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The 19th Century “De-Christianization”: *Why the Kingdom Temporarily Reverted to Traditionalism During the Interregnum*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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FEATURE
IMAGE

A traditional African masquerade mask and dancers seen at indigenous festivals useful for visualising the types of traditional religious and ritual practices associated with pre-Christian belief systems during periods of cultural resurgence.

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THE 19TH CENTURY “DE-CHRISTIANIZATION”

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Masquerades in Nigeria wear colourful traditional costumes, illustrating the kinds of indigenous ritual performance and spiritual expression that flourished independently of Christian institutions, and which relate to traditionalism revived during the Itsekiri interregnum. Photo credit: Orokbest1 via Wikimedia Commons.

The 19th century was a period of major political, cultural, and religious transitions across the Niger Delta. Among the most significant historical developments was a temporary “de-Christianization” within the Warri Kingdom also known as the Kingdom of Itsekiri during the long interregnum that followed the death of Olu Akengbuwa in 1848. This period, which lasted for several decades, constituted a dramatic shift away from the strong Christian presence established earlier through Portuguese influence in the 16th and 17th centuries. According to scholars, Warri Kingdom, the royal family’s earlier Christian alignment weakened as succession disputes destroyed political stability, leading to a reassertion of traditional institutions.

01

Historical Background

- Early Christianization and Portuguese Influence

From the 1500s onward, the Warri Kingdom maintained prolonged contact with the Portuguese. Several Olus were baptized, adopted Christian names, and established relationships with Catholic missionaries. Historical sources note that the kingdom was often described as a Christian-leaning African polity, unique for its early royal conversions. The palace adopted Christian symbols, and royal heirs were educated under missionary supervision. This set the foundation for a hybrid Itsekiri identity partly Christian, partly traditional.

- Olu Akengbuwa’s Reign and the Fragile Balance

Olu Akengbuwa (1808–1848) continued this Christian orientation while simultaneously supporting ancestral and traditional obligations. His reign created a delicate balance:

Christianity functioned as a diplomatic and elite identity;

Traditional religion maintained spiritual authority and cultural continuity.

The king's death in 1848, however, disrupted this balance.

02

The Interregnum and Political Crisis

- Succession Disputes and Collapse of Central Authority

After Olu Akengbuwa's passing, the kingdom could not immediately determine a successor. Wikipedia: Warri Kingdom emphasizes that many potential heirs died unexpectedly, creating fear and uncertainty. This succession crisis resulted in a prolonged interregnum that lasted until the crowning of Ginuwa II in 1936.

During this period without a central monarch:

Christian influence associated with the palace diminished;

traditional authorities, elders, and lineage chiefs reasserted control.

Without a Christian-leaning ruler, Christianity lost its royal patronage.

- Withdrawal of Missionaries and Loss of External Influence

The political instability discouraged European missionary activity. Catholic and later Protestant missions which depended on palace approval—lost access and influence. Without consistent institutional support, Christian structures in the kingdom weakened significantly. This vacuum made the resurgence of traditional culture almost inevitable.



Egungun masquerade figure in Nigeria, part of the ancestral spirit tradition of West African cultures a visual analogue to traditional rites that regained prominence when Christian practices waned. Photo credit: Michaël Wittmer via Wikimedia Commons

03

Factors Behind the “De-Christianization”

- Restoration of Traditional Religious Institutions

Traditionalists viewed the interregnum as an opportunity to reaffirm ancestral norms. Palace shrines, lineage priesthoods, and spiritual custodians regained prominence. Rituals connected to deities such as Umalokun, Ogun, and the ancestral spirits became central again. Christianity, which had previously been intertwined with royal authority, now lacked institutional protection.

- Social Need for Cultural Stability

Amid the uncertainty, many Itsekiri communities sought stability in long-standing customs. Traditional practices unlike Christianity were deeply embedded in:

Thus, reverting to indigenous spirituality served as a social stabilizer.

- Christian Identity as a Royal, Not Popular, Practice

One key reason for the temporary reversal was that Christianity in the kingdom had been:

It had not yet become a deeply rooted mass religion. With the monarchy disorganized, the Christian identity associated with it naturally declined. This pattern mirrors other Niger Delta societies, where the king's religion often shaped communal practice.

04

Cultural and Religious Expressions During the Period

- Revival of Festivals and Ancestral Rituals

Major traditional festivals experienced renewed strength during the interregnum. Seasonal rituals tied to rivers, land, and ancestors regained visibility. The lack of monarchical oversight allowed spiritual guilds to express themselves fully.

- Re-emergence of Priesthoods and Custodians of Tradition

Priestly families and ritual specialists previously overshadowed by missionary presence became central again. Their authority in rites of purification, thanksgiving, and conflict resolution shaped community life. They served as cultural anchors at a time when political authority had broken down.

- Decline of Christian Marriage, Naming, and Funeral Ceremonies

With fewer priests and reduced missionary activity, many Christian social rituals fell out of use. Traditional birth rituals, ancestral funeral rites, and indigenous forms of marriage (including bridewealth protocols and libation ceremonies) became dominant again.

05

Long-Term Effects and the Return of Christianity

- Reestablishment of Christianity in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Christianity began to reassert itself later in the 19th century due to:

increasing Itsekiri engagement with European trade;

conversion by influential merchant families.

This gradual re-Christianization laid the groundwork for the eventual enthronement of Ginuwa II in 1936, who solidified Christianity's place within the monarchy while retaining respect for ancestral tradition.

- Permanent Syncretism

Even after Christianity returned, the kingdom never abandoned its traditional identities. Instead, a syncretic dual identity emerged:

the palace adopted Christian prayers and rituals;

indigenous rites remained essential to kingship and cultural heritage.

This synthesis continues today, shaping burial rites, festivals, and palace ceremonies.

The 19th-century “de-Christianization” of the Warri Kingdom was not a rejection of Christianity but a consequence of political instability,

the absence of a monarch, and the withdrawal of missionary influence. With the palace Christianity's strongest institutional base destabilized, traditional systems regained their authority. The interregnum offered a space for cultural reaffirmation and the re-emergence of ancestral spirituality. When political order eventually returned in the 20th century, Christianity re-established itself, but this time within a more stable balance between tradition and modernity. The legacy of this period is a uniquely syncretic religious identity that remains central to Itsekiri cultural life.

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