



Socio-Economic Dynamics and Neo-Traditionalism in Igboland: Exploring Factors, Shaping Cultural Revival

Ifeanyi A. Chukwudebelu^{1*}, Ven. Dr. Geoffrey Chidebem Molokwu²

^{1*}*Department of Religion and Human Relations, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Nigeria.*

²*Institute of Theology, Paul University Awka, Nigeria.*

Email: ²Geoffrey.molokwu@pauluniversity.edu.ng

Corresponding Email: ^{1}chukwudebeluifeanyia88@gmail.com*

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Abstract: *This study explores the resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igbo society, analyzing its link to socio-economic factors. Against a backdrop of economic challenges and cultural shifts, traditional beliefs resurface as responses to adversity and quests for meaning. Through a multidisciplinary approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the research investigates how poverty, social injustice, unemployment, illiteracy, and parental influence shape cultural revival in Igboland. Findings reveal the intricate interplay between socio-economic dynamics and cultural identity, highlighting the resilience of Igbo communities. The study underscores the importance of addressing socio-economic challenges to foster sustainable development and social cohesion. Ultimately, it emphasizes the significance of preserving cultural traditions for identity and collective well-being amidst contemporary complexities in Igbo society.*

Keywords: *Neo-Traditionalism, Socio-Economic Factors, Igbo Society, Cultural Revival, Resilience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Igbo society, the resurgence of neo-traditionalism stands as a poignant reflection of the intricate interplay between socio-economic dynamics and cultural identity. Against a backdrop of economic challenges, social injustices, and cultural shifts, the revival of traditional beliefs and practices emerges as both a response to adversity and a quest for meaning, solidarity, and empowerment. This study seeks to delve into the multifaceted relationship between socio-economic factors and the emergence of neo-traditionalist movements in Igboland, Nigeria, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms driving cultural revival in the face of contemporary challenges.



The landscape of Igbo society has witnessed profound transformations marked by economic struggles, social inequalities, and cultural evolution. In recent years, the resurgence of neo-traditionalism has emerged as a notable phenomenon, captivating the attention of scholars, policymakers, and community leaders alike. Against the backdrop of economic hardships, social injustices, and cultural disintegration, the revival of traditional beliefs and practices among the Igbo populace serves as a poignant testament to the enduring resilience and adaptive capacities of the community.

Yet, amidst the growing interest in understanding the drivers and implications of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, there remains a notable gap in scholarship regarding the intricate nexus between socio-economic factors and cultural revival. While existing research offers valuable insights into the cultural, religious, and historical dimensions of neo-traditionalist movements, there exists a paucity of comprehensive studies that systematically explore the role of socio-economic dynamics in shaping these phenomena.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED WORK

Abdullah (2020). In the study: 'Neo-Traditionalism' vs 'Traditionalism': brought out an Islamic perspective on neo-traditionalism. According to the work:

When I say that I am a “neo-traditionalist”, what I mean by it is that I incline towards and participate in the movement to return to the classical adherence to the schools of Islamic law (4 Sunni Schools), the study and contextualization of mainstream Sunni doctrine (viz. Ash’ari, Maturidi), and the study and practice of traditional text-based Islamic spirituality (historically referred to as Sufism). This being so is not to be understood that I am in favor of any sort of dogmatic adherence to any of the three forms of Islamic thought (fiqh, ‘aqida, and tasawwuf). Rather, one is to understand that any school of law, creed, or spiritual path and/or order is merely a means, not an end in itself. Each has a long and complicated history with respect to their formation, promulgation, and standardization. When I speak of being a neo-traditionalist, I also mean the manner that one goes about acquiring Islamic knowledge which is namely through direct contact with living human receptacles of knowledge (at least at the start of one’s scholastic career. (P.2)

The work is a scholarly perspective of the concept of neo-traditionalism from the stand point of Islamic laws and traditional spirituality in historical context but lack a wider approach and perspective hence limited in Islamic context. The research will avoid such an error in this research work.

Also, Azami, (2019). In his work: *Abdullāh Bin Bayyah and the Arab Revolutions: Counter-Revolutionary Neo-Traditionalism’s Ideological Struggle against Islamism*, also tried to put in perspective the real meaning of neo-traditionalism from Islamic view point when he averred: “Broadly speaking, I define Neo-traditionalism as a denomination of Sunnism that emphasizes respect for and adherence to one of the four schools of law, the Ash‘arī or Māturīdī schools of theology, and valorizes Sufism”

The work is a courageous effort to demonstrate the authentic viewpoint of neo-traditionalism within the Islamic perspective. However, it is disappointing that it fails to provide a comprehensive explanation of neo-traditionalism as promised. The author uses a few inadequate words that do not contribute significantly to what has already been stated in the



introductions or earlier statements. In reality, there is not much substance to ponder upon regarding the author's ideas on the true meaning of the term "neo-traditionalism" and its practical application. Also, Azami's labeling of certain pedagogical priorities as 'counter-revolutionary' is curious as he does not explain what makes these 'neo-traditional' priorities deserving of such a label. However, it is commendable that he has chosen a few scholars to represent the entire intellectual enterprise and make them the focus of his argument.

Further, Najjar. (2000). *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd*. The work, furthering the Islamic perspective of neo-traditionalism, argued that the term 'neo-traditional' was originally used to describe one's beliefs and values in technical areas such as *usul al-fiqh*, *tasawwuf*, and *aqeedah*. However, it is not particularly useful in determining one's political affiliations or agendas. Therefore, it is best to use the label 'neo-traditional' only when discussing one's approach to *tasawwuf*, *fiqh*, and *aqeedah*. When it comes to political or social controversies, the ethical goals of neo-traditionalists and their religious competitors are often quite similar, as both aim to establish a moral culture based on Islamic Revelation, albeit through different methods and interpretations.

The commendable aspect of this work is that it explains how a group of Muslim academic-activists, belonging to a new generation, are utilizing the term 'neo-traditionalism' to further their political motives and engage in polemics. However, the study would have adopted a comprehensive approach to explore the internal discussions and variations within *Tasawwuf*. The focus will be on the significance of mysticism, the role of *tariqah*, and the relevance of *Sharia* in these debates. The researcher will adopt a more comprehensive approach to this research.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address this gap in the literature, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative methodologies, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, economics, and cultural studies. Through a combination of archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and statistical analysis, we aim to elucidate the complex interplay between socio-economic factors and the emergence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland.

Theoretical Structure

Dependency theory emerged in the mid-20th century as a critique of modernization theory and its assumption that all societies progress through similar stages of development. This theory posits that economic and social development in certain regions (typically the developed countries) leads to the underdevelopment of other regions (typically the developing countries). Dependency theorists argue that the global economic system is structured in a way that benefits the core (developed countries) at the expense of the periphery (developing countries), maintaining a state of dependency that hinders genuine development in the latter.

Key Concepts in Dependency Theory Include:

- **Core and Periphery:** The division of the world into developed (core) and developing (periphery) regions, where the former dominates and exploits the latter.



- **Historical Exploitation:** The historical processes, such as colonialism and imperialism, that have established and maintained this unequal relationship.
- **Economic Exploitation:** The mechanisms through which wealth is extracted from the periphery to the core, such as unequal trade relations, foreign direct investment, and debt.
- **Structural Constraints:** The limitations placed on peripheral countries that prevent them from achieving autonomous development due to their economic dependence on core countries.

Relevance of Dependency Theory to the Study

1. Historical Context of Igboland:

Colonial Legacy: Dependency theory provides a framework for understanding the historical impact of colonialism on Igboland. The colonial period disrupted traditional economic systems and imposed new economic structures that integrated the Igbo economy into the global capitalist system in a subordinate position (Rodney, 1972).

Postcolonial Dependency: After independence, many African countries, including Nigeria, continued to experience economic dependency on former colonial powers. This ongoing dependency perpetuates economic and social challenges in regions like Igboland, where local economies remain tied to global capitalist interests (Frank, 1967).

2. Economic Exploitation and Underdevelopment:

Trade Imbalances: Igboland, like many peripheral regions, faces trade imbalances where the value of its exports is significantly lower than the value of its imports. This creates a cycle of economic dependency and underdevelopment (Dos Santos, 1970).

Resource Extraction: The exploitation of natural resources in Igboland primarily benefits multinational corporations and foreign economies, leaving local communities with minimal economic gain and significant environmental degradation (Amin, 1976).

3. Cultural Revival and Neo-Traditionalism:

Resistance to Western Hegemony: Dependency theory can explain the rise of neo-traditionalism in Igboland as a form of resistance to the cultural and economic dominance of the West. By revitalizing traditional practices and values, the Igbo people assert their cultural identity and resist the homogenizing effects of global capitalism (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979).

Social Cohesion and Identity: Neo-traditionalism may also be seen as a response to the social disintegration caused by economic dependency. Reaffirming traditional cultural practices helps strengthen community bonds and provides a sense of identity and continuity in the face of external pressures (Hountondji, 1995).

4. Policy Implications:

Autonomous Development: Dependency theory advocates for policies that promote autonomous development, reducing reliance on external economic forces. In Igboland, this could involve supporting local industries, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and investing in education and infrastructure (Dos Santos, 1970).

Empowerment of Local Communities: Empowering local communities to manage their resources and make decisions about their economic and social development is crucial. This



includes promoting participatory governance and ensuring that development projects are community-driven (Amin, 1976).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Socio-Economic Factors and the Emergence of Neo-Traditionalism:

In examining neo-traditionalism in Igbo society, socio-economic factors refer to the social and economic conditions and influences that shape and impact individuals, communities, and societies. These factors are instrumental in determining people's quality of life, prospects for progress, and overall well-being. They provide a framework for comprehending and examining the interplay between social and economic dynamics within a specific context or society, offering insights into the opportunities and challenges individuals and communities face in relation to their social and economic circumstances.

Therefore, in this stage, our focus will be on identifying social and economic conditions that have played roles in the emergence or revival of neo-traditionalist movements in Igboland. By exploring the interaction between these factors, we aim to uncover patterns and systemic issues that affect individuals within Igbo communities. This analysis will provide valuable insights into addressing the socio-economic challenges associated with neo-traditionalism and facilitate the promotion of equitable and sustainable development in Igbo society.

2. Socio-Economic Factors Shaping Neo-Traditionalism in Igboland

The Socio-economic factors encompass a broad spectrum of elements that influence and interact with traditional beliefs, practices, and cultural revival within a society. These factors are pivotal in shaping the emergence or resurgence of neo-traditionalist movements, particularly in regions like Igboland in Nigeria. Below is an explanation of these socio-economic factors:

Poverty: In 2022, Nigeria experienced a significant increase in extreme poverty, with approximately 12 percent of the global population living in extreme poverty residing in the country (Wakili-Effin, 2022). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of the Nigerian Federal Government reported that around 130 million Nigerians, accounting for 63 percent of the country's population, were living in poverty (Wakili-Effin, 2022).

The Igbo community, like other regions in Nigeria, faces economic challenges that contribute to the prevalence of poverty. Limited access to quality education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment opportunities, along with historical and socio-economic factors, have led to disparities in wealth and income within the Igbo community (Nwakama, 2020; Ejimabo, 2013).

Due to economic hardships, individuals and communities may turn to their religious practices for assistance and guidance. It has become common for young people to visit shrines and seek economic relief and food from deities. The Haaba deity in Agulu town, Anambra State, is an example where sacrifices are offered, and the food from these sacrifices is shared among the followers of the deity, providing nourishment and enjoyment (Anonymous, personal communication).



This practice of offering sacrifices and sharing food is not limited to a few popular shrines but has become widespread across Igbo communities. The revival of these rituals and communal feasting is seen as a way to reconnect with cultural heritage and traditional religious practices, gaining prominence and influence (Anonymous, personal communication).

In Agulu town, there is an economic empowerment initiative centered around the Haaba deity, where young individuals receive low-interest loans to start their own businesses after seeking blessings from the associated religious leader. This initiative intertwines cultural and traditional religious practices with economic development, aiming to support the economic endeavors of the young people in the community (Anonymous, personal communication).

The Igbo people hold deep reverence for life and believe in the spiritual implications associated with poverty. Poverty is seen as a formidable adversary to human existence, and the belief in the sanctity of life drives them to endure and seek ways to overcome economic challenges. They turn to deities and shrines for protection, guidance, and prosperity (Madu, 2004; Idowu, 1973).

Agricultural prosperity is highly valued among the Igbo people, as it is seen as a measure of wealth and overall prosperity. Deities and shrines associated with agriculture, such as Ala and Ikenga, are invoked for their ability to bestow fertility upon the land and ensure abundant harvests (Ikenga-Metuh, 1991). Similarly, deities and shrines associated with commerce and well-being are revered for their powers to bring financial success and overall prosperity (Ifesieh, 1989; Kalu, 1992).

The Igbo community believes in the importance of ancestral blessings for prosperity and maintains ancestral shrines to honor and communicate with deceased family members. Ancestors are considered intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being, and their guidance and blessings are sought for various aspects of life (Kalu & Kalu, 1993).

During periods of economic hardship, the traditional belief systems of the Igbo people provide strength, unity, and identity. Engaging in traditional practices and embracing cultural traditions allows individuals to find hope, regain a sense of control, and foster social cohesion in the face of poverty and socio-economic challenges (Umeanolue & Anizoba, 2017).

Social Injustice: Social injustice refers to wrongful actions against individuals within society, where equals are treated unequally and unequal individuals are treated as if they are equal (Burgess, 2021). Social justice, on the other hand, advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all individuals in society (United Nations, 2006).

Research suggests that social injustice hinders growth, development, and the reduction of inequalities, and is influenced by factors such as economic inadequacy, imbalances in economic structures, and flaws in education and training systems (Bierhoff et al., 2023). In an ideal world, equal treatment and access to opportunities, resources, and rights would be ensured for everyone, regardless of their background or identity.

However, in Nigeria, there are various forms of social injustice prevalent since independence in 1960, including tribalism, nepotism, corruption, insecurity, discrimination, and election rigging, which have had adverse effects on social cohesion, economic progress, the rule of law, and social inequalities (Oko, 2020).



Among the Igbo people, justice holds a central position within their cultural beliefs and values, and they have a strong reverence for justice. Igbo justice is practiced in various domains, such as land disputes, inheritance matters, and interpersonal relationships, and it contributes to equity, communal development, and harmonious coexistence within their society (Oraegbunam, 2022).

When faced with perceived injustices, the Igbo often turn to their cultural traditions for redress. Traditional institutions, rituals, and deities, such as the Haaba deity and the Ogwugwu Akpu Okija shrine, are seen as sources of justice and protection, attracting individuals from diverse backgrounds seeking resolution and solace (Personal communication, June 1, 2023; Personal communication, Feb. 6, 2023).

These encounters with social injustices have fostered deep devotion, trust, and reliance on these deities, empowering individuals to assert their rights and address grievances within their communities. Injustice acts as a catalyst for the resurgence of neo-traditional movements in Igboland, allowing individuals and communities to restore equilibrium, confront grievances, and preserve their cultural heritage (Anonymous sources, 2023).

Hence, the Igbo people's response to perceived injustices through their cultural traditions highlights the importance of justice and fairness in their cultural values, providing a means for individuals and communities to address grievances and maintain their cultural identity in the face of social and economic disparities.

Unemployment: Unemployment is a pressing issue in Nigeria, especially among the youth, leading to frustration, disillusionment, and social challenges such as poverty and increased crime rates (Burgess, 2021). In Igboland, the lack of employment opportunities among the youth hampers economic growth and development, exacerbates social issues, and arises from factors like inadequate investment, limited access to education and skills training, and slow industrial development (Burgess, 2021). Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, the President-General of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo, recognizes youth unemployment as a major concern and vows to prioritize education, security, and business development to tackle this issue (Opejobi, 2023).

The presence of unemployment in Igboland can lead to a resurgence of neo-traditionalism and cultural revival (Burgess, 2021). Young individuals facing unemployment may turn to traditional and spiritual practices, such as visiting shrines, seeking guidance, support, and solace (Burgess, 2021). Traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals are revived as a response to unemployment, influenced by cultural beliefs in the efficacy of traditional practices and deities associated with shrines (Burgess, 2021). These cultural and religious rituals may be seen as a way to increase chances of finding employment or as a form of resistance against perceived social injustices (Burgess, 2021). Shrines also provide a sense of belonging and community, emotional support, and a space for psychological release (Burgess, 2021).

Therefore, unemployment in Igboland is intertwined with the resurgence of traditional values and practices, reflecting the impact of unemployment on cultural revival and the search for meaning, support, and solutions in challenging times (Burgess, 2021).

Illiteracy: Illiteracy refers to the inability to read and write, hindering individuals from participating in activities that require literacy skills (The Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential). In Nigeria, illiteracy remains a significant challenge, with approximately



31% of adults lacking basic literacy skills (Premium Times, 2022). Illiteracy restricts individuals' access to employment opportunities and perpetuates poverty, hampering economic development (Opiah, 2022).

The Igbo population, like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, faces literacy challenges, although specific data on literacy rates among the Igbo is limited (Brown, 2013). Factors contributing to illiteracy among the Igbo include limited education access, socio-economic conditions, cultural beliefs, and inadequate infrastructure (Brown, 2013).

However, illiteracy can contribute to the emergence or persistence of neo-traditionalism, where individuals rely on oral traditions, inherited beliefs, and cultural practices due to limited exposure to formal education and alternative ideas (Opiah, 2022). The lack of critical thinking and exposure to diverse perspectives can foster a strong attachment to traditional norms and values, leading to a resistance to change or outside influences (Opiah, 2022).

It is important to note that not all illiterate individuals embrace neo-traditionalism, as various factors shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors, including socio-economic conditions and personal experiences (Opiah, 2022). Additionally, literacy does not necessarily lead to a rejection of traditional practices, as many literate individuals actively engage with their cultural heritage while embracing modern elements (Opiah, 2022).

Thus, illiteracy poses challenges to Nigeria's development, including limited participation in societal progress and employment opportunities. Among the Igbo population, factors contributing to illiteracy include limited education access and cultural beliefs. Illiteracy can potentially lead to the emergence or persistence of neo-traditionalism, but its influence varies among individuals and communities.

Parental Influence: Parenting is the process of raising and educating a child from birth or before until adulthood (Self Growth, 2012). According to Mawusi (2013), parenting refers to carrying out the responsibilities of raising and relating to children in such a manner that the child is well prepared to realize his or her full potential as a human being (p. 4). Parenting involves supporting a child's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual capabilities and can apply to both biological and non-biological children.

Parenting styles and practices are influenced by various factors such as culture, personality, parental background, educational level, socio-economic status, family size, and religion (Bisi, 2020). Culture, in particular, has a significant impact on African parenting, shaping the values, beliefs, and practices followed by parents (Bisi, 2020). In Igboland, parenting plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural values and traditions (Nkoli & Okoye, 2016, p. 3). Parents in Igboland are responsible for teaching their children about the Igbo language, folklore, proverbs, and oral history, which serve as a means of passing down ancestral knowledge and wisdom (Nkoli & Okoye, 2016, p. 3). Eze and Madu (2019) highlight that Igbo parents prioritize cultural preservation as an integral part of parenting, recognizing the importance of passing down traditions to ensure the continuity of the Igbo identity and strengthen the sense of pride and belonging in future generations (p. 7).

Parents also play a significant role in teaching children about Igbo religious beliefs and practices (Eze & Madu, 2019, p. 7). Igbo spirituality involves a belief in a supreme being (Chukwu or Chineke) and the veneration of ancestors (Eze & Madu, 2019, p. 7). Parents



guide their children in understanding and engaging with these spiritual aspects, including rituals, prayers, and ancestral worship (Eze & Madu, 2019, p. 7).

Hence, parenting practices in Igboland act as catalysts for neo-traditionalism by emphasizing the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Through teaching language, folklore, proverbs, oral history, and religious beliefs, parents instill a sense of pride, identity, and continuity in Igbo traditions (Nkoli & Okoye, 2016; Eze & Madu, 2019). These parenting practices contribute to the revival and rejuvenation of neo-traditionalist tendencies within the Igbo society.

5. CONCLUSION

The resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igbo society epitomizes the intricate interplay between socio-economic factors and cultural identity. This study has elucidated how poverty, social injustice, unemployment, illiteracy, and parental influence shape the revival of traditional beliefs and practices among the Igbo populace. Against a backdrop of economic challenges and cultural shifts, neo-traditionalist movements serve as both responses to adversity and quests for meaning and empowerment.

By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this research has provided valuable insights into the complexities of neo-traditionalism in Igboland. It underscores the resilience and adaptive capacities of the Igbo community in the face of contemporary challenges, offering a holistic understanding of the socio-economic dynamics driving cultural revival.

Moving forward, addressing the socio-economic challenges facing Igbo communities necessitates recognizing the intertwined nature of cultural identity and socio-economic well-being. Efforts to promote equitable access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social justice, while fostering the preservation of cultural heritage, are vital for sustainable development and social cohesion in Igboland.

In essence, the resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland reflects not only a cultural revival but also the resilience, adaptability, and vitality of the Igbo people in navigating the complexities of the contemporary world. As the community continues to evolve, the preservation and celebration of cultural traditions remain essential for identity, solidarity, and collective well-being amidst adversity.

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