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# Religion and spiritual influence on Igbo entrepreneurial behaviour and persistence

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how religiosity and spirituality influence entrepreneurial behaviour. The focus is on indigenous Igbos in Nigeria. Igbos are famous for successfully establishing transgenerational business legacies and indigenous enterprise clusters across West Africa. They are also notorious for their cultural devotion and belief in *Chi* or *Chukwu* (God), *alusi* (gods, spirits or deities), *ndi ichie* (ancestors) and the oracle. Hence, the majority of Igbo personal names contain the word 'Chi'. Igbo cultural values are based on the spiritual maxims of '*Onye a Hana Nwanne ya*' (don't leave your brother behind), '*Onye biri ebeya biri*' (live and let live) and '*Akuruno*' (make wealth reach home). These charactertics make the Igbos a unique population, which allows us to examine the links between their entrepreneurial behaviour, religion and spirituality. Using a qualitative design (interviews), we analyzed expert data provided by 34 Igbo entrepreneurs to clarify these links. The findings reveal that 'other-worldly' and 'this-worldly' orientation are the two main forces that influence entrepreneurial behaviour. An 'other-worldly' orientation influences entrepreneurial behaviour such that the pursuit of a family business lifestyle has become the norm. Also, 'this-worldly' orientation influences entrepreneurial behaviour that is associated with risk-taking, informal entrepreneurial learning, community-based entrepreneurship, social responsibility, etc.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'influence de la religiosité et de la spiritualité sur le comportement entrepreneurial. L'accent est mis sur les indigènes Igbos au Nigeria. Les Igbos sont connus pour avoir réussi à établir des héritages commerciaux transgénérationnels et des groupes d'entreprises indigènes à travers toute l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Ils sont également connus pour leur dévotion culturelle et leur croyance en Chi ou Chukwu (Dieu), alusi (dieux, esprits ou divinités), ndi ichie (ancêtres) et en l'oracle. C'est pourquoi le mot « Chi » apparaît dans les noms de la majorité des personnes Igbos. Les valeurs culturelles des Igbos reposent sur les maximes spirituelles suivantes : « Onye a Hana Nwanne ya » (ne laisse pas ton

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frère derrière toi), « Onye biri ebeya biri » (vivre et laisser vivre) et « Akuruno » (faire en sorte que la richesse arrive jusqu'à la maison). Ces caractéristiques font des Igbos une population unique, ce qui nous permet d'examiner les liens entre leur comportement entrepreneurial, la religion et la spiritualité. À l'aide d'une méthode qualitative (entretiens), nous avons analysé des données d'experts fournies par 34 entrepreneurs Igbos afin de clarifier ces liens. Les résultats révèlent que les orientations « vers l'autre monde » et « vers ce monde » sont les deux principales forces qui influencent le comportement entrepreneurial. L'orientation « vers un autre monde » influence ce comportement de sorte que la poursuite d'un style de vie d'entreprise familiale est devenue la norme. De même, l'orientation « vers ce monde » influence le comportement entrepreneurial associé à la prise de risque, à l'apprentissage informel de l'entrepreneuriat, à l'entrepreneuriat à assise communautaire, à la responsabilité sociale, etc

## 1. Introduction

African indigenous communities identify with either traditional religion, Islam or Christianity, that forms the belief system and norms that influence behaviour. These religious systems provide the foundations for the cultural values and moral expectations, and also define the relationships with God, other humans and society. This article examines the relationship between religiosity and spirituality, on the one hand, and entrepreneurial behaviour and persistence, on the other. Although several studies examine the influence of institutions and culture (regarded 'as the rules of the game in society' that determine human behaviour, North 1990, 3) on entrepreneurial behaviour, there remain gaps in our knowledge regarding how elements of religion and spirituality influence behaviour.

Entrepreneurial persistence, as applied in this study, relates to perseverance and the continuance of an entrepreneurship tendency and actions. Entrepreneurial behaviour represents a set of actions which allows individuals or groups of people to explore and identify possible ways to innovate and/or improve upon the existing commercial ideas to create a product or service that can compete in the market effectively (Ying et al. 2022). The characteristics of entrepreneurial behaviour include being visionary, taking calculated risks, taking chances, the tolerance of ambiguity (an ability to deal with uncertainty), affordable losses (exploring if an idea is worth pursuing or not), mitigating risks (understanding and measuring all risks), etc.

Religiosity describes strong religious feelings and devotion based on religious doctrine, practice and values. On the other hand, spirituality is associated with a belief in God, or a supernatural or higher power (Koenig 2012; Pérez and Rohde 2022). Historically, spiritual development has been maintained through the religious school system and political system. It is believed that different levels of spirituality and religiousness (high or low) are associated with quality of life and happiness (Vitorino et al. 2018). Also, spirituality integrates many human elements, such as moral, social, and religious values, that allows entrepreneurs to consider the betterment of society, that is not solely focused on fulfilling financial needs (Rashid and Ratten 2022).

Previous studies have argued that, when spiritual beliefs are visible in the mission of any business, this helps with achieving both social and economic goals (Khari and Sinha 2018; Kurt et al. 2020). Moreover, Rashid and Ratten (2022) argue that spirituality nurtures a sense of purpose and promotes individual achievements.

Therefore, spirituality and religiosity, as a multidimensional construct, provide a paradigmatic case through which to explore entrepreneurial behaviour, values and attitudes. Although the role of religion and spirituality in influencing entrepreneurship has been a subject of scholarly debates for many centuries (Dvouletý 2023; Rashid and Ratten 2022), more research is required to explore the dynamics of the relationship between religion, social change and entrepreneurial action (Siwale et al. 2023; Ying et al. 2022). Several scholars have explored the critical elements of religion that influence entrepreneurial behaviour in many regions (see, e.g. Audretsch, Bonte, and Tamvada 2013; Dana 2009; Dodd and Gotsis 2007; Enterprising Religion 2009; Henley 2017; Kumar et al. 2022; Siwale et al. 2023), however, many African indigenous communities remain unexplored.

Therefore, the focus of this article is on the indigenous Igbo population (one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria). Igbos are profoundly religious and polytheistic people with strong belief in God the creator ('*Chukwu*', '*Chi*' or '*Chineke*'), earthly goddesses, deities and spirits. These attributes make Igbos a unique population to examine the link between spirituality, religiosity and entrepreneurial behaviour. Despite the increasing research focus on the relationship between religion and enterprise development, the effect at the individual level remains unexplored (Siwale et al. 2023). Therefore, this research explores entrepreneurs' perspectives using qualitative methods, in an attempt to answer the question:

- What are the links between religiosity, spirituality and entrepreneurial behaviour?

As part of its contribution, this article analyses this critical question to explore African indigenous entrepreneurship. The previous research on indigenous Igbo entrepreneurial behaviour (see, for example, Adeola 2020; Igwe et al. 2018, Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020; Ekekwe 2021) has failed to address this fundamental question. Moreover, the unique characteristics and rich heterogeneity of indigenous people and their respective cultural norms vary considerably across nations and regions (Dana 2015). Therefore, understanding the impact of religion and spirituality on various indigenous groups can contribute towards advancing the entrepreneurship theories and practices (Greidanus and Sharpe 2017; Bruton, Zahra, and Cai 2018; Dell, Mika, and Warren 2017; Igwe 2021; Neubert et al. 2017). Arguably, the limited focus on indigenous knowledge in the literature may have impeded the development of entrepreneurship theories (Bruton, Zahra, and Cai 2018; George et al. 2016).

The rest of the article is organized as follows: the next section 2 presents the theoretical background such as the link between religiosity and spirituality and human development; the influence of religious and cultural values on indigenous entrepreneurship; and an overview of traditional and entrepreneurial manifestation of the indigenous Igbo people. Section 3 describes the research method, including the research strategy, data collection, data analysis and coding process. Section 4 presents

the findings and propositions developed from the research themes. The final section (5) discusses the findings and (6) concludes the article.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. The link between religiosity and spirituality in human development

Religion is associated with the history of humankind and how people conduct their lives, which is often linked to a holy, sacred and divine reverence or attitude towards God, gods or spirits. Hence, religion represents a system of beliefs and rituals that is embedded in the social and cultural contexts (Siwale et al. 2023). Also, humans have always lived with a sense of aliveness and interconnectedness to spirits, which might define their sense of purpose (Dein 2020; Villani et al. 2019). Despite the connection between the history of humans and religion, there remains controversy concerning the definitions and impact of religion and spirituality on human development (Koenig 2012; Moulin-Stożek 2020; Vitorino et al. 2018). Religiousness is related to the interconnectedness of the transcendent elements of spirituality and community traditions, which influence beliefs, attitudes, behaviour, the adherence to certain rules, expressions and refraining from certain activities (Villani et al. 2019).

Moulin-Stożek (2020) observed that the religious school system provides a foundation for people to reflect on their own beliefs and perspective on life. A religious self-transcendence state is associated with decreased self-salience and an increased sense of connectedness with others (Dein 2020). Weber (1978, 544) identified two different religious orientations: other-worldly and inner-worldly (this-worldly). Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), define other-worldly as being more closely connected to spiritual things than to the ordinary things of life, while this worldly refer to material or earthly concerns. 'Inner-worldly involvements include engagement in mundane and face-to-face activities. Other-worldly involvements includes various forms of private contemplation' (Summers-Effler and Kwak 2015, 258). Summers-Effler and Kwak (2015) explained that inner-worldly refers to engaging the immediate social world, and other-worldly refers to withdrawing from the social world by isolating oneself from face-to-face interaction with other people.

Previous studies reveal that a variety of forces determines religious belief and spirituality. Having an attachment to God or gods is the foundation of religious belief (Dein 2020; Villani et al. 2019). The other-worldly orientation emphasizes cognitions about a supernatural order or human relationships with a supernatural being (Davidson 1972). This kind of belief is related to the existence of life after death and Christ's divinity (Davidson 1972). The this-worldly orientation represents humans' relationships with other people or their activities within the social institutions (e.g. religious directives to love one's neighbour and help others) (Davidson 1972). These attributes imply that spiritual development should occur when individuals can experience, create, inquire into and enjoy things that are beneficial to life's meaning and purpose (Moulin-Stożek 2020). Table 1 summarises the forces of religiosity and spirituality (other-worldly and this-worldly) orientations based on a review of the literature.

Table 1. Other-worldly and this-worldly orientation.

|  | Religiosity | Spirituality |
|---|---|---|
| Other-worldly (connected to spiritual concern) | Organised beliefs and attitudes | Personal beliefs and value system |
|  | Strong identity, behaviour and actions | Having an attachment with spirits |
|  | Having an attachment with God the creator or gods | Power of Supernatural and divine forces |
|  | Blessings from above | Devotion by sacrifices |
|  | Mediation, mindfulness and devotion | Feeling a sense of peace, purpose and connection with others |
|  | Collective expressions that become part of culture | Journey to find meaning and individual connections |
|  | A feeling of Holiness versus Satanism | Discovery of spiritual wellbeing |
| This-worldly (connected to earthly concern) | God-giving life meaning and purpose of life | Supernatural order, self-esteem and self-control |
|  | Practice of worship and faith based | Experiences in life and dialogue with the inner self |
|  | Life after death consequences | Belief in spiritual or evil forces |
|  | Fulfilment of being part of the community and responsibility | Protection and self-defence |
|  | Social and moral control based on values of creation | Feeling of connectedness and community-oriented |
|  | Faith mechanisms with rituals based on high power | Solidarity and congregational affiliation and oneness-oriented |
|  | Judgement, punishment (good or evil, right or wrong) | Compassion of self and others |

Source: Compiled by authors.

Other unique aspects of spirituality include being close to and having a relationship with God (Granqvist 2014); God giving life meaning and a sense of attachment to God (Pérez and Rohde 2022); a belief in miracles; a belief in the afterlife, a belief in heaven and hell and evil forces (Park 2017; Pérez and Rohde 2022). Another factor is congregational affiliation (Davidson 1972). Religion is associated with community cohesion and embeddedness, that are designed (a) 'to facilitate closeness to the transcendent, and (b) to foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in a community' (Koenig 2012, 2). Therefore, religious belief and spiritual values influence the behaviour of individuals and communities, and are linked to social, political and economic development, such as entrepreneurship.

## 2.2. The influence of religious and cultural values on indigenous entrepreneurship

Indigenous peoples are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the land and natural resources in the area where they live. They make up approximately six per cent of the global population (World Bank 2023). Other scholars refer to the indigenous population as the first inhabitants of a place or people who live in a particular location and are influenced by a local culture (Davison and Andrade 2018). Therefore, indigenous people practice a unique traditional model of entrepreneurship, that is influenced by cultural and religious values. Several scholars argue that indigenous people are a disadvantaged population, who suffer oppression and deprivation (Hindle and Moroz 2010; Marlow and McAdam 2012). There is evidence that religious norms and cultural values are critical factors that determine indigenous people's decision to become entrepreneurs (Audretsch, Bonte, and Tamvada

2013; Neubert et al. 2017). The assumption is that values entail a prime channel, through which belonging to a religion and entrepreneurship are linked (Rietveld and Hoogendoorn 2022).

Henley (2017) found that the impact of religion on entrepreneurship is mediated by pluralism and regulation. The findings note the potential role that the religious structure may play in mediating any association between religiosity and entrepreneurship (Henley 2017). Another finding indicates that, in societies with a high degree of salience and a strong behavioural commitment, forms of Christianity can flourish, and religion appears to contribute positively as a cultural factor to environmental munificence for entrepreneurial activity (Henley 2017). Rietveld and Hoogendoorn (2022) conclude that those belonging to a religion and entrepreneurs prioritize values related to self-transcendence over those related to self-enhancement. These associations are relatively constant across the major religions in Europe, according to Rietveld and Hoogendoorn (2022).

Entrepreneurship is an important aspect of human life, as well as religion. Religion is a critical 'form of motivation; source of value and significance; contributor to mortality and health; source of coping; and source of distress' (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005, cited in Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021, 2). Various factors influence people's evaluation of their lives: their subjective well-being, life satisfaction, life fulfilment, etc. Religion and spiritual values also motivate both individuals and communities (Krause 2011; Luhmann et al. 2012; VanderWeele 2017). Defining the purpose or quality of life is a key attribute of persistence. A religious belief enables people to define the purpose of their life and life satisfaction (Mak et al. 2011; VanderWeele 2017). Setting immediate goals, a desire to succeed, a reliance on one's ability, seeking cooperation, the fulfilment of social needs, determination, industriousness, and planning future and long-term goals are other attributes of persistence (Balzarotti et al. 2016; Diener, Oishi, and Tay 2018).

Religion develops in a social context, such as social entrepreneurship, social capital and social networks, that emphasize behaviour that transcends beyond one's own needs to incorporate the needs of others (Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021). Historically, religion has had a significant influence on all societies, as an agent of social change and a community's progressive civilization (VanderWeele 2017). Religion teaches unity, tolerance, compassion, love, justice, humility, sacrifice, trustworthiness, service to humanity, etc. Also, the religious denominations are united by the concepts of solidarity and agency (capacity building) (Tarpeh and Hustedde 2021). Arguably, community-based entrepreneurship originated from religious civilization, and utilizes public resources, linkages and mutual trust to promote economic activities (Parwez 2017). Both religion and entrepreneurship provide collaborative platforms that enable local resources to be leveraged in creative ways to address urgent local problems (Kim and Kim 2022).

## 2.3. Traditional and entrepreneurial manifestation of the indigenous Igbo people

'Things Fall Apart' is a pioneer novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, first published in 1958 which depicts pre-colonial life and culture of the Igbos. Igbos are ethnic group in eastern and some parts of South-South regions of Nigeria. Traditionally,

Igbos worship many gods (such as the supreme God or gods) (Froiland 2020). Hence, the majority of Igbo personal and family names are linked to 'Chu' or 'Chi' (God or gods). Ranked beneath Chukwu or Chineke are lesser gods (Alusi), such as Amadioha, Agbara and Umuagbara (earth goddesses and oracles), including the spirits of ancestors and the dead. Masquerades considered as superior beings are associated with spiritual elements, according to Igbo belief. They are important spiritual elements of society and represent images of deities.

Having a relationship with God, miracles, the afterlife, the spirit of the dead and evil forces are some of the spiritual forces that guide individuals' behaviour and actions. Igbos praise or invoke the name of God or a spirit when they sense danger or have cause to rejoice. Traditionally, they are crimes that are regarded as 'Alu' (abominations), such as armed robbery or murder, which are punishable by the religious or traditional gods or deities. Also, the traditional rules describe gendered (men and women's) roles and responsibilities in society (Igwe 2021). The Igbo tradition promotes individualism (based on wealth-seeking) as well as communal values, and practices mutual social responsibility. Hence, Igbos prioritize the clan, community, family and extended family.

Therefore, the Igbo economic, political and social institutions find their relevance in the kindred, extended families and village set-up. The mutual social responsibility gives men and women a sense of responsibility towards their community, and, in turn, the community has a sense of responsibility towards them and their children. There exist certain processes and systems through which some individuals in the village attain seniority, which confers on them with power to take decisions on behalf of their community.

There exists a leadership and recognition culture (Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020). Igbos acknowledge the power of individuals within the community, and a council of male elders within the kindred system are powerful. Hence, the majority of the decisions are made through consultation, discussion and consensus. The authority resides among the elders of the kindred or senior members of the village; for example, through the *Ndi Ichie* (elders' forum), *Umu Nna* (sons of the fathers), and *Umu Ada*, *Umu Nne* or *Ikwu Nne* (daughters of the extended families). The 'Umuada' (*Umu* means people) of first daughters (*Ada*) are a powerful, influential group of women, who serve as a bridge between the women and men as well as checking any abuse of power by the council of male elders (Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020).

Igbos are regarded as an enterprising, commercial community, with a high propensity towards risk-taking in business (Mamabolo, Benedict, and Ndofor 2016). Igbos have four-market-oriented days that make up the traditional week (Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo). Some of the most important attributes of the Igbo indigenous culture and belief system are prudency, innovativeness, trust, perseverance, submissive apprenticeship, and a form of participative leadership, whereby the number of bureaucratic rules and regulations are kept to a minimum (Mamabolo, Benedict, and Ndofor 2016). Ethnic obligation (termed 'ethnos oblige') has been described as the perceived duty of individuals towards the other members of their ethnic group (Zoogah et al. 2021).

Igbos are renowned for their entrepreneurial persistence, continuity and success. They are also famous for developing a Nigerian Model for Stakeholder Capitalism (see, Ekekwe 2021) and the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) (known as 'Igba Boi', to learn the trade) (see, Adeola 2020; Agu and Nwachukwu 2020; Igwe et al. 2018, Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020; Oyewunmi, Oyewunmi, and Moses 2020). Igbo apprenticeship system is world's largest business incubator platform (Neuwirth 2018). They dominate the private sector in West Africa, specializing in a wide range of businesses including exports and imports, trading, transportation, automotive spare parts, the movie industry (Nollywood), pharmaceuticals, hospitality, etc. (Igwe 2021).

Igbos believe that parents bring children into the world, but communities ensure that these children succeed and thrive (Ekekwe 2021). Igbos are known for their mobility and migratory characteristics (Igwe 2021). The majority of Igbo businesspeople reside in other parts of Nigeria or within the diaspora (Obaje and Uzomba 2018). The Igbos' entrepreneurial exploits began due to their contact with the Portuguese in the mid-fifteenth century and the European slave trade on the Niger Coast. Following the abolition of the slave trade, the Igbos embarked on business ventures in many different areas. Another important political event in the Igbos' development was the Civil War (1967–1970), during which the 'Igbo nation' attempted to proclaim its independence from Nigeria, as the Republic of Biafra (Korieh 2016). The war marked a key point in the Igbos' entrepreneurial spirit (Igwe et al. 2018, Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020). Following the Civil War, the Igbos managed to recover a significant proportion of their pre-war economic status, even though the Nigerian government confiscated the bank accounts of many Igbos and offered them £20 ($28) to start afresh (Igwe et al. 2018). To overcome the challenges arising from the financial constraints caused by the Civil War, the Igbo leaders developed the 'Igba Boi', as a community-run apprentice scheme.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research strategy

A qualitative approach is the preferred analytical method for this study. Qualitative research provides unique means for understanding complex social processes and developing new frameworks, based on in-depth, contextualized insights into a particular context (Colman and Rouzies 2019; Ojo 2019; Rauch, van Doorn, and Hulsink 2014). To achieve the aim of the research, data were collected from expert interviews with experienced entrepreneurs and retired business owners (who have become community leaders/rulers). Experts are considered knowledgeable about a particular subject and are identified by their specific knowledge, community position or status (Döringer 2021). The expert interview, as a qualitative empirical research method, has been widely discussed as a valuable qualitative method to adopt for political and social research, that aims to explore or collect data about a specific field of interest (Döringer 2021). This research approach unveils the participants' perspectives and provides them with a voice to narrate their experiences (Lee and Hung 2014; Marlow and McAdam 2012; Palinkas et al. 2015).

Döringer (2021) distinguishes between three types of expert interview, according to their epistemological functions, as follows. The first type is the exploratory expert interview, which is often used to gain knowledge of and an orientation in an unknown or complex field. The second type is the systematizing expert interview, which facilitates the structured, comprehensive collection of expert knowledge to generate a high level of data comparability. The third type relates to the 'theory-generating expert interview that serves as a starting point for the envisaged methodological development of problem-centered expert interviews' (Döringer 2021, 266). This study applied exploratory expert interviews. Before the questions were asked, the participants were encouraged to develop a narrative that reflects their business, religious, spiritual, community, family and cultural experiences related to entrepreneurship. The interview questions were divided into three sections: (i) questions determining the profiles of the participants; (ii) questions investigating the history of Igbo entrepreneurship; and (iii) questions exploring the influence of spirituality, religion and culture on entrepreneurial behaviour.

## 3.2. Data collection

The participants were identified through business associations/trade unions in Eastern Nigeria. Only members of these business associations/unions who volunteered were interviewed. After the interviews ended, we asked the business owners to suggest or recommend any retired business owners/community leaders among their acquaintance whom we could invite to participate in the research. Although many of the participants were recommended to us, only those who volunteered and could be reached were interviewed. Therefore, convenience and purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015) enabled the identification and selection of individuals who were exceptionally knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Clark 2011). To achieve the research objectives, 22 experienced Igbo entrepreneurs (14 males and eight females) and 12 community leaders/rulers (all of whom had owned a business until their retirement) were interviewed face-to-face (as presented in Table 2).

All 34 of the participants had between 15 and 30 years of experience of owning and operating either a small or medium-sized business or managing multiple businesses. In this regard, some of the business owners employed between ten and 100 full-time workers. Also, all the business owners have begun as sole proprietors following their apprenticeship and later expanded their business into its current form. Therefore, we regard these business owners as experts. All of the interviews were conducted in either Igbo or English and were recorded and transcribed. All of the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. They were informed of the aims and objectives of the research and that the interviews would be recorded but that their anonymity would be preserved. Hence, the responses and quotes have been linked to pseudonyms. Each interview lasted between 40 and 95 min.

## 3.3. Data analysis and process

The qualitative data were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed. This approach facilitated the thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Inductive

Table 2. Profile of participants.

| Pseudonames | Gender | Level of education | Type of business/trade | Years of business experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Okoro | Male | Primary | Industrialist/manufacturer | 17 |
| Okechukwu | Male | Primary | Electronics dealer | 23 |
| Chijioke | Male | Secondary | Motor spare parts | 28 |
| Chukwuma | Male | Secondary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 30 |
| Ofordile | Male | Primary | Major distributor of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and beverages | 24 |
| Nneamaka | Female | Primary | Fashion | 16 |
| Nneka | Female | Secondary | Fashion | 15 |
| Adaeze | Female | Secondary | Textile and gold | 19 |
| Francis | Male | Primary | Domestic good distributor | 22 |
| Nnamdi | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently traditional ruler | 29 |
| Nnebolise | Male | Primary | Building materials distributor | 21 |
| Kelechi | Male | University | Computers & office equipment | 25 |
| Umahi | Male | Secondary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 36 |
| Ikechukwu | Male | Secondary | Tricycle & motorcycle distributor | 20 |
| Chikwado | Male | Primary | Fashion & textile | 15 |
| Chidiebere | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 27 |
| Amos | Male | Primary | Electronics dealer | 24 |
| Okafor | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently traditional ruler | 30 |
| Ikenna | Male | Primary | House interior materials | 23 |
| Ejike | Male | Secondary | Motor transport and politician | 18 |
| Onyinyechukwu | Female | Secondary | Restaurant and bar | 20 |
| Adaora | Female | University | Events and wedding designer | 23 |
| Chioma | Female | Secondary | Salon and beauty materials | 15 |
| Ukachukwu | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently traditional ruler | 27 |
| Udeogu | Male | Secondary | Retired business owner & currently traditional ruler | 30 |
| Nwali | Male | Secondary | Electrical material | 21 |
| Benjamin | Male | Primary | Electronics | 18 |
| Ifeanyi | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 26 |
| Kenechukwu | Male | University | Supermarket & chemist | 20 |
| Onyekachi | Female | Primary | Catering & food vendor | 17 |
| Akunna | Female | Primary | Cosmetics and textiles | 16 |
| Kenneth | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 29 |
| Nnachi | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently traditional ruler | 25 |
| Nwaeze | Male | Primary | Retired business owner & currently community leader | 22 |

Source: Authors' compilation.

coding helped to identify the dominant themes arising from the inquiry (Colman and Rouzies 2019). The coding process was flexible and involved the use of open codes. Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Through the process of open coding, the participants' views about a phenomenon are analyzed, questioned and explored, which leads to new assumptions. Through the coding and recoding, the patterns and themes emerged (Colman and Rouzies 2019).

First, the data were arranged systematically by converting them all into text format. Based on the research objectives and questions, the data were organized into themes. The themes were identified by categorizing and assigning properties and patterns to the data. Building on these patterns enabled informed decisions to be made regarding the presentation and analysis. As a means of validation and to ensure reliability, the interview transcripts were sent to the participants to validate and confirm their responses (see, e.g. Mero-Jaffe 2011). The qualitative data patterns were analyzed through thematic analysis using three stages of first, second and third order analysis *via* coding and re-coding.

The first order allows for the emergence of broad categories, whilst the second order is geared towards developing sub-categories and third order enable development of theoretical propositions (Darbi and Coffie 2021). The first stage involved reading and becoming familiar with the data. The second stage involved a second reading and coding, searching for themes and highlighting the emerging themes. The third stage involved re-cording to enable themes and sub-themes to emerge. Themes that emerged from the findings were categorized as main themes and propositions presented as findings.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The links between religiosity, spirituality and entrepreneurial behaviour

The findings reveal that spiritual and religious beliefs provide a positive platform on which Igbo entrepreneurship thrive. Igbo entrepreneurial spirit manifests in several ways – ingenuity, audacity, resilience, and unique capacity to turn adversity into unique opportunities. The brilliance and entrepreneurial spirt of the Igbos has remained exemplary across the globe. An 'other-worldly' and 'this-worldly' orientations plus salient religious and spiritual beliefs influence Igbos' entrepreneurial behaviour and persistence (represented as Figure 1).

The model (Figure 1) represents how religious and spiritual beliefs influence individuals as well as the conduct within a social group and the enactment of the rules of engagement that influences entrepreneurial behaviour. It could be argued that Igbo
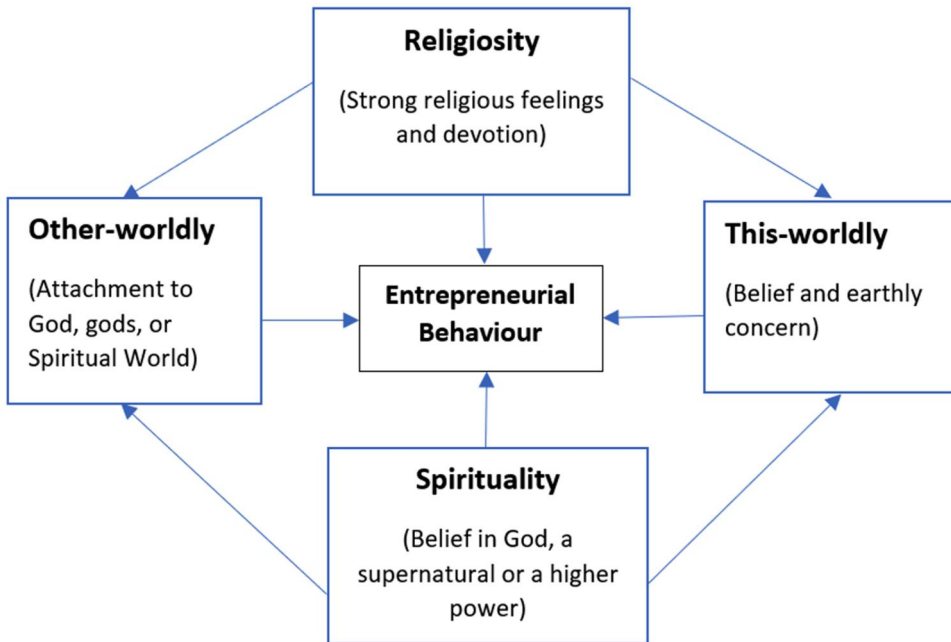


Source: Authors' framework

Figure 1. The links between religiosity, spirituality, and entrepreneurship.
Source: Authors' framework

Apprenticeship System (known as '*Igba Boi*", to learn the trade) could be as a result of this-worldly (concerns for material or earthly possessions. Propositions 1–6 explains the links between religion, spirituality and Igbo indigenous entrepreneurship. Also, the extended family system and community-based economic system become strategic resources that nurture and develop young people's entrepreneurial knowledge, creativity and risk-taking. Also, religious and traditional associations produce stakeholders, business networks and customers, that enable resource-sharing, opportunity identification and opportunity exploitation.

**Proposition 1:** *An other-worldly orientation (a belief in a spiritual God or gods) influences Igbo indigenous entrepreneurial behaviour, such that the pursuit of an authentic business lifestyle, based on the religious and spiritual doctrines, has become the norm.*

> The Igbos' religious beliefs and value system reflect the notion that nothing concerning nature and human endeavours, including businesses, can exist outside the spirit of God (Chi) or gods (Retired business owner & community leader).

Igbos develop strong religious identity, behaviour and actions. The participants expressed a strong belief in God or gods (deities) by highlighting some of the principles that influence Igbo entrepreneurial behaviour. Some of the participants provided Igbo proverbs to illustrate important Igbo maxims:

> *One of the Igbo philosophies is "Onye biri ebeya biri" (Live and let live), which is a liberal and democratic principle upheld through spiritual and religious commitments that requires individuals to live an authentic life fully and freely and to allow others to live likewise* (Retired business owner & currently a traditional ruler).

> *Another belief is that of "Nwanne di na mba" (Even beyond the homeland, a brother or a sister exists), which creates a friendly hospitality attitude to strangers and migratory behaviour* (Motor transport owner and politician).

Igbos believe that their faith, having an attachment with God or gods, reciprocity and devotion form the cornerstones of their entrepreneurial exploits and success. The majority of the participants highlighted that, alongside upholding a business culture, they are committed to the religious doctrines of kindness, God giving life meaning, life after death and a belief in heaven and hell, that define the purpose of their life and moderate their actions.

> *A strong religious belief is manifested in many popular Igbo names, such as* Chiamanda *(God will not fail),* Chidiebere *(God is merciful),* Chinedu *(God leads),* Chijioke *(meaning God is the custodian of all blessings) and* Chinenye *(God gives)* (Female, textile and gold business owner).

Igbos are known for their migratory tendency. It is believed that Igbos' risk-taking propensity and migratory characteristics are driven by their strong religious belief and trust in God or gods that guide and protect them, together with the ideology of '*Nwanne Di Na Mba*' (a brother exists in another land). These Igbo philosophies and beliefs, however, have both a positive and negative influence, according to Nwali, as Igbos are popularly known to engage in both legal and illegal businesses. According to Nwali, a strong belief in *deities* and gods' protection mean that Igbos take risks and engage in illegal businesses that are risky to undertake.

*The traditional religious practices, cultural beliefs, and now modern Christianity provide the foundation for defining the purpose of life and personal goals. Traditionally, the will of the deities is sought through divination and sacrifices. These beliefs have a key influence on Igbos' purpose and life expectations* (Chukwuma).

*The power of deities intervenes or mediates with the supernatural powers when there is disagreement or when communities or families are searching for solutions to problems or unknowns* (Former business owner and traditional ruler).

Furthermore, another influence of religion on Igbo behaviour is the gendered roles related to responsibilities and the ownership of an asset. Despite men and women being equal before God, some of the participants mentioned the creation of two human beings, that reveals differences in their God-given functions and responsibilities related to gendered roles, leadership and the duty of women to submit to their husbands.

*Arguably, Igbo values are biased towards males. Men are supposed to be the head of the family, and take full responsibility for the financial need of the family. Hence, the existence and character of the first son or male children become the most important aspect when planning for entrepreneurial succession or the sharing of a family asset* (Nneka).

*Beliefs in differences in God-given functions between men and women influence the Igbo tradition that allows male children to inherit the family property when their father dies, while daughters are nurtured and prepared for family life* (Chioma).

**Proposition 2:** *A this-worldly religious orientation influences Igbos' indigenous entrepreneurial behaviour, that is associated with being independent and responsible.*

Igbos exhibit social and moral control based on faith values. Igbos' passion for entrepreneurship is based on the assumption of an intense reward for independence and wealth-seeking associated with doing business. Igbos have been described as suffering from an institutional disadvantage, which led to the Civil War. Arguably, the war served as a major motivator for the Igbos' entrepreneurial spirit and persistence.

*The Igbos' business philosophy developed from the religious doctrine of being responsible, hardworking and imaginative, as well as a belief in the God of miracles that gives abundant wealth* (Traditional ruler and business owner).

*Igbos' striving for independence has become a major source of devotion and motivation for both the old and new generations, thereby enabling the re-enactment of entrepreneurial persistence and wealth-creation* (Nnebolise).

*Every devotion to God solicits divine blessings in the form of wealth, health and children. The obsession to become rich is not selfish but based on a desire to become the provider for the family. Doing business and making money become entrepreneurially spiritual as people make efforts to take care of their personal and family responsibilities* (Nnamdi).

Entrepreneurship enable Igbos to embark on the journey to self-esteem, finding meaning and individual connections to the society. Several participants explained that Igbo business persistence manifests itself through traditional and religious beliefs which support personal independence, self-employment, profit-seeking and wealth-seeking tendencies.

*"Trading and wealth possession". This is the guiding principle of Igbos' earthly-worldly dream. A willingness to establish a private dynasty* (Ikechukwu).

The above quotation was also referenced to justify Igbos' mobility and migratory tendency. The majority of the participants argued that Igbos have turned migration into an advantage and motivator to engage in exploring new opportunities. According to Adora (a female participant), Igbos do not fear failure or risk in business due to their strong affiliation and belief in God or gods.

## 4.2. The link between religiosity, spirituality and entrepreneurial persistence

**Proposition 3:** *Igbos' indigenous entrepreneurship persistence developed through the religious doctrine of knowledge-seeking through collaborative learning.*

Historically, knowledge sharing, and collective endeavours enabled the Igbos to develop business sense and enterprising spirit. The Igbos were among the exporters of slaves to Europe and America from the 17th to 19th centuries (Oriji 1987). Following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Igbos entered other areas of business. The knowledge and experience that the Igbos developed over many centuries of engaging in business enabled them to create transgenerational business legacies and business clusters in the major cities of Nigeria and other West African countries.

> The "Igba Boi" *system is an indigenous knowledge system, that is not imported from other contexts or cultures, but purposely designed by Igbos to promote the social and economic empowerment of the Igbo race* (Business and community leader).

> *Learning the trade has always been like a religion for the Igbos. Also, engaging in trade is spiritually-oriented towards securing one's financial destiny* (Traditional ruler).

Seeking and developing adequate knowledge, soliciting cooperation, and planning for both success and succession are the foundation of Igbos' entrepreneurial persistence, several participants maintained. The '*Igba Boi*' (informal apprenticeship) is a community-influenced, collaborative learning and business training system that recruits young people to learn a trade as apprentices and then start their own businesses. The fulfilment of social needs is another attribute of Igbos' entrepreneurial persistence.

> *Collaborative learning is maintained through the coming together of extended family members and utilization of resources and opportunities, made possible by linkages with one's family members, kindred members and business networks* (Okoro).

Apprentices were unpaid but received a daily allowance from the business owner to cover their food and upkeep. They were expected to help with the household tasks after the daily business operations ended. Depending on an informal agreement with their parents, the apprentices stayed with the business owners for between three and seven years. In exchange, the apprentices were promised cash, a shop and goods to enable them to start their own businesses upon completion of their apprenticeship.

> *The key to Igbo entrepreneurship's success and motivation is the apprenticeship, that is so embedded in the community values that have existed for more than five decades* (Chijioke).

Chijioke narrated how, after working for his uncle alongside other apprentices for six years, he was given a shop, cash and goods. His boss introduced him to a network

of suppliers and customers, and regularly monitored his progress for a further two years. Today, Chijioke has more than eight warehouses in different locations, selling spare car parts, and a pool of more than 16 apprentices and 20 paid full-time staff. He described how, in addition to starting an apprenticeship after leaving secondary school at the age of 17, he also learned about business operations and strategies by helping out with his family's business from the age of 12. Learning about trade as a teenager has become a critical factor in Igbos' entrepreneurial success, according to Chukwuma.

**Proposition 4:** *Igbos' indigenous entrepreneurial persistence develops through defining the purpose of life and a belief in one's own ability to succeed even in the most difficult circumstances.*

Igbos are renowned for being 'naturally enterprising' and creating a 'transgenerational business legacy' (Igwe, Madichie, and Nihar 2020). Transgenerational legacies develop from cultural collaboration and community innovations, where extended family(ness) is a strategic resource for creating new businesses or sustaining the performance of existing ones. Given the unfavourable Nigerian economic environment, Igbos engage in innovations to overcome these challenges and create business legacies. Igbos' entrepreneurial persistence emanates from a reliance on their own ability and defining the religious purpose and meaning of life. Also, Igbos believe in their own ability to succeed even in the most unfavourable or unfamiliar environment.

> *Have you not read part of the scripture that states that "an intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge"? Persistence is linked to capacity and knowledge capability. Informal learning and education at the family and community levels lay a solid foundation for Igbo entrepreneurial persistence* (Okechukwu, electronics dealer).

> *Also, I will advise you to read the scripture which states that "a wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might"* (Okechukwu, electronics dealer).

Determination and industriousness are other attributes of Igbos' entrepreneurial persistence. Igbo businesspeople rarely take holidays, working long hours almost every day of the year. Ikechukwu and Umahi maintain that Igbos open their shops for more than 12 h a day and that one hour missed in business is like one week missed in Igbo business life. They note that young people are trained to emulate this hard work and dedication through the apprenticeship, which trains them to devote long hours and huge energy to the business. Another business leader, Chikwado, stated that, when apprentices are found to lack these qualities or fail to display a desire to develop them, this usually leads to their expulsion or the termination of their apprenticeship agreement.

## 4.3. The influence of religion and spirituality on social and entrepreneurship development

**Proposition 5:** *Igbos' indigenous entrepreneurial persistence developed from the social structures of the extended family network and community support, that facilitate business and social development.*

Igbos' social and moral control develop from the social structures of family values and community values. 'Ezinaulo' (family and community), 'Umunna' (members of the extended family) 'Ikwu' (kindred) and Ndi ogo (in-laws) are the most important features of the Igbo social structures, that facilitate learning and social development. The Igbo ideology of 'Ahamefuna' (my name or legacy should not disappear) drives families to pursue business and wealth, and also plan for successors to carry their business forward.

> If families do not take responsibility, the kids might grow up and become a liability and nuisance (Former business director and traditional ruler).

> Any place where our men go and find it fertile, they'll come back and take others to join them (Business owner and community leader).

Francis and Nneamaka explained the role of the extended family in Igbo business life. Both participants stressed that the strength of the Igbo business legacy rests on the strength of the connectedness and community-oriented extended families. Ofordile narrated how, after he completed his apprenticeship, the capital offered to him by his uncle was insufficient to expand his business. He gathered several extended family members and asked if they could provide him with the extra cash. Some of his extended family members got together and raised the extra capital (without interest) that he needed to expand his business. Igbo businesses tend to be organized based on a strong family philosophy.

> Every family is responsible for preparing their children to develop knowledge and entrepreneurial skills. There exists healthy competition among our children, and families compete against each other in business or professionally (Traditional ruler).

Nnamdi explained that the traditional role of families is to focus heavily on investing in human capital and nurturing young people to learn the business. He notes that families prepare their children for future uncertainty.

> They will identify children with an entrepreneurial mindset and vision and send them to their kin in the city to undertake an apprenticeship and start from there (Community leader).

Solidarity, congregational affiliation and Oneness-orientation are reflected on the foundations of 'Ikwu' (Kindred) and 'Umunna' (the extended family system) which are critical to the development of the 'Igba Boi' system. These groups are influential in identifying talents and linking mentees with mentors. Also, these groups play an important role in mediation and dispute resolution, when necessary. 'Ikwu' and 'Umunna' are derived from the ideology and community spirit of 'Onye a Hana Nwanne ya' (don't leave your brother behind), which led to the development of a collaborative learning system among the Igbos. Also, another critical factor in Igbo economic development is the role of the town unions, aimed at promoting social development and community development.

> Our kin and kindred work together to become successful, come back to support or sponsor other kin and engage in community development (Community leader).

> Akuruno (make wealth reach home) exerts a significant influence on the Igbo business ideology of shared prosperity. People are encouraged to pursue wealth and bring wealth back to their communities (Ikenna).

Igbos' organised beliefs and attitudes towards entrepreneurship focuses on social value creation and mutually beneficial exchanges to solve community problems or empower society. Also, Igbo society places a high value on wellbeing and wealth creation through entrepreneurship. Nneka (a female participant) explained that the village or community is the source of Igbo strength, and that the members always come together to support others both in times of need and also in times of joy. They pray that God or the gods will guide them wherever they go and bring them back to the community successfully.

As noted by one business founder, Amos, one of the key cultural characteristics of the Igbos is the influence of the community in terms of recognizing and rewarding success. All sons and daughters in the diaspora who bring back success or wealth are recognized, respected and accorded a chieftaincy title, maintains Ejike, another successful entrepreneur and politician. Both Nneka and Ejike stress that the Igbos' competitiveness trait arises from the community culture, which rewards individual success and encourages peer and inter-family rivalry, as a result of which, Igbos thrive and hustle individually.

> *Parents will summon their sons to a meeting and draw their attention to the fact that other family members or community members, who are in the big cities or overseas, are doing well and challenge them to do better* (Onyinyechukwu).

> *Wealthy men and women are highly respected, valued and influential in the Igbo cultural system. This is another critical factor that influences Igbo entrepreneurship. If you don't take proactive action and make it like others, nobody'll recognize you* (Business and community leader).

**Proposition 6:** *Igbos' indigenous entrepreneurial persistence developed from community embeddedness, influenced by strong spiritual beliefs and value system that facilitate leadership and collaboration.*

Compassion of self and others, and a closely-knit community relationship provides resources and skills for private enterprises. Also, Igbo society provides a positive platform that encourages healthy, albeit sometimes fierce, competition among the community members. Moreover, loyalty is temporary and limited to business interests rather than ethnic identity or proximity.

> *Family members regard business as a challenge and the means to compete with other families* (Ukachukwu).

> *Older members of the community provide entrepreneurial leadership, which influences the younger ones, providing experiential learning, socialization and innovation* (Adaeze).

Feeling a sense of peace, purpose and connection with others are other spiritual connectedness of the Igbos. Igbos relate to their fellow Igbos through cooperation, collaboration, and competition at the same time. These attributes of the Igbos differentiate them from other ethnic groups, like the Indian communities, which are understood to be more harmonious in nature than competitive, as people believe in group performance. For instance, Marwari (India) behavioral constructs such as Sakh and Samai that influences trust-based business relationships and tendencies of effectual behaviour (Amoncar, Igwe, and Madichie 2023).

## 5. Discussion

This article examined how religiosity and spirituality influence entrepreneurial behaviour and persistence. An 'other-worldly' orientation, embedded in a system of beliefs and rituals affiliated to God or gods, developed into the Igbo way of life and values. The findings revealed that the pursuit of an authentic business lifestyle was based on the religious and spiritual doctrines that are influenced by a belief in God or gods (deities). A strong belief in religion and spiritual forces (such as *ndi ichie*) influences their personal relationships, and social and community engagements. Igbos' perseverance and continued entrepreneurial success emanate from the tradition and religious values that have existed in Igbo society for many decades (dating back to the period of the slave trade).

A 'this-worldly' orientation influences Igbo indigenous entrepreneurial behaviour, associated with being the provider of the family and other social responsibilities, such as the enactment of the informal learning system, identification of talent and planning for succession. Igbos' passion for entrepreneurship is based on a belief in an intense reward for independence and wealth-seeking, associated with doing business and entrepreneurship. Igbos' transgenerational business legacies develop from their cultural and social responsibilities. Religious and spiritual values encourage knowledge-seeking through collaborative learning (informal apprenticeships). Igbos' entrepreneurial persistence is maintained through this management philosophy.

Having a relationship with God or a belief in deities (gods) moderates the adherence to certain rules and refraining from certain actions. In particular, the powers of the deities are often employed to intervene or punish through supernatural powers when a disagreement arises or communities are searching for those responsible for certain actions that are considered *Alu* (abominations). The findings reveal that Igbos' belief in God (Christianity), or deities (gods) promotes a philosophy of shared prosperity and community responsibilities. Moreover, creative innovation, entrepreneurial experimentation and a risk-taking tendency are high among the Igbos, which could also be linked to a belief in God, gods' or spiritual protection while engaged in human endeavours. A belief in the religious and spiritual norms enables Igbos to define the purpose of life.

The belief system is based on God giving life meaning, life after death, heaven and hell, the holy spirit, evil forces, the powers of deities (gods), moderate behaviour and relationships. Religious and spiritual beliefs create a philosophy based on family and community values. Hence, the social structures developed, based on the foundations of the extended family network, kindred and community (through 'Ikwu' and 'Umunna'). The social cohesion and embeddedness facilitate business learning, business support and social development. For instance, the Igbo spiritual maxims of 'Onye a Hana Nwanne ya' (don't leave your brother behind), 'Onye biri ebeya biri' (live and let live), and 'Akuruno' (make wealth reach home) exert a significant influence on the Igbo business ideology of shared and community prosperity. A closely-knit community relationship, together with cultural and religious forces, influence the entrepreneurship and social development. Igbos' traditional entrepreneurship practices promote individual wealth, family wealth and community wealth, as well as encouraging fierce competition and healthy collaboration between individuals.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

The religious and spiritual elements of societies have been neglected but hold great promise for economic and social research. It is both theoretically and practically important to examine the links between entrepreneurial behaviour, on the one hand, and spiritual and religious values, on the other. It is believed that entrepreneurship is embedded in the cultural and religious values that exist in many societies (Ratten and Ferreira 2017). For instance, Henley (2017) found that the impact of religion on entrepreneurship is mediated by pluralism and regulation. Similarly, religion influences entrepreneurial intentions and participation (Audretsch, Bonte, and Tamvada 2013). For instance, Islam and Christianity are found to be conducive to entrepreneurship, while Hinduism inhibits it (Audretsch, Bonte, and Tamvada 2013). This article contributes to the nexus between religious influence on innovative behaviour (Dvouletý 2023) and supports previous research in the field of 'spirituality' and entrepreneurship performance (Kauanui et al. 2010).

Religion influences entrepreneurial decision-making, market and non-market behaviours (Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021). Given the centrality of religion in society, this article explored the uniqueness of the Igbo indigenous traditional business philosophies and practices, which are comparatively marginalized in the mainstream entrepreneurship research. It has been suggested that religious and spiritual fields will chart a new path for transformative entrepreneurship research (Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021). Historically, Igbos have strong religious beliefs, based on the traditional gods (dating from the pre-colonial period) and God (*Chukwu onye okike*) from Christianity belief (dating back to the colonial era). Traditions and religion play a huge role in Igbo life, as Igbos believe in numerous deities (e.g. *Amadioha*, Oracle, *Ndi-Ichie*, etc), who offer protection, miracles, good health, wealth and success. On the positive, being close to and having a relationship with God or gods and a strong belief on life after death moderate behaviours. On the negative, a strong belief on the supernatural powers and deities led some Igbos to high risk-taking and sometimes illegal business endeavours.

In this study, the influence of religiosity and spirituality on entrepreneurial behaviour has been examined, using a qualitative research method. However, the qualitative approach suggests that several limitations exist (for example, data saturation) (Saunders et al. 2018). Saturation means that any further data collection would yield similar results and serve merely to confirm the themes that have already emerged, so further data collection and/or analysis are unnecessary. Moreover, the use of judgemental/convenience sampling could be a major limitation of this research. There are limitations related to the overreliance on a small sample and one indigenous group, and the use of the narrative approach.

As Gartner (2007, 619) stated: 'the narrative approach recognizes that a story is never the whole story since any story is embedded in a context'. Therefore, we suggest that future research might examine other indigenous groups in many regions by examining the influence of religiosity and spirituality on entrepreneurial behaviour. To advance the development of the indigenous entrepreneurship theory, it is pertinent to undertake a cross-examination of multiple cultures to identify possible explanations for different types of entrepreneurial behaviour and actions. Another research

opportunity would be to test the variables associated with the 'other-worldly' and 'this-worldly' orientations (as presented in Table 1), by applying quantitative methods to analyze the relationship between religiosity, spirituality and entrepreneurial behaviour.

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