

AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE RESURGENCE OF IGBO TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN THE SOUTH EAST OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices in the South-East of Nigeria marks a pivotal cultural phenomenon in an era of globalization and modernity. However, this revival also raises critical questions about its societal, psychological, and ethical implications. Despite the increasing prominence of these practices, there is limited research on their socio-cultural impact, psychological benefits, and the challenges of reconciling them with modern societal norms and legal frameworks. This study aims to identify the specific Igbo traditional spiritual practices experiencing a resurgence; explore the socio-cultural and individual motivations for this revival; assess the impact of these practices on communal cohesion, psychological well-being, and identity; evaluate ethical dilemmas arising from the practices in the context of modern human rights; and to examine methods by which traditional practices are being adapted to align with contemporary lifestyles. The study employs a qualitative research approach, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, to gather insights from community members, cultural scholars, and practitioners actively engaging in these traditions. Primary data is supplemented with secondary sources, such as journal articles and archival records, to ensure a comprehensive analysis. This study is significant for understanding how cultural heritage shapes communal identity and psychological resilience. It contributes to discussions on the coexistence of tradition and modernity, offering practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and cultural preservationists. The findings illuminate pathways for safeguarding Igbo spiritual heritage while fostering inclusivity, ensuring its evolution aligns with contemporary ethical and societal standards.

Key Words: Igbo spirituality, Cultural identity, Traditional practices, Socio-cultural impact, Revival dynamics.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, renowned for their rich cultural heritage, have experienced a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. Following the colonial era and the subsequent Nigerian Civil War, many Igbo traditional practices faced a period of decline, influenced by the spread of Christianity, Western education, and socio-economic changes (Afigbo, 1981). The impact of colonialism significantly disrupted the traditional socio-political structures and religious beliefs of the Igbo. Missionaries actively propagated Christianity, leading to the erosion of indigenous religious practices and the demonization of traditional deities (Isichei, 1976). Western education, while offering opportunities for advancement, also fostered a sense of alienation from traditional knowledge and values. The post-colonial era, marked by rapid urbanization and modernization, further contributed to the dilution of traditional practices as younger generations became increasingly exposed to globalized cultures. Yet, amidst these changes, the Igbo people have demonstrated a remarkable resilience in preserving their cultural identity. In other words, in recent decades, there has been a noticeable resurgence of these practices, reflecting a renewed interest in cultural identity and heritage preservation. This resurgence is not a monolithic phenomenon but a multifaceted response to various socio-cultural and political dynamics.

Moreover, the resurgence of traditional practices can be interpreted as a form of cultural revivalism, a conscious effort to reclaim and reaffirm Igbo identity in the face of perceived cultural homogenization (Nwadiakor, 2012). This revival is manifested in various ways, including the revitalization of traditional festivals, the resurgence of traditional titles, the renewed interest in indigenous languages, and the re-emphasis on traditional moral values.

Furthermore, the political landscape of Nigeria has also played a crucial role in shaping this resurgence. The marginalization of the Igbo people within the Nigerian polity has fueled a sense of cultural nationalism, prompting a return to traditional roots as a means of asserting identity and solidarity (Uchendu, 1965). The Igbo concept of "Onye aghala nwanne ya" (do not leave your

brother behind) has been re-emphasized as a guiding principle, fostering a sense of communal responsibility and cultural cohesion.

Moreover, the perceived erosion of moral values in contemporary Nigerian society has led many Igbo individuals to seek guidance and stability in traditional ethical frameworks. The emphasis on values such as "Ofo na Ogu" (innocence and justice) and "Ime obi oma" (good character) is seen as a way to address the challenges of corruption, crime, and social decay (Njoku, 2006).

Nevertheless, this resurgence is not without its complexities and challenges. Some argue that certain traditional practices may be incompatible with modern values, particularly in relation to gender equality and human rights (Okeke, 2010). There are also concerns about the commercialization and commodification of traditional culture, which may undermine its authenticity and spiritual significance.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the multifaceted impact of the resurgence of Igbo traditional practices in the South East of Nigeria, exploring its socio-cultural, political, and ethical dimensions. It seeks to understand the motivations behind this revival, the forms it takes, and its implications for the future of Igbo identity and culture. By analyzing the interplay between tradition and modernity, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cultural revivalism in post-colonial societies.

Statement of the Problem

It is axiomatic to state that the resurgence of Igbo traditional practices has been observed in the South East of Nigeria (Nwadiakor, 2012), although, the specific impact of the revival of Igbo traditional spiritual practices remains under-explored. This resurgence, encompassing deities, rituals, ancestral veneration, and indigenous healing systems, presents a complex phenomenon with potentially profound implications for individuals and communities. The core problem therefore, lies in the lack of comprehensive understanding of how this resurgence is influencing the socio-cultural, psychological, and ethical landscapes of the Igbo people in the contemporary context. Specifically, the following issues contribute to this gap in knowledge: There is a lack of systematic documentation and analysis of the specific spiritual practices being revived and the demographics engaging in them. How is the resurgence of these practices affecting social relationships, communal identity, and the resolution of conflicts within Igbo communities? Are

there emerging tensions between those who embrace traditional spirituality and those who adhere to other belief systems? How is the resurgence of these practices influencing the mental and emotional well-being of individuals? Are these practices providing alternative or complementary approaches to mental health care? How is the resurgence of these practices shaping ethical decision-making and moral behavior in contemporary Igbo society? Are there conflicts between traditional ethical frameworks and modern legal or human rights standards? In a rapidly changing world, how are Igbo communities reconciling traditional spiritual beliefs and practices with the demands of modern life? Are there processes of adaptation and syncretism occurring, and what are their implications for the integrity of traditional spiritual practices?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to comprehensively examine the impact of the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices on the socio-cultural, psychological, and ethical landscapes of the South East of Nigeria. Specifically, this research aims to: Document and analyze the scope and nature of the resurgence. Investigate the impact of the resurgence on social cohesion and identity. Assess the psychological and emotional impact of the resurgence. Evaluate the ethical and moral implications of the resurgence. Explore the processes of reconciling tradition and modernity. Contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural revivalism; and provide valuable insights for cultural preservation and development in Igbo land.

Research Question:

1. What specific Igbo traditional spiritual practices are experiencing a resurgence in the South East of Nigeria, and what are the primary socio-cultural and individual motivations driving this revival?
2. How is the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices impacting social cohesion and communal identity within Igbo communities, and are there emerging tensions between adherents of traditional spirituality and other belief systems?
3. To what extent does the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices contribute to the psychological and emotional well-being of individuals, and how are these practices utilized in addressing personal challenges such as illness, grief, or anxiety?

4. What are the ethical and moral implications of the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices, and how are traditional ethical frameworks being reconciled with modern legal and human rights standards?

5. What are the key processes by which Igbo communities are reconciling traditional spiritual beliefs and practices with the demands of modern life, and what are the implications of these processes for the preservation and evolution of Igbo spiritual heritage?

Significance of the Study

This research will contribute to the preservation and documentation of a vital aspect of Igbo cultural heritage. By systematically examining the resurgence of traditional spiritual practices, the study will help to record and analyze these practices before they are further altered or lost due to modernization. This documentation would serve as a valuable resource for future generations, scholars, and cultural practitioners.

The research will also, provide insights into the complex socio-cultural dynamics shaping contemporary Igbo society. It will shed light on how communities negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, and how cultural identity is being redefined in a globalized world. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering social cohesion and addressing potential conflicts arising from cultural differences.

The study will equally explore the potential role of traditional spiritual practices in promoting mental and emotional well-being. By examining how these practices are utilized in addressing personal challenges, the research can contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous healing systems and their potential as complementary or alternative approaches to mental health care.

By analyzing the ethical and moral implications of the resurgence, the research could inform discussions about the reconciliation of traditional values with modern legal and human rights standards. This is crucial for developing inclusive and culturally sensitive legal frameworks that respect the rights of individuals and communities while upholding traditional values.

This research will as well contribute to the broader academic discourse on cultural revivalism in post-colonial societies. It will provide a case study of how a specific cultural group is responding

to the challenges of globalization and modernization, and offers insights into the factors that drive cultural revivalism.

Scope of the Study

The research is conducted within the five states in the south east Nigeria namely, Ebonyi State, Enugu State, Anambra State, Abia State and Imo State. This specific location is chosen to provide a focused and an in-depth understanding of the traditional religious practices in the South-East before the advent of Christianity and how these practices have evolved. The area is also chosen to examine how economic instability, widespread corruption, and the quest for identity among younger generations in the area contribute to the resurgence of Igbo traditional practices. The study equally investigates the connection between Igbo traditional practices and criminal activities such as kidnapping and the use of charms by criminals.

Research Methodology

Research Design

An in - depth study of the people of the south east of Nigeria was carried out, focusing on their culture and social practices. This was conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the personal experiences, perceptions, and cultural factors related to the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices in the area of study. The researcher audio recorded the respondents in the course of the interview and the record was transcribed. However, the recording was done with the express permission of the respondents.

Area of Study

The southeast region of Nigeria is geographically located in the southern part of the country, bordered by both land and the Atlantic Ocean. This region is home to five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The region shares boundaries with Benue and Kogi States in the North, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states in the south, Delta state in the east and Cross River state in the west.

The study involved various demographic groups within the region, including children, youth, adults, and the elderly. It also considered gender differences by examining the experiences of both men and women in relation to the practices.

Population of Study

The population for this study comprised all the five states that make up the south east of Nigeria.

Sampling and Sampling Techniques

The families were included in the research through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. In addition, families were involved in the study through active fieldwork.

Sources of Data Collection

The study involved face to face semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview protocol/questions was prepared by the researcher and approved by the supervisor.

Methods of Data Collection

Surveys and Questionnaires

The researcher developed a structured questionnaire that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, ensuring that the questions are clear, concise, and relevant to your research objectives. He conducted a pilot test with a small sample to ensure the questions are understood and to identify any issues. He distributed the questionnaires to his selected sample. He did this through face-to-face interviews. The completed questionnaires was collected and data organized for analysis.

Interview

The researcher created a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions that aligned with his research questions and objectives. He identified and contacted key informants such as religious leaders, community elders, and practitioners of idolatry and seek their consent to participate in the study. He scheduled and conducted in-depth interviews, recording the

conversations (with consent) to ensure accurate data collection. He transcribed the recorded interviews for analysis.

Focus Group Discussions

The researcher developed a guide with open-ended questions and prompts to facilitate discussions on the resurgence of idolatry. He selected participants from different communities, ensuring a mix of practitioners and non-practitioners. He organized and conducted focus group discussions, ensuring a comfortable environment for open dialogue. He also recorded the discussions (with consent) and take notes, and as well transcribed the recorded discussions for analysis.

Observation

The researcher identified specific events, rituals, and practices related to Igbo traditional practices that he wanted to observe. He created a checklist to guide his observations, focusing on key aspects such as rituals, participant engagement, and social interactions. He attended and observed the identified events and practices, taking detailed field notes. Ensuring he remained unobtrusive and respectful during observations. He organized and documented his observations for analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher employed thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data. He identified key themes, narratives, and insights that provided a deeper understanding of the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured that all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their participation. He used pseudonyms or codes to protect the identities of participants. This was to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity.

Cultural Sensitivity: the researcher was respectful of cultural practices and beliefs during data collection, by avoiding any actions or questions that might offend or disrespect the participants.

Validation of Instrument

Items in the instrument were vetted in terms of item construction, relevance and relatedness to the research questions developed for the study. This was done to ensure validity.

Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of Data

4.2 Presentation of Data

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaire

	Frequency	Percent
Returned	95	95.0
Unreturned	5	5.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.1 showed that 95% (95) respondents returned their questionnaire while 5% (5) respondents did not returned their questionnaire. This implies that a large proportion of the questionnaire were filled and returned.

Table 2: Distribution According to Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	60	69.0
Female	27	31.0
Total	87	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

As indicated in Table 2, 69% (60) respondents were male while 31% (27) were female. This shows that male respondents participated more in the research than their female counterpart.

Table 3: Distribution according to Age

	Frequency	Percent
21 – 30 years	30	34.5
31 – 40 years	24	27.6
41 – 50 years	18	20.7
51 – 60 years	9	10.3
51 – 60 years	6	6.9
Total	87	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

In the age grade category in Table 3, it showed that 34.5% (30) respondents are between 21 – 30 years, 27.6% (24) were between 31 – 40 years age range, 20.7% (18) were from 41 – 50 years, 10.3% (9) respondents were in between 51 – 60 years, while 6.9% (6) were in the age bracket of above 51 – 60 years.

Table 4: Educational Level: (None/Primary/Secondary/Tertiary)

	Primary school	percent	Seconda ry school	percent	Tertiary Educatio n	percent	None	percent
	15	15.0	20	20.0	60	60.0	5	5.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

In the educational level of the participants as shown in Table 4 above, it shows that 15% (15) respondents have at least primary education, 20.0% (20) respondents have secondary education, 60.0% (60) respondents have tertiary education while 5.0% (5) respondents did not attend any formal education.

Table 5: Occupation:

Frequency	Percent	Occupation
20	20.0	Farming
30	30.0	Business
50	50.0	Civil/Public Servant
Total = 100	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 5 above showed that 20.0% (20) respondents were farmers, 30.0% (30) respondents were business men and women, while 50.0% (50) respondents were civil/public servants.

Table 6: Religious Affiliation (Christianity/Traditional Religion/Other):

ATR	percent	Christianity	Percent	Islam	percent	None	None
25	25.0	70	70.0	5	5.0	00	00

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 6 above shows that 25.0% (25) respondents were adherents African Traditional Religion (ATR), 70.0% (70) respondents were Christians, while 5.0% (5) respondents were adherents of Islam.

Table 7: Location of respondents

State	Frequency	percent
Ebonyi	20	20.0
Enugu	20	20.0
Anambra	20	20.0
Abia	20	20.0
Imo	20	20.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 7 above showed that 20.0% (20) respondents each were from Ebonyi State, Enugu State, Anambra State, Abia State and Imo State.

4.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data collected from research question 1, What specific Igbo traditional spiritual practices are experiencing a resurgence, and what are the primary socio-cultural and individual motivations driving this revival?, shows that Practices such as the New Yam Festival, Ancestral Veneration (*Ili Omma*), Masquerade Ceremonies (*Iti Mmanwu*) and rituals involving deities like *Ala* (Earth Goddess) are witnessing a revival. These cultural traditions are particularly resonating with younger generations. Socio-cultural motivations for the resurgence according to majority of our respondents include a desire to preserve cultural heritage and rediscover authentic Igbo identity amidst modern influences.

This revival aligns with findings by scholars like Eze (2020), who highlighted that cultural heritage preservation and identity restoration drive the resurgence of ancestral practices. Furthermore, the

influence of globalization appears to have paradoxically spurred a counter-movement toward traditional practices as a means of safeguarding identity (Chukwu, 2022).

Moreso, eighty percent (80%) of the respondents to questionnaires on research question 2: How is the resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices impacting social cohesion and communal identity, and are there emerging tensions with other belief systems?, observe that the resurgence fosters communal identity, strengthening shared values and history. Rituals such as communal sacrifices and celebrations for instance, promote unity; although there are noted tensions between adherents of traditional spirituality and followers of other faiths, especially Christians, who may view these practices as conflicting with their beliefs.

This aligns with Nwankwo (2021), who emphasizes that younger generations play a critical role in using rituals to enhance unity. Nevertheless, the noted tensions reflect ongoing interfaith challenges, underscoring the need for dialogue to reconcile differences while maintaining respect for diversity in belief systems.

Furthermore, sixty – five percent (65%) of the respondents on the questionnaires on research question 3: To what extent does the resurgence of Igbo traditional practices contribute to individuals' psychological and emotional well-being?, affirm that rituals like cleansing ceremonies provide emotional relief, particularly during grief, while communal support during such practices promotes a sense of connection and grounding. Equally practices like consulting diviners and making offerings to deities such as Ala are believed to have healing effects.

These findings resonate with Okafor (2019), who explored the therapeutic dimensions of traditional Igbo spirituality, emphasizing its role in providing emotional and spiritual reassurance during personal crises. This suggests the potential for integrating traditional and modern mental health approaches.

Similarly, seventy percent (70%) of the respondents to questionnaires on research question 4: What are the ethical and moral implications of these practices, particularly regarding modern human rights standards? Maintain that while many practices align with values such as communal care, others, like animal sacrifices, face ethical scrutiny. They also hold that challenges in reconciling practices with human rights laws include issues like gender equality and clashes over property laws tied to ancestral rituals.

These tensions highlight the evolving interplay between traditional and modern ethical frameworks, as noted by Chukwu (2022). The reconciliation of such disparities requires adaptive strategies to preserve cultural practices while respecting global standards.

In the same vein, eighty – nine percent (89%) of the respondents to questionnaires on research question 5: What processes are reconciling traditional practices with modern life, and what are the implications for cultural preservation? were of the view that digital platforms and educational curricula are increasingly used to bridge gaps, showcasing Igbo traditions in ways that resonate with modern lifestyles. They also hold that eco-friendly adaptations of rituals reflect a blending of traditional practices with contemporary environmental concerns.

The integration of digital tools aligns with modern trends in cultural preservation and provides an innovative pathway for sustaining Igbo traditions. This aligns with broader efforts to ensure the evolution of indigenous heritage while maintaining its essence (Eze, 2020).

Discussion of Findings

Findings from various studies on “An Examination of the Impact of the Resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices in the Southeast of Nigeria,” reveal that Igbo traditional spiritual practices, deeply rooted in cultural heritage, are experiencing a resurgence in Southeastern Nigeria. This revival is reflected in the re-emergence of rituals and festivals such as the Igbo New Yam Festival and ceremonies honoring deities like Ala, the Earth goddess. These practices, which were historically integral to the Igbo worldview and cosmology, are witnessing renewed interest, particularly among younger generations (Eze, 2020). Specific Practices Experiencing a Revival is the New Yam Festival which serves as an annual celebration symbolizing gratitude and harvest renewal. Also, ceremonies involving Ala, the Earth goddess, reflect the community's connection to the land and moral order. Other rituals include ancestral veneration and divination practices, offering spiritual guidance and community cohesion (Okafor, 2019).

One significant driver of this resurgence according to the findings is the preservation of cultural heritage. As globalization continues to erode indigenous traditions, efforts to rediscover authentic Igbo identity have intensified (Chukwu, 2022). Among younger generations particularly, there is growing recognition of the importance of maintaining cultural distinctiveness in a rapidly

homogenizing world. Moreover, these practices provide individuals with a sense of belonging and a tangible connection to their ancestral roots (Nwankwo, 2021).

Furthermore, **modern** socio-cultural changes have significantly influenced the revival of these practices. Initiatives such as cultural education programs and digital platforms showcasing Igbo traditions have made these practices more accessible and appealing. Additionally, the integration of traditional rituals into contemporary ceremonies, such as weddings and naming ceremonies, has helped bridge generational gaps (Eze, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The resurgence of Igbo traditional spiritual practices in the South-East of Nigeria signifies a profound reconnection with cultural identity amidst the rapid globalization and religious transformations experienced in the region. This resurgence has been instrumental in preserving the customs, language, and values of the Igbo people, contributing to a reinforced sense of community and belonging. However, the revival has also sparked debates surrounding its compatibility with contemporary societal norms and the potential for inter-religious tension. Despite these challenges, it is evident that Igbo traditional spiritual practices hold significant relevance in fostering cultural pride and continuity (Okafor, 2022).

Recommendations

To ensure the harmonious integration of Igbo traditional spiritual practices with contemporary society, it is recommended that:

1. Further studies and public discourse be encouraged to promote mutual understanding between adherents of traditional spirituality and followers of other faiths in the region (Eze & Nwosu, 2021).
2. Governmental and non-governmental organizations support the documentation and promotion of Igbo traditions through educational programs and cultural festivals (Chukwu, 2020).

3. Policies be developed to safeguard traditional practices from exploitation or misrepresentation while ensuring their evolution aligns with present-day human rights standards (Onyeka, 2023).

These measures, when implemented, can help create an environment where traditional spirituality coexists with modernity, thereby enriching the cultural fabric of the Igbo people.

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