

A HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IBENDA COMMUNITY, 2011-2025

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JULY, 2026

TITLE PAGE

A HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IBENDA COMMUNITY, 2011-2025

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FACULTY OF ART'S AND EDUCATION, GODFREY
OKOYE UNIVERSITY ENUGU STATE**

**IN PARTIAL, FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A) IN HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

SUPERVISOR

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JULY, 2026

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research, titled “A History of Catholic Church in Ibenda Community, 2011-2025” was carried out by AGU, IJEOMA with the registration number, GOU/U23/HIS/109, under the supervision of Assoc. Prof Ifeoma Ezedinachi. I have given due acknowledgement to all the sources from which the constructive ideas and inspirations were taken from. The project is free from any plagiarism and has not been submitted anywhere for publication. Therefore, this will be submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu.

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Date

APPROVAL

This project is approved for the award of Bachelor of Arts (B.A) Degree in History and International Studies, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu.

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DEDICATION

This work is humbly dedicated to my husband Mr Emeka Eze and my parents Mr and Mrs Agu that guided me through the efforts and provided me strength and courage to complete this work effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to God Almighty whose love, mercy, and guidance have seen me through a successful undergraduate journey. Reaching this significant milestone in my academic pursuit fills me with immense joy and fulfilment. It is truly an honour, and I extend heartfelt appreciation to everyone who played a part in the success of this work.

I sincerely appreciate Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu for providing a conducive environment of learning for me throughout my years of study.

With sincere gratitude, I thank my supervisor and the Head of Department Assoc. Prof. Ifeoma Ezedinachi for her patience, support, contributions, and supervision throughout the completion of this project. I also thank the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Education, Rev. Bro. Prof. Ekene Osuji, thanks for your support and encouragement.

My appreciation also goes to all the lecturers in the Department of History and International Studies for their remarkable input throughout my academic journey. Prof. Ngozi Ojiakor, Dr. Ugochukwu Okoji, Dr. Kelechi Okoro, Dr. Hope Iwuchukwu, Dr. Leonard Nnoli, Dr. Eyeh, Dr. Ani, Mr. Christopher Uwakwe and our amiable secretary, Mrs. Edith Chinwendu thank you all for your kindness and support.

To my dearest Husband and best friend Mr. Emeka Eze, my parents, Mr and Mrs Agu, I am immensely grateful for your prayers, your belief in me, your unconditional love, encouraging words, support, and constant attention. I love you deeply. To my wonderful siblings Chekwube, Nneze, Ozioma, Richard, Sixtus, thank you for always checking up on me and showing your support.

Finally, to my amazing friends Adaeze Ezeugwu, Eze Sonia, and my course mates Onuoha Ihuoma Charles, Nwachukwu Victor, Onyemaechi Irene, Achine Victor, Augustine Favour, Nnachi Daniel, Oparaocha Elvis your presence made the journey worthwhile, and to everyone I encountered during my research your contributions are truly appreciated and acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the historical development of the Roman Catholic Church in Ibenda Community, Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State, from 2011 to 2025. The objectives were to trace the historical evolution of the Church, examine its growth and spread across the seven villages of Ibenda, evaluate its religious, social, and community impacts, and assess the challenges that shaped its development during the period under study. The research adopted a qualitative historical research design and relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were obtained through oral interviews with parish priests, catechists, parishioners, and community elders, as well as archival materials from the National Archives, Enugu. Secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and Church publications. The collected data were analysed using the historical method of source criticism and qualitative interpretation. The study found that although Catholicism was introduced into Ibenda through earlier missionary activities in the Nsukka cultural zone, the establishment of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish in 2011 marked a significant phase in the consolidation and expansion of the Church within the community. It further revealed that the Church experienced sustained growth in membership, sacramental life, parish organisations, and infrastructural development, while making substantial contributions to education, moral formation, social cohesion, youth and women empowerment, and community development. The study also found that the Church successfully adapted to local cultural realities through inculturation, despite facing challenges such as economic hardship, youth migration, secularisation, and inadequate infrastructure. It concludes that the Roman Catholic Church has become a major religious and socio-developmental institution in Ibenda and contributes to existing scholarship by providing a systematic historical account of Catholicism in the community, thereby filling an important gap in the historiography of Christianity in the Nsukka cultural zone and southeastern Nigeria.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The introduction of Christianity in Igboland can be traced to the wider background of European missionary expansion and British colonial penetration in what is now known as Southern Nigeria, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The advent of Christianity into many interior communities, including Obollo, was made possible by the establishment of colonial administrative structures and missionary networks. The Christian missionaries employed education, evangelism, and basic social services as instruments for spreading the Christian faith. These endeavors eventually changed the religious landscape of the region, which had formerly been dominated by indigenous belief systems entrenched in ancestral worship and traditional institutions. However, the acceptance of Christianity was not immediate, as many communities initially perceived it as an alien intrusion into their cultural and spiritual life.¹

The Roman Catholic Church came to Obollo in 1920, through the activities of missionaries such as Rev. Fr. Davey, Rev. Fr. James Mellet, and Rev. Fr. Joseph Horgan, who played important roles in establishing churches and schools that functioned as centres of both religious instruction and Western education.² The Obollo church was then under the administrative subordination to Eke Parish.³ In 1948, St. Martin De Porres Parish in Obollo-Eke was created, along with schools, and catechetical centres.⁴ These contributed considerably to the consolidation of Catholic faith in the Obollo area. These structures enhanced religious teaching and encouraged social change through the introduction of Western education and new systems of social organisation.

The founding of new Catholic communities in recent times reveals both demographic growth and the need for decentralised pastoral care. As existing parishes expanded, the Church creates additional worship centres to guarantee efficient administration and closer engagement with the faithful. This method has been mainly evident in rural and semi-urban communities, where access to central parish facilities was most times inadequate. The establishment of parishes generally went hand in hand with the appointment of resident priests and the building of churches. These developments indicate religious growth and institutional consolidation within the Catholic Church. Therefore, the creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Ibenda village in 2011 forms part of a wider pattern of ecclesiastical growth in the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka.⁵

The growth of the Catholic faith in Ibenda between 2011 and 2025 can be credited to the pastoral dedication and community participation. The parish priests and catechists played an essential role in expanding religious knowledge through catechetical instruction, sacramental preparation, and youth engagement programmes. A significant landmark in the development of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda, occurred on 15 June 2025, during the pastoral visit of the Most Rev. Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, Bishop of the Diocese of Nsukka. This visit saw the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation to 186 young members of the Church which signifies an important indicator of numerical growth and spiritual consolidation.⁶

The history of the Catholic Church in Ibenda between 2011 and 2025 can be described as one of foundational establishment, consolidation, and gradual expansion. Against this background, therefore, this study examines the advent and growth of the Catholic Church in Ibenda village, looking at the challenges and impacts

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In spite of the prevalent presence of Christianity in general, and Catholicism in the northern Igbo area particularly Nsukka, there is a obvious paucity of focused literature on the growth of specific local Catholic communities such as Ibenda village. Most scholarly works mainly focused on the general history of missionary activities and the wider interface between Christianity and traditional religion. Although these literatures provide important knowledge, they most times neglect the micro-level dynamics that influence the birth and development of individual parishes in modern times. Accordingly, the history of the creation and growth of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda remain documented. This is the problem this study wants to fill.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The aim of the work is to examine the Historical study of the introduction and spread of Catholic Church in Ibenda village, between 2011 and 2025. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the historical evolution of the Catholic Church in Ibenda village, between 2011 and 2025.
- ii. analyse the growth and spread of the Catholic Church in Ibenda village, between 2011 and 2025.
- iii. investigate the impact of the Catholicism in Ibenda village, between 2011 and 2025.
- iv. assess the challenges of the Catholic Church in Ibenda village, between 2011 and 2025.

1.4 Significance of the study

The study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, unlike existing studies which have analyzed in broad terms issues relating to Christian missionaries activities particularly the Roman Catholic Church in northern Igboland such as Nsukka area, this study provides the first parish-specific, local-focused assessment of the history and spread of the Roman Catholic Church in Ibenda village, Obollo-Eke community in Nsukka Catholic Diocese. It also advances theoretical frameworks by contributing to debates on the micro-level dynamics that influence the birth and development of individual parishes in modern times.

Practically, it will be relevant to the Christian Community in general and the Roman Catholic community especially the Ibedan catholic community. It is also important to students of Church history, and parishioners of St Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda in particular, and the Obollo-Eke Deanery, as well as Nsukka Catholic Diocese in general.

1.5 Scope of the study

The study covers the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in the seven villages that make up the Ibenda community. This includes the activities of St Patrick's Catholic Church in Ngeleokpo, Ajama, Nkporogwu, Echara, Idoko, Uburu and Umuro villages. Though, reference to the Obollo-Eke Deanery and the Nsukka Catholic Diocese are made when necessary. The timeframe covers between 2011 and 2025. The beginning date, 2011, marked the creation of St Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda. The end date, 2025, marked the huge pastoral visit and confirmation. It was in 2025 that the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka, the Most Rev. Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, Bishop, visited the community where 186 young Catholics received the sacrament of confirmation in the community, marking a major growth milestone for the local parish.

1.6 Limitation of the Study

One major constraint was the limited access to some church records. Some parish documents and administrative records that could have improved the work were inaccessible due to confidentiality concerns. Another challenge was lack of time to carry out broad fieldwork, interviews, and data verification. Also, there was a financial challenge, especially in the area of transportation, and data collection. These limited the scope of field work and the number of respondents that could be consulted. Regardless of these limitations, efforts were made to ensure the reliability and validity of the study through careful selection of sources, triangulation of data, and critical analysis of all information gathered.

1.7 Methodology

The research adopts the qualitative methods, which focuses on understanding meanings, contexts, and interpretation of historical past events. The study makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral interview from the parish priest, catechists, parishioners and community elders. Also archival materials from the National Archives Enugu were used particularly with regards to the advent of the Catholic Church in the Nsukka region, and the historical background of the Ibenda people. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, academic projects, and Church bulletins. These sources were analyzed using historical analysis.

1.8 Literature Review

Chuka Euka and Ikechukwu K. Agu, “Conflict and Consensus of Interest between Christianity and Obollo Traditional Practices”⁷ investigates the clashes between the indigenous belief system and Christian faith in Obollo, looking at its impacts on the social life of the people. The study reveals that in spite of many years on Christian encounter, the Obollo people still holds on to many of their traditional belief system which are contrary to the Christian faith. The study is relevant in understanding the advent of Christianity, and its clashes with the traditional religion in the Obollo area. However, it did not discuss the introduction and spread of the Catholic faith in Ibenda, which the present study wants to address.

Tobias Chibuike Onah, “The Re-Awakening of the Worship and Veneration of a misinterpreted Deity Ekwensu amid thriving Christianity in Obollo, Enugu State, Nigeria”⁸ examines the re-birth of the veneration and adoration of the Ekwensu deity which previously experienced disappearance in the course of flourishing Christianity in the area. The paper shows that ekwensu is a deity in Obollo, which the people perform an annual ritual in its honour, and not the biblical Satan. The paper also shows the spots where ekwensu was worshiped during onwa-assa festival and the masquerades and forest dedicated to the deity. In addition, the study reveals the negative impact of the Christian faith on the people’s culture which formally engendered the extinction of ekwensu deity. The study is important in understanding the impact of Christianity in Obollo area. However, it did not discuss the theme of the present study hence the need to address it.

A. O. Makozi & J A. Ojo, “The History of the Catholic Church in Nigeria”⁹ examines the history of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, looking at the advent, growth and institutional consolidation. The work highlight that the Roman Catholic Church achieved a solid footing in Nigeria through structured missionary approaches including education, catechism, and pastoral

outreach. The work also reveals that the creation of dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces enhances the spread of Catholicism, particularly in Eastern Nigeria. The work emphasizes the role of foreign missionaries including the Holy Ghost Fathers and their cooperation with indigenous clergy. In addition, the book shows that Catholic institutions such as schools and seminaries were instrumental in planting the faith within local communities. This book is pertinent in understanding how Catholicism infiltrated rural communities. However, the book did not discuss the Ibenda community.

M. R. Anibueze, “African Catholicism: The Birth of the Liturgical Vernacular in Igboland”¹⁰ explores the growth of Catholicism in Igboland looking at the liturgical inculturation and missionary adaptation. The paper emphasizes the advent of Catholic missionaries in Onitsha in 1885 and their effort to comprehend indigenous religious systems. The study reveals that the success of Catholicism in Igboland was mainly because of the process of inculturation, where local language and customs were incorporated into worship. The work also reveals the role of the indigenous groups in promoting the Catholic faith. The paper is important for understanding the language and cultural challenges faced by early Roman Catholic missionaries and how they overcome some of these challenges.

A. O Nwalu, O. Okeke & C. Okoko, “The Expansion of Roman Catholic Mission and Formation of Catholic Diocese of Enugu, Nigeria, 1962–2009”¹¹ investigate the growth of the Roman Catholic mission in Igboland especially the creation of the Enugu Diocese. The paper traces the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church in Igboland to the coming of Father Joseph Lutz in Onitsha in 1885. It reveals that the growth of Catholicism was assisted by structured missionary extension into hinterland communities. The work emphasizes the role of parishes,

and indigenous clergy in consolidating Catholic faith. The paper is important in understanding the role of diocesan structures in influencing the spread of Catholicism in rural communities.

O. P Aluko, C. A. Adeleye & J. O. Olakanmi, “The Church and National Development in Nigeria: A Historical Survey”¹² consider the role of the Church in Nigeria’s national development. The paper reveals that missionary activities laid the foundation for Western education and healthcare systems in Nigeria. It also emphasizes the contribution of the churches to leadership formation and moral development in Nigeria. The work highlight that the Church has remained a major agent of social transformation. The paper is important in understanding the wider impact of Christian missionaries such as the Catholic Church in national development.

O. Egwuonwu, “An Appraisal of the Ex-Slaves Factor in the Spread of Christianity in Nigeria, 1841–1900”¹³ examines the role of ex-slaves in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria during the nineteenth century. The paper reveals that ex-slaves served as intermediaries between European missionaries and indigenous populations. They functioned as interpreters, teachers, and evangelists, thus improving missionary success. The study emphasizes that their knowledge of local languages and cultures made them effective agents of evangelization. In addition, the paper reveals the contributions of the ex-slaves in the founding of schools and churches. The paper is important in understanding the relevant of local agency in religious growth.

F. J. Kolapo, “*Christian Missionary Engagement in Central Nigeria, 1857–1891*”¹⁴ investigates early missionary activities in Central Nigeria looking at African-led missions. The work challenges the narrative that missionary activities were exclusively driven by Europeans by emphasizing the contributions of African missionaries. The work reveals that local communities vigorously influenced the structure and content of Christianity. The work further reveals how

cultural interfaces influenced the acceptance or rejection of missionary ideas. This study is significant for understanding the dynamics of religious change in Nigeria.

C. A. Obi's "Background to the planting of Catholic Christianity in the Lower Niger"¹⁵ examines the reason for the coming of Christianity in the Lower Niger, the role of the Holy Ghost Fathers, as well as the involvement of the locals. The paper reveals that Holy Ghost missionaries led by Father Joseph Lutz, Father Horne and Brother Hermas and Jean-Gotto arrived Onitsha in 1885 with a specific objective: to plant the Catholic faith in South-Eastern Nigeria. It also reveals how the King of Onitsha, Obi Anazonmu gave the Catholic missionary a site for settlement and building off their church. The paper further shows the challenges encountered by these early missionaries. The paper is relevant in understanding the background to the planting of Catholic Christianity in Igboland. However, it did not treat the spread of Catholicism in northern Igboland especially the Ibenda community hence this studies aims to address it.

C. I. Eke's "The creation of more Diocese after 1960: Port Harcourt, Enugu, Ikot Ekpene, Abakaliki, Awka, Orlu and Okigwe"¹⁶ examines the establishment of more diocese after the country has achieved independence in 1960. The paper reveals that apart from the Umuahia diocese created in 1958, all other existing Catholic diocese in Eastern Region of Nigeria by 1960 were headed by expatriate Irish clergymen. He reveals that Bishop Anthony Nwedo was made bishop of Umuahia diocese in 1959, and was therefore the first residential indigenous Catholic bishop in Eastern Nigeria. The paper traces the creation of more catholic diocese including Enugu diocese established in 1962. The paper is relevant in understanding the spread and growth of Catholicism in Igboland especially the creation of diocese. However, it did not discuss the

spread of the catholic church in local villages including Ibenda. This is why this present research is necessary to fill the gap.

Uche Eke's "Impact of Christian missionaries in Northern-Igbo region, 1900-1960"¹⁷ examines the effects of the Christian missionaries' teachings in the Northern-Igbo communities, particularly Nsukka area. The paper traces the advent of the Christian missionaries, especially the Church Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Church in the study area. It reveals that the Christian missionaries made positive contributions in these communities especially through the introduction of Western education and health system. However, it did not discuss the activities of the Christian missionaries in post independence era; neither did it discuss its activities in local villages like Ibenda. Nevertheless, it is relevant in understanding the background to the Christian missionaries' activities, as well as its early impact on many communities in the Northern-Igbo area including Nsukka.

Crescentia Ugwuona's "Linguistic Borrowing and Translanguaging in Multicultural Obollo Speech Community, Southeastern Nigeria"¹⁸ examines the socio-cultural environment of Obollo-Eke and its surrounding settlements. Ugwuona argues that the Obollo region became an important contact zone from the 1970s due to migration, trade, and intergroup interaction. The work highlights how linguistic borrowing and translanguaging emerged among the inhabitants of Obollo communities, including Ibenda. The study is important because it demonstrates that Obollo-Eke developed into a multicultural environment influenced by mobility and economic interaction. However, the study focuses primarily on sociolinguistics rather than the activities and growth of Catholicism, leaving gaps which the present work intends to address.

Samuel Onyenaechi Odoh's "Igbo Women in the Cashew Industry in Obollo-Afor, South Eastern Nigeria Since 1978"¹⁹ examines the contribution of women to rural economic

development through cashew processing and marketing since 1978. The study shows that agricultural commercialization in the Obollo axis created employment opportunities and strengthened household economies. Although the study centered on Obollo-Afor, it is significant for understanding the broader economic history of surrounding communities such as Ibenda because of their shared market networks and agrarian economy.

Emeka Nnoli's "Christianity and Masquerade Practices among the Youth in Ibenda, Obollo-Eke, Enugu State, Nigeria"²⁰ provides valuable insight into the cultural environment of Ibenda community. The work shows the persistence of traditional masquerade institutions despite the spread of Christianity. The study argues that masquerade performances remain important because they reinforce communal identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity among the youth. The study is relevant because it highlights how traditional institutions in Ibenda have survived modernization and religious change.

1.9 Organisation of the Work

The work is organized into five chapters. Chapter One is the introduction, and includes the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, scope of the study, limitations of the study, methodology, literature review, and the organization of the work.

Chapter Two is the geographical and historical overview of the Ibenda community. It includes the geographical and physical features of Ibenda, the origin and traditions of migration of Ibenda, the pre-colonial socio-political and economic institutions of the community, as well as the world view and traditional religion of the people.

Chapter Three is the introduction and early development of the Catholic Church in Ibenda. It includes the advent of Catholicism in Ibenda, the creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda, and the challenges and initial growth of the church.

Chapter Four is the expansion and impact of the Catholic Church in Ibenda. It includes the growth and institutional development of the Church, socio-economic and cultural contributions to the community, and the challenges and evaluating of the church growth.

Chapter Five is the summary and conclusion of the study.

Endnotes

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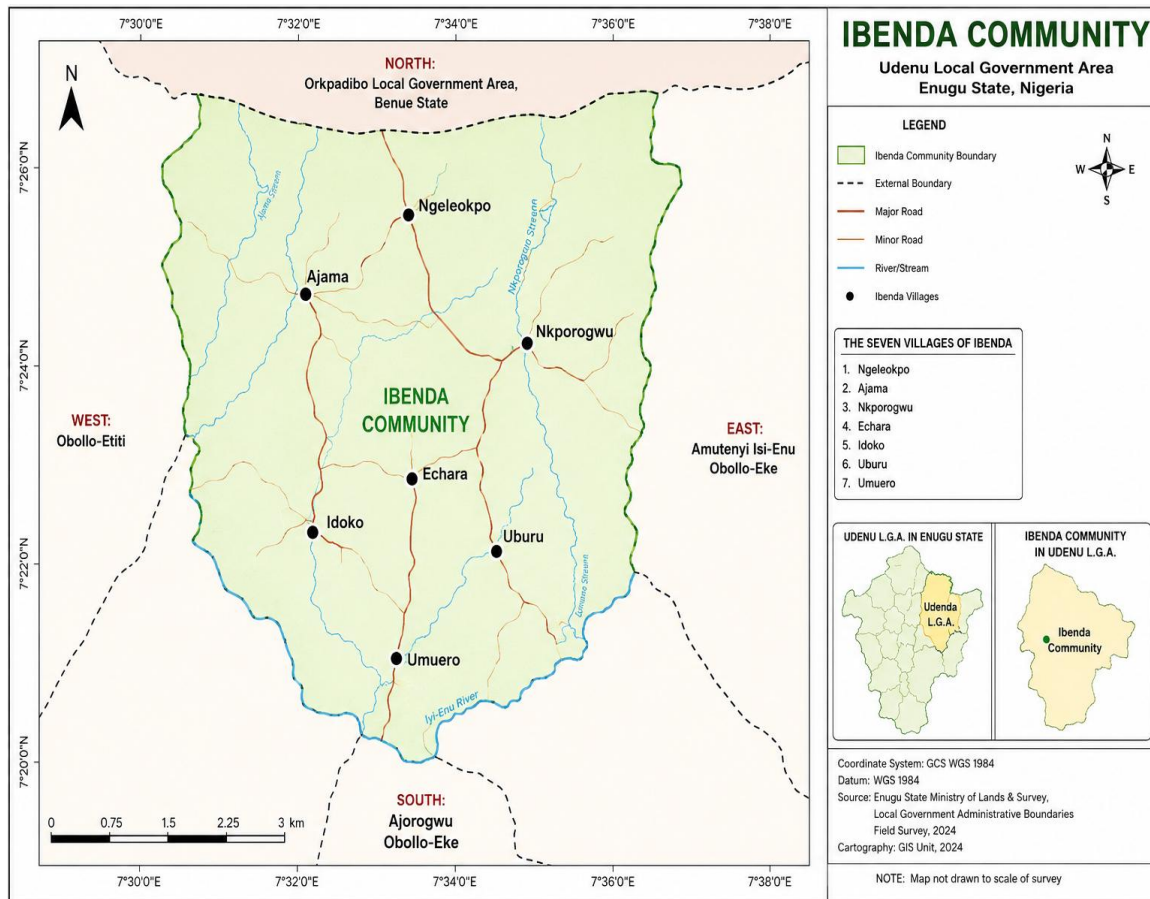
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19. Samuel Onyenaechi Odoh, "Igbo Women in the Cashew Industry in Obollo-Afor, South Eastern Nigeria Since 1978." *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2021): 1–15.
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CHAPTER TWO

A GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE IBENDA COMMUNITY

2.1 Geographical Location and Physical Features of Ibenda

Figure 1: Map of Ibenda Community showing the seven villages.



Source: Satellite imagery obtained from Google Earth Pro; cartographic design and map preparation by the researcher using QGIS 3.34, 2026.

Ibenda community is located within the Obollo zone in Udunedem Kingdom, in Udeno local government area of Enugu State. It lies approximately 37 kilometres north-east of Nsukka town, about 18 kilometres east of Obollo-Afor, and 5 kilometres north-west of Obollo-Eke market.¹ Ibenda community shares boundaries with Amutenyi Isi-Enu Obollo-Eke in the east, Obollo-Etiti in the west, Ajorogwu Obollo-Eke in the south, and Orkpadi local government area of Benue state to the north.² This proximity to Idoma-speaking areas explains the linguistic diversity of the Ibenda, who predominantly speak Igbo and sparingly Idoma.

The area is characterized by a typical rural landscape distinct by a network of natural and artificial freshwater bodies, such as streams, rivers, wells, and man-made ponds.³ These water sources play important function in sustaining agricultural activities and domestic life. This is because many of the indigenous population were agrarian and depends a lot on these water sources for irrigation and household use. The spatial distribution of farmlands often necessitates the crossing of rivers and streams, indicating a terrain shaped by fluvial processes. The area experiences a tropical wet-and-dry climate, with a rainy season lasting between March and October and marked by heavy rainfall, thunderstorms, and important soil erosion due to the loose, sandy nature of the soil.⁴ The dry season, which is usually experienced from November to February, is dominated by the harmattan. The area has a distinctive vegetation; guinea savannah and tropical rainforest.⁵

The study area is located in the sedimentary basin which is underlain by three significant formations, all of Maastrichtian to Danian age and these include the Mamu Formation which is mostly carbonaceous and grey shales interbedded with sandy shale and fine sandstone.⁶ The Ajali Formation is made up of mainly poorly consolidated, medium- to coarse-grained

sandstones with subordinate shale and clays. Overlying parts of the area is the Nsukka Formation, composed of alternating layers of sandstone, dark shale, lateritic sand and ironstone. Ibenda is characterised by ridge-like hills of resistant outcrops of the Nsukka Formation, resting on the Ajali Sandstone with the valleys mostly underlain by the Ajali Formation and generally dipping to the southwest at an angle of about 2° to 5°. ⁷ This ridge and valley topography is primarily due to the differential weathering and erosion processes and not due to the tectonic processes. ⁸

2.2 Origin and Traditions of Migration of the Ibenda Community

The Ibenda community is part of the Obollo-afor clan and share the same origin and migration tradition with the wider historical evolution of Obollo clan. Oral history reveals that the people of Obollo trace their ancestry to a common ancestor known as Olenyi. According to oral tradition, Olenyi was a trader who moved between Idah, Onicha and neighbouring settlements in pursuit of commercial activities. During one of his trading expeditions, he reportedly lost his horse at Ama-ebo, a forested area where he customarily rested. While searching for the horse, he killed an elephant in the bush, an event which afterward encouraged his permanent settlement at the location. This location, later known as Ulo n'Obollo or Ama-ebo, became the ancestral homeland from which the various Obollo communities, including Ibenda, dispersed to their present locations. ⁹

Another version of the traditions of migration stated that the ancestors of Obollo initially migrated from the Abakaliki region before moving through Eha-Amufu and Ikem. Oral history identifies a figure named Nnam Edu who migrated from Abakaliki area. He was said to have three male children namely Olenyi, Otase Enyi and Igwuru Enyi. Olenyi was the father of Obollo; Otase Enyi fathered Asakwo who also fathered Ikem while Igwuru Enyi fathered Eha Amufu. ¹⁰

This oral history establishes a genealogical relationship between Obollo, Ikem and Eha-Amufu communities.

Tradition reveals that Olenyi married four wives who bore one male child each for him amounting to four sons. These four sons were Ezejo who was the eldest; Ekpa Olenyi, the second son; Ugbabe was the third and Obullor was the last of his children. Ezejo later migrated towards Ada and Umuitodo areas, where he gave birth to four children, including Ibenda, who also gave birth to seven children that founded the seven villages of Ibenda, namely, Ngeleokpo, Ajama, Nkporogwu, Echara, Idoko, Uburu and Umuro villages.¹¹

2.3 Socio-Political Institution

The pre-colonial socio-political organisation of the Ibenda community mirrored the general republican political organization feature of many Igbo societies. Political authority in Ibenda was not concentrated in a single monarch or leader with absolute powers, rather it was distributed among elders, lineage heads, age grades and titled men.¹² The family represented the essential or primary political unit, with the eldest male acting as the head of the household and custodian of ancestral traditions. Several related families formed a lineage, while clusters of lineages made up the village structure. Decisions concerning the welfare of the community were usually arrive at through consultation and consensus. This decentralised political structure promoted communal participation and restricted the emergence of despotic authority.

The council of elders played a vital role in the governance of Ibenda. They were respected due to their advanced age, wisdom and experience in communal affairs. They oversee the management of customary laws, settlement of disputes and performance of traditional rites. In addition, the elders handle all issues concerning land ownership, marriage disputes, inheritance

and inter-family disagreements or conflicts. The elders obtain their authority through moral influence and communal acceptance, and not by force. And decisions taken by the elders were usually binding.¹³

Another important socio-political institution in Ibenda was the age grades. It is made up of people born within the same age bracket, mostly between three and five years. They are formed with some social responsibilities and obligations. They carry out communal labour including road clearing, maintenance of market squares, security patrols and construction of public facilities. They also take part in important roles during festivals, burials and conflict situations. The youthful age grades mostly served as internal security and defenders of the community during external threats. On the other hand, the older groups performed advisory and judicial functions. The age-grade system promotes discipline, solidarity and collective responsibility among its members. It also promoted social integration and ensured the continuity of communal traditions, norms and values.¹⁴

The Umuada institution is another important socio-cultural and conflict-resolution bodies in Ibenda community. It comprises all daughters of the community, whether married within or outside Ibenda. It plays significant roles in maintaining peace, mediating family disputes, promoting moral values, and safeguarding the welfare of women and children. They possess substantial moral authority and are often invited to intervene in cases involving domestic conflicts, inheritance disputes, and communal disagreements. In addition to the Umuada is the Inyomdi or Nwunyedi institution, which consists of married women resident in the community. These women contribute significantly to community development through collective labour, sanitation activities, welfare programmes, cultural events, and support for community projects.¹⁵

Religious institutions were closely tied with the political institution of the Ibenda community. Priests and diviners exercised significant influence in communal affairs because religion was a part of daily life. They supervised sacrifices, purification ceremonies and consultations with ancestral spirits. They also consult, the gods and ancestors for guidance before any major political decision. This close link between religion and governance made political leaders seem sacred and morally accountable. People were also afraid of being punished by forces if they misbehaved. This fear encouraged everyone to follow the community's customs and norms. The connection, between religion and politics helped keep the community in order.¹⁶

Similarly, the masquerade institutions are an essential component of pre-colonial socio-political control in Ibenda. It served many functions such as entertainment, instruments of social regulation, and enforcement of communal morality. Some of the masquerades in Ibenda include Omabe, Akatakpa, Okikpe and Okpokwu. Some of these masquerade performed disciplinary actions and enforced public order during festivals and ceremonies. Their presence also symbolised the ancestral spirits among the living. The fear and veneration attached to masquerade institutions enhanced their effectiveness as custodians of tradition and social discipline. Membership of the masquerade cult is open to only the male in Ibenda, and most Igbo communities. Young men joined the masquerade cult through an initiation process that was done mostly in the night. The masquerade institution in Ibenda community has religious significance with socio-political functions.¹⁷

In addition, kinship ties and communal solidarity played vital roles in sustaining the socio-political order of Ibenda. The people emphasised collective identity, mutual assistance and respect for lineage relationships. Marriage alliances strengthened social unity between families

and neighbouring communities, while communal festivals reinforced shared identity and collective memory. The principle of seniority guided interpersonal relationships, with the younger persons expected to respect the elders. Social harmony was highly valued, and conflicts were usually resolved through mediation rather than prolonged confrontation.¹⁸

In the contemporary period, the Town Union has emerged as the principal socio-political institution coordinating community affairs. The Ibenda Town Union serves as the umbrella body representing the interests of the seven villages of Ngeleokpo, Ajama, Nkporogwu, Echara, Idoko, Uburu, and Umuero. Through elected executive officers and village representatives, the union coordinates development projects, mobilizes community resources, maintains relationships with government agencies, and promotes peace and unity among the people. It also serves as a platform through which community members at home and in the diaspora contribute to the socio-economic development of the community.¹⁹

Traditional rulership is one of the key pillars of socio-political life in Ibenda. Pre-colonial Ibenda or most Igbo society was largely decentralized with no kingship but now there are recognized traditional rulers as custodians of culture and tradition. The traditional ruler serves as the symbolic leader of the community and collaborates with the village leaders and the Town Union and government to ensure peace, development and preservation of the culture of the people. The ruler also has ceremonial roles, he represents Ibenda in external relationships and leads in matters related to the welfare and progress of Ibenda.²⁰

2.4 Economic Institution

Pre-colonial Ibenda community's economy was primarily agricultural, particularly farming. The fertile land around Ibenda was used for farming and many of the activities included were yam, cassava and vegetables. Yam was an important crop as it was an indicator of wealth and status, particularly for men. Families farmed together with the men doing the land preparation and the women assisting in the planting, harvesting and cooking. The food they grew was not only for their own families but also to sell or trade with others in local markets. This method of agricultural production enabled the community to become self-sufficient and to have a surplus of agricultural products to trade for other needs.²¹

In the pre-colonial era, palm products played a huge role in the economy of Ibenda. The area was filled with palm trees, which were used to make palm oil, palm kernels, and palm wine. People used palm oil for cooking, and trading with nearby communities. Palm wine was also very important for social events like weddings, festivals, and community gatherings. The palm industry helped many families earn a living and supported commercial activities in Ibenda. Trading palm products also helped the Ibenda people connect with other groups, such as the Idoma, Tiv, and Onitsha traders, which boosted the local economy.²²

In Ibenda community, trade and commerce were a big part of the economy. The community was in a great spot, between the north and south of Nigeria, which made it easy for people from different ethnic groups to do business together. The people went to buy and sell things like food, animals, pots, baskets, among other things in the local markets, which holds every four market day. These markets helped people get things they couldn't make or find themselves. There were also trade routes that connected Onitsha, Idah, and Benue, which made the area even more

bustling with business. Women were especially important in the markets, helping to buy and sell goods, and making a big contribution to their families and communities. They played a key role in making sure everyone had what they needed.²³

The economy of Ibenda was also characterized by craft production along with indigenous industries, which contributed greatly to the economic institution in the community. There were also specialized occupations, such as pottery, basket weaving, and woodwork, and some lineages were known for their exceptional skills in pottery production. This not only gave the community the necessary domestic tools but also ceremonial items for neighbouring communities. Basket-making was also a prosperous trade, due to the wealth of forest resources. Other crafts as well as hunting and utilization of timber provided more economic avenues, especially in early years when forests were teeming with valuable trees such as iroko and mahogany. The resourcefulness and adaptability of the Ibenda people are illustrated in these indigenous industries, which demonstrate their ability to make use of the surrounding environment to create sustainable economic activities.²⁴

Prior to the coming of the Europeans, communal labour was an important element in the economy of Ibenda society. Farmers sometimes worked cooperatively and helped each other out, especially when it came to tasks that needed to be done during busy times of the year such as land clearing, planting, or harvesting. This partnership helped to make things easier for individual households, but also helped to bring people together as a community. The age grades in the society went a step further and coordinated group work on issues that would benefit the entire community, such as road maintenance, and cleaning the markets. These labour systems were based on the concept of reciprocity, that is, if someone helped you, you would help them

back when they needed it. Together and interdependent, the Ibenda people made a robust, interdependent economy that was the very definition of a community-based economy.²⁵

The cultural beliefs and traditions of the community also had an effect on the economy in Ibenda. Festivals, such as the New Yam Festival, were closely linked to the agricultural cycle, and the people would make offerings to gods of fertility and harvest. The Isiji celebration marked the onset of the yam eating season and represented people's thanks for the bountifulness of their yam harvest. Some days of the week were regarded as sacred and people would not work on those days. There were also special rituals which they would conduct at the time of planting and harvesting crops. All of these practices illustrate the intertwining of the economy and the community's spirituality and culture.²⁶

2.5 World View and Traditional Religion of Ibenda

The Ibenda community has an unique way of looking at the world. They believe that everything is connected, the living, the dead spirits and supernatural forces. They believed that human existence goes beyond the physical world into the spiritual sphere where deities and ancestral spirits live. Therefore, life is believed to be a conversation between visible and invisible forces. The people look up to their ancestors as guardians of what's right and wrong. They believe that their ancestors can reward them for doing good things and punish them for doing bad things. This way of thinking affects the people's behavior, and how they relate to each other.²⁷

The Ibenda people believe in a supreme deity who created the world and takes care of it. However they do not always talk to this deity directly. Instead they talk to deities, ancestral spirits and special people who help them communicate with the supreme deity. They have deities

for different things like fertility, agriculture and protection of the land. The Ibenda people build places called shrines where they can talk to these deities and ask for their help. They also have special people called priests and diviners who take care of these shrines and help the people understand what the deities' want.²⁸

The Ibenda people have a lot of respect for their ancestors. They believe that their ancestors are still involved in their lives and can help them or hurt them. The family heads often perform rituals to honor their ancestors. During events like weddings, funerals and festivals the Ibenda people ask their ancestors to bless them. If they do not honor their ancestors they believe that bad things can happen to them. This way of thinking helps the Ibenda people respect their traditions and take care of each other.²⁹

Ibenda community has festivals and celebrations, which are very important in their spiritual lives. These festivals are not a fun, but they have spiritual meaning. For instance, Omabe is a festival that is celebrated for bravery and respecting the ancestors. The Onwa Eno Festival is related to the connection between the living and the dead. During these festivals the Ibenda people dress up in costumes and perform rituals to talk to their ancestors and deities. These celebrations help the community join together and reminisce their heritage.³⁰

Also, the Ibenda people believe in the responsibility they have in their actions. They think that if they do bad things their deities and ancestors will punish them. They have guidelines for their conduct. They have special rituals to understand why bad things are happening to them. Such thinking can assist the community to maintain balance and harmony with one another.³¹

Even though many Ibenda people became Christians they still keep many of their beliefs. They still believe in their ancestors, spirits and rituals. In fact many Ibenda people practice both Christianity and their traditional religion. This blend of beliefs is unique to the Ibenda community. It helps them stay connected to their heritage. The Ibenda people are proud of their identity and their spiritual beliefs are a big part of that.³²

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CHAPTER THREE

THE INTRODUCTION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IBENDA

3.1 The Advent of Catholicism in Ibenda Village

The introduction of Catholicism in Ibenda Village was one of the many activities of Roman Catholic missionaries in the Nsukka cultural zone in the early part of the twentieth century. Catholic missionary work into the area was facilitated by the British colonial administration which opened up the hinterland by constructing roads, building administrative structures and improving communication networks.¹ Catholic missionary work reached the Obollo area through Eke Parish and subsequently from St. Theresa's Parish, Nsukka which was the mother parish for many mission stations in the area. By 1910, both Obollo-Afor and Obollo-Eke had become outstations of St. Theresa's Catholic Parish, Nsukka.² The development of Catholic faith in

Obollo-Eke was also linked with the endeavors of pioneer missionaries including Rev. Fr. Davey and Rev. Fr. James Mellet, who supported the founding of churches and schools in the zone.³ Through these missionary actions, Catholic teachings slowly entered the communities that had earlier stick to traditional religious practices. As a result, Ibenda became one of the communities exposed to early Catholic evangelisation within the Obollo area.

An important landmark in the history of Catholicism in Ibenda happened when the headquarters of the Obollo-Eke Catholic outstation was located at Ngeleokpo, Ibenda. The mission headquarters then was located behind the compound of the late Leonard Abor and served as the administrative centre of Catholic activities in the area until 1929.⁴ At this time, evangelisation was organised through Ibenda by missionaries, who spread their reach to the surrounding villages. The mission headquarters also made it possible for regular pastoral visits and catechetical instruction as well as the introduction of formal Christian worship. Gradually, the Catholic message was spread by preaching, instruction and personal relationships with members of the community. Therefore, Ibenda came to become one of the first centres of Catholic missionary activity in Obollo-Eke.

The growth of Catholic Church in Ibenda received additional drive in 1932 when the administrators of St. Theresa's Parish, Nsukka, sent Mr. Clifford Orakwube to the community as a teacher-catechist.⁵ He was accompanied by Mr. Ugwuoke Nwagu and Mr. Ogbonna Eze Onyeke who helped to establish a school and church centre. The twin role of education and evangelisation revealed the broader missionary approach adopted throughout Igboland, where schools served as tools for religious conversion and social change. The school-church complex set up at Ulo n'Ibenda became the center for religious teaching and learning and for literacy

acquisition. The teacher-catechist educated numerous youth and families in Catholic teachings and practices through their teachings and catechetical works in the classroom. This expansion helped pave the way for the growth of Catholicism in the community later on.

Several local families generously gave land for the mission, which was the basis for the school's and church's establishment in Ibenda. Included among the donors were Jacob Alumona, Agbodo Ayigbo, Mba Nnajiagu, Nanmani Agboedo and Asogwa Itodo;⁶ their willingness to donate land signified a burgeoning acceptance of the Catholic presence in the community. The original building was a small hut which had few facilities, but it became the first permanent Catholic worship and teaching centre in Ibenda. The missionaries used it for worship on Sunday evenings, catechesis and elementary schooling. The school-church compound came to signify the Church's dedication to spiritual and educational growth over the years. It also offered the chance of social mobility and Western education. The Catholic mission thus slowly became part of the people's lives and gained their respect.

There were significant social and cultural challenges in the initial phase of Catholicism in Ibenda. The obstacles to conversion were mostly traditional religious beliefs and polygamy, which were deeply rooted in the local society. So only a few people in the beginning accepted the new faith. Together with other early converts, Michael Agu, Felix Odo, John Iziga and Peter Alumona marked a pivotal moment in religious history of the community.⁷ The first man to take a catholic marriage in Ibenda was Michael Agu and he became a model for the later converts. These pioneers showed others the way to embrace Christianity by their commitment and exemplary lifestyles. Through their work they helped to build slowly an enduring Catholic community in Ibenda.

The conversion of the pioneering converts paved the way for a second generation of Catholic believers, among which were Luke Alumona, Wilfred Odo, William Ezeake, Cyril Urama, Daniel Ojobor and Maria Agu who became the first educated woman in the community.⁸ With the increase of Catholic faith in the community, the Church grew in influence on the social, educational and moral life of the villagers. By the mid-twentieth century Catholicism had established itself well in Ibenda and had made a positive impact on community development. The Church was started as a small missionary community and became a flourishing centre of worship and education through the leadership of Headmaster Daniel Ugwu during the construction of the stone church building in 1951.⁹ These developments led to the eventual establishment of an independent parish in the 21st century.

3.2 The Creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Ibenda

The creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish, Ibenda, in 2011 marked a historic turning point in the religious development of the community. Prior to its elevation, Ibenda functioned as an outstation under St. Martin De Porres Parish, Obollo-Eke, which itself had been created from St. Theresa's Parish, Nsukka, in 1951.¹⁰ For decades, the Catholic faithful in Ibenda participated actively in parish activities while aspiring to attain independent parish status. The steady increase in membership, growth of church organisations, and improvement in local infrastructure strengthened the community's claim for autonomy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Catholic population had expanded considerably, making the establishment of a parish increasingly feasible. The desire for greater administrative and pastoral attention further encouraged discussions about parish creation. Consequently, the idea of creating St. Patrick's Parish gained momentum among both clergy and laity.

A decisive step towards parish creation occurred on 23 February 2011 when Rev. Fr. R. Okigbo, the Parish Priest of St. Martin De Porres Parish, invited members of the Ibenda Station Council to a meeting in Obollo-Eke.¹¹ During the meeting, he informed them of the possibility of becoming a parish and requested their opinion on the proposal. Although the community initially preferred a waiting period of several years to allow for further infrastructural development, the process advanced more rapidly than anticipated. The station council subsequently accepted the proposal and began preparing for the transition. Their willingness reflected confidence in the spiritual and organisational maturity of the Catholic community. The support of parish authorities and diocesan leadership further strengthened the initiative. Thus, the groundwork for parish creation was firmly established.

The official announcement of the creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish took place on 13 July 2011 during a station council meeting held at the residence of Mr. Simon Okpe.¹² During the meeting, Rev. Fr. Okigbo informed the congregation that Ibenda had been elevated to the status of a parish. The announcement generated widespread excitement among parishioners who had long anticipated such recognition. The decision represented not only administrative restructuring but also recognition of the remarkable growth of Catholicism in the community. The creation of the parish provided opportunities for enhanced pastoral care, local leadership development, and greater participation in diocesan activities. It also affirmed the historical significance of Ibenda as one of the earliest centres of Catholic evangelisation in Obollo-Eke. Consequently, the event became a landmark in the religious history of the community.

The formal inauguration of the new parish took place on 30 July 2011 with the arrival of the pioneer Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Mellitus Mmaduabuchi Idogwu.¹³ His reception was characterised

by celebration, enthusiasm, and communal solidarity. The establishment of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish brought ecclesiastical administration closer to the people and facilitated more effective pastoral ministry. Since its creation, the parish has continued to experience growth in membership, sacramental participation, and infrastructural development. Recent evidence of this growth was demonstrated during the pastoral visit of the Bishop of Nsukka, Most Rev. Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, in June 2025 when 186 candidates received the Sacrament of Confirmation at the parish.¹⁴ The event reflected the continued vitality and expansion of Catholicism in Ibenda.

3.3 Challenges and Initial Growth of the Church

The Catholic conversion of Ibenda brought with it many difficulties which could have endangered the lives of the early Catholic community. Amongst these challenges, the most persistent one was the traditional religious beliefs and practices. Before the introduction of Christianity people had their own religious beliefs and traditions, including the worship of their own gods and spirits, the veneration of ancestors, and ritual practices. For many villagers, converting to Christianity meant rejecting traditional beliefs and the cultural practices of their community. Early believers were thus often ridiculed and rejected by family and friends. Despite the attachment to traditional beliefs that placed a limitation on the pace of conversion and extent of the church's initial impact, missionary efforts gradually eroded the resistance and increased acceptance of the Christian faith.¹⁵

Another great difficulty was the widespread practice of polygamy that was incompatible with the Catholic doctrine of marriage. Polygamy was the norm in Igbo society, and was considered a sign of prosperity, prestige and status. It was customary for many men to have more than one wife, and many potential converts did not want to accept the Catholic faith because it was

incompatible with their views of large families as a prerequisite for agricultural productivity and the continuity of the family line. The Church's doctrine of Christian marriage brought some conflict between tradition and religion. Consequently, conversion was sometimes a costly personal sacrifice and social adjustment. Some of these challenges were overcome and some persons became teachers for others in accepting the Catholic teachings. Slowly but surely, as they got more committed, they shared their Christian values regarding marriage with the community.¹⁶

The Church also had challenges with infrastructure and logistics in their early days. The first school-church building was a small building with inadequate space and facilities. Access roads to Ibenda were also poor which made it difficult for mission visits and educational work and communication with neighbouring groups, and led to the move of mission headquarters from Ibenda to Ugbabe Uwali-Eha in 1929.¹⁷ Lacking of funds also hindered the building of permanent structures and development of church programmes. However, there were those who were willing to offer assistance in the form of land, labor and materials from within the community and local convert circles. They helped the Church to persist despite these limitations.

The Catholic Church in Ibenda had experienced tremendous expansion since the 1930s, notwithstanding the various challenges. Increasing numbers of adherents were attracted to the activities carried out by the teacher-catechists, to the establishment of schools, and to the exemplary lives of pioneer converts. Education was used in particular as an evangelising tool as parents who wanted to educate their children were often exposed to Catholicism. In 1951 a stone church building was built which reflected not only the numerical expansion, but also the organisational stability, of the group. The establishment of educated Catholic elites further

strengthened the Church's social influence in the community. The Church developed as a part of life through ongoing evangelisation, sacramental ministry and educational programmes. Such accomplishments paved the way for the eventual formation of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish in 2011 and growth in subsequent years.¹⁸

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CHAPTER FOUR

EXPANSION AND IMPACT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IBENDA

4.1 Expansion and Institutional Development of the Church

The expansion of the Catholic Church in Ibenda after 2011 represents an important phase in the institutional consolidation of Christianity in the community. The elevation of Ibenda to a parish status enabled the establishment of more structured pastoral governance, improved sacramental administration, and increased participation of the laity in Church activities. This development aligns with broader patterns of Catholic expansion in Igboland, where parishes often serve as administrative and spiritual centres for surrounding communities.¹ The presence of a resident parish priest further strengthened ecclesiastical authority and improved pastoral care delivery. The Church also expanded its internal organisations such as the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO), Catholic Men Organisation (CMO), and youth movements. According to Ekenechukwu Eze:

The creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish in Ibenda in 2011 with the arrival of the pioneer Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Mellitus Mmaduabuchi Idogwu saw the growth of the Church especially, the Laity Organisations. Before then, the members of the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) and the Catholic Men Organisation (CMO) were very small, and less than thirty and twenty active members respectively. The Youth wing was even the worst with only three active members, Michael Idowu, Theresa Ezeani and Cynthia Ezech. But by June, 2025 when the Bishop visited the Church, the youth have over seventy registered members, most of them very active. The Catholic Men Organisation has over fifty-six registered members as of June, 2025, and the Women Organisation have ninety-two registered members as of June, 2025.²

In addition, the Church in Ibenda now have over ten active laity organizations, including Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria (CCRN), Block Rosary Crusade, Legion of Mary, Divine Mercy Devotion, Church Choirs and Liturgical Groups, among others.³ These groups contributed to institutional stability and increased lay participation in Church governance.

The expansion of infrastructure in St. Patrick's Parish Ibenda is further indicative of institutional expansion. After its establishment, the parish slowly began to grow in church-building, parish-hall construction, and the addition of other facilities to serve the needs of the church and parish for both worship and administration. This work was supplemented by parishioners contributing to it through communal contribution, donations and volunteer labour. These developments are similar to the traditional Catholic approach to churches, in which is rooted a strong sense of local ownership and participation. The growth of physical infrastructure also helped the Church to meet the growing demands of its members.⁴

The enhancement of catechetical and educational activities was also an important part of institutional development. Religious education programmes for children, youths and adults were intensified, leading to a greater understanding of the doctrines and deeper formation of the souls. Catechists had a significant role in maintaining at the grassroots level the continuity of faith education. The Church also, at the same time, started St. Patrick's Nursery and Primary School at Ibenda⁵, and this is in line with the earlier strategies of Catholic missions in Igbo society, which were based on education and evangelisation.⁶ Through constant education, the Church reaffirmed its moral and doctrinal legitimacy in the community. Catholic beliefs were also passed on to the next generation in Ibenda through the focus on education.

The growth of sacramental life also represented institutionalization in the parish. The regular celebration of sacraments (baptism, confirmation, holy matrimony and the Eucharist) reinforced the faith of the faithful. Over the years there have been steady increases in membership and participation, as seen by the number of confirm and catechumens. It is interesting to note that the pastoral visit of the Bishop of Nsukka in 2025 where 186 candidates were confirmed, is an example of the relevance of the Ibenda in the overall structure of the diocese. These events also help to strengthen the unity of the parish with the Catholic Church hierarchy. This sacramental expansion shows institutional maturity and stability.⁷

In addition, the Church established better administrative relationship with the Diocese of Nsukka and surrounding parishes. These connections enabled resources to be shared, pastoral co-ordination and involvement in diocesan programmes. The parish was also more connected in the wider Catholic world, thus intensifying its visibility and impact. According to Eze:

St. Patrick parish is one of the eight parishes that make up the Obollo-Eke Deanery. The other parishes including St. Martin De Porres, Obollo-Eke, St. Anthony's, Ogbodu-Aba, St. Mary's, Ada Obollo, St. Michael's, Imilike-Agu, St. Paul's, Umuitodo, St. Anthony's, Obollo-Etiti, and St. Mary's Eha-Azuabor.⁸

Institutional development was therefore not limited to internal structures but extended to external ecclesiastical relations. This integration strengthened the Church's capacity to respond to pastoral needs effectively.

4.2 Socio-Economic and Cultural Impact of Catholicism in Ibenda

From its inception the Catholic Church has had a strong socio-economic influence in Ibenda. The most outstanding facet of contribution has been in the field of human capital formation (education and skills formation). The Church has placed a strong focus on literacy and moral education which has seen the educational attainment of young people in the community improve. The missionary education in Igboland was once very important in social mobility and economic development, and this is still the case in Ibenda community through catechetical education and youth training programmes.⁹ Consequently, many have learned skills which have improved their employability and entrepreneurial opportunities.

The Church has had an indirect impact on the local economy by providing jobs and engaging in community-initiated projects. Employment opportunities for local artisans and labourers have been created during the construction activities in the parish, both temporary and permanent. Self-help development activities among parishioners, such as co-operative societies and small scale enterprises are also encouraged by the Church. These programs have helped to raise the incomes of households and lower poverty rates for some households. The Church has also contributed to the economic activity of the community at times of religious festivals and events. In this way, the Church can be seen as an instrument and facilitator of grassroots economic development.¹⁰

The Catholic Church also has played a role in cultural change in Ibenda. The traditional practices which were once predominant have been slowly modified or reinterpreted under the influence of Christianity. Some methods of ritual worship are not seen as in accord with Catholic teaching, and have diminished in significance. Concurrently the Church has incorporated some elements of Igbo culture into its liturgical practices, thereby fostering cultural continuity in

Christian worship. The process of inculturation reflects the overall strategy of the Catholic Church in Africa. In this engagement, the Church has helped to transform the communities' value and moral orientation.¹¹

Church, at the social level, has encouraged unity, peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ibenda. Church organisations offer opportunities for reconciliation, dialogue and mediation between families and community groups. These steps have fostered greater solidarity among citizens and helped to alleviate conflicts. The Church's moral stance also condemns violence, corruption and anti-social behaviour. It has consequently become a stabilizing element in community relations. In rural communities, where there is an overlap of traditional conflict settlement structures and formal government institutions, this role is especially significant.¹²

Additionally, the Church has made its contribution for gender inclusion and youth empowerment. Women's groups have given women a space to lead, learn and gain economic empowerment within the parish. The youth have also received spiritual guidance, vocational training, and leadership opportunities from youth groups. These have helped to improve community involvement in community development processes. The Church's approach has therefore enhanced social capital and civic engagement. In general, Catholicism has been a great motivator for socio-cultural change in Ibenda.¹³

4.3 Contemporary Challenges and Evaluation of Church Growth

On the positive side, the Catholic Church in Ibenda has made great strides, but there are some challenges in the present day that have a negative impact on the growth and sustainability of the Church. Economic constraint is one of the great challenges of parishioners, impacting on the

funding for Church projects and activities. A large proportion of the community are involved in subsistence farming and low income earners. This constrains them from being able to fund infrastructural development and Church programmes. This means projects may take time to be implemented. The same problems have been noted in rural Catholic settings throughout Nigeria.¹⁴

Youth migration and urbanisation is another challenge that needs to be addressed. A significant number of youth leave Ibenda for the better educational and employment opportunities in Urban Centre. This migration can be seen to challenge the continuity of the parish life and the active involvement of young people in Church. It also impacts on human resources that are available for Church organisations and Church programmes. The Church has tried to respond to this through youth engagement programmes, however this does not have a strong impact. This population trend is a long-term issue for parish sustainability.¹⁵

As well as this, cultural secularisation is also an emerging threat to Church influence. Younger generations have different value systems because of increased exposure to modern media, education and urban lifestyle. There is deterioration in the interest of some young people in traditional religious activities and participation in the Church. The Church is still responding by evangelising, providing youth programmes and social media engagement strategies, all of which mirror worldwide trends of religious change.¹⁶ But maintaining religious commitment is an ever-present issue.

There are also institutional difficulties such as infrastructure development and maintenance. The parish has developed since it was established but there's still plenty of work to be done to improve many facilities. Long-term planning is limited due to lack of financial means and

reliance on donations. In addition, at local level there is sometimes a restriction of administrative capacity which affects the efficiency of carrying out the project, but the Church is still steadily expanding through the involvement of the community and support of the diocese.¹⁷

Overall, however, the assessment of the church growth in Ibenda is still positive. There has been progressive growth in membership since 2011, and it is also clear that attendance at sacramentals is growing. The Church has also become a more prominent player in the spiritual, social and cultural life of the community. It continued to be a force in education, morals and community development. Despite the difficulties faced, the upward trend shows resilience and adaptability. The Catholic Church in Ibenda is hence a very important institution in formulating the present and future development of the community.

Endnotes

1. V. N. Eke, "Impact of Christian missionaries in Obollo, Enugu State, Nigeria, 1900-1960", *Evangel International Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2:1 (2021), 35.
2. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.
3. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.

4. Interview with Titus Agu, Parishioner St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.
5. Interview with Titus Agu, Parishioner St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.
6. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.
7. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.
8. T. C. Onah, *A Social History of Ibenda Community up to 1960* (Nsukka: Atlas Printers, 1983), 22.
9. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.
10. Eke, "Impact of Christian missionaries in Obollo, Enugu State, Nigeria, 1900-1960", 36.
11. Eke, "Impact of Christian missionaries in Obollo, Enugu State, Nigeria, 1900-1960", 37-38.
12. Interview with Titus Agu, Parishioner St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.
13. Interview with Ikechukwu Agu, Civil servant, 50 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.
14. Interview with Ikechukwu Agu, Civil servant, 50 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.
15. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.

16. Interview with Ekenechukwu Eze, Catechist, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Idoko, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 07/03/2026.

17. Interview with Titus Agu, Parishioner St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 70 years, Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, Enugu, State, 03/02/2026.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The introduction of Catholicism in Ibenda formed part of the wider missionary expansion in the Nsukka cultural zone in the early twentieth century, facilitated by colonial infrastructure and missionary centres such as St. Theresa's Parish, Nsukka and Obollo-Eke. Early evangelisation was carried out by teacher-catechists, leading to the establishment of a mission outpost at Ngeleokpo, Ibenda, which served as an early centre of worship and instruction. By 1932, a more

structured mission presence emerged through the establishment of a combined school and church system, which used education as a key instrument of evangelisation. Despite initial resistance rooted in traditional religion and cultural practices such as polygamy, gradual acceptance was achieved through missionary persistence, education, and the emergence of early converts. These developments laid the foundation for the consolidation of Catholicism in Ibenda.

The steady expansion of the Church eventually led to the creation of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish, Ibenda in 2011, following its long development as an outstation under Obollo-Eke and Nsukka parishes. Its elevation reflected growing membership, organisational maturity, and the need for local pastoral administration. Since its establishment, the parish has recorded steady growth in membership, sacramental participation, and lay organisation, supported by active parishioner involvement and integration within the Diocese of Nsukka. Over time, it has also developed infrastructural facilities and strengthened catechetical and sacramental programmes, contributing to its institutional stability.

Beyond spiritual growth, the Catholic Church has played a significant role in the socio-economic and cultural transformation of Ibenda community. It has contributed to education, moral formation, social cohesion, and youth and women empowerment, while also supporting community development through various projects and initiatives. The Church has influenced cultural change through value reorientation and inculturation, blending selected elements of Igbo culture with Catholic worship. However, it continues to face challenges such as economic hardship among parishioners, youth migration, secularisation, and limited infrastructure development. Despite these constraints, the Church has remained a strong and growing institution within the community.

In conclusion, the study shows that the development of the Catholic Church in Ibenda between 2011 and 2025 is the result of sustained missionary foundations, local acceptance, and adaptive engagement with indigenous society. It has grown into a central institution in the religious and social life of the community, demonstrating steady institutional maturity and resilience. The Church's contributions to education, social cohesion, and community development highlight its importance as both a spiritual and developmental institution in Ibenda.

Furthermore, the study contributes to knowledge by providing a systematic historical account of the introduction and spread of Catholicism in Ibenda within the period under review, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. It reconstructs the growth and development of St. Patrick's Catholic Parish, Ibenda, and situates it within the broader narrative of Catholic missionary expansion in the Nsukka cultural zone. In doing so, it fills a gap in local church historiography and contributes to understanding the relationship between religion and community development in southeastern Nigeria.

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Agu, Titus	70	Ngeleokpo, Ibenda	Parishioner	3/2/2026.	Direct	Reliable
Anokwuru Emenike	71	Ajama, Ibenda	Retired teacher	7/2/2026	Direct	Reliable
Eze,	70	Idoko,	Catechist	7/2/	Direct	Reliable

Ekenechukwu		Ibenda	t	2026		
Ikpegbu, Tochukwu	58	Idoko	Business man	5/2/ 2026	Direct	Reliable
Ikoh, Namani	49	Idoko	Business man	5/2/ 2026	Direct	Reliable
Ndubuisi Chukwudi	66	Echara Ibenda	Retired Civil Servant	13/2/ 2026	Direct	Reliable
Ogbu, Chijioke	53	Umuero Ibenda	Teacher	16/2/ 2026	Direct	Reliable
Owunna Nnamdi	65	Ngeleokp o, Ibenda	Retired Teacher	4/2/ 2026.	Direct	Reliable
Udeh Ifunanya	51	Ajama, Ibenda	Teacher	7/2/ 2026	Direct	Reliable
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