

RELIGION AND MORALITY AS INSTRUMENTS OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN IGBO SOCIETY

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Abstract

If there is anything a society needs so much and seriously today, it may not fall short of human development which would permit such society to lead other societies or to catch-up with the leading ones. Modern development focuses on science, technology, infrastructure, industry, education, politics, agriculture and many more. Most scholars may have it that education is the most potent instrument for the overall development of mankind, but it serves no purpose to develop a society that is difficult to inhabit because of anti-social behaviours such as corruption, killing, injustice, bribery and many more. Igbo Society got contaminated with western civilization first introduced by the missionary and since then has not recovered. In this paper the writers try to examine religion and morality as instruments of human development in Igbo society against the impact and effect of Western civilization and modernity. Durkheim's social theory of religion that says that religion functions to reinforce the collective unity or social solidarity of a group was adopted. Primary data was collected through observation, interview and references to experiences. Secondary data was collected from books, journals, magazines and internet materials. The study found out that Igbo society was a peaceful and a loving, full of charitable works and brother's keeper until Christianity, Western civilization and modernity interfered to change the narrative. The study recommends that traditional religion be taught as course of study in both primary and secondary schools in Igbo society.

Key words: Religion; Morality; Human Development; Igbo Society

Introduction

African Tradition Religion which has been the religion practiced in Igbo society before the coming of Christianity, recognizes God as the creator and final guardian of law and order, and of moral and ethical codes. One of the perennial concerns of traditional religion or all religions is the need for a better society, an environment where life can be honestly celebrated in its fullness.

Religion and morality are usually regarded as cardinal instruments for societal transformation, change and human development. Today, globalization has made human development an independent variable, like an octopus that feeds from eight tentacles or suckers. Many factors are craving to have their way on human development: intelligence, psychology, philosophy, economics, sociology and many more. Minus religion and morality as factors of human development, all other factors influence mankind away from God. This is the problem of man today. Studies outside religion and morality have made some people atheists, agnostics, humanists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, scientists and technologists, who one way or the other, deny religion as the imposer of motility. They claim that man is capable of determining what is right and wrong. They even deny existence of God while establishing that man is capable of taking care of himself. But whatever the case may be, religion remains the most powerful force of bringing people together despite geographical barriers, political affiliations and social status. Nobody denies religion in any of the three epoches of life: birth, religion will initiate a new birth; Marriage, religion will officiate marriage to be legal; death, every death must be buried in religious rite.

Obiefuna (2018) states that religion is fundamental to human life and living, thinking pattern, attitudes and relationships; the basic understanding is that it is on human beings that societal development hangs, good or bad. Religion and morality are two elements that would lay foundation of any society that would benefit generation after generation. Foundation of any society, will be likened to biblical saying: "therefore whoever hears these saying of mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the flood came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock" (Matt 7:24-25). In this paper, the writers try to describe religion and morality as instruments of human development in Igbo society, when the society was described by Achebe (1958) as acting as one, living in peace and as brothers' keepers against the life of Igbo society in this modern time.

Religious Practices in Igbo Society

In ATR, the adherents recognized God as too holy and respectful to be talked to anyhow. So, the option has been that they should approach him through the minor deities, who then would carry their message to God as His servants. Among the minor deities, the most often communicated with is the earth goddess (*Ani* or *Ana*). It is because people found their living upon it. Orji (2014) explains that the original religion of the Igbo people was the worship of the mother-earth and the worship of deities. The Igbo also believe that there is another superior being known as *chi* or *Chineke* (the creator) or *Chukwu*, *Chi-ukwu* (the Great God). According to Orji, the worship of the mother-earth was generally observed throughout the Igbo land. It was referred to as *Alaor Ani* (Earth). The mother-earth was generally represented by a deity known as *Aja-ala* or *Aja-ani*. The deity was sometimes referred to by the elders as *Nna-ochie* or *Nne-ochie*. This practice was obtainable in the whole Igbo society. The ceremony marking the season for the worship of *Aja-ala* use to take place immediately the first seasonal crops started yielding fruits, in those days before one ate any of the new crops such as vegetables: *Ugu*, *Ugboguru*, *Okro*, or maize he would first of all brought a small quantity of such a crop and drop it in front of the shrine of the *Aja-ala*, god. The mother-earth was begged to accept the poor sacrifice and eat the crop first, and then bless it so that when human being started eating it later, it would have no adverse effect on their health. He said also that the worship of the mother-earth included an annual festival which lasted for about three days. The opening ceremony of the festival was performed by the traditional priest in company of the elders of the town, who assembled in front of the shrine with pots of palm wine, kola nuts, alligator pepper and all items of seasonal crops, such as yams, okro, vegetables, melon seed, beans, and so on. The kola nut was broken by the traditional-priest who had to pray fervently to the *Aja-ala* urging her to look after the health of the entire populace (of the town). He also prayed for the long life of everybody and bounteous harvest every year. As he prayed, he was at the same time hitting on the ground the *oho* or *ofo* which was the symbol of authority and representative of the divinities. As he did this the elders gave the traditional priest support by saying *ise, ofokwa, obuiheanyikwuru*, (so we have said) which means Amen! Or 'we want it to be so', or it is what we said'. This was to ram it home to the deity that her people were ardent in their dedication and request. This act is what Durkheim calls Mechanical Solidarity. He argued that religious symbolism such as sacred objects and ritual bound communities for collectively expressed emotion as well as ideological belief. He added that in traditional societies in which everyone shared the same religion and social beliefs there was very limited opportunity for the development of individual identity. After all that was done, the kola nut was broken and shared among the participants together with the alligator pepper. The priest chews together both the kola nut and alligator pepper. He swallowed some and spat some quantity on the shrine and on the *ofo*. Some pieces of kola nut and alligator pepper were also thrown into the shrine. After that, a goat and a cork were slaughtered and their blood sprinkled on the shrine and on the *ofo*. The slaughtered animals and the yams were later cooked and eaten by all and sundry present. The palm wine was also drunk.

Orji (2014) also observed that when the men had their fill, there was great joy and jubilation. The men started singing war songs. They ran up and down the arena of the shrine, jumping up and down in acrobatic display and show of strength. The ceremony came to a close very late in the evening. From this moment the *ihea-ala* festival took off with all pomp and pageantry followed by the slaughtering of goats and fowls by the town's people in their families. Friends, relations and well-wishers from other clans were also invited to take part in the festival. There was a lot of eating of rich and decently prepared food. Young men drank until they were drunk. Girls appeared in their natural beauty having only as their articles of dress, beads made of cowries worn from the navel region of their body down to the middle of their laps; necklaces, ivory-hand-rings were also worn. Red and yellow cam woods were generally applied all over their body, with the artistic patterns of indigo to match. They sang, danced and played with boys in the village square. Achebe (1958) says that the feast of the new yam was an occasion for giving thanks to *Ani*, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. *Ani*, he said, played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. She was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth. The feast of the new yam, (which is still the greatest feast in Igbo society) was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. Hence men and women, young and old in Igbo society, looked forward to it because it began the season of plenty. In Igbo society then, nobody dare offend the earth goddess and go unpunished. On one occasion in Umuofia, during the week of peace, a week set aside before the new yam feast in honour of the earth goddess, a holy week. Achebe (1958) describes how one of the members of Umuofia clan violated the law of the land by beating one of his wives during the holy week. Before it was dusk, Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, called on the violator and fined him heavily for his misconduct. The priest then warned the man that violated the "holy week" that he would not have beaten his wife even if he had found her with her lover. The priest used that occasion to remind the people of Umuofia of the danger of violating the holy week. Orji (2014) emphasized that the method of worshipping God in Igbo land were virtually the same. If there were differences, they were found only in the type of animal sacrificed and also in the period and duration of their festivals.

Religion and Moral Impact on Igbo Marriage and Family System

H. Ekwenibe (personal communication 16/2/2025) emphasizes that religion plays great impact on Igbo marriage and family system. He says that there are two religious groups in Igbo land: Traditional religion and Christian religion and that both of them play role in Igbo marriage and family system. He stresses that under Catholic doctrine marriage would start with training of the couples and consummated with wedding in a Church. He believed that other branch churches should be doing the same and for traditional marriage religious ceremonies do serve the same purpose. He continued that the training received by the husband and wife do go a long way in helping them cope with family life. Ekwenibe also says that the interplay of family, religion and society brings about human development. He emphasizes that each of the three factors has serious foundation and fundamental role to play in the life of a child such that would make the child to the acceptable in the society. Ekwenibe reminds that religion would make the child have moral and not be wild as to become problem, to both the family and society.

Marriage and family system in Igbo traditional society and religion, as in many people group or society are so important that Gehman (2001) puts it thus:

Marriage and birth of children are central to all of life in Africa. Unmarried men and women are unthinkable in traditional African society. There is no traditional category for a single lady or single man. He continued that who refuses to marry is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but under human. Failure to get married

under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejected him in turn. (p. 33).

In Igbo traditional society, marriage is a must done thing in order to keep continuity of the family (name) and not extinguish it. For this reason, if in a family the only male child dies without marrying a wife, in some groups, wife would be married on behalf of the dead for the family not to close. Hence, Gehman (2018) views marriage by the African traditional religionists as the focal point of all existence. According to Gehman, at marriage ceremony, both the living, the dead and those yet unborn meet together, for the very future of the community depends upon a succession of descendants. If the married wife is not bearing children, the condition for bringing a second or more wives is created. In other words, child bearing according to Gehman, is central in the whole marriage relationship in Africa tradition religious perspective. Imasogie (1985) in his opinion states that marriage should be regarded as one of the African traditional rites of passage because, behind-the-scene, there exist traditional religious activities which are not made public in some societies. He continued that in as much as contracting marriage differs from one group to the next, but common to all remains the fact that marriage is not so much regarded as a union of two individuals as it is a union of two families or two ethnic groups, if the marriage is exogamous: (that is marrying outside one's group), Imasogie explains that the group involved marriage contact heightens both the religious and the social aspects of marriage. Marriage in traditional Igbo society used to be process, starting with inquiry either by an appointed intermediary or by the parent(s). They would begin the religious activity by going to a diviner to find out the wishes of the divinity if it will be well with their daughter. While carrying out an investigation on the religious plan, they also make an intensive inquiry into the social history, the character and health history of the suitor and the family. Every answer given in reply must be based on the outcome of the investigation. The proposing family is believed to have made proper inquiries before proposing. If all were well, the family of the wife-to-be would give positive answer and other activities would start.

In the traditional Igbo society, a grown-up man that would want to marry must discuss his intention with his parents, who would then begin to search for a wife for their son. Enquiries would be made regarding history and background of families that their son should not dabble into family of bad character. The resultant effect use to be that a good wife should be found and a good family built. That system or method of proper enquiry by parents of both parties reduces divorce and marriage breakage. This tradition has been interrupted by Christianity and Western civilization. A man can now pick a wife without the knowledge of his parents. If he sees a lady of his choice, because she looks attractive through make-ups, not minding character, family history and background. This has been a reason for marriage breakdown.

Child Upbringing in the Igbo society

In those days there was no western type of education, where there was no school were children gathered for training and the training of children was informal and the responsibility of their parents and community members. Learning system was on the job, fathers and grandfathers took care of the male children while mothers trained the female children, male children were following the fathers to work while female children were following their mother to work. At home mothers gathered children for relaxation, during which stories were told. Orje (2014) in his survey of child training reported that in some cultures, mothers play a high role in child training while fathers have minimal role. He also said that clan members have better role in child training than fathers and concluded that mothers and clan members have greater contributions in the development of children than fathers. It was not so in Igbo society in those days, what was applicable was that fathers carried more for the training than their male children while mothers for their female children. As the male children

become of age, the clan will continue to contribute in the training of especially the male children in fighting war.

The type of occupation mostly available in those days were farming, carving, blacksmithing, craft work like basket weaving, hunting, fishing, taming of domestic animals, the world around them was small and they were after physiological needs, Igbo people in those days were able to provide for themselves with tools like hoe, machete for farming, ropes and so on. Most historians agreed that agriculture was the first most important needs of man which also made man to settle in a place. Although they live primitive life compare with when Christianity and colonization came in this modern time so to say, but they loved themselves and were faithful and less corrupt than today. In those days children followed their parent to farm and were obedient. Clan and child upbringing can be seen in the area of community project or development. In those days, there were no heavy-duty equipment for road construction and building of bridges and houses. No bulldozer to pull down big trees and cover erosion sites, so many young men were needed for a work like that. As people got involved in community work, they learn many things even through general discourses.

Traditional Education as Instrument of Religion and Human Development

Before the coming of the white man, Igbo people had a way of educating, training and developing their children. Ukeje, Akabogu and Ndu (1992) confirm that each ethnic group had its own system of education which was largely vocational and generally aimed at the acquisition of skills, abilities and behavior patterns necessary and desirable for effective life in the society. Through the system of education, every child inculcates the sense of the acceptable group behaviour. In this system there was no special class of people called teachers and no special place for the education. Education was given by every adult member of the extended family, everywhere and at any time. Every adult member of the extended family was a teacher for every child within the extended family and at times beyond. From about the age of six, age-grades become the main agency in traditional education. The age-grades played and are still playing vital roles not only in education but also in security matters and in public morality. They enforce discipline not only among them but among the entire members of the community. Fafunwa (1974) outlined the goals of traditional education as follows:

1. To develop the child's talent physical skills;
2. To develop character;
3. To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority;
4. To develop intellectual skills;
5. To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labor;
6. To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs;
7. To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large.

Ukeje, Akabogu and Ndu (1992) insert that function of the traditional pre-colonial education system was to inculcate a sense of acceptable group concepts, beliefs and behavior pattern. It was the education of the youths in the code of behavior, conventions, ethics, customs, mores and laws of the society into which they belonged. It was obtained from the parents, the adult members of the extended family unit and from the age-grades. After the first stage of education within the training process, every male child had to undergo a process of initiation before he was accepted into full manhood while the girls were trained in the arts of womanhood, in cooking and housekeeping. To say it all, under the traditional system of education the young had to go through a process designed to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to cope successfully with their environment and live effectively and efficiently in their religion and culture.

Effect of Modernity on Igbo Religious Practices

Religious practices are made up of worship, prayer, sacrifice and magic. In Igbo society, religious practice started with traditional religion before Christianity came with multiple denominations and different patterns of practices. The Igbo patriarchs formulated the system of worship and practices. Worship of deities in Igbo traditional religion begins with the offer of kola nut. With kola nut prayer is offered, including requests for protection and many more. After prayer with kola nut, which must be done by the eldest man, sacrifices can now follow; sacrifice of wine (libation), food, animals and other rituals like incantation, curse to enemy or blessing of upspring. In Igbo traditional religion, kola nut is very important, for, apart from being used to speak to the deities, kola nut is used for 'communion' or eating together to the glory of God. Kola nut is also used for making 'covenant'. Nothing is done in traditional religious practice without kola nut. Christianity first found its way into Igbo land by the mid of nineteenth Century. From that time, religious practices in Igbo society began to change. The missionaries that spread the gospel came with their religious practices and introduced them to the Igbo converts. These practices came along with western civilization, colonialism and imperialism. They mixed religious practices with education, dressing, language, politics and many more, revealed and concealed.

Before Christianity came to Africa and in Igbo society, it had split into different denominations with different methods and patterns of practicing: the Catholic Christian, the Anglican, the Lutheran, the Baptist and so many others, including African Independent Churches (AIC) and recently the Pentecostals. However, all their religious practices when analyzed still come under worship, prayer, sacrifice and ritual just like African Traditional Religion or Igbo traditional religion. Modernity crept into the world through science and technology and soon influenced communication. Using science and technology communication as powerful agents, modernity overthrew all other aspects of the world. The effect of modernity on religion as a whole is so devastating that modernity through its instrument like the internet, reduced man to paleolithic age indirectly. Overstreet (1949) (cited in Nwaike, 2000) commenting of the effect of modernity on human development observed:

The newspapers have a vested interest in catastrophe, since that is what makes money for them. The radios have a vested interest; in mediocrity since the appeal is to the largest group of the average. This is also true of the television. The motion picture industry has a vested interest in escapism the appeal is to emotion, (therefore), to too great and they tend to dull man's critical faculties, to reinforce and stimulate his non-rational interest and drives ant to keep him Immature (p. 15).

Effect of Modernity on Igbo Language and identity

Language as social integrationist put it is a symbolic interactionism and to them, society is formed through interaction between individual (self) and society. Through interactionism, structures and institutions such as family, school, organization, and market are built. When Missionaries and the colonialists came to Igbo society, the only Language available to the society was Igbo language which the foreigners did not understand. Their only symbolic means of communication were their English language and dressing. Igbo people were not dressing well like the foreigners. So, for there to be communicative activities, they coerced Igbo society to learn their language as superior language and also to dress the way they dress. They perfected this by opening school and teaching their culture. As Obiefema (2018) put it:

Education (formal and informal) and the church are strong agents of socialization. In spite of positive contributions of western education and Christianity to the psychophysical development of Africa, they make Africans imbibe more of Western values to the relegation of African values, traditions and cultural institutions. The instrument of this onslaught is the

white man's language thought to have all of white man's magic. For instance, the English Language is taught in most of West Africans as the recognized Language of official communication. It is rated so high that it is taken as Nigeria's lingua franca (p.243).

When, therefore, Igbo society was merged with people of other ethnic groups, having different local languages, different history, and culture, by way of amalgamation, Igbo people lost in the quest for better and western life. Thus, mixture of Igbo people with white people and people of other culture left Igbo society with unrecoverable lost golden culture. Communitarianism, somersaulted into individualism, while Igbo language lost to English language and culture become one quarter Igbo three quarters European to this day. Even in "Umunna meeting, English language dominates.

Challenges of Modernity on Religion and Human Development in Igloo Society

Today as in the past, modernity appears to be the force behind progress and development in every sphere of life. This has called to question the relevance of the religion(s). However, while it is indisputable that modernity makes life easy, what is not easily appreciated is that the apparent ease brought by modernity is often accompanied by so much undesired but inevitable consequences which are often beyond the competence of modernity itself, so devastating are these consequences that there is a debate about whether or not modernity improves the life of man or worsen it. It is not researcher's intention to enter into the debate, rather to show that Igbo society like every other society impacted by modernity, call it mankind, if you like, would have been worse off" with modernity without the moderating influence of the religion (s). This research is poised to show the positive and negative impacts of modernity on human development as well as religion.

1. Crime, there is today what many be tagged scientific crime or phone robbery. Crime is on the high side with modernity.
2. Indecent dressing is common. Among the youths
3. Quest for quick money, which often result to killing, kidnapping, banditry, prostitution, which spreads deadly disease.
4. Decline in traditional Igbo ethics, communitarianism and adoption of individualism.
5. Loss of Igbo identity. Modernity swallowed up Igbo identity. Today, some Igbo people are Igbo in nature but not in outlook and language. They are English in every other thing apart from nature. This is the worst thing modernity has done to Igbo society.
6. Capitalism. Selfish interest instead of community interest dominated in Igbo society till today.
7. Corruption in its highest echelon, with ICT, children, youths by watching pornography, which corrupt them beyond recovery.

Guinness (1993) explains that modernity can be understood as the character and systems of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization, especially capitalism, industrialized technology, and telecommunications. The impact of modernity in the Igbo society means that the religious faith has lost much of its integrity and effectiveness in shaping the lives of Igloo people. Modernity put the moral and cultural sphere of Igbo people in trouble. Igbo people are no longer shaped by beliefs, ideals, and traditions as they were. Compared with the past, faith today influences culture less. Compared with the past, foreign culture today influences both faith and local culture more. The impact of modernity has contributed so much to the undoing of Igbo traditional religious belief, ideology, ethics, unison, and identity.

Modernity Infest Igbo Society with:

I. Plurality of Religion

It will surprise the Igbo person to notice that Igbo society which was once of monotonous religion is filled all sorts of religion: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Gordon religion and the original traditional Igbo religion plus many more because modernity permits and promotes plurality of religion. Igbo society remained a monotheistic religions society before modernity through Christianity interrupted it. By 1857, what is judged the first church station in Igbo society, was opened at Onitsha oversees by Rev. Taylor an Ibo ex-slave who came down with Crowder. From this time forward, missionaries trooped into Igbo land on missionary work. From the work of the missionaries, Igbo people were converted to Christianity and plurality of religion started and quickly gained ground till today. Obiefuna (2018) in what he calls in praise of plurality opined that plurality (of religion) is not bad in itself. Human beings can make it evil. The fact of many religions in Nigeria should be a thing of beauty and not instrument of rancor. Obiefuna continued that It destroys monotony and helps in bringing out the rich heritage of the country. He added that religion influences people in their political, economic, legal, and educational and health decisions. Another conceptual advantage of plurality of religion is that it helps in checks and balances of human behavior. When one religion is not doing it well, criticisms from others may help them to adjust and be on the right track.

On the other hand, plurality of religion, divides a society no matter how well it is managed. Religion is so powerful that it can never be joked with. Politically, plurality of religion does influence voting in an election and sharing of political responsibilities. Marginalization is another problem plurality of religion could cause. The people in power may neglect people of other religion for more of security reasons. Nepotism is yet another problem associated with religious plurality. In appointments, people of the same religion may use religion to have their way to the neglect of others. Nigeria is an example of where such is done

2 Secularization

Secularization is one of the damaging trends brought into the world by modernity. In the traditional world or life, religion explains pattern of life, morality, culture and society. A sage said that without religion human being would be like an animal even a wild animal. Today sociologists have come out to dispute the saying; the result among others is Secularization. Guinness (1993) gave as concept that the three damaging trends are secularization, privatization and pluralization. He describes secularization as a process and explains that process is largely invisible and touches many. He further explained that secularization is much more subtle and often deceives Christians (religious adherents) before they are aware of it, compare with secularism, which he describes as a philosophy, may be less damaging. A lot of scholars have argued on Secularization but the general point is that it means abandonment of religion for worldly or material things. Less regard for religion, which means less regard for God and more trust on humanity? Next to secularization is privatization.

3 Privatization

The danger of privatization in Igbo society is that not only that economy has been affected with people engaging in obnoxious practices to make money but religion the custodian of Faith, love, tolerance of morality et cetera, is also bastardized in the name of private churches. Asiegbu (2013) regretted that the modern Christianity is in terrible mess. Asiegbu said that those who supposed to weep are jubilating while those who supposed to Jubilate are weeping. Asiegbu lamented that those he calls pretenders, quacks, fakes, diviners and antichrists, are being celebrated while the few who still profess the message of eternal life are being mocked and castigated. Because people are in one trouble or the other and seeking solution from anywhere possible, clever individuals see it as opportunity for exploitations. And the best and cheap way to do that is through owning a private

church, where lies can be believed to be truth without investigation. So every available private building and space are turn prophetic, church where solution to problems are said to be obtained.

The idea of privatization gave rise to individuals owning properties including religious centers, such as church. The clear effect is loss in collective solidarity and divided faith. Other adverse effect includes criticism of opponent's faith; Guinness (1993) comments that through privatization, modernity produces a cleavage between the private and public where religion is free to flourish. Today in many countries in the world there are private churches with different types of ideology in worship, baptism et cetera. Some even engage in syncretism. In traditional religion before Modernity, such never happened. It is common to use the statement African Initiated Christianity (AIC) to refer to private churches.

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