

THE PERSISTENCE OF IGBO INDEGENOUS TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THIS ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

This study explores the resilience and continuity of Igbo Indigenous Traditional Religion (ITR) amidst the expansive forces of globalization. Despite the widespread influence of modernity, Christianity, Islam, Western education, and mass media, which have significantly altered cultural and religious landscapes across Africa, the traditional religious practices of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have shown remarkable persistence. Again, the various cries of woes painted by some scholars concerning the Igbo traditional religious practices being down and out, gave rise to the examination of these religious practices which were believed to be already heading to total extinction. These panic cries about the extinction of African/Igbo religious practices caused panic, confusion, and misrepresentation of realities among the Igbo of South-East Nigeria. The paper also examines the socio-cultural, spiritual, and philosophical underpinnings that sustain Igbo traditional religious beliefs, including the centrality of divinities (*alusi*), the role of rituals and festivals, and the importance of sacred spaces. It further investigates how globalization has both threatened and, paradoxically, facilitated the preservation of these traditions through cultural revivalism, and digital media. These hypotheses created by some scholars are the subject matter of this paper, to examine the veracity of these claims through the method of the culture-area approach to know how they stand the test of time. It was discovered that these claims are mere semantics, but in reality, Igbo traditional religious practices are only modified and sustained ensuring its survival and relevance in the contemporary modern Igbo society.

Introduction

Igbo traditional religion and indeed African traditional religion and its practices, in general, have been written off in several fora by different scholars or schools of thought that its death or going into extinction will be a matter of time, due to the onslaught of agents of modernism, missionaries, globalization and other agents of change. This picture painted by most African scholars showed that the African/Igbo gods were on retreat because the forces that invaded the Igbo land were beyond its control and the gods might not return and take their proper place. This has become a source of worry that some Africans and Igbo people have been asking what is the fate of Igbo indigenous religious practices in the face of the persistent onslaught of the combined forces of the agents of globalization. Obiefuna and Aniago (2010) remark that the process of globalization is a combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, political, and religious forces, which have great impacts on the dislodging of Igbo traditional practices. They argue further that globalization has affected it in a tremendous way and turned Africans/Igbo with their religious practices into a dependent set of people in almost all ramifications.

Again, many African and Igbo scholars lamented on the bad effects of globalization on the Igbo people and Africa in general in different ways considering its consequences on the total life of the Igbo people, though it came with good fortunes. Nwadinigwe (1999) comments on the bad effects of globalization as thus:

The advent of civilization has divested the Africans and Igbo in particular. Many scholars of African religion and tradition have pointed to this fact in their various works and publications.... The white man has put a knife and cut the string that holds the Igbos together and since then the center can no longer hold.... Though the white man brought and introduced to us some good morals, he deceitfully lured Africans, especially the Igbos, into discarding their rich cultural heritage. Consequently, upon this, many vices have rocked the foundation that holds the Igbos together. Crime of all sorts has become the order of the day. Many of our rich artifacts have been stolen and sold to the same man who condemned them as devilish. (p. 2).

Earlier before this Mbiti (1969) predicts this ugly situation and describes it in this way that:

Africans are being caught up in a world of revolution that is so dynamic that it has almost got out of human control.... The man of Africa must get up and dance, for better or for worse, on the arena

of world drama. His image of himself and of the universe is disrupted and must make room for the changing universe and not simply become a tribal man. (p. 216).

Sequel to the above and the phenomenal increase in the number of Igbo traditional religious practices being lost every day due to palpable effects or impacts of agents of globalization and fear of the seemingly total extinction of Igbo traditional religious practices, there is an ongoing call for the revival of African/Igbo traditional religious practices in the whole of Igbo land through many annual festivals and sponsoring of activities pertaining to the revival of Igbo cultural heritages. This call is bearing much fruit among the Igbo people who on their own, as of today are embracing these religious, social, and cultural practices though it has negative effects on society.

But from this research, it would be discovered that it is not a total rout of the gods by the agents of globalization as painted by most scholars which is the bone of contention of this research rather what took place or is going on is the change that is constant in nature. No culture can go into extinction but a considerable process of modification, discontinuity, continuity, and syncretism is taking place generally. Therefore, the impressions or the view of total routs of the gods by some scholars due to forces of globalization on Igbo traditional religious practices is a false alarm, as there are still elements of the resilience of the Igbo traditional religious practices. However, one has to agree with Oguejiofor (1996) that Igbo traditional religion is no longer in its pristine state, much has been changed especially the ideas or meanings attached to certain acts, objects, and rituals but there are great signs of persistence in the life of Igbo people in the South-East Nigeria.

Meanwhile, in the course of this research, African and Igbo traditional religion or religious practices will be either used together to mean the same thing or interchanged and the scope is limited to the South-East Nigeria though comparison will be drawn from Nigeria and other parts of the African countries. It has to be noted that Igbo traditional religious practices as part and parcel of Igbo culture have been visibly affected by globalization and it has also impacted on globalization (Obiefuna and Aniago, 2010).

Foundational Basis for Persistence of Igbo Traditional Religious Practices

The need to establish the foundational basis of the continuous existence of traditional religious practices despite the effects of agents or factors of religious change and globalization. This will help to investigate areas of continuity, modification, discontinuity, substitution, and even level of syncretism. The most visible outcome or influence of civilization or globalization on the Igbo traditional religious practices is the high level of syncretism found among the Igbo people in South-East Nigeria. No religious or cultural practices can be found in their original form as of today, most have been modified or changed completely or augmented to come to the level of conventional practices going on every day in this era of globalization. The foundational basis gives the people or the practices their authentic meanings even in the face of the prevailing global agents of change going on in the world without losing their core identities, meanings, and values. Hence, the resilience or persistence of Igbo traditional religious practices in this case means the ability of people or religious practices to recover quickly or slowly from crises, injuries, misfortunes, depression, or agents of change as the case may be.

African/Igbo traditional religious practices were truly interrupted by the forces or agents of globalization, it was never annihilated nor gone into extinction as predicted by some scholars, rather Igbo traditional religious practices tried to regain their normal values or structures after being affected by forces of globalization. Despite, the effects of globalization on cultural and religious values, there still exists some lasting differences in the traditional religious cum cultural values and practices. This is exactly the idea of the theory of cultural differentiation propounded by Bayles and Smith (1997) to explain the concept of globalization in relation to culture. Cultural differentiation maintains that among or between cultures, there are lasting differences that are largely unaffected by globalization or by any other bi-multi-inter or trans-cultural process. Bayles and Smith identified culture differentials as cultural diversity a situation where national identities and solidarities survive or thrive in the contemporary globalizing economy.

This globalizing theory accounts for the unchangeable nature of some Igbo traditional religious and cultural practices. For example, the breaking of cola nuts, the *iwa-ji* festival in different towns, and ceremonies associated with marriage rites have not been affected by the agents of globalization in Igbo communities. So, globalization in this case occurs only on the surface and the deep structure of the cultural value has not been affected. This is why Ritzer (2010)

concludes that this kind of situation or condition, these cultural practices, and many others are largely closed not only to globalization but also to the influence of other cultures.

Another theory or principle for the foundational basis for the persistence of Igbo traditional religious practices is the principle of cultural continuity. According to Madu (2004), “the principle of cultural continuity does not permit cultural extinction, but cultural modification or assimilation, cultural extinction would presuppose the extinction of a people, but this seems impossible” (p. 38). This principle simply shows that culture does not die, but it can be transformed or modified into something better for valuable practices. This is why the Igbo traditional religion is still much felt and practiced among the people in different forms. It accounts for why Igbo people today, no matter how highly placed, still perform certain rites and rituals found in their religious practices during festivals and annual celebrations.

Finally, the shattered microcosmic theory by Trimingham (1955) attributes the rapid change that came in the wake of colonialism, which shattered the structures of traditional societies but sustained traditional religions. For him, this led to conversion from the African/Igbo traditional religion to the Christian religion as a convenient means of coping with the changed situations. Trimingham is trying to project through the shattered microcosmic theory that the impact of Western civilization and globalization upset the social and religious structures of African/Igbo societies, which were based on village, rural, and tribal structures, and it also affected the subsistence economies. The after-effect of these on African/Igbo traditional religion which is bound up with the social structures, resulted in the collapse of African/Igbo religion. This does not mean that African/Igbo converts did not retain some of their traditional beliefs for the shattered microcosmic theory underscored the fact that the religious change that took place in Africa/Igbo was not an in-depth one since Africans/Igbo still retained some of his/her traditional beliefs. This supported the view of Obiefuna (1985) who lamented during the centenary celebration in Onitsha Archdiocese that after one hundred years of Christianity in Igboland it is still skin-deep Christianity that is being practiced in Igboland.

The above theories showed that change is constant and necessary, for adaptation and modification of things from time to time, which was seen in the case of Igbo traditional religious practices responding to forces of change in the form of globalization and other agents of change. This portrays the Igbo traditional religious practices as a resilient and strong culture, which defies the cries of extinction of Igbo traditional religious practices by some scholars. Oguejiofor (2010) reiterates the view of strong culture as thus:

The strong culture is not one that is unable to accept influences from external culture but one that is able to integrate it and perhaps create a new, better, more useful, and more adaptable reality. It is to the extent the Igbo culture is able to do this that its paradigm remains resilient. (p. 25).

At this point, it has to be noted that it is the material aspects of culture that change fast most times while the non-material aspects of religion or culture remain heavily unchanged because it is more of the ideology of people in the society.

Signs of Persistence in Igbo Traditional Religious Practices

If there is anything that gives renewed continuous persistence to the traditional religious practices of the Igbo people, it is the issue of the Western world introducing marriage of homosexuals, and lesbians, and the issue of transgender that is prevalent in most continents of the world. This is a culture or practice that was rejected in the Igbo land from the time of their forefathers. These practices being adopted in the Western world and beyond are seen in Africa/Igbo land as an abomination that must be rejected by all means. This, in a way, reinforced the traditional practices of the Igbo people as being authentic and better than following the way of the white men who taught the Africans to be moral in their daily life through their religion given to African/Igbo people. Hence, this accounts for the resurgence and upholding of practices like levirate marriages, polygamy, and non-celibate status, *ezenwanyi*, *igo-mum*, these equally created additional tension for Igbo Christians who wanted to combine these with inherited religion (Okolo, 1985).

The traditional religious practices of the Igbo people, according to Mbiti (1969), the missionaries rejected and called them devilish, paganism, juju, and so. This made the Igbo Christians reject most things concerning their culture, religion, and way of thinking. Achebe (1978) equally captures this situation as thus:

It is already too late’ said Obierika sadly. Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger, they have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what

of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame' 'I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto.' What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?' asked Okonkwo. The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter.' 'Does the white man understand our custom about land?' 'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came peaceably and quietly with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won over our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (p.140-141).

Globalization again came with the supersonic transmission of events or information through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), global news networks, and the internet and other media processes, this brings information about a culture or religious practices from any remotest part of the world to the viewing or hearing of all, to all part of the world even to door steps through the self-phones and other electronics. With this, all cultures and religious practices are shown to the world daily, preserved and transmitted, learned and upgraded by all and sundry. This corresponds with the view of Babangida (cited by Oguejiofor, 2010) that globalization entails liberalization and intensification of international linkages to trade, culture, education, politics, religion, finance, markets, and so on. These are accelerated by discoveries in microelectronics, information, and communication processes. This automatically ensures the resilience or persistence of any religious or cultural values in any part of the world. So, through this way one joins in any celebration going on in any part of the world be it sports activities, religious/prayer sessions, cultural, social, and economic presentations, or celebrations as the case may be because the world is a global village as of today. This helped a lot during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that threatens the whole world, all works and religious and non-religious celebrations were done electronically from all parts of the globe.

Through the globalization process, most of the African and Igbo authors are trying heavily to promote African/Igbo traditional religious practices through their writings and explanations of the African/Igbo cultural religious practices and cultural values. Through this way, the Africans/Igbo people are showing their cultural heritage as they are to the world, and some are already forming or building a kind of bridge between the African/Igbo and other world religions and faiths. Kanu and Okoye (2023) focus on the Ikeji festival of Arondizogu people of Imo state, South-East Nigeria in relation to how to live an authentic Christian life, given that the festival is considered by most Christians as a pagan festival and yet its participation by Christians is increasing on yearly basis. Kanu and Okoye (2023) inquire:

How can such a festival be Christianized so that it can be celebrated across religious borders? How can a bridge be built between the Ikeji festival and the Christian faith? Based on the findings of the survey on the perspective of Arondizogu Christians on the Ikeji festival, it has become very important to initiate the process of building a bridge between the Christian faith and Ikeji festival, which is an aspect of the religio-cultural experience of the Arondizuogu people of Imo state Nigeria,.... the researchers are more interested in the proposal of a theoretical path or a concept that would guide such a relationship. The theoretical path or concept that is proposed is the concept of Catholic theology which has served as an instrument for the reconciliation of faith and culture, which is INCULTURATION. (p. 74-81).

It is true that the researchers were not interested in pointing out the particular areas in the Ikeji festival where such bridges can be built in relation to the Christian faith. However, the theoretical path or concept that is chosen attempts to make the traditional Ikeji festival to be understood more by people of every culture and locality. This will make Christians celebrating the Ikeji traditional festival truly feel at home and the tensions of committing sin removed from their daily lives. Hence the Ikeji cultural cum religious festival on this account is gaining popularity among people outside Arondizogu and South-East Nigeria.

Globalization has helped different ethnic groups to access and to equip itself from the findings that they must have learned from other religious or cultural groups, this accounts for innovations and sustained cultural values and syncretism in most parts of the world. However, this on the negative side encourages neglect and a superiority complex

by some cultures which regard itself as superior to others. According to, Uzodigwe, Oguche, Akogwu, Okonkwo and Eze (2023) the view that:

Globalization makes it simple for Africans to access foreign cultures and good traditions, which include; food, movies, music art, and scientific knowledge. This is because globalization permits the free movement of people, goods and services, art, and information.... Globalization on the other hand promotes the superiority of one culture over another. Global ethnocentrism has placed the cultural hegemony of Western values over the African value system. (pp. 19-21).

This perceived idea created by globalization in relation to African or Igbo traditional values as being moribund helps to bring a revival towards African/Igbo traditional values which is ongoing in South-East Nigeria.

Rain-making or cloud seeding in Africa, especially in the South-East of Nigeria is regarded as a cultural heritage that is gradually disappearing. However, it remains firmly believed in and practiced in many parts of the Igbo land. Although the scientific procedures behind it are not widely known, a few individuals within the community known as rain-makers are recognized for their expertise in the practice. Mbiti (1969) agrees that rain-making is one of such African communal rites and rain-makers are some of the most important individuals in almost all African communities and the knowledge and powers of rainmaking are handed down from one individual to his near relatives. However, Mbiti adds that:

From many parts of Africa, it is reported that both people and rainmakers know for certain that only God can 'make' or produce rain. Therefore, rainmakers play the role of intermediaries, whatever else they might do is to enhance their position and activities. Rainmakers are thus the focal point of communal need and request for rain.... The actual practice of the rainmaker involves the use of sacred objects especially 'rain-stones' some of which are rare and others are believed to have fallen from the sky. Burning of rain-leaves or other combustibles is another method, whereby the smoke from them is thought to 'capture' the rain from the sky and bring it down. (p. 180-181).

The central point here is that they are needed by the community on many occasions and when they fail to stop the rain on occasions where they are employed to do so, it most times leads to loss of their prestige and may even endanger their lives. This belief in rain-making is sometimes denied because of a lack of scientific process and proof and is seen as a source of devil manipulations, hence many African/Igbo Christians abandoned the belief and neglected the practice. Yet in moments of events, festivals the individuals in the communities or the communities themselves consult them for clement weather during these important occasions, events and festivals or the rain-makers may use their art of rainmaking to spoil the event and make it uninteresting by scaring people away with heavy down-pour, and lightening of thunder.

The response of the Igbo people towards the agents of globalization shows clearly that contrary to the view of some African scholars that Igbo indigenous practices are down and out, globalization actually helped to a great extent to revitalize and firmly broaden the scope of unknown structures of Igbo indigenous religion. The Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria having gained from the educational aspect of globalization, have taken it upon themselves to showcase and re-write their religious practices and show the same to the world through all the media platforms in existence as of today. Most of these elites or educated Igbo people are into various groups depending on which each of them aligned himself or herself. This was well pointed out by Ejizu (2003) as thus:

Our next sample will be the group I refer to as 'active mixers'. These are Igbo people who have ostensibly converted to Christianity, but in effect, maintain a dual religious allegiance. They have one leg in a Christian church and the other in the traditional religion. The next focus of attention will be the contemporary form of Igbo Indigenous Religion that obtains the group I call (for lack of a better expression) 'cultural revivalists'. Certain educated members of society who have become dissatisfied with Christianity deliberately opt to return to the traditional beliefs and practices of their forebearers.... The Godian Religion of Chief K.O.K Onyioha. Godianism claims to be the authentic modern version of the Igbo traditional religion. But it is really a new and distinct religious movement. The last contemporary Igbo Indigenous Religious form I propose to highlight is the survival and persistence of the traditional worldview, beliefs, and rituals in several new religious movements, praying-healing centers, and Pentecostal ministries that proliferate in virtually every corner of Igboland today. (p. 184).

The above quotation shows that traditional religious practices can never go down anymore but grow from locally rooted to world religion. The fact that it has reached the stage of adhesion as pointed out by Nock (1969) in which people stood with one foot on either side of the traditional religion and Christianity, adopting the new elements from the new worship as a useful instrument rather than retiring the gods. The consequences of this mixing of religious practices or adhesion is rife in the Igbo communities of South-East Nigeria, especially among the young people who misunderstand the subject and object of traditional religion as practiced by their forefathers. It is widely known that people seek the help of traditional religious gods as a means to get rich, hence the level of ritual killings or mutilation of body parts for sacrifices going on around the African continent is an indication of abuse of traditional religion being seen as a means to get rich quicker. This again increased the number of self-acclaimed native priests and priestesses (*Dibia and Ezenwanyi*) in African/Igbo societies who were there for the business of making money rather than being the eyes of the gods.

Another reason or sign why Igbo traditional religion keeps growing and reviving among the Igbo people is that it does not need proselytizers. The world religions in their bid to grow and increase in number sought new converts through jihads or missionary works which are widely known but in the case of indigenous traditional religion, the natives or votaries go on their own without being preached to or lured in any way. The missionaries used all sorts of means to lure the people away from their traditional religion and even condemn the religious cum cultural values. Ibezim (2018) captures the situation in the following way:

The greatest missionary enterprise was on the culture. One significant aspect was the relegation of our traditional life to the background. African culture even though religious was trampled upon by the missionaries who felt it was an impediment to their objectives.... Religion and tradition of the people were denounced and supplanted by the new religion. (p. 118).

Though the missionaries and colonial masters introduced a lot of help to improve the lives of the Igbo indigenous people which were also to their own advantage and equally suppressed many religious and cultural activities that were not good. Ejizu (2003) comments that:

Igbo indigenous religion as practiced today by fervent traditional religionists has continued to undergo change and modification brought about mainly by the realities of modern society. Already during the heydays of colonialism and expatriate Christian missionary evangelism in Igboland such dysfunctional aspects like human sacrifice, the killing of twins, oracular institutions including *Chukwu* oracle of *Aro-Chukwu*, *Igwe K'Ala* of *Umunneoha* and *Agbala* of *Awka* (that were seen as disruptive by both officials of the colonial administrations and Christian missionary evangelists), were suppressed. (p. 191).

The analysis above shows that Igbo traditional religious practices are far from going into extinction rather, some were modified by the circumstances of the moment and some remain as they were, showing in general that they are strong cultural values. This whole issue of globalization has led to the indigenization process of religious practices in Igboland which according to Nzomiwu (1985) means an attempt to recapture the Igbo mind and redeem the fundamental values of its culture as an authentic mode of living and speaking the language of Igbo people. Indigenous values and practices which are understood by the Igbo man in his daily anxieties, sorrows, frustrations, and joys, and relate it to his daily survival.

Conclusion

In the words of Ejizu (2003) the Igbo indigenous religion that predominated from the time of our fore-fathers has been affected by the severe hemorrhage caused by many factors of civilization and globalization and the result of all these was the law of diminishing return set in and befall the whole system of religious practices. This of course was the view of some earlier scholars on African/Igbo traditional religious practices who thought that the relevance of Igbo traditional religion rested in the past history of the Igbo people. However, the traditional religion continued to exist in different forms as a living faith among the Igbo people of South-East Nigeria. It shows that Igbo traditional religious practices have the potential or ability to adapt to the changing times of the globalized world.

It has to be noted that what remains as of today in the religious practices of the Igbo has been greatly modified, some lost and some retained in different ways while some remain as it is but raised to high status due to agents of change that affected the entire cultural and religious systems. So, the main concern as most scholars of today is about capturing the areas of continuity and discontinuity in the religious practices. This of course entails knowing its strengths and

weaknesses in the daily lives of the people as they affect the activities of the people. The era of hiding while being a votary of African/Igbo traditional religion has gone, the votaries these days are revamping the buildings and shrines of the deities and encouraging many religious and cultural practices.

It is from this context that the quest to revive the Igbo language and other aspect of Igbo culture emerged. This movement encourages all Igbo people to speak the Igbo language at all times and everywhere. This is introduced in the schools, churches, and other places converged by the Igbo people for any ceremonial activities. This also accounts for the new philosophy of *akuluo-uno* in the bid to create and bring back wealth at home to strengthen the structures of Igbo traditional religion destroyed by the ongoing globalization. Obviously, more gains are seen from globalization rather than previous cries of woes initially expressed by some scholars against the demise of the African/Igbo traditional religious practices.

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