

**THE CHANGING REALITIES OF AFRICAN LIFE AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE
TRADITIONAL AFRICAN VALUES AND SPIRITUAL INCLINATIONS**

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fact of change is a reality in every human society; in relation to every growth and development, what can be said to have happened is growth. Societal cultural values change as the human persons who make up a given society change. As people come in contact with others, changes occur; invariably when a culture meets another one, a cross breeding of ideas occurs, one enriches the other and change automatically occurs between the duo. Africa as a multi-cultural continent has through the centuries had intercultural and intracultural encounters with the people outside her borders and within herself respectively. These have brought about tremendous change in her traditional African values and spirituality positively and negatively. Using the style of textual analysis and critical expose, this work wishes to identify the original African cultural values and the influences other cultures have made on her. It will argue that despite the harm done to the original African image, she can galvanize herself and create a much better identity and a rebranding of her original self. The Igbo cultural context will be a dominant ground for the expositions and critical appraisal.

Keywords: Change, Realities, African Life, African Values, Spiritual Inclinations

Introduction

A great philosopher of the pre-Socratic era, Heraclitus, stated that everything is in a state of flux; in other words, change is constant. In contrast, another school of thought in the same era upheld that reality is one, hence, that nothing changes. Can these claims be rightly thought of Africa and her life-world? Yes. A look at Africa as a continent and as a people with unique identity and rich cultural heritage reveals that she has experienced and is still experiencing tremendous evolution in all spheres of life.

However, amidst all these changes, certain elements have persevered and continue to endure. Bearing this in mind, this work consolidates the fact of the changing realities of African life and outlines the factors responsible for those changes. It throws light on some autochthonous traditional cultural values of Africa and their current fate after modification. An evaluation is made on the nature of the impact – positive and negative – that these changing realities have

on traditional African cultural values and spiritual inclinations. It also highlights whether certain aspects of these values have remained unchanged.

Laying credence to Ibigbolade (2015), Africa is a massive continent with diverse religious traditions and cultural values, to the extent that within the same tradition there are variations. It would be virtually impossible for this work to do full justice to the changing realities across the entire continent. Therefore, the **Igbo tribe of Nigeria** will serve as the primary reference in examining African traditional values and spiritual inclinations. Definitions of key terms are also provided.

Traditional African Values

According to *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (Walker et al., 2004), value is defined as something regarded as desirable, worthy, or right – such as a belief, standard, or precept. It can also refer to intrinsic excellence or desirability. Thus, value may be seen as a collection of practices that people hold sacred or precious.

Traditional African values are a composite set of principles, knowledge, and beliefs held in high esteem within African societies. These serve as guidelines for human behavior in interpersonal, group, and intergroup relationships (Blake, 1993). These values are cultural in nature, as they originate from the African people's lived experiences without external influence. African culture itself can be defined as the “totality of the African people's response to nature and their social environment” (Ogbuja, 2014, p. 208).

Key values include respect for human life (linked to its perceived sacredness), communalism, respect for elders, hospitality, justice, moral rectitude, a deep sense of the sacred, docility, and integrity (Ramose, 1999). Proverbs and folklore were essential educational tools used to convey these values informally (Okolo, 1993).

African Spiritual Inclination

Africans are deeply spiritual people. Mbiti (1970) famously describes them as “notoriously religious” (p. 1). African spiritual inclination reflects how Africans perceive their existence in relation to the Supreme Being. In the **Igbo worldview**, this supreme being is referred to as *Chiukwu*.

Africans often attribute life events – whether positive or negative – to the influence of deities or spiritual forces. This belief reinforces the idea that communities and individuals are at the mercy of divine forces. Achebe (1958), in *Things Fall Apart*, portrays this vividly by recounting a year plagued by poor harvests, which the Igbo people attributed to spiritual displeasure.

4. The Changing Realities of African Life: A Fact or Myth?

Is life in Africa truly changing? The answer is yes. A comparison of past and present African life reveals not just change, but also significant transformation. There has been a shift in worldview and tremendous cultural adaptation. This section identifies the key factors responsible for these changes.

5. Factors Responsible for the Changing Realities of African Lives

These factors can be broadly classified into **intra-African** and **extra-African**.

Intra-African factors involve cultural exchanges among African communities, such as intertribal marriages and sharing of ideas through migration. For instance, in Nigeria, intertribal unions and mobility foster cross-cultural integration.

Extra-African factors include colonization and globalization. Ufearoh and Onebunne (2017) argue that colonialism and globalization, combined with the Igbo people's adventurous spirit, have led to major socio-cultural shifts. Colonization began with the Portuguese arriving in Ghana around 1470 and later in Benin, Nigeria (Aderibigbe, 2015). This encounter with Europeans drastically impacted Africa's political, religious, and economic systems.

Colonialism introduced Christianity and commerce, yet it also opened the door for the trans-Atlantic slave trade and exploitation of African people (Okere, 2005b). African cultural practices were condemned as primitive and fetish, leading to cultural degradation. Nevertheless, this interaction also introduced education, healthcare, and scientific knowledge, which helped Africa develop and resist some colonial shackles (Okere, 2005b).

The **second wave of European contact** in Africa, occurring in the late 19th century, was driven by motives beyond exploration – it was orchestrated by initiatives such as Pope Nicholas V's papal bull (Okere, 2005b). The resulting colonial enterprise affected African

society in **political, economic, social, and religious** domains. While Christianity and commerce were introduced, so were exploitation and slavery. African traditions were demonized, often labeled as *fetish* or *primitive* (Okere, 2005b; Ufearoh & Onebunne, 2017).

Despite these negatives, **colonial contact had its benefits**: Africans were exposed to Christianity, formal education, improved healthcare, and scientific knowledge. These tools helped Africa develop self-awareness and resistance against colonial domination (Okere, 2005).

Globalization further accelerates cultural change. Defined as how trade and technology create global interdependence, it promotes cross-cultural and economic exchange in a more respectful manner compared to colonial times, which was more of a slave master relationship. It allows Africa to project its values and assimilate others. (National Geographic Education, 2024).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – including the internet, media, mobile phones – has transformed Africa into part of a "global village," significantly impacting traditional values. One of globalization's strongest instruments is **Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**. Tools like radio, television, the internet, and mobile phones have turned the world into a "global village" (Walker et al., 2004). However, this global exposure has also introduced **foreign ideologies and lifestyles** that challenge African traditional values (Blake, 1993). For instance, ICT has altered how proverbs and folktales, once vital in African informal education, are transmitted. Young people now rely more on online content, often foreign, rather than oral traditions (Ogbuja, 2014). Additionally, ICT promotes individualism through personal media consumption and online interactions, weakening community-based learning and interaction.

Africa, with its vast cultural heritage, has undergone substantial transformations through colonization, globalization, and information and communication technology (ICT). These forces have reshaped the African worldview – affecting everything from spirituality to social norms. From the above, we have seen that realities of African life are changing and certain factors are responsible for these changes. Hence, the following section examines the **impacts** these changes inflict on African traditional values and spiritual inclination.

6. The Impact of the Changing Realities of African Life on Traditional African Values and Spiritual Inclination

As previously established, Africa is a vast continent endowed with rich cultural heritage and traditional values. It has also been shown that Africa has undergone tremendous transformation due to both internal and external influences – namely colonialism, globalization, and information and communication technology (ICT).

It is pertinent to note that the **impact** of these changes on traditional African values and spiritual inclinations **has been both positive and negative**. On one hand, these external contacts have increased global appreciation for African cultural values; on the other, they have also led to the dilution, neglect, and in some cases, extinction of certain traditions. The **positive outcomes** include access to education, improved healthcare, broader worldview, and the internalization of universal values such as human rights and democracy (Okere, 2005). However, the **negative consequences** are particularly evident in the erosion of key traditional values. Below are detail clarification:

i. Communalism

Communalism is a core African value that asserts that an individual is only meaningful through others. This is captured by the popular *Ubuntu* philosophy, which states, “*A person is a person through other persons*” (Ramose, 1999). In a similar vein, Okolo (1993) encapsulates this with the Latin expression *Cognatus ergo sum* (“I am related to others, therefore I exist”). This does not deny individuality but emphasizes that identity is achieved within a community.

Traditionally, communalism meant that individuals were recognized, valued, and protected within the communal web (Ogbuja, 2014). However, this value has been **deeply eroded by Western individualism**, which was introduced during colonization and accelerated by globalization. The mistrust instilled by the trans-atlantic slave trade, the prioritization of personal success over collective welfare, and the growing culture of privacy (such as building high fences around houses) have all contributed to the **marginalization of communal living** (Aderibigbe, 2015). Today, people are more self-centered; personal goals often take precedence over community needs.

ii. Downplay of the Sacredness of Human Life

In traditional African society, human life was considered sacred. The killing of an individual, including unborn children, was abominable. However, modern society has significantly devalued this principle. For instance, in Nigeria, the violent acts perpetrated by Fulani herdsmen and increasing abortion rates reflect this shift. In Igbo society, ritual killings and kidnappings have also become more prevalent, fueled by silence from authorities and a general degradation of cultural norms (Aderibigbe, 2015; Ogbuja, 2014).

iii. Erosion of Respect for Elders, Authorities, and Laws

Elders traditionally served as custodians of knowledge and moral authority. They were respected figures in African societies. Today, however, many are abandoned, ridiculed, or disrespected. In meetings like the *Umunna*, elders are often challenged or even assaulted. Additionally, the rich and powerful in society often operate above the law, a situation alien to traditional African justice systems (Ogbuja, 2014).

iv. Decline in Chastity and Modesty

In pre-colonial African societies, chastity before marriage and modesty were deeply valued, particularly among the Igbo. While early Africans may have dressed scantily, sexual integrity was upheld. Today, however, cohabitation without marriage, prostitution (now called “hook-up”), and indecent dressing have become normalized. ICT and the internet have exacerbated these trends, challenging the African value of communal responsibility and moral correction (Blake, 1993; Okere, 2005a).

v. Demonization of African Cultural Heritage

Christian missionaries often condemned African traditions as fetishistic, promoting Christianity through an Eurocentric lens. This lack of inculturation led to a shallow rooting of faith in African soil. The result was **syncretism** – a blend of Christianity and traditional religion that often distorts both. Thankfully, the rise of **inculturation**, as promoted by the Vatican II Council, now aims to integrate African values and customs into Christian life and liturgy (Arinze, 2008; Udechukwu, 2021).

vi. Eclipse of Integrity and Moral Rectitude

Integrity, once revered in African culture – especially through institutions like the Ozo title – is fading. Today, many titled men are corrupt, giving false testimony for money. The Igbo proverb *ikpe mara eziokwu na aka azu di ya* (“judgment against the truth has a backhand”) illustrates this sad reality. Moral uprightness, once held above wealth (*ezi afa ka ego*), is no longer upheld (Okere, 2005b).

vii. Rise of Hedonism among Youth

African spirituality traditionally emphasized the harmony of body and soul. Today, consumerism, materialism, and hedonism, especially among the youth, are increasingly dominant. This quest for wealth, often by any means necessary, has led to a loss of spiritual balance and moral compass (Atueyi, 2021).

Positive Impacts

i. Improvement in Science and Technology

Contact with the global world brought advancements in agriculture, medicine, communication, and education. Local arts and crafts have been refined and expanded through these technological exchanges (Walker et al., 2004).

ii. Systematic Education

Before colonialism, Africa’s education was informal and vocational – skills were passed down from one expert to another. Formal education introduced by missionaries structured learning and improved the quality of life. Now, people specialize and contribute to society more effectively (Okere, 2005b).

iii. Better Appreciation of African Values

Though initially rejected, African cultural values are now being recognized within religious contexts. The **Second Vatican Council** (1962–1965) emphasized *inculturation*, incorporating local languages, music, and rituals into worship. Organizations like **SECAM** (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) promote building the Church as the "Family of God" in Africa (Arinze, 2008; Nwaigbo, 2015). Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi

modeled this by incorporating Igbo traditions such as the breaking of kola nuts into Christian hospitality (Udechukwu, 2021).

iv. Balanced Spiritual Outlook

Christianity provided Africans with tools to understand personal agency. The African worldview, often fatalistic, evolved to include concepts of planning and working towards a future, balancing spirituality with practical action (Okere, 2005a).

v. Elimination of Anti-Life Practices

Christianity helped abolish harmful traditions like twin killings and human sacrifice. These practices have been largely eradicated, making traditional religion more compatible with modern human rights and life-affirming values (Mbiti, 1970).

vi. Revival of Communal Spirit in the Diaspora

Despite individualism at home, many African diaspora communities are reviving traditional communal values. Organizations such as the *Igbo Union* in New York or *Ndi-Igbo in Texas* foster cultural events like the New Yam Festival, thereby preserving heritage and creating solidarity abroad (Ufearoh & Onebunne, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that **change is a constant feature** in African life, and this change has brought both blessings and challenges. While colonialism, globalization, and ICT have undermined many African values, they have also introduced tools for progress and self-rediscovery. Today, Africans face the task of reclaiming their identity through a balanced integration of their cultural values and the Gospel message of Christ.

Despite a painful history marked by slavery, exploitation, and cultural denigration, Africa possesses the strength to rise. Through **inculturation, education**, and a renewed sense of **communalism**, African societies can both **preserve their rich heritage** and **advance in the modern world**, free and dignified.

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