

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION ON THE RISE OF TRADITIONAL RITUAL PRACTICES AMONG THE YOUTHS IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY.

Chidimma Nkemdilim Ezeador Ph.D.¹

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ORCID: 0009-0002-5320-0754; cn.ezeador@unizik.edu.ng

And

Precious Chinenye Okolisah Ph.D.²

Federal University, Wukari, Taraba State.

preciousokolisah@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this research is to critically investigate the reasons or motives behind the sudden revival of some ritual practices like Ezenwanyi, Oke-ite, dibia, ichu aja, igba afa etc, among the youths in contemporary Igbo society today. This paper observes that for almost a decade in Igbo society, there is this desire, hunger and passion basically among the youths to jettison some modern ways of living and return back to the old ways of doing things. The reason being that globalization and civilization have taken away some Igbo traditions, making Igbo people to see their culture as inferior and old. This paper after critical investigation finds out that the motives behind this sudden passion for change is beyond globalization, as the focus is basically on reviving traditional ritual practices neglecting other areas. This paper attributes the reasons behind this sudden rise to collapse of faith, economic empowerment, protection and money ritual. Employing the method of critical analysis, this paper argues that if urgent attention is not taken to put a stop to these activities, the consequences and the effects will be terrible, as it will result to misfortune and calamity in the society. This is because, these youths engaging into these cults lack proper orientation about these ritual practices and these practices are totally against odinala. The paper therefore argues that the youths in Igbo society need to be educated seriously on the dangers and negative effects of these ritual practices they are delving into. The paper concludes that all hands must be on deck to cultivate good values and create a well playing field for the youths in Igbo society.

Keywords: Neo-paganism, Odinala, Ritual, Igbo Society, Oke-ite, Ezenwanyi

Introduction

The Igbo people have inhabited the area of southeast Nigeria known as Igbo land since ancient times. They comprise 15percent of the total population of Nigeria. Before the coming of missionaries in Nigeria to convert Igbo to Christianity, Igbo people have traditional Igbo religion called *Odinani / Odinala*. *Odinala* in central Igbo dialect is the compound of the word *odi* (located) + *n* (na, within) + *ala* (the one god) consisting of *anu* (enu) above (the heavens) and *Ala*, below (the earth). Other dialectical variants include *Odinani*, *Odinana*, *Omenala*, *Omenana*, and *Omenani*. *Odinala* is a pantheistic and polytheistic faith, having a strong central spiritual force at its head from which all things are believed to spring. Igbo religion distinguishes between three types of supernatural beings: God, the spirits, and the ancestors.

God 'Chukwu'

The supreme deity in traditional Igbo religious belief is called *Chukwu*, *Chineke*, *Obasi di n'elu Osebuluwa*. Igbo people believed in *Chukwu* which is the same entity as God in Christianity. *Chukwu* is believed to rule over everything on Earth and in the spirit world. He created the world and sustains it from above. That is why Igbo parents respect and honour *Chukwu* by naming their children in praise of His power: *Chukwuka/ Chukwuebuka* (God is great), *Chukwuemeka* (God is so kind), *Chukwudimma* (God is good), *Chukwumaobim* (God knows my heart), *Chukwubuike* (God is my strength), *Chukwuma* (God knows) etc. *Chukwu* is seen as the most powerful and the Supreme Being, He who holds the knife and the yam and who provides for His people. *Chukwu* does not intervene in the minor details of human existence, however; such matters He leaves to the spirits and ancestors, who are often described as His messengers. (Encyclopedia.com)

The Spirits (Alusi)

The spirits (*Alusi*, *Arushi* or *Anusi*) in different dialects are powerful beings who inhabit three dimensions of space that is Sky, earth, and ancestral world. There are several categories of spirits. Powerful sky deities manifest through thunder and lightning (*Amadioha*) Igbo literal meaning "free will of the people". *Amadioha* is known as a god of justice. He speaks through thunder, and he strikes with lightning. Persons judged guilty by *Amadioha* are either killed by lightning (which leaves a black mark on the forehead) or attacked by a swarm of bees (nairaland.com). Sun (*Anyanwu*) the Igbo deity that is believed to dwell in the sun. *Anyanwu* was one of the principal spirits for the Igbo, often associated with *agbara*, the holyspirit as they both dwelled in the sun. The guardian spirit of the earth is *Ani/Ala*, the earth mother. *Amadioha* is often shown as a husband to *Ani*. The pair are said to be the first *Alusi* to have been created by *chukwu*. While *Ani* is considered to be the lawmaker of Igbo society (which is known as *Odinani*), *Amadioha* is the enforcer and protector of the law There is also a spirit associated with each day of the Igbo four-day week: *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor*, and *Nkwo*. Patron spirits serve as guardians of hunters, farmers, fishermen, medicine men, and other professional guilds; the matron spirit is called *Nne mmiri* or *mami Wata*. Marine spirits inhabit rivers and streams. (encyclopedia.com)

Ancestral Spirits

These are the living dead who inhabit the spirit world but are involved in the lives of progenies in the human world. During festivals, they visit the human world as guests in form of masquerades. Before drinking palm wine, the Igbo pour out a few drops in honor of the ancestors. The ancestors are believed to help the living reap a good harvest, have many children, and protect the family from misfortunes. Evil spirits live in both human and spirit worlds. Only those who lived honest lives, did not die from inexplicable diseases, and had full burial rites can be ancestors or reincarnate. The spirits of evil people wonder as *akalogolu* who appear on lonely farm roads to frighten people. Among the most dreaded evil spirits are *ogbanje*- spirits who manifest as children, covenanted to return to the marine world after a brief sojourn among human families (encyclopedia.com)

How Igbo People Became Christians

Igbo people were converted by the white missionaries because of social benefits and economic well being. Okeke (2023: no page) states that, “having striven unsuccessfully for 33 years between 1857&1890- contrary to their earlier boasting- to convert the Igbo in mass to Christianity, the missionaries (CMS, RCM, Methodist, Presbyterian) grew frustrated and became desperate to do everything possible, good or bad, to advance their ambition and scheme. To catalyze this desperation to convert the Igbo in mass was the bitter rivalry between the CMS and RCM at Onicha and also in their head offices at London and Rome (Medium.com). According to Okeke, to position themselves for the desperate and hook-and-crook agenda ahead of the coming 20th century, the Romanists (Catholics) replaced the Frenchman, Fr Joseph Lutz with an Irishman, Ignatius Shanahan as the British traders and colonists had bitterly requested in resistance of having Frenchmen leading in their territories. On the part of the CMS, Bishop Ajayi Crowther was hounded by the white racist priests under him who began to challenge him openly even as their London head office connived in diminishing his Episcopal powers (Medium.com)

Although, the missionaries felt frustrated in their penetration of the Igbo land beyond Onicha, Obosi, and Ogidi, they realized that they had to apply some violent force to subdue and intimidate the Igbo into accepting Christianity and abandoning their indigenous religion. Thus,

Strike fear into them with violence, we move in to give them succor based on the condition of conversion. In that circumstance, missionaries moved with the greatest masterstroke of only protecting those who admit to be baptized and remain consistent in attending church activities. Defenseless, most Igbo people rushed to the church for protection and believed that the presence of the missionaries will protect their communities from being invaded or shelled (Medium.com).

However, the middle-aged and old men who were desperate to evade unending labour were forced to bring their *Ofo, Ikenga, Okposi* for destruction at the churches or risk being rejected as converts, thus putting the final nail on the coffins of their indigenous religion.

How Igbo Traditional Religion was Challenged and Chattered by Contact with Christianity

The Igbo traditional religion remained intact until the coming of the missionaries. In the words of Nwuba (2021:39) the foreigners who came from Europe were the explorers, the merchants, the administrators, the imperialists, and the missionaries. They opened the country to western development and civilization by initiating new religions. For her, these foreign forces inflicted derision on the traditional religion, categorizing them as heathenism, paganism, uncivilized, and of the evil one. In other words these foreigners acted as a team to repress the traditional religion and to enforce Christianity.

However, the Igbo society were largely affected and attracted to Christianity due to the European strategies of establishing schools and hospitals which gave room for free education and free medical care. Nwuba (2021:40) has it that the western teachings in schools and in Christianity made Igbo children to see the cultural practices of their parents as demonic. The new religion initiated inflicted derision on the Igbo traditional religion, categorizing them as uncivilized and evil. This made the Igbo children basically to see these cultural practices of their forefathers and fathers as demonic. Igbo traditional belief, social control methods like divination and consultation of oracles and the cult of ancestors were chattered and by Christianity. Some beliefs that were chartered by Christianity are twin killing, Human sacrifice, Burials, Etiquette and swearing an oath. However, Christianity and western colonization of the Igbo were portrayed as the inductive forceful change in Igbo land.

The Sudden Rise and Revival of Some Igbo Traditional Practices in Igbo land and Reasons behind the Practice

Pot of progress (*Oke-ite*)

Pot of progress known as *Oke-ite* or *Nne-ite* in Igbo language is a charm prepared with different animals like elephants, dogs, monkeys and sometimes human parts may be involved. The preparation of *Oke-ite* or *Nne-ite* involves the use of different types of herbs, roots, combination of different drinks and other ritual materials gathered in a mud pot. It is prepared by witch doctors with aims of accelerating accomplishments in life. To the Igbo youths, *Oke-ite* makes accomplishments sudden and quicker. According to Nnatuanya (2022:49), in Igbo communities, it is called different names depending on locality. For the people of Ayamelum, *Oke-ite* is called “*Oruru*” (lurk charm), others know it as “*awe*”, and among the Igbo youths, sometimes they called it “Yahoo plus” (the combination of charm with 419 tricks). Nnatuanya citing Chukindi avers that “yahoo plus” in the Nigerian parlance is a popular name given to internet scammers, most of whom operated with laptops. But when people became alert about the internet scams, young boys began to engage native doctors to prepare charms for them in order to hypnotize and defraud their victims. So, the involvement of the native doctors to the practice makes their activities ‘yahoo plus’ (2022:49). This practice is now the trend in Igbo society as some Igbo youths between the ages of 18 – 30 and above now engage into it because the practice gives them quick money. The huge money made in such way makes them to see trading and other jobs as suffering and waste of time and stress. This practice of *Oke-ite* is totally against *odinala* Igbo. The act is evil and uncultured, as these youths who are engaging into it use innocent human beings for these sacrifices.

Queen Mother “*Ezenwayi*” in Igbo Society and Reasons behind the Trend.

According to Eze et al (2023:5), *Ezenwanyi* cult cannot be traced without the mention of the *Inyama* cult. For them, *Inyama* is linked to a deity that chose a woman and possessed her. They further argue that one does not become *Inyama* by choice or lineage. The deity has the prerogative to choose any person of her choice to be the *Inyama*. Eze et al (2023) maintains that *Ezenwanyi* is a prototype of *Inyama*. Stressing that some who could not be possessed to be

Inyama took to *Ezenwanyi* probably to fulfill their life ambition. Thus this proliferation of *Inyama* cult in the name *Ezenwanyi* cult is a modern trend and there were no particular cultural activities that could be linked to its origin. Although, Christianity has chattered traditional religion and ritual practices, still many believe that the solutions to their spiritual matters can only be handled through traditional means. The *Ezenwanyi*, since she has a relationship and connection with the spiritual world is in a good position to give solutions to people's problems. However, it is very important to note that this *Ezenwanyi* practice is a modern invention of the twenty-first century in Igbo society. It became rampant again due to the campaign for cultural revival in Igbo society. This clamour for cultural revival emanated when some people began to lose faith in government and Christianity. However, there is nothing wrong with Igbo traditional religion. Religion is all about belief. If what someone believes is working out for him/her let the person go for it. After all, the Austrian born philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend in his book titled *Against Method* calls proliferation of ideas. Thus he asserts:

“...people all over the world have developed ways of surviving in partly dangerous, partly agreeable surroundings. The stories they told and the activities they engaged in enriched their lives, protected them and gave them meaning. The progress of knowledge and civilization –as the process of pushing Western ways and values into all corners of the globe is being called – destroyed these wonderful products of human ingenuity and compassion without a single glance in their direction. ‘Progress of knowledge’ in many places meant killing of minds. Today old traditions are being revived and people try to adapt their lives to the ideas of their ancestors.” (pp, 3-4)

From Feyerabend's statements, it is quite good to refine and revive traditions. Reviving these traditions will make them to suit the taste of current reality. However, on the contrary, way the *Ezenwanyi* cult is been practice in Igbo society today calls for urgent intervention. The characters of the women who engage in this cult need to be questioned. The motives of most women who belong to the cult are entirely different. Some women belong to the cult because it is a recent trend and believe they can use it for an opportunity to achieve their means, torment people and make wealth. The way the cult is been practice today is totally against *Odinala* Igbo. Igbo tradition does not support or promote evil '*Alu*'. What the recent *Ezenwanyi* cult practice in Igbo society present is demonic, devilish and evil. This is not what our ancestors laid down for us. Revival of traditions has to do with upgrading the tradition to ensure people don't see them as inferior and not using them to hurt others.

Factors That Engender These Ritual Practices in Igbo land

The sudden quest to go back to the traditional ways of doing things and worship as a matter of fact is not the main reason why the Igbo youths venture into these ritual practices. There are so many reasons and factors behind this shift. Some of these factors are;

Lack of Family Values and Poor Parenting

Family values are disappearing due to the fact that most parents no longer have time to sit their children down and give them proper teaching on things that are abomination and taboo in the society. Most parents also add to why youths today are moving into money rituals. They frustrate these youths more by comparing them with their age mates that have made money, instead of encouraging and supporting them to be useful. These children now live their lives the way that pleases them because they lack parental care and good training. Most of these Igbo youths do not have orientation about these ritual practices that they are engaging into. They know nothing about them. Their focus is on the wealth, forgetting that quick money kills. It is the duty and responsibility of their parents who already knew the consequences of these rituals to caution and stop them in engaging in these rituals on time. Most parents do not know that their children are into these practices because they failed to monitor them to know the type of friends they keep and where they go.

Quick Money Syndrome and High Nature of Materialism (*Ego -mbute*)

Igbo people have so much respect for wealthy people. The way rich people are been celebrated in Igbo land without proper questioning serves as an encouragement for the youths to venture into quick money making. They believe that money solves everything. This is observed in most of the Igbo traditional songs and proverbs like *Aku na esi obi ike* (wealth makes ones heart to be strong), *onye ji ego bu uzo* (one who has money comes first) and *ego bu guy* (money makes one special). So, the youths of today grew with that mentality that money is everything without questioning well to know how their fathers made their own wealth. All they know is that they must make it by all means. This notion has led them into so many demonic and evil activities today. No wonder, Nnatuanya (2022:51) stresses that most often; desperation and pressure from family and friends are silent factors that lure many youths into getting rich at all cost.

The Collapse of Faith/ Priestcraft

There are so many churches in Igbo land today with their various teachings. Some of these churches have faulty foundations. They give false prophecies, saying what God did not say and forcing their believers to accept the false and fake prophecies. When those false prophecies failed to manifest, their followers will lose faith in God. This will make them to divert to ritual practices since God has failed them. Ignorantly, in a bid to find solutions to their problems, they may fall again into the hands of people who will deceive them again not knowing the negative implications of performing those rituals due to the frustration they found themselves. Citing the book of 2Nephi 26:29, Johnson (2008) gave a very succinct and helpful definition of priest craft. For him, priest crafts are men that preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of the Zion. He explains further that there are various manifestations of priest craft, including setting up churches or even becoming anti-Christ. There are a lot of people advertising *Oki-ite, igba-*

afa and *Ezenwanyi* on social media. A lot of youths have been initiated and deceived through this means. Because of high rate of poverty in our society, these groups have devised some strategies of deceiving the youths on social media.

Bad governance and corrupt traditional Rulers

The inability of the government to rise up and adhere on their responsibilities as leaders has contributed majorly to these evil activities going on in almost all the societies in Nigeria. When leaders fail to invest and create a well playing field for their citizens, insecurity and social unrest will become the order of the day. Most reason why the youths venture into these illicit practices is due to high level of unemployment in the country. There is this popular adage that says, an idle mind is a devil's workshop. The youths cannot progress without empowerment and incentives by the government. It is only in Nigeria that rich becomes richer and poor becomes poorer due to the system of government allows that. To change this narrative, the youths have navigated another alternative way due to negligence by the government to provide opportunities for them.

On the side of the Igbo traditional rulers, the present day traditional rulers have failed woefully in carrying out their duties and obligation in their respective communities. Some traditional rulers used giving of chieftaincy titles like *nze na ozo*, *ichie*, *odu*, *idi*, etc for making money. These rites and titles are now given based on ones level of wealth which is contrary to the qualifications for title giving in Igbo land. The youths in Igbo land rush to take these titles because the rulers giving these titles are after their money and not their good characters and contributions toward the growth of Igbo society. These youths receive these irrelevant names like *Akukaria* (excess money or so much money), *Akunatakasi* (wealth scratches), *Odogwu* (wealthy), *ite-ego* (pot of money) etc. These names depict that their sources of income are evil.

Negative Effects of *Oke-ite*, *Ezenwanyi* and other Ritual Practices in Igbo Society

Oke-ite ritual in Igbo land is not part of our tradition. The practice is evil, and our youths must be aware of that. Majority of these youths engage into it because they are desperate to make wealth because of the poverty in Nigeria. On the other hand, the way *Ezenwayi* cult is being practice in Igbo society today is totally against the Igbo culture and tradition. Most of the women who call themselves *Ezenwanyi* are not worthy to be called *Ezenwayi*. The cult has been turned to club where these evil women belong to bewitch and tie men who fell in their traps. The cult has also been used to promote different kinds of evil in Igbo society. It is not an overstatement to say that these practices contribute to insecurity, sufferings and incessant death in Igbo land today. The effects of these ritual practices are both personal and societal in nature. It is personal when the repercussions come to the person who carried out the activity and also to his immediate family. When the person involved fails to sacrifice the demands required, the *Oki-ite* will revenge for failing to fulfill the demands required. The effects could be madness, sickness or untimely death, which will equally affect the immediate family as well. On the other hand, it is societal when the repercussions affect the entire society. The insecurity, kidnappings and killings facing the entire Igbo society today are the repercussions.

Alusi in Igbo traditional religion is totally against *Alu* (evil). *Oke-ite* and these modern forms of *Ezenwanyi* and *iju-aja* (sacrifice) are totally against *Odinala Igbo*. *Odinala* or *omenala* Igbo is what Igbo people are known for. Igbo youths have migrated from *oke-ite* to selling of human parts, human sacrifice, unnecessary killings, and some other practices that are illegal in Igbo land. Most towns and communities in Igbo land have been under insecurity which as it stands has chased many people out of their communities.

Solutions /Ways to curb the rise in ritual practices in Igbo Society

As it stands, the rate youths in Igbo society are delving into occultism for wealth and protection is perturbing. If solutions to end this evil are not proffered, this will result to serious danger in Igbo society. Life will become short, nasty and brutish as it was in Hobbesian state of nature. So, here are some solutions proffered to curb these ugly practices;

Good Governance

In a country where there is good governance, there is always stability. This is because the leader of such country will always provide incentives and job opportunities for the citizens. The citizens will never think of doing anything harmful to destabilize the country. In Nigeria, the masses, particularly the youths have been denied and deprived a lot of opportunities and privileges as a result of bad government. An idle mind is a devil's workshop. Things began to fall apart when the Nigerian leaders began to focus on their own interest, neglecting the masses. Things can only get better if our leaders will wake up and look for ways to address the challenges confronting the nation.

Youth Empowerment

The youths are the future leaders. When the government fails to investment on them, they will turn out to become nuisance and irresponsible to the society. Many university graduates in Nigeria are unemployed. The only way to lift them out of poverty is by creating job opportunities and also by empowering those with innovative ideas. These solutions will be effective if the leaders can keep aside their egoistic interest and focus on how to empower the youths.

Good parenting/ Proper Orientation

It is quite unfortunate that people who called themselves parents no longer have quality time to spend with their children. Parents should go back and bring out the family values they have lost. It is better not to bring out a child in this world than to bring out children that you will not care for. Parents should counsel and monitor their children on the way they watch things in the social media because this is where they learn some certain behaviours that are strange. There should be limit to things; their access to social media must be limited.

Promoting Good Values

Igbo people must learn to promote good values and desist from celebrating youths who got their wealth in wrong ways. In Igbo culture, "*nwa bu nwa ora*". A child belongs to the society,

and the society must join hands together to ensure that the child becomes useful to that society. This can only be achieved when the society helps in fighting bad values. It behooves on the traditional rulers to be very vigilant and careful when giving chieftaincy titles. Chieftaincy titles must be given to people who deserve it. People who are truly working hard to ensure that there is peace, development, justice and harmony in the society are the right people who deserved to be honored. People with integrity are the people that deserved to be honored and not people who got their wealth in evil ways.

Conclusion

The sudden revival of *Oke-ite* and *Ezenwanyi* ritual practices and the rate youths in Igbo land are delving into these cults / practices call for urgent attention. The way the rituals are been practiced today is totally against *Odinala* Igbo. If actually the Igbo society wants to return back to their tradition as they claimed to do before engaging into these ritual practices, they should be ready to revive all the traditions and culture. The shift or focus on rituals alone connotes that these are areas where their attention lie and not that they are tired of western culture. These sudden attitudes are noticeable among the youths and they did not just develop it without cause/s. The inability of Nigerian leaders to provide a well playing field for their citizens, poverty, parents' failure to guide their children and collapse of faith all contributed to these ugly practices.

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