
Faces of Neo-Traditionalism: Reviving Igbo Culture in Contemporary Society

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Received: 01 April 2024

Accepted: 14 June 2024

Published: 05 August 2024

Abstract: *This study delves into the resurgence of Igbo cultural heritage in modern society, examining various facets of neo-traditionalism in Igboland. Through a comprehensive literature review, it explores how the Igbo people are reclaiming their traditions, customs, and practices. Focusing on cultural festivals like the New Yam Festival and the revival of masquerade performances, the research highlights the enduring significance of Igbo cultural expressions. It also discusses the renewed emphasis on traditional arts, attire, language, and the resurgence of deities and rituals. Notably, the study emphasizes the active role of Igbo youth in driving this cultural renaissance, utilizing modern platforms to celebrate and amplify Igbo heritage. This blend of traditional and contemporary elements underscores the dynamic nature of neo-traditionalism in Igboland.*

Keywords: *Neo-Traditionalism, Igbo Culture, Cultural Revival, Contemporary Society, Cultural Heritage.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have a rich and vibrant cultural heritage that has faced various challenges over time, including the impacts of colonialism, modernization, and the decline of traditional practices (Nwaru, 2015). However, in recent years, there has been a significant resurgence of interest among the Igbo, especially the youth, in reviving and preserving their cultural identity (Nilson & Thorell, 2018; Odoemene, 2020). This phenomenon, known as "neo-traditionalism," encompasses a range of efforts to reclaim and reinvigorate Igbo cultural expressions and practices (Esekong & Elizabeth, 2013).

This work aims to explore the multifaceted faces of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, providing a comprehensive understanding of the various ways in which Igbo culture is being revived and celebrated in contemporary society (Aniako, 2002; Nwaru, 2015). By delving into the

diverse aspects of this cultural renaissance, the study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature, which often focuses on specific elements of Igbo culture without a holistic examination of the broader trends and manifestations of neo-traditionalism (Okpuku, 1970; Madu, 2004; Balogun et al., 2010).

This study is timely and relevant given the growing concerns expressed by Igbo cultural advocates, such as Chief Mrs. Uche Ezeoke, about the neglect of traditional practices in favor of foreign influences (Pilot News, 2023). Her collaborative efforts with the Anambra State government and other stakeholders to revive the masquerade festival in the South-East region underscore the importance and urgency of preserving Igbo cultural heritage (Ukaegbu, 2007; Ugobude, 2021; Uwaegbute, 2021). This sentiment is shared by many Igbo youths, who feel that the marginalization of their cultural practices by Christianity has prompted a renewed commitment to reclaiming and upholding their ancestral traditions (Okeke and Okeoma, 2016; Emanajo, 1986).

By exploring the diverse faces of neo-traditionalism, this work aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Igbo cultural renaissance and its significance in contemporary society. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation and identity, offering insights that may apply to other Indigenous communities grappling with the challenges of modernization and globalization (Okemkwu & Mbakwe, 2022; Isiani et al., 2022).

2. RELATED WORK

Several scholars have explored the concept of neo-traditionalism across various contexts. Walder, (1986), in his work: *Communist neo-traditionalism: Work and authority in Chinese*, argues that neo-traditionalism as ‘an explicitly historical term, excluding any consideration of the actual, regional histories of these “traditional” phenomena’. Walder argued that neo-traditionalism does not imply ‘not modern’; drawing on late 1960s works on modernization, he avers that there is no universal scale of modernity. Walder’s neo-traditionalism, therefore, characterized by features ‘traditionally’ held to be pre-modern, is both modern and unique. The work in its merit succeeded to reveal the concept of neo-traditionalism to have the capacity to break with primordial notions of deeply rooted cultural essences or characterizations of static and anti-modern tradition. However, it is pertinent to note that the work lacks insight on the actual base of neo-traditionalism which has to do with resurgence of traditions and cultural ideologies. The researcher will elucidate more on this in this research. Also, within African Studies, Marleen (2012) argues that neo-traditional religious movements represent a "conscious renewal" of indigenous beliefs in response to modernity and globalization (p. 48). They aim to preserve valuable aspects of tradition while adapting them to the present (Marleen, 2012).

Further, Islamic perspectives emphasize adherence to established schools of law and spiritual practices. Abdullah (2020) defines a neo-traditionalist as someone who studies classical Islamic disciplines and avoids dogmatic adherence (p. 2). Azami (2019) and Najjar (2000) offer similar definitions but focus on specific Islamic traditions (Azami, 2019; Najjar, 2000). Azami, (2019). In his work: *Abdullah 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.

These studies provide a foundation for understanding neo-traditionalism, but some lack a comprehensive approach (Azami, 2019; Najjar, 2000). This research will explore the core essence of neo-traditionalism: balancing tradition with adaptation and integrating the best of the past with the contemporary world.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research delves into the contemporary phenomenon of Neo-Traditionalism within Igbo society, exploring its efforts to revive cultural practices. To achieve this, we employ a qualitative research approach that prioritizes lived experiences. Viz.:

1. Ethnographic Immersion: We embark on an immersive journey, living alongside a community actively participating in the Neo-Traditional movement. Daily interactions, ceremonies, and participation in cultural activities were meticulously documented through detailed field notes. This provides a first-hand understanding of how Neo-Traditionalism integrates with contemporary life, highlighting the nuances and complexities of its impact.

2. Oral History and Community Narratives: The voices of the elders and community leaders are crucial. Through in-depth interviews, we explore their motivations for reviving traditions, their personal histories with Igbo culture, and how Neo-Traditionalism has reshaped their understanding of it. Additionally, group discussions help to capture the perspectives of a wider range of participants within the movement, revealing shared values, potential disagreements, and the overall social dynamics surrounding the revival.

3. Life History Approach: Focusing on individuals whose lives have been significantly influenced by Neo-Traditionalism offers invaluable insights. Capturing their personal narratives reveal the movement's lasting impact on individuals and its role in shaping their identities. These stories provide a powerful testament to the emotional and personal dimensions of the revival movement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Faces of Neo-Traditionalism in Igbo Society.

Neo-traditionalism in Igboland takes various forms and manifests in different aspects of cultural expressions and practices. It encompasses a range of faces or aspects that reflect its presence and influence within Igbo society and reflect its multifaceted presence and impact on different aspects of Igbo culture, identity, and community life. Here are some prominent forms of neo-traditionalism in Igboland.

i. Igbo Cultural Revival: Igbo cultural revival refers to the reawakening of Igbo cultural consciousness and is a means by which the Igbo reconstruct their past, reinterpret their present, and launch out to recover their lost cultural values and virtues. Nwaru (2015) observed that:

The greatest danger facing Igbo arts and culture today is that of extinction in the mist of competing cultures. Having suffered destruction, degradation and looting during the colonial era and in fact during the civil war, Igbo culture deserves a lot of attention. Understandably the Igbo in their attempt to catch up with other Nigerians in different areas of their national life has tended to neglect their culture (P.16).

"Cultural Days" are observed in Igbo communities, celebrating local traditions. These events encompass dances, songs, masquerade performances, and lectures that remind the community of its history, origins, and essence. Hence, cultural revival in Igboland entails the resurgence of Igbo practices, traditions, and values. Some of these cultural activities and events include:

a. Cultural Festivals: Ogunba (1978) underscores the importance of festivals as crucial artistic institutions that rejuvenate and advance the community. Correspondingly, Okpoku (1970) emphasizes how festivals unite individuals within a community or family, allowing them to express their reverence for ancestors or divine forces through music, dance, and ceremonies. These celebrations elevate community consciousness and unity, renewing the connections between the divine realms and the earthly realm for the community's welfare (IGODO, 2019).

In Igbo tradition, numerous festivals exist, serving as avenues for the Igbo people to show gratitude to the Almighty for His benevolence and kindness towards them.

Nwaru (2015) in agreement stated that:

Festivals and ceremonies in Igbo land do not only go beyond mere recreation and entertainment, they also are a way of transmitting Igbo customs, norms and values. Festivals give expression to the crafts, technology, psychology and philosophy of a people, their social control, dance, music, religion, government etc. (P.7)

Some of such festivities among Igbo include Igu-aro, Iri-edede, and Iri Ji Ofu (the new yam festival). Moreover, for the benefit of our research, we will be limiting our scope to the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji Ofu or Ife Ji Oku) as the chief festivity of Igbo people.

According to Nwanya (1997), it can be stated that:

Igbo people are rich in culture. Festivals are one of the great artistic institutions that people inherited from their ancestors. Festivals in Igbo culture originated from immemorial and are

means by which their ancestors expressed their belief in transcendent beings other than themselves. In Igbo cosmology, a festival involves "worship" of some sort and not just mere celebration. This is true of the Iri-Ji (New Yam) Festival, which is a Thanksgiving feast in honor of the god "Ahajioku," the god of yams. (P. 29)

Ife Ji Oku is a significant Igbo festival that celebrates the yam harvest and the "god of yam." This New Yam Festival reflects the Igbo people's religious beliefs in their supreme deity. The festival begins with the arrival of the new moon in August, signaling the preparation for the "Iri Ji Ohu" festival, though its timing varies among communities. This vibrant event is a testament to yam's importance in Igbo life, symbolizing the transition from one harvest season to the next planting phase. Joyful dance, feasting, and celebrations are central to this annual event, expressing gratitude for a bountiful harvest (Madu, 2004).

Traditionally, yams are first offered to God and ancestors before being distributed among villagers. Rituals include sacrifices of fowls on the farm, their blood symbolizing a connection to the earth and gods. Yams are also offered to the gods and earth with prayers for protection and benevolence. These rituals are carried out either by the community's eldest man, the king, or a distinguished title holder. Following prayers, the first yam is eaten by these individuals, who are considered intermediaries between the community and the land gods. These practices continue, underscoring gratitude for the gods' role in the harvest (Daniels, 2009).

This celebration culminates in the sharing of food with friends and well-wishers. Achebe (1958) narrates the communal nature of the feast, with a large dish of pounded yam that participants eat their way through all night. The festival features folk dances, masquerades, parades, and parties that collectively express joy, gratitude, and community (p. 46).

Yam's symbolic significance as the "king of crops" holds deep spiritual meaning for the Igbo people, a gift from Chukwu (God). Madu (2004) affirms that yam embodies life, wealth, and settlement, reflecting the saying "Ejikwe ji ado ala." The Ahiajoku Festival further underscores yam's importance, representing an intellectual harvest and legacy among the Igbo (Balogon et al., 2010, p. 17).

To enhance the festival's observance, NGOs have introduced innovative concepts, like culture and tradition seminars, deepening understanding of Igbo heritage. The Ahiajoku Lecture, initiated by Dr. Samuel Onunaka Mbakwe in 1979, provides a platform for the Igbo community to reflect on their history and culture, reinforcing their identity (Igodo, 2019, p. 172). Hence, the Ife Ji Oku festival and its lectures contribute to a cultural renaissance, fostering a renewed connection to Igbo traditions and values.

b. Masquerade Cult/Festival: Masquerades hold a revered position in Igbo culture, symbolizing both the spiritual and human realms. They demand respect when encountered in public due to their higher entity connections. Masquerade performances involve individuals, vocalists, drummers, players, advisors, and the masquerade itself.

Masquerade festivals captivate through dynamic reenactments of primordial encounters and familiar actions, focusing on aesthetics rather than elaborate narratives (Ukaegbu, 2007). These performances symbolize animals, gods, spirits, and ancestors, with performers embodying their roles.

Masquerades' appearance and character vary, conveying beauty or fear. Integral to events like funerals and festivals, each masquerade has unique characteristics, representing different narratives or identities. They encompass various talents like dance and communication.

Ijele: In ancient times, Ijele was regarded as the supreme Masquerade and was accompanied by forty-five other Masquerades. However, today, the figurines on top of Ijele represent these forty-five Masquerades. Ijele is the most important Masquerade and is usually the final act of any Masquerade performance. In various communities in the south-eastern region of Nigeria, Ijele is believed to bring about fertility and a prosperous harvest. It is a common sight at festivities, funerals, and other significant events.

Mkpamkpanku: The masquerade in question is characterized by a stern and distinctly masculine appearance. These masquerades are known for being quick, forceful, nimble, and having a reputation of their own. Because they are so active, they are primarily worn by young people and require at least two strong men to control them with a rope tied around their waist to prevent them from becoming too overwhelming.

Izaga: The Izaga masquerade, which may be considered a humorous or enjoyable masquerade, is likely the tallest of the Igbo masquerades and can vary in height. It is typically featured in traditional events or festivals with the objective of pleasing the audience.

Adamma: Men in certain villages in the south-eastern region of Nigeria wear a modern female spirit mask called Adamma. The ceremonial mask is named after the first daughter of a family, whose name means 'beautiful woman'. Adamma is dressed in vibrant clothing and dances gracefully, often leading to speculation about the gender of the person behind the mask.

Ojionu: The Agbaja people of Enugu State have a unique masquerade known as the Odo, which serves as a representation of a deity. This deity allows for communication between the living and the dead, in accordance with their customs and beliefs. During the Odo festival, it is believed that the dead can freely interact with the living through the manifestation of this masquerade. (P.9)

Truly, Igbo youths are increasingly participating in traditional masquerade activities to revive their culture, as shown in a study by Uwaegbute (2021). Youth engagement in masquerade celebrations in towns like Nsukka, Umuandu, and Obollo reflects their commitment to preserving traditions despite limited institutional support (p. 6).

c. Art and Craft: The visual arts of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Igboland, encompass diverse forms like sculpture, painting, pottery, textiles, masks, and more (Esekong & Elizabeth, 2013). Aniako (2002) defines art as man-made objects evoking emotional and intellectual responses, including sculptures, masks, dances, and performances (p. 6). The Igbo term "ihenkiri" refers to the visual experience of arts like masking and dancing (Nwaru, 2015). These artistic expressions reinforce identity, unity, and values among the Igbo, serving entertainment, politics, rituals, and aesthetics (p. 16).

Arts and artifacts are essential for preserving Igbo culture. They convey stories, values, and beliefs to future generations. Traditional practices like dance and music pass down wisdom, ensuring continuity. Museums and cultural centers use them for education, sharing Igbo history. The creation and sale of these works contribute to the economy, fostering pride and unity, and attracting tourists for cross-cultural exchange.

Arts and artifacts play a pivotal role in Igboland's cultural revival by preserving identity, transmitting knowledge, promoting education, boosting the economy, nurturing unity, and facilitating cultural exchange. These tools empower the revival, preservation, and celebration of the rich Igbo heritage.

d. Traditional Attire: Igbo traditional attire plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Igbo people in Nigeria. The attire reflects their values, social status, and cultural pride (Katt, 2023). For men, the attire includes the "Isiagu" or "Chieftaincy" shirt with intricate embroidery, worn alongside the "Ntong" wrapper and a symbolic "Okpu agu" or "Ozo" hat. Women don the "Buba" blouse, "Iro" wrapper, and vibrant "Gele" head tie, often complemented by beads and accessories (Kumer, 2023).

Recent years have witnessed resurgence in interest among Igbo youths to embrace traditional attire and practices, aiming to celebrate their heritage (Nilson & Thorell, 2018). Cultural organizations, festivals, and events promote traditional attire, instilling pride and a sense of belonging. The fashion industry incorporates Igbo elements, gaining popularity globally. Social media platforms further amplify Igbo aesthetics (Nwaru, 2015).

e. Music, Dance and Movie: Music, dance, and movies are integral to Igboland's cultural revival, preserving, celebrating, and promoting its heritage (Okpala, 2016). Traditional music, enriched by instruments like "udu," "ogene," "ekwe," and "ikoro," reflects Igbo life, with evolving genres like highlife and gospel (Okpala, 2016). Dynamic Igbo dances, including "Agaba" and "Ikpirikpi-ogu," convey history, values, and spirituality (StudyCorgi, 2020). "Nollywood" films incorporate Igbo culture, educating and entertaining, fostering cultural pride (Uwah, 2009).

Cultural festivals like the "New Yam Festival" and "Mmanwu Festival" showcase art forms, entertaining while preserving traditions (Jeremiah, 2018). Digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok amplify cultural revival, enabling broader audience reach and collaboration (Oparaoji, 2020).

ii. Emphasis on the Igbo Language: The Igbo community is striving for a cultural rebirth and has placed great emphasis on the revival and preservation of their indigenous culture through the use of the Igbo language. Schools, cultural organizations, and community initiatives offer Igbo language classes to both children and adults. Language preservation initiatives aim to ensure the transmission of the Igbo language across generations. (Okeke and Okeoma, 2016)

Also, academic literature and Publications, writers, authors, and scholars contribute to the cultural revival by producing literature, books, and publications in the Igbo language. These works capture and document Igbo history, folklore, proverbs, and contemporary experiences. They contribute to language preservation and cultural awareness. (Emanajo, 1986)

2. Resurgence of Deities and Rituals Sacrifices:

In present-day Igboland, a contemporary movement of revitalizing traditional gods and goddesses from Igbo mythology has emerged, aiming to integrate their worship into modern

Igbo society (Isiani et'al, 2022). These deities, associated with diverse life aspects like fertility, agriculture, healing, and protection, are believed to possess distinct powers.

A striking trend among young men involves constructing new shrines or restoring existing sacred sites dedicated to specific deities (Isiani et'al, 2022). These practices entail elaborate rituals encompassing offerings, prayers, songs, dances, and veneration (Ogbu, 2003). By engaging in these rituals, individuals and communities seek blessings, spiritual guidance, and a connection to ancestral forces believed to govern the cosmos.

This revival movement spans Igboland, reflecting a growing interest in ancestral worship and spirituality (Isiani et'al, 2022). Focusing on three distinct deities, this research delves into the intricate details of these practices, illuminating how they manifest within contemporary Igbo society. Some of these shrines include:

a. Ogwugwu Akpu Deity of Okija: The Ogwugwu Akpu Shrine in Okija holds a notable position as a conflict resolution center for personal, land, and business disputes, mediated by the deity (Latest Nigeria News, 2019). Its primary purpose is to foster peaceful resolutions, distinct from harmful rituals or death-related practices. The shrine has gained a reputation for addressing issues of business deception and attracting foreign partners seeking justice (Oral communication, 2023).

Educated youths took on the roles of priests around 19 years ago, enhancing the shrine's stature and drawing people from various parts of Igbo land and beyond for oath-taking in cases of suspected offenses (Obi, 2016). In 2004, the Nigerian police took control of the shrine due to allegations of immoral activities, leading to opposition from certain community members who considered it inhumane and contradictory to traditional beliefs (Maas, 2011).

Despite its demolition 15 years ago, a renewed interest among young people persists in worshipping the deity, indicating enduring faith, particularly among youths and non-indigenous individuals of Okija (Ujumadu, 2019). This resurgence underscores the ongoing relevance of traditional religious beliefs and practices, even in the face of challenges and changes over time.

b. Haaba Deity of Agulu: The Haaba deity can be found in Agulu, a town in the Anaocha local government area of Anambra State, specifically in Obe village. This goddess has followers both within and outside of Agulu and is commonly referred to as "Nne Anyi" (meaning "our mother" in Igbo). While she is believed to have a maternal nature, it is also known that she can be quite dangerous if provoked.

According to Agulu elders (Kinman, 2021), Haaba is a protective deity traditionally worshipped at a mud-brick shrine adorned with animal imagery. Today, the shrine is a concrete structure marked by animal sacrifices. Notably, interest in Haaba worship is rising, particularly among young people who seek blessings and protection. The community celebrates Haaba with two annual festivals: Mmii Haaba in March for a bountiful harvest and Ogbugba Haaba in November/December, which marks the return of Agulu residents and a surge in youth participation (Kinman, 2021).

c. Imo Oka Deity: The Imo Oka deity holds a revered position among the Awka people, safeguarding their community and ensuring agricultural prosperity (Osuagwu, 2013). Its

origin dates back to inter-tribal conflicts when Awka sought protection through a potent charm devised by Nwunyeokapo, a medicine man. The annual Imo Oka festival commemorates this event and honors the deity (Osuagwu, 2013).

Imo Oka is esteemed by Awka people, with beautiful names like Akaete, Iyiapan'akaona-ele, and Agboghomalumma Awka ji di ebube (Anochi, 2020). The deity's power is respected, and worship is marked by the yearly Imo Oka festival (Anochi, 2020).

The shrine, "Obu Imoka," has strict entry restrictions, allowing only the considered pure. A resurgence in Imo Oka worship is observed among Awka's youth, evident by increased participation in the festival (Anonymous, personal communication). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 festival was initially banned, but traditionalist youths opposed the ban and celebrated anyway (Chukindi, 2020).

d. Oke-Itte Ritual: The Oke-ite ritual, a contemporary form of neo-traditionalism, is gaining traction among Igbo youths. Originally a medicinal concoction created by native doctors, Oke-ite is now sought by the youth as a means to attain wealth (Meche, personal communication, May 20, 2022). Preparation involves animal parts and human blood, with various types of blood used for activation, such as white ram, dog, or pig (Anizoba & Aande, 2021). Oke-ite is believed to attract unlimited wealth and financial prosperity (Anizoba & Aande, 2021).

The popularity of Oke-ite reflects a blend of traditional beliefs, cultural heritage, and contemporary aspirations for economic empowerment. However, caution is advised due to potential legal, ethical, and moral implications (Nnatuanya, 2022).

Renewal rituals involving animal blood appease Oke-ite, crucial for preventing negative consequences for oneself and future generations (Anizoba & Aande, 2021). Witch doctors craft Oke-ite to accelerate achievements, and its allure lies in the promise of quick wealth and success, sometimes overshadowing Christian faith (Nnatuanya, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive examination of the diverse faces of neo-traditionalism in Igboland has shed light on the remarkable resurgence and revitalization of Igbo cultural heritage in contemporary society. The study has delved into the multifaceted ways in which the Igbo people are reclaiming and reinvigorating their traditions, customs, and practices, driven by a deep-rooted desire to preserve their unique identity amidst the challenges of modernization and globalization.

From the vibrant celebration of cultural festivals like the New Yam Festival, which serves as a testament to the enduring significance of yam in Igbo cosmology and community life, to the revival of masquerade performances that bridge the spiritual and earthly realms, the Igbo cultural renaissance is manifesting in diverse and captivating ways. The renewed emphasis on traditional arts and crafts, the embrace of Igbo attire and language, and the resurgence of deities and rituals all reflect the Igbo community's unwavering commitment to safeguarding their ancestral traditions and passing them on to future generations.

This research found Igbo youth at the forefront of cultural revival. They actively engage in traditions, reconnect with spirituality, and leverage technology to showcase Igbo culture. This

unique blend of old and new highlights the dynamism of Neo-Traditionalism, allowing the Igbo to navigate the present while honoring their heritage.

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