliefs. Sanneh's concept of translatability emphasises the capacity of Christianity to communicate through indigenous languages and cultural categories without remaining confined to its original cultural setting. Similarly, Walls demonstrates how

Christianity develops through cross-cultural encounters, as the interaction between the Christian faith and diverse societies produces new expressions of religious identity and practice. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how Christianity interacts with local cultural traditions, negotiates tensions between inherited beliefs and Christian teachings, and develops contextually meaningful forms of religious expression.

Literature Review

Missionary Liturgy and the Cultural Construction of Nigerian Christianity

The studies on Christianity in Nigeria increasingly challenged the earlier tendency to interpret missionary Christianity principally as the transmission of a religious message from Europe to Africa. Such an interpretation gives insufficient attention to the cultural forms through which that message was transmitted. Missionary Christianity arrived with particular assumptions about worship, music, ritual, ecclesiastical authority, and acceptable Christian behaviour. Consequently, the early Nigerian church was not merely introduced to Christian doctrine; it was also introduced to a largely European liturgical culture. Ademiluka (2023) demonstrates this particularly in relation to music, noting that Protestant missionaries discouraged indigenous music and musical instruments because of their perceived association with traditional religious practices. European hymns, often accompanied by the organ, consequently became dominant in many mission churches.

This missionary approach, however, raises an important conceptual problem. If Christianity is distinguished from culture, why were European cultural forms permitted to function as appropriate Christian worship while African forms were treated as inherently problematic? The missionary rejection of indigenous music suggests that the distinction between Christianity and African culture was not always applied consistently. The issue was therefore not simply theological but also cultural. Fasipe (2022) confirms that Yoruba musical instruments initially regarded as inappropriate for Christian worship have subsequently become prominent in Yoruba Christian worship.

A counter-position is that the missionaries' restrictions cannot be dismissed entirely as cultural imperialism. Their concern was partly theological: indigenous music, ritual, and dance could carry religious meanings associated with traditional worship, and missionaries feared that their incorporation would produce religious syncretism. Ademiluka (2023) similarly notes that missionary opposition arose from concern that converts might retain traditional religious practices. The historical problem, therefore, should not be reduced to a simple opposition between oppressive missionaries and culturally liberated Africans. Rather, it involved a genuine theological question concerning how Christianity could enter an existing religious culture without simply reproducing its previous religious meanings.

The more convincing interpretation lies between these extremes. Missionary Christianity introduced Christianity through culturally particular forms, while African Christians eventually questioned whether those forms were essential to the Christian faith itself. The resulting tension created the conditions for indigenisation. Thus, the historical significance of missionary liturgy lies not only in what missionaries imposed but also in the cultural questions their approach eventually generated among Nigerian Christians.

African Christian Agency and the Indigenisation of Worship

A major development in recent scholarship is the increasing recognition of African Christians as agents rather than passive recipients of missionary Christianity. Popoola (2024), examining Yoruba Christianity, argues that indigenisation involved the incorporation of cultural values and traditions into Christian expression and that the resulting synthesis made Christianity more intelligible within African philosophical and cultural contexts. This argument is important because it shifts the analytical focus from missionary activity to African appropriation.

Nevertheless, the concept of indigenisation requires qualification. To describe Africanisation simply as the incorporation of African culture into Christianity risks assuming that culture exists as a fixed and homogeneous entity. Nigerian cultures themselves are dynamic, internally diverse, and continually changing. Moreover, African Christians did not merely reproduce traditional culture; they selected, modified, rejected, and reinterpreted particular cultural forms. Africanisation was consequently a process of negotiation rather than cultural transplantation.

The history of Christian music illustrates this agency. Ademiluka (2023) identifies youth fellowships, indigenous choirs, Aladura churches, and Neo-Pentecostal churches as significant agents in introducing indigenous genres, instruments, and dance forms into Nigerian worship. Fasipe (2022) similarly demonstrates that musical instruments once rejected by missionaries have become accepted features of Yoruba Christian worship. These developments challenge the assumption that liturgical transformation was initiated primarily by church authorities. Much of the transformation emerged from Christian communities themselves.

Yet an exclusively celebratory account of African agency is also insufficient. Africanisation did not necessarily produce theological consensus. Some Christians continued to regard certain indigenous practices as incompatible with Christianity, while others viewed them as necessary expressions of an authentic African Christian identity. The process therefore generated continuing debates concerning the limits of cultural incorporation.

Indigenous Music as a Site of Theological Negotiation

Music provides one of the strongest areas of evidence for the Africanisation of Nigerian Christianity because it reveals the interaction between cultural identity and Christian worship. The movement from European hymns towards indigenous melodies, instruments, rhythmic patterns, choruses, and dance demonstrates that worship is not culturally neutral. Ademiluka (2023) argues that indigenous musical adaptations have contributed positively to Nigerian Christian worship and have become sufficiently established that many churches can scarcely conduct contemporary worship without them. Fasipe (2022) reaches a similar conclusion concerning Yoruba Christian worship, showing that indigenous instruments have moved from being rejected to being widely accepted. Adedeji (2021) further identifies the indigenous music of the Christ Apostolic Church as an important expression of the interaction between Pentecostal theology and African musical culture.

However, the argument that indigenous music necessarily strengthens Christianity requires critical examination. Musical forms are not merely aesthetic; they may carry religious and philosophical meanings inherited from their original cultural settings. Consequently, the incorporation of an indigenous instrument or musical genre does not automatically constitute inculturation. Its theological significance depends partly on how the community reinterprets its meaning within Christian worship.

Recent research in Edo State strengthens this argument. Aluede et al. (2025) demonstrate how Edo folk-song traditions have been domesticated within contemporary Christian worship, interpreting this process as evidence of the resilience of indigenous musical traditions and the continuing relevance of inculturation. Ojo (2023), in examining Gospel *Àpàlà*, similarly illustrates how an indigenous musical genre can be reworked to communicate Christian themes while retaining aspects of its traditional stylistic identity. The synthesis is therefore that Africanisation of music is neither mere entertainment nor simple cultural preservation. It constitutes a theological negotiation in which inherited cultural forms acquire new meanings within Christian worship.

Indigenous Rituals, Continuity, and Discontinuity

The most contested dimension of Africanisation concerns the relationship between Christian worship and indigenous ritual practices. One position maintains that Christianity must critically distance itself from traditional religious practices because their original theological meanings may conflict with Christian doctrine. Another position argues that the wholesale rejection of indigenous practices creates a culturally foreign Christianity that fails to address African existential realities.

Recent Nigerian scholarship increasingly rejects both extremes. Opara (2026) argues that contemporary Nigerian churches demonstrate neither complete rejection nor uncritical acceptance of indigenous ritual practices. Instead, practices associated with naming, healing, and communal rites may be reinterpreted within Christian contexts. Similarly, Eze et al. (2024) argue that the continuing interaction between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion requires greater attention to areas such as symbolism, liturgy, sacrifice, and ontology rather than treating the two religious systems as completely disconnected.

The counter-argument is that excessive accommodation may blur the boundary between Christian inculturation and religious syncretism. Okeke (2025), writing on Igboland, observes that inadequacies in the inculturation process have contributed to situations in which some Christians continue to resort to traditional practices when confronting existential challenges. This suggests that cultural exclusion can create a vacuum, but indiscriminate cultural incorporation can also create theological ambiguity. The finding therefore points towards critical inculturation rather than unrestricted indigenisation. The objective is neither to reproduce missionary Christianity unchanged nor to incorporate indigenous practices indiscriminately. Rather, indigenous cultural forms require theological interpretation before their incorporation into Christian worship.

Inculturation as a Framework for Africanisation

Inculturation provides a useful conceptual framework for resolving some of these tensions because it treats culture neither as an enemy of Christianity nor as something that should be incorporated without evaluation. Its central concern is how Christian faith becomes meaningfully embodied within a particular cultural context.

Recent scholarship supports this approach. Popoola (2024) argues for a systematic integration of Christianity and Yoruba culture rather than an uncritical cultural synthesis. Opara (2026) explicitly employs inculturation and contextual theology to explain how Nigerian churches negotiate continuity and discontinuity between indigenous ritual practices and Christianity. Okeke (2025), however, demonstrates that inculturation remains difficult where indigenous cultural meanings have not been adequately engaged by Christian theology.

This debate suggests that inculturation should be understood as a critical process of translation, appropriation, reinterpretation, and theological discernment. Such a framework also avoids the weakness of equating Africanisation simply with the presence of African cultural forms. A church may employ indigenous music while retaining an essentially missionary liturgical structure; conversely, a church may retain certain inherited Western forms while expressing its theology through thoroughly African conceptual categories.

Pentecostalism and the Expansion of Indigenous Worship

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has further complicated the relationship between Africanisation and Western Christianity. Contemporary Pentecostal worship in Nigeria is highly indigenous in areas such as music, prayer, healing, prophecy, deliverance, testimonies, and spiritual warfare, yet it is simultaneously connected to global Christian networks. Africanisation therefore cannot be understood simply as a movement away from the West.

This point is important because it challenges a binary model in which Nigerian Christianity progresses from “Western” to “African”. Contemporary Christianity is better understood as a hybrid and transnational religious formation. Haustein (2025), reviewing recent African scholarship on Pentecostalism, identifies methodological and definitional challenges that require scholars to move beyond rigid denominational and geographical boundaries. Nigerian Pentecostalism demonstrates precisely this complexity: its worship can be culturally indigenous while its theology, media, organisational structures, and networks remain globally connected.

The implication is that Africanisation is not the disappearance of external influence. Rather, it is the growing capacity of African Christians to appropriate diverse influences and reorganise them according to local religious and cultural priorities.

Consequently, the above interrogations demonstrate considerable agreement that Nigerian Christianity has undergone a movement from missionary-controlled cultural forms towards greater indigenous participation and expression. However, scholars differ

concerning how this process should be interpreted. One strand emphasises African agency and cultural recovery; another stresses theological discernment and the danger of syncretism; while a third emphasises hybridity and transnational interaction. These positions should not be treated as mutually exclusive.

The evidence instead suggests a coordinated interpretation: Africanisation developed because Nigerian Christians appropriated Christianity through their own languages, music, institutions, spiritual experiences, and cultural categories; nevertheless, this appropriation involved continuous theological negotiation concerning which indigenous practices could be retained, transformed, or rejected. The process was therefore neither a complete rejection of missionary Christianity nor an uncomplicated restoration of African traditional religion.

The principal gap is that these dimensions have frequently been investigated separately. Studies of missionary attitudes explain the initial restrictions on indigenous worship; studies of music demonstrate the recovery of indigenous musical forms; studies of inculturation examine cultural-theological negotiation; and studies of Pentecostalism illuminate contemporary indigenous expressions. What remains insufficiently integrated is a historical appraisal connecting these developments as stages of an ongoing process from missionary liturgy to indigenous worship. The present study addresses this gap by bringing missionary liturgical control, African Christian agency, indigenous musical and ritual expression, and theological inculturation into one analytical framework.

Accordingly, the study extends existing scholarship by treating Africanisation not merely as indigenisation of external forms, but as a historically developing process through which Nigerian Christians increasingly became interpreters and constructors of their own Christian worship.

Method

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative historical-documentary research design to examine the Africanisation of Christianity in Nigeria from missionary liturgy to indigenous worship. A historical design was appropriate because the study sought to reconstruct and interpret changes in Christian worship across different periods, while the documentary approach enabled systematic examination of published and archival evidence rather than relying on contemporary perceptions alone. The qualitative orientation was particularly suitable because the central concern was to understand the meanings, processes, tensions, and theological interpretations associated with the transformation of Nigerian Christian worship.

The study did not treat Africanisation as a linear movement from Western to African Christianity. Instead, it investigated the interaction between missionary traditions, African Christian agency, indigenous cultural forms, and theological inculturation. This approach enabled the researcher to identify both continuity and discontinuity and to distinguish cultural adaptation from the uncritical incorporation of traditional religious practices.

Population of the Study

The population comprised documentary sources relevant to the historical development of Christianity and Christian worship in Nigeria. These included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical studies, missionary accounts, theological publications, denominational histories, and relevant documentary materials addressing missionary Christianity, indigenous Christian movements, African Independent Churches, Aladura Christianity, Christian music, liturgy, inculturation, and Pentecostalism.

The documentary population was deliberately broad because Africanisation is multidimensional and cannot adequately be reconstructed from one denomination, ethnic group, or category of source. Sources concerning Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and other Nigerian Christian contexts were considered where they provided evidence relevant to the wider historical argument.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to select sources that directly addressed the research questions. Sources were included when they met at least one of the following criteria: (a) they examined missionary Christianity or missionary attitudes towards indigenous practices; (b) they documented African Christian responses or indigenous church movements; (c) they analysed changes in Christian music, liturgy, language, ritual, or worship; (d) they addressed inculturation or contextual theology; or (e) they examined contemporary Nigerian Christian expressions relevant to Africanisation.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed and academically authoritative sources, particularly studies published within the most recent ten years. However, foundational works were deliberately retained where they provided indispensable theoretical or historical arguments. This combination prevented the literature review from becoming either excessively dependent on older scholarship or disconnected from the foundational debates that established the field.

Sources were excluded when they lacked identifiable authorship or scholarly provenance, merely reproduced unsubstantiated claims, or dealt with Christianity in Africa without sufficient relevance to the Nigerian context. The sampling process was therefore relevance-driven rather than volume-driven, ensuring that the final corpus directly served the analytical objectives of the study.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The principal instruments for data collection were a document analysis matrix and source evaluation checklist developed by the researcher. The document analysis matrix recorded the author, publication year, geographical context, denomination or Christian tradition, principal argument, evidence employed, methodological orientation, relevance to the research questions, and contribution to the Africanisation debate.

The source evaluation checklist assessed each document according to four criteria: authority, relevance, historical reliability, and argumentative value. Where historical

accounts presented conflicting interpretations, the researcher compared the claims across independent sources rather than accepting a single account as definitive. Particular attention was given to the distinction between primary evidence, later historical interpretation, and theological argument.

Data collection proceeded through four stages. First, relevant literature was identified using scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, and academic databases. Second, potentially relevant sources were screened against the inclusion criteria. Third, selected sources were read critically and entered into the documentary matrix. Finally, evidence was organised under the major themes generated by the research questions.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic historical analysis and critical documentary analysis. The analysis was organised around four principal themes: missionary liturgy and cultural control; African Christian agency and appropriation; indigenous transformation of worship; and theological negotiation through inculturation.

The analysis proceeded from description to comparison and interpretation. First, the researcher identified what individual sources claimed. Second, convergent and divergent arguments were compared. Third, the historical evidence was examined for patterns of continuity, change, resistance, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Finally, the findings from different categories of sources were synthesised to establish how missionary Christianity was progressively appropriated and transformed by Nigerian Christians.

The study also employed source triangulation. Claims concerning missionary attitudes, for example, were compared with historical studies of indigenous churches and later scholarship on contemporary worship. Similarly, claims about indigenous music were examined alongside theological literature on inculturation. Triangulation strengthened the credibility of the analysis by reducing dependence on any single author's interpretation.

The analytical framework was principally informed by inculturation theory, complemented by Sanneh's concept of Christian translatability and Walls's understanding of the cross-cultural transmission and appropriation of Christianity. These perspectives provided analytical categories for examining translation, cultural appropriation, transformation, and theological discernment. The framework was applied critically rather than prescriptively, allowing the evidence to demonstrate where Africanisation involved continuity with indigenous culture, discontinuity from traditional religion, or interaction with global Christianity.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

Several procedures were employed to enhance methodological rigour. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of different types of scholarly and historical sources. Dependability was promoted through the systematic use of explicit inclusion criteria and a documentary analysis matrix. Confirmability was addressed by distinguishing the claims of individual scholars from the researcher's own synthesis and by comparing competing interpretations rather than privileging one perspective without justification. Transferability

was enhanced through detailed description of the historical and denominational contexts represented in the documentary corpus.

Particular care was also taken to avoid anachronism. Contemporary Pentecostal practices were not automatically projected backwards onto nineteenth-century Christianity, and missionary attitudes were interpreted within their historical contexts. This was important because the meaning of particular worship practices changed over time. Consequently, the study treats Africanisation as a historically contingent process rather than assuming that contemporary indigenous worship represents an unchanged continuation of pre-Christian African religion.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study did not involve human participants, ethical principles concerning academic integrity, accurate attribution, and responsible historical representation were observed. All ideas, arguments, and evidence derived from other scholars were appropriately acknowledged using APA 7th-edition citation and referencing conventions. The researcher avoided selective citation intended to create a predetermined conclusion and represented significant scholarly disagreements fairly.

Historical sources were also interpreted with sensitivity to the cultural and religious diversity of Nigerian communities. Indigenous religious practices were not automatically characterised as either primitive or authentic, and Christian practices were not presumed to be culturally neutral. This approach was necessary to maintain analytical objectivity and avoid reproducing either missionary-era cultural judgements or an uncritical romanticisation of indigenous traditions.

Methodological Justification

The methodological choices collectively ensured that the study addressed its historical question with appropriate rigour. A qualitative historical-documentary design provided access to the long-term development of Nigerian Christianity; purposive sampling ensured that the selected sources were directly relevant; systematic documentary analysis made the process transparent and reproducible; thematic analysis connected disparate historical materials; and triangulation strengthened the credibility of the conclusions. Most importantly, the methodology allowed Africanisation to be examined as a contested historical process involving missionary influence, African agency, cultural adaptation, theological discernment, and continuing interaction with global Christianity, rather than as a predetermined transition from foreign to indigenous religion.

Findings

The historical-documentary analysis indicates that the Africanisation of Christianity in Nigeria developed progressively rather than as a single event. The evidence reveals identifiable phases from the establishment of missionary Christianity in the nineteenth century, through the emergence of African Christian agency and independent churches, to

the development of indigenous and Pentecostal forms of worship in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Missionary Liturgy and the Initial Phase of Christianity in Nigeria, c. 1840s–1880s

The documentary evidence indicates that the sustained establishment of Christianity in Nigeria began in the 1840s, following the expansion of missionary activities by Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Roman Catholic missions. During this initial phase, Christian worship was substantially organised according to European missionary patterns. Congregational hymns, Western musical forms, formal liturgical structures and missionary regulations constituted important features of the emerging Christian worship environment. The evidence further indicates that indigenous musical forms and instruments were initially restricted in several Protestant mission contexts because missionaries associated them with traditional religious practices. Thus, the earliest phase was characterised by a relatively strong missionary definition of acceptable Christian worship. Ademiluka's historical study confirms that Protestant missionaries in nineteenth-century Nigeria generally discouraged native music and musical instruments because of concerns about the retention of traditional religious practices.

Emergence of African Christian Agency, c. 1880s–1920s

A significant historical shift became visible from the 1880s, when African Christians increasingly challenged aspects of missionary control and sought greater participation in the organisation and expression of Christianity. Webster (1964) identifies 1888–1922 as a formative period in the development of African churches in Yorubaland. His study shows that dissatisfaction with aspects of missionary policy, including ecclesiastical administration and the limits placed on African participation, contributed to the emergence of independent African church movements. The period therefore represents an important transition from African participation within missionary structures to increasing African control of Christian institutions.

The establishment of the United Native African Church in Lagos in 1891 represents another significant landmark in this development. The emergence of independent African churches demonstrated that Africanisation involved more than the modification of worship; it also concerned African leadership, ecclesiastical authority, institutional autonomy and the cultural expression of Christianity. Historical evidence further indicates that some of these churches employed vernacular languages and produced African Christian hymns and songs, thereby linking institutional independence with emerging changes in Christian worship.

The significance of African agency, however, preceded the emergence of independent churches and extended throughout the missionary period. Mepaiyeda and Popoola (2019), in their study of indigenous missionaries and Christians between 1860 and 1969, demonstrate that African catechists, clergy, evangelists and other Christians played substantial roles in the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria. Their study specifically challenges the historiographical tendency to concentrate disproportionately on European missionaries while giving insufficient attention to their African counterparts.

Thus, the historical evidence indicates that Africanisation did not begin only with the formation of independent churches. Rather, African participation was already embedded within missionary Christianity during the nineteenth century and became increasingly institutionalised and autonomous from the 1880s onward. The period c. 1880s–1920s consequently marks an important phase in the transition from African participation in missionary Christianity to African agency in defining the organisation, leadership and expression of Christianity in Nigeria.

Development of Indigenous Worship and the Aladura Movement, c. 1910s–1940s

A further transformation occurred during the 1910s and 1920s, particularly with the emergence of prophetic and Aladura movements. Around 1910, an indigenous prophetic movement associated with the Christ Army emerged, while the 1918 influenza pandemic contributed to the growth of prayer and healing movements. The Precious Stone movement emerged around 1918, and Aladura groups subsequently developed into established African Independent Churches (Peel, 1968; Omoyajowo, 1982).

The 1920s and 1930s therefore constitute an important phase in the Africanisation of worship. The Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim was founded in 1925, while the Church of the Lord (Aladura) emerged in 1930 (Omoyajowo, 1982; Peel, 1968). The Aladura tradition emphasised prayer, fasting, healing, prophecy, singing and more expressive forms of worship (Peel, 1968; Adogame, 2004).

The evidence shows that this period witnessed a movement away from exclusive dependence on European liturgical forms towards worship that incorporated African languages, musical expressions, bodily participation and indigenous leadership (Peel, 1968; Omoyajowo, 1982). The change was therefore institutional as well as liturgical.

Indigenous Music and the Transformation of Worship, c. 1930s–1970s

The documentary evidence indicates that the Africanisation of worship became increasingly visible through music. During the 1930s and 1940s, Aladura churches developed forms of worship characterised by indigenous languages, locally meaningful musical forms, drums, singing, dancing and spontaneous participation.

A further development occurred in the 1950s–1970s, when indigenous musical forms became increasingly incorporated into wider Nigerian Christianity. By the mid-1970s, church choirs were appearing on radio and television, while gospel music was beginning to develop beyond the immediate liturgical setting. Ojo identifies the 1970s as a significant period in the emergence of Nigerian gospel music as a distinctive genre combining Christian themes with elements of traditional and contemporary Nigerian musical practice.

Consequently, Africanisation during this period was increasingly expressed through musical language, rhythm, instrumentation, performance and congregational participation rather than simply through institutional independence.

Pentecostal and Contemporary Expansion of Indigenous Worship, c. 1970s–Present

From the 1970s onward, the Africanisation of Christianity became increasingly visible within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Indigenous musical genres, prayer practices, testimonies, healing, prophecy, deliverance and participatory worship became prominent features of many Nigerian Christian communities. The historical trajectory identified in the documentary evidence therefore extends from the earlier African Independent Churches into later Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal movements.

The evidence does not, however, indicate a complete replacement of missionary Christianity. Rather, missionary hymns, denominational structures and inherited theological traditions have continued alongside indigenous languages, African musical forms, spontaneous prayer, dance, indigenous instruments and Pentecostal expressions. The resulting Nigerian Christian landscape is therefore characterised by continuity, adaptation and transformation.

Chronological Pattern of Africanisation

The historical evidence can be summarised as follows:

Phase	Period	Historical development	Principal expression
1	c. 1840s–1880s	Establishment of missionary Christianity	European liturgy, hymns and missionary-controlled worship
2	c. 1880s–1920s	Emergence of African Christian protest and leadership	African church movements and institutional independence
3	c. 1910s–1940s	Rise of prophetic and Aladura Christianity	Prayer, healing, fasting, prophecy and expressive worship
4	c. 1930s–1970s	Development of indigenous musical and liturgical expressions	Indigenous languages, drums, traditional rhythms, dance, choirs and Nigerian gospel music
5	c. 1970s–present	Expansion and diversification of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity	Contemporary gospel music, mass-mediated worship, deliverance, testimonies, healing and prophetic ministry

Source: Author's synthesis based on Webster (1964), Peel (1968), Omoyajowo (1982), Ademiluka (2023), Ojo (2023), and other historical sources cited in the study.

The overall historical pattern is therefore:

The historical development of Africanisation in Nigerian Christianity can be summarised as follows: missionary Christianity (c. 1840s–1880s) → African Christian agency (c. 1880s–1920s) → African Independent and Aladura Christianity (c. 1910s–1940s) → indigenous

musical and liturgical transformation (c. 1930s–1970s) → Pentecostal and Charismatic diversification (c. 1970s–present).

This five-phase arrangement aligns the table with the structure of the Findings and Discussion while distinguishing the principal developments of each period. The phases are analytical categories rather than rigid chronological boundaries, as some developments overlapped. Africanisation was neither an abrupt rejection of missionary Christianity nor a simple replacement of European practices with African traditions. Rather, it was a gradual process through which Nigerian Christians increasingly shaped the language, music, leadership, ritual practices and institutional forms of their Christian faith.

Discussion of Findings

Missionary Liturgy and the Historical Foundations of Africanisation, c. 1840s–1880s

The finding that missionary Christianity initially operated largely through European liturgical forms (between the 1840s and 1880s) indicates that Africanisation developed partly as a response to an inherited worship structure that was culturally foreign to many Nigerian communities. Missionary Christianity introduced hymns, Western musical patterns, formal liturgical arrangements and ecclesiastical structures that reflected European Christian traditions (Ademiluka, 2023). This supports the argument that the earliest institutional form of Christianity in Nigeria was not culturally neutral but was mediated through the assumptions and practices of its European missionary agents.

However, the evidence should not be interpreted as demonstrating that missionary Christianity simply suppressed African culture. Missionaries also sought to distinguish Christian worship from practices they regarded as incompatible with Christianity, particularly where indigenous music and ritual were associated with traditional religious meanings. Thus, the historical tension was simultaneously cultural and theological. The significance of the period c. 1840s–1880s lies in the fact that the adoption of European forms created the cultural and liturgical context against which subsequent African Christian experimentation developed.

From the perspective of inculturation theory, this period represents an initial stage in which Christianity had been transplanted into Nigeria but had not yet undergone extensive cultural appropriation. Sanneh's emphasis on the translatability of Christianity is particularly relevant because Christianity's movement into African societies eventually required its communication through African languages, cultural categories and indigenous forms of expression. The historical evidence therefore suggests that Africanisation was not an external addition to Christianity but developed through the process by which Nigerian Christians increasingly made Christianity their own.

African Christian Agency and Institutional Transformation, c. 1880s–1920s

The emergence of African Christian agency from the 1880s, particularly during 1888–1922, demonstrates that Africanisation involved more than the adaptation of worship styles. Webster (1964) shows that this period was formative in the emergence of African churches

in Yorubaland, while the establishment of the United Native African Church in 1891 illustrates the increasing demand for African participation and institutional autonomy. Mepaiyeda and Popoola (2019) further demonstrate that indigenous missionaries and Christians played substantial roles in the expansion of Christianity between 1860 and 1969. These developments are significant because they challenge an interpretation of Africanisation as merely the replacement of European hymns with African songs. The historical evidence points instead to a deeper redistribution of religious agency. Africans increasingly became interpreters, evangelists, teachers, musicians, church leaders and institutional decision-makers. Africanisation consequently involved a movement from being principally recipients of missionary Christianity towards becoming active constructors of its Nigerian expression.

These findings complement Walls's understanding of Christianity as a faith capable of crossing cultural boundaries while being transformed through the receiving community. Nevertheless, African agency should not be equated with complete rejection of missionary Christianity. African Christians frequently retained biblical teachings, Christian doctrines and organisational structures while modifying their cultural expression. Africanisation was therefore characterised by appropriation and adaptation rather than wholesale cultural separation.

Prophetic and Aladura Christianity as a Turning Point, c. 1910s–1940s

The emergence of prophetic and Aladura Christianity between the 1910s and 1930s represents a particularly important transition in the historical development of Nigerian worship. The emergence of the Precious Stone movement around 1918, the founding of the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim in 1925, and the emergence of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in 1930 demonstrate that African Christians were developing forms of Christianity that responded directly to their religious and existential contexts (Peel, 1968; Omoyajowo, 1982).

The significance of these movements lies in their transformation of the location of religious authority. Worship increasingly incorporated prayer, fasting, healing, prophecy, visions and indigenous leadership. These practices addressed concerns that were deeply embedded in African religious consciousness, including sickness, spiritual insecurity, protection and the search for divine intervention. Consequently, Africanisation became not simply a matter of cultural appearance but a process of theological reinterpretation.

At the same time, this development complicates an uncritical understanding of inculturation. The incorporation of indigenous categories into Christian worship raised questions concerning the boundary between cultural adaptation and religious continuity with African Indigenous Religion. Thus, the Aladura development illustrates the central theological problem of Africanisation: how can Christianity employ culturally intelligible forms without simply reproducing the religious meanings of pre-Christian traditions? The historical evidence suggests that Nigerian Christianity addressed this tension through selective appropriation, reinterpretation and rejection.

Indigenous Music and the Cultural Reconfiguration of Worship, c. 1930s–1970s

The increasing use of indigenous languages, musical forms, drums, rhythm, dance and congregational participation from the 1930s to the 1970s demonstrates that Africanisation gradually moved from institutional structures into the everyday experience of worship. This development supports scholarship that treats music as an important medium through which African Christians negotiated Christian identity (Ademiluka, 2023; Fasipe, 2022).

The historical significance of this transformation is that music enabled Christianity to communicate through cultural forms that were familiar to Nigerian communities. The use of African musical structures did not merely make worship more entertaining; it altered the way worshippers participated in and experienced Christian faith. Ojo's (2023) discussion of Nigerian gospel music further indicates the increasing development of musical forms capable of combining Christian theological themes with Nigerian cultural and musical resources.

Nevertheless, indigenous music should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of complete inculturation. A drum, rhythm, dance or indigenous melody can acquire a different meaning when transferred into Christian worship. Therefore, the historical evidence supports a distinction between cultural form and religious meaning. Africanisation occurred most significantly when indigenous forms were reinterpreted within Christian theological frameworks rather than simply reproduced in their original religious contexts.

Pentecostalism and the Continuing Transformation of Nigerian Christianity, c. 1970s–Present

From the 1970s to the present, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has provided another major context for the Africanisation of Christian worship. Prayer, healing, prophecy, deliverance, testimony, spontaneous worship, contemporary gospel music and participatory forms of worship have become prominent within many Nigerian Christian communities. This development demonstrates that Africanisation did not terminate with the emergence of African Independent Churches but remains an ongoing process.

The contemporary period also challenges the assumption that Africanisation means the rejection of external influence. Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity is simultaneously indigenous and transnational. It incorporates African cultural resources while interacting with global Christian movements, technologies, media and theological networks. Haustein (2025) therefore provides an important corrective to approaches that construct African Christianity as either purely indigenous or purely imported.

The implication is that Africanisation should be understood as a dynamic process of appropriation. Nigerian Christians continue to receive external Christian influences but reinterpret and reorganise them within local cultural, social and theological contexts. The historical trajectory from the 1840s to the present therefore demonstrates increasing African agency without implying the disappearance of missionary Christianity.

The findings have important implications for inculturation theory. The historical evidence demonstrates that inculturation is not a single moment in which Christianity becomes

culturally adapted. Rather, it is a continuing process involving translation, appropriation, reinterpretation and theological discernment. The transition from missionary Christianity in the 1840s, through African church movements from the 1880s, Aladura developments in the 1910s–1930s, indigenous musical transformation from the 1930s–1970s, and Pentecostal expansion from the 1970s onward illustrates this gradual process.

The findings also reinforce Sanneh's concept of Christian translatability. Christianity became increasingly Nigerian as it was expressed through indigenous languages, music, leadership structures and cultural categories. Walls's emphasis on cross-cultural transmission is similarly useful because the Nigerian case demonstrates that Christianity is not simply reproduced unchanged when it enters another cultural environment. The receiving community becomes an active participant in its reinterpretation. The study therefore proposes that Africanisation is best conceptualised as the interaction of missionary inheritance, African Christian agency, cultural appropriation and theological discernment rather than as a linear movement from "Western Christianity" to "African Christianity".

Practical and Ecclesiastical Implications

The findings have implications for Christian worship and theological education in Nigeria. First, churches may recognise indigenous languages, music and culturally meaningful forms of participation as legitimate resources for communicating Christian faith, provided that their theological meanings are critically examined. Second, theological institutions should give greater attention to the historical contributions of African catechists, clergy, musicians, prophets and lay Christians, particularly because the evidence from 1860–1969 demonstrates that African participation was central to the expansion of Christianity.

Third, churches should approach indigenous cultural practices through critical inculturation rather than either indiscriminate rejection or uncritical incorporation. The historical experience of the Aladura movements from the 1910s–1930s demonstrates both the creative possibilities and theological complexities involved when Christianity engages African religious consciousness.

The study is limited by its reliance on historical and documentary sources rather than interviews with contemporary worshippers. Consequently, it reconstructs Africanisation primarily through documented historical evidence and cannot fully capture the personal experiences of present-day Christians. The availability and interpretation of historical records also vary across regions and denominations, with some traditions better documented than others.

A further limitation is the geographical and denominational diversity of Nigeria. The historical trajectory identified in this study draws substantially on evidence from Yorubaland and major Christian traditions, particularly because some of the most extensively documented African Independent Church movements emerged there. The trajectory should therefore not be treated as an identical historical sequence for every Nigerian ethnic group or denomination. These limitations, however, do not invalidate the

central historical pattern; rather, they indicate the need for further regional and denominational studies.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the Africanisation of Christianity in Nigeria developed progressively from missionary liturgical forms in the 1840s–1880s to increasing African Christian agency from the 1880s–1920s, the emergence of Aladura worship in the 1910s–1930s, indigenous musical transformation from the 1930s–1970s, and Pentecostal expressions from the 1970s to the present. Its key contribution is showing that Africanisation involved cultural appropriation, institutional agency and theological negotiation rather than the simple replacement of missionary Christianity.

Recommendations

These are the following recommendations:

1. Churches should strengthen culturally meaningful worship through appropriate use of indigenous languages, music and participatory forms identified in the study.
2. Theological institutions should incorporate African Christian agency into teaching on Nigerian church history and worship.
3. Churches should apply critical inculturation, distinguishing culturally appropriate Christian expressions from practices whose original religious meanings conflict with Christian theology.

Future Research

Future studies should conduct regional and denominational comparisons of Africanisation, particularly beyond the predominantly Yoruba evidence, and should investigate contemporary worshippers' experiences through empirical research to complement the historical-documentary findings.

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