
Neo-Paganism as a Socio-Religious Phenomenon in Africa and among the Igbo: The Problem of Nomenclature and the Revivalists' Albatross

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Abstract

Colonial encounter has left Africa with a lot of words incongruous with the nature and character of Africans. The gradual return to the ancient Igbo traditional culture, has in recent times, come to the domain of religion. Through the last two to three decades, this return was gradually experienced in health care and culture. Even in Christian circles, the Igbo have experienced gradual inclusion of some Igbo cultural practices in Christian gatherings, both in worship and social activities. Alongside this experience, some socio-cultural activities of the Igbo which were not found to directly contradict the Christian message were endorsed by Christians. Recently, this trend developed into reopening traditional Igbo religious centres and reviving Igbo religious systems and core cultural practices. Young people especially are no longer satisfied with being on the fringes of Igbo religious reality. They constitute the majority of the Igbo who plunge themselves back into the ancient religious systems. Igbo Christian population understand this phenomenon as a problem which needed solutions. In order to solve this problem, theologians and Christian leaders identify this phenomenon as 'Neo-Paganism'. However, we are convinced that wrong identification will result in wrong solutions. The work also considers the revivalists as missing the core of this revival; a core which it identified as community. The present work is based on the hypothesis that the identification of revivalists as 'Neo-pagans' is problematic. The work suggested two identifications – Revivalism and Apostasy. This suggestion was made against the background that presently the Igbo is dominantly Christian and that more than the rift and bad energy the identity of 'Neo-Paganism' will generate, the two suggested concepts will foster empathy with the traditional religious culture and sympathy with the Christian population which is espousing this revival. The work used the historical and hermeneutic methods of approach.

Keywords: Paganism, Neo-paganism, Igbo, Religion, Igbo Religion, Igbo Identity, *Arusi*

Introduction

Returning to the practices of traditional Igbo religious culture is a new trend in Igbo land which has become worrisome, especially to Christianity; a Christianity which in a span of three decades, had created enmity out of that religious culture in the first place. Young people out of frustration, disenchantment, disappointment and ignorance are reviving traditional religious practices and ancestral culture. It is as though the ranks of Christianity are breaking and the religion is losing its hold on the young people who are poised to depopulate the dominating

religion. Many theologians who understudy this phenomenon have failed to connect this trend to the prior trend in Christian religious practice through three preceding decades, in order to understand this return as a deterioration in Christianity's dominance of Igbo land. For more than a century, Christianity has dominated Igbo land and has almost eclipsed traditional religious culture, but in recent times, there is a resurgence in the practices of the traditional religious culture, championed especially by people who were once Christians.

Curiously, theologians captured this trend as "Neo-Paganism". This work is set on the hypothesis that a "Neo-Paganism" can only be built upon a former "Paganism", and if there was no paganism in the first place, then there is no basis for neo-paganism. The work also presumed that if a proper diagnosis of the phenomenon is not done, then any solution proffered will be of no effect. It is this author's conviction that Igbo traditional religious culture is a prelude to Christianity. This work, therefore, fosters the change of narrative in which Christianity could build on Igbo traditional religious culture as against the idea of being opposed to it; destroying and replacing it. This later idea of being opposed to, destroying and replacing it had been propagated in progressive nuances in the last three decades. The decades had trailed in Christianity, the confiscation of symbols and materials of the Igbo religious culture, the burning down and destruction of shrines and effigies of the religious culture, the denigration and demonization of ancestral heritage, the demonization of the ancient religious practices and the disintegration of traditional family institutions. Apparently, the Christianity of the past three decades had championed a complete decimation, destruction and obliteration of the practices of the ancient Igbo traditional religious culture.

The work not only identified the misgivings in studying traditional African religious culture, it went through the route of in-depth study of the given in traditional Igbo religious culture, using it as a case study. It did an ethnological study of God, deities and spirits; levels of spiritual spheres, their existence, manifestations and operations in the Igbo universe. It identified the community as the basis of Igbo spiritual universe, touting that it is the revival of the community which the revivalists are actually missing out on. The spirits and spiritual forces of the Igbo universe cannot effectively operate outside the community which gives it being and delineates its operations and functions.

Contrary to the expectations of Christianity which had in these times understood ancient practices as dying culture, the religious culture is bouncing back and claiming the virile Igbo who once were Christians. Christianity seem not to acknowledge the fact that traditional religious culture is an Igbo common heritage which even the Igbo Christian should also be proud to be part of without being less Christian. The work asserted that "Neo-Paganism" is a wrong nomenclature for this phenomenon of reviving the ancient Igbo traditional religious culture. It, therefore, suggested "Apostasy" and "Revivalism". The researchers think that it is important that Christianity is deeply aware that those who are returning to the traditional religious culture were Christians who apostatized, and that they are reviving a practice which had been abandoned for far too long. The work went ahead to suggest a model that may work for those who crave practicing the traditional religious ways to avoid unnecessary conflicts. The work is an exercise in historical and hermeneutic methods of inquiry.

The Birth of Paganism in Africa

To understand the birth of paganism in Africa, it is important to explore the environment of Europe where it was conceived. In other words, the birth of Paganism in Africa was conceived

in Europe, not in Africa. The word 'Pagan' is, arguably, a fourth century Christian term used to qualify parochial or regional religious cultures which were neither Christian nor Jewish. Albeit, not in a derogatory sense; the word did not immediately evoke the offensive, just a categorization. It was, in a sense, a Christian replacement of the Jewish classification of non-Jews as 'Gentiles' (the nations or non-Jewish peoples). Aitamurto (2016) and Owen (2011) argue that by the Middle Ages the term connoted the worship of "false gods" (the Devil or other evil spirits). Meanwhile, "False gods" was a Christian depiction of the objects of worship for cultures which were not yet Christianized; it made sense in a world which had become dominantly Christian and in which the Christian God had assumed absolute domination of the spiritual space. From this time, being a pagan became offensive to the ideal, conventional and civilized life which was increasingly Christian. To this extent, not to be Christian is to be pagan which amounts to sub-human and uncivilized existence, uncultured and primitive life, being irreligious and devil worship.

From the 17th century, the human spirit was reborn into focusing on itself. The medieval consensus about God and his absolute authority over human beings and life was gradually giving way to a new culture of placing man at the center of the universe and saddling him with the authority and power once reserved for God. The development of the human spirit in this period was championed by philosophers, thinkers and scientists. From Rene Descartes, through Immanuel Kant, to Fredrick Nietzsche, the human spirit had grown into a monstrosity which flipped the throne of God's reign and enthroned man who was ready to live without God. The God in question here was the Christian God exposed to metaphysical scrutiny from medieval times. By the Nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Christianity began to lose its chokehold on human culture and civilization, people proudly identified as pagan and referred to their works, especially those inspired by ancient traditions, as pagan. This way the word 'Pagan' re-assumed its former meaning as non-conforming or non-compliant to popular religious culture. In modern times, paganism took a very different turn. Especially in the West. For over half a decade, there has been resurgence of nature worship and revival of native faith and wisdom. Rountree (2014) observed that:

Under the Pagan umbrella, however, the relative importance of ecology, magic, ethnic politics and indigenous tradition varies significantly, and there is a vast diversity of traditions. Some – like Wicca and Druidry, which originated in Britain, and neo-Shamanism and Goddess spirituality, which originated in the USA – have spread via literature, the movement of people and the internet to countries throughout the world where they have been adapted to local landscapes, seasonal cycles and cultures by local practitioners (p. 81)

These refer to themselves as modern pagans, neo-pagans or contemporary pagans. However, it must be noted that these ancient religions are not the same with African-Igbo religious cultures. It is our quest in this work to bare the underpinnings of African religious culture, so as to bracket it from the characters of paganism as was and is evident in the West.

It was in the 19th century, when paganism was used as identifier for works and movements inspired by ancient wisdom and culture, that Christian missions, especially to Africa, became en vogue and got a lot of funding. From the deposits of their mission work among the different African peoples, the missionaries who embarked on that spree drew a lot from medieval theology and learning. There appeared to be a deliberate scheme not to infect the new converts in the 'virgin' continent with the secularist and atheistic culture prevalent at the time in the

West. So it was not surprising that the sense of medieval paganism was invoked in the judgment of African religious cultures. In other words, for the missionaries, to refer to African religious culture as pagan was to understand it as primitive, brutish, uncivilized and archaic. There was also the deliberate refusal to jettison a whole human civilization by labelling it primitive and undermining a comprehensive religious culture by branding it various shades of paganism (devil-worship, animism, pantheism, witchcraft or even heathenism).

Coming from their experiences of religion in the West, it was easy for the white missionaries to label this culture pagan, by which they mean everything derogatory from sorcery to devil worship. Consequently, it became an imperative for the African to first of all denounce his religious culture to mark the beginning of conversion to Christianity. This gave birth to two possible ideas, either that traditional religious culture stood on the way of Christianity or it inadvertently assumed the status of a Christian contrast. At the second level, viewing traditional religious culture from the prism of western anthropological and philosophical schemes, the missionaries and their scientist-allies worked hard to isolate the religious from the social and in the process denied evidences of the philosophical and scientific which were present in African civilization and culture. Africa, for them, became the Dark Continent on which light can only be shed by torches invented in the West. In other words western torches became more luminous than the African sun and amazingly Africans accepted it as true. This judgment informed the philosophy of education and the fundamentals of religion which was foisted on Africa.

This manner of understanding Africa was a standard set in the sixteenth century by the ilk of a London sailor quoted by Chimamanda Adichie in her 2009 *TEDtalk*, titled: “*The Danger of a Single Story*”, thus: “Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called **John Locke**, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as “beasts who have no houses,” he writes, “They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.” Through education, religion, politics and most importantly military expedition, Africans caved in to these schemes. Africans even began to refer to themselves as pagans.

Generations of Africans Born into the Era of Paganism

There was born and trained generations of Africans who, with John Locke, believed that their forefathers worshipped the devil, were mired in evil, lived an anti-life culture, lived in darkness, were not civilized, had no science and philosophy, were hell-bound; and with the privilege of gaining this new knowledge, are themselves saved from the calamitous existence of their forebears; generations who knew next to nothing about their past and cannot go beyond what was taught them by these foreign anthropologists, philosophers and churchmen. African religions, education, language, politics, science, life in general and a whole civilization became signs of backwardness; the new civilized Africans trained in the new western ways must part ways with their African ancestry and denigrate it to be ready for the better life ahead of them, which, unfortunately, they may never realize.

Outside the western scholars themselves, these western trained Africans were the first who studied the African continent from different fields of knowledge, but did so using the tools of study offered them by their western trainers. Whatever they found became the foundation of the global knowledge-base about Africa. Among the Igbo products of this era, we identify Francis Arinze (*Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, 1970) and Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958),

whose opinions and judgments of African life and practices had been a standard for more than half a century. Yet it is safe to say that these and their ilk served more the interest of their Christian faith and western literary tradition all of which were set upon schemes in the standard of John Locke. However, tributes must be paid to Chinua Achebe for especially *Things Fall Apart*, a classic which showcased the reality of African predicament. At the same time the depth of the Igbo civilization and religious cultural value, hidden away in his literary style must be acknowledged. Same can be said for Francis Arinze whose work opened new vistas as to finding content in studying religion in Africa. At the same time, his unwillingness to encounter the internal functions of the aspects of the Igbo religious culture which he discussed, showed in the further severance of Igbo traditional religious culture from his preferred Christian culture. It should be noted that in as much as the works of these two literary giants mentioned above were centered on Igbo Life and experiences, they stood for most of the West, for the whole of Africa. However, contrary to that opinion, Africa is a continent of diverse people and culture; no one of them may adequately represent the whole.

The early African successors of western expatriates and missionaries furthered the same severance into apathy and misconstrue of African religious culture for many decades until a generation was born whose quest and aim was to destroy the vestiges and evidences of this religious culture. Doing this for them was being the better educated or Christian. Many ancestral religious centers, sacred grooves and symbols of African heritage were destroyed in the process. A generation was raised, who were convinced into believing that their only obstacle to a better life is their heritage; their sanguinal entanglement with their ancestors was their albatross. For them, any brand of Christianity which could keep them farthest away from these entanglements was the most powerful. Obiefuna and Okwuchineke (2024) made copious advocacy for “community deliverance” based on the conviction that traditional religious practices in some communities were founded on evil. Unfortunately, it was their very African kin who helped to realize this quest through various kinds of weird manipulation called evangelical ministries. From warring against the spirits of their imagination in the African environment, they labelled family members and relations agents of these spirits in more ways than one, thereby hurting the unity and conviviality of African extended family system. Consequently, the community spirit which is the bed rock of the African religious culture is almost gone. For this generation, nothing about their African ancestry and heritage can qualify as good. Unfortunately, this included family lineage system, environment and ancient landscape.

Another generation was born who began to study these trends; who began to realize that their forefathers were not dwellers of a Dark Continent and were not devil worshippers. Though they have reservations with the forms of the ancestral practices of science and religion, they were convinced that these ancestors had something of value which should not be lost in science, ethics, philosophy, politics or even religion. Nevertheless, this generation was reluctant to break the fetters of western civilization and religion or lacked the creativity to reform themselves and the future generation along the line of their findings. This generation did not have the courage to innovate marching actions to the truth which their intellect and scientific knowledge could afford. They talked away reality and stood on the fence of appropriate actions to revive the life of Africa which was lost in the ancestral disconnect. They stood at the edge of the Nietzschean abyss, agonized and contemptible, equipped to risk the crossover but unwilling to embark on the transformational journey to the Eureka era (Fredrick Nietzsche used the metaphor of the abyss to describe the nihilist tendency of the contemporary man who

destroyed his god-shaped past and is confronted by a consequent nihilism which bars him from advancing into the *Übermann* of his quest). Alongside them were agents of Christian evangelization who, in seeking material prosperity, found safe-havens in the Christian enterprise. These pretended to understand traditional religious culture, which they do not, exploited the immortal connection of the average African to traditional spirit-force dynamics and pulled the strings of their fears and ignorance to hold them spell-bound with myriads of promises. These also made a lot of money, evidently impoverished their followers and completed their severance from any kind of ancestral connection.

Lastly, a generation of Africans was born who possess the will but are lacking in the knowledge. They harbor resentment for the Christian religion on which they blame this ancestral disconnect, frustration resulting from unfulfilled promises offered them by same Christianity and anger for what they deem lies sold to them by agents of Christian evangelization. In their ignorance, they abandon Christianity and return to traditional religious cultural practices. The challenge is that as they return to the once sacred grooves and shrines, they find spaces emptied of spirits. In their quest, they stumble into external ritual systems, relish in the fascination and newness they discover. They do not know that at the core of that religious culture is the community whose consensus is *sine qua non* to the generation of the energies and powers which in turn binds and rules over them. These are the people identified in the current turn of events as Neo-pagans. In this exercise we fault this label when we state that in the first instance, the medieval version of paganism was diametrically opposed to any God found outside Christianity whereas God is, of course, larger than Christianity. Therefore, if we are able to find that the knowledge of God was not foreign to the African, and that the nature of that God corresponds to the nature of the Christian God, then there were no pagans among Africans. Sequel to that, these revivalists may not be rightly referred to as neo-pagans. If we successfully remove the yoke of neo-paganism from their necks, it belongs to us to properly identify them alongside their role in today's religious discourse.

Understanding Paganism in Africa: Making a Case with Practices in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture

Misgivings in understanding traditional Igbo Religious Culture

We have delineated three epochs in the understanding of paganism. The first referred to peoples and cultures not Roman and Christian. The second referred to brutish, primitive and backward people who doubled as devil worshippers. The third are a piece of the first who freely identify as pagan. At the same time, we have opined that the reference to Africans as pagans precisely towed the second sense. It is based on that permutation that we think that Africans were never pagans. It is based on this that we review some Igbo traditional religious practices to show that the Igbo was highly cultured, systematically religious, and traditionally civilized. Meanwhile, we start with the misgivings in understanding the Igbo traditional religious culture.

One of the fundamental misgivings in understanding traditional Igbo religious culture, to which many scholars are prone is, the attempt to use western methods to make a religion out of Igbo cultural-ethnic existence which meets with other religions known to the western mind like Christianity, Islam and Judaism, or otherwise. In other words, understanding these religions to be paradigmatic to the study of other religions; the nature of these religions informing the criterion by which any other form of interacting with the other realm outside the material could be called religion. Another is the attempt to put those religious forms found in Africa together and distinguish them from all other aspects of life in Africa, be it social or cultural so as to call

it a religion. In a strict sense, among the Igbo, like many other African ethnic groups, may not be found an institutionalized or formalized religion. From an African perspective, such religion is moribund and lifeless.

On the level of misgivings still, the Igbo is often understood as ‘Idol worshippers’. In Igbo, idol worshipping will be referred to as ‘*Ife Arụsị (Ihe) apịrị apị*’. On the one hand, worship is an English word which encapsulates a lot of social, ritual and cultic actions – venerate, reverence, adore, petition etc. These can be performed as “ritual drama, prayers of many sorts, dancing, ecstatic speech, veneration of various persons and objects, sermons, silent meditation, and sacred music and song. Also included in worship are acts of private response: spoken or unspoken prayers, silence, the assumption of particular postures, ritual acts and gestures, and individual acts of veneration of persons or objects” (Harrelson, 2023). There is no singular word in Igbo which will connote all these, but worship does. On the other hand, ‘*Ife Arụsị apịrị apị*’ in English will translate in a literal sense to: ‘Paying homage to a carved image’, in as much as we know that the users of this phrase simply mean also, ‘Idol worshipping’. However, none is correct. In the first place, the Igbo do not pay homage to carved images. Secondly, the Igbo do not worship Idol. It will not be fair to throw a blanket judgment on the matters of Igbo religious culture without in-depth hof its dynamics or do so to compliment western socio-religious culture, which has taken over Igbo land, by standing on the fence and identifying seeming correspondences between the two.

The Fundamental Given in Traditional Igbo Religious Culture

There are also a couple of given in the Igbo religious culture. For instance, most scholars of African studies agree that at the basis of African ontology is community and religion. J. S. Mbiti even described Africa as a religious universe, A. G. Leonard touted the religious reflexes of Africans in such a way that they do everything religiously; religion is the fabric of the African community. Another way of saying that the African is a religious being. In the same vein, it seems a consensus that the ‘I-thou’ existence of Martin Buber is not an African reality. Barnabas Okolo, Innocent Onyewuenyi, Ikenga Metuh and a host of others think that in Africa it is an ‘I-We’ existence which interpret their existential reality. It is important to lay down this fundamental understanding of African ontology; on it is its religious culture founded. Every ethnic group in Africa bears this mark of being religious and community oriented.

On the one hand, in as much as the mystical dimension of the religious culture appears overwhelming to its human adherent, the Igbo is aware that the spirit-force or cosmic energy which overpowers or holds sway over humans is exactly equivalent to the ‘community force’. It is the community which is the real power and energy, and which at the same time is spiritualized. Consequent upon this, the community is as powerful as having the power of ripping the same power off anyone or deity which exercises it because it is the community which is the first cause of the spiritual power exercised in the first place. This buttresses the saying: *Arụsị kpaa ike, e gosi ya osisi e jiri pia ya* (If a deity exceeds the limits of its power, it shall be reminded of the wood from which it was carved out). On the other hand, the African child is born into a religious community; he does not train or learn himself into it; he is not initiated or schooled into its theology, he spends a lifetime advancing his knowledge of it, having been born into it.

Another important aspect of the Igbo religious culture is the nature of divinity. The Igbo know that there is a Supreme Being, but this Supreme Being is inaccessible and indifferent. These

characters of the Supreme Being are not his nature, they are the consequences of human actions without which this Supreme Being would have as much as walked human streets. However, spirits do walk human streets among the Igbo, but never the Supreme Being. The Igbo is deeply aware that no human action can change these consequential characters of the Supreme Being. Therefore, instead of living in frustration and hopelessness, the Igbo sought manifest spirits who are accessible. They are not as pure and impeccable as the Supreme Being, but they are higher powers than humans and can at the same time sway over humans. The Igbo represent these spirits in carved wood, earthenware or similar objects; identify them with trees, rivers or even empty spaces. Most of these spirits are mythical personages whose stories embody their mystical operation among humans.

For instance, *Ogwugwu* is a female deity. In Igbo myth, she is an agonized widow married to a warrior who sacrificed his life to save a people who cared nothing about him. She is represented in effigy as a woman who bears the body of her only son. That son is *Udo* who sought to accomplish the quest of his father, but was killed by the same people who mocked the mother by giving her the dead body of her son to carry. These two deities protect, judge and revenge; they are unforgiving. Meanwhile every shrine among the Igbo is a community of spirits where different spirit-forces are represented with an altar. These exist in mutual complementarity with whichever principal spirit to which the particular shrine was dedicated. The generic name for these spirits is *Arusi*. There is another variant of *Arusi* called *Okpesi* which is more personalized or particularized by role. In every Igbo community, tens and hundreds of shrines are found dedicated to these spirit-forces. The Igbo developed a very personal relationship with them and are so occupied interacting with these spirit-forces that the Supreme Being is lost to their human activities. Yet from time to time, sacrifice was rendered to him called *Anyanwu na Eze Elu*, *Anyanwu na Agbala* or *Agbala na Eze Elu*, depending on the Igbo culture area, merely to acknowledge its continued existence. These are parts of the given; fundamental knowledge which have implications for the Igbo as a member of any other religious body and for the Igbo in the quest of reviving whatever they may deem as ancestral religion. They also need to be known before the Igbo is labelled as “Pagan” in the sense of brutish, uncivilized and devil worshipping.

Arusi in its essential form is spirit. Otherwise it is an oracle of the spirits or it is a socio-ethical covenant/principle coded in religious rituals. To understand the existential form of *Arusi* one needed to explore the world of spirits in Igbo religious culture. Basically, there are four domains of spirit operation in the Igbo universe ordered from the highest plain as *Aka*, *Chi*, *Anwu* and *Azi*. *Aka* is the domain of *Chukwu*, *Ndi Aka na Ndi Ushi* (God, primordial and primeval spirits) and other pure spirits deemed by the Igbo, all known as *Umaka*. They however exist and the Igbo cannot fathom or access their operations. However, the Igbo is not in the habit of giving up, yet the Igbo know better than keeping their lives on hold to achieve one feat – *Ana-eme onwa*, *ana-eme ibe ya* (performing one action does not stall another), *Ana-azọ ala*, *onye ji Ji ana-akonye* (while the dispute about land ownership is going on, whichever party having yams is free to go on cultivating them). While the Igbo did not give up figuring out the spiritual route to *Aka*, they engage the other domains, even as they sustain the quest for the unknown for a possible time of breaking through it.

Chi is the domain of *Umuchi*. *Umuchi* are myriads of spirits which accompany humans into earthly life. They have complex relationships with *Umanwu* and can manifest in the world of humans in those complex forms. Here can also be found *Ifejioku/Ihejioku/Njoku/Ajoku*,

Umuoku, *Umunka*, *Umuoma*, etc. For instance, in existential manifestation, *Agwu Chi*, *Ogwugwu Chi*, *Udo Chi*, *Chi Umuoku*, and so forth can be found, in spite of the fact that *Agwu*, *Ogwugwu*, *Udo* and *Umuoku* belong to the domain of *Anwu*.

Anwu is the domain of *Umu-anwu*, made up of *Ndi Ichie* (Ancestral spirits), *Ndi Mbu na Ndi Egede* (Primogenitors and progenitors), *Mmuo Ndi na-emere anyi ihe na Mmuo ndi anyi na-emere ihe* (Benevolent/Benefactor and Beneficiary spirits). The interesting thing here is that the Igbo can access this domain and ritualize activities of that interaction in human experiences. *Agwu*, *Ogwugwu*, *Udo*, *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afo*, *Nkwọ*, *Arọ*, *Ngene*, *Ofufe*, *Kamalu*, *Amadioha*, *Igwe*, *Ala*, *Ekwensu*, *Nome*, *Odo*, all belong to this domain and are often ritualized part of the Igbo environment.

Azi is the domain of *Umuazi*. Here is the domain of spiritual manifestations or existential domain of spirits peopled by *Dibia*, *Arusi*, *Okpesi*, *Mmonwu/Mmanwu* or *Mmuo/Maa*. These nomenclatures are generic and are manifestations of spirits or material representations of spiritual entities. In as much as in existential reality, these are either human beings, objects of nature or objects crafted by human hands, they are understood by the Igbo as essentially manifestations of spirits. They are the ritualized part of the environment as referred to earlier.

It is human beings who are at the epicenter of the Igbo universe; they are the principal players in the epic and epochal drama of life, mimicking all kinds of characters pre-existential and existential. They live a complex universe where their primary aim is engaging natural and spiritual phenomena which enhance or oppose their continued existence or survival in the universe. In the cause of this engagement, they are in the habit of ritualizing their encounters with these phenomena. This ritualization itself is religious in nature. Care must be taken to encounter these rituals, in order to understand their underpinnings.

From the foregoing, *Arusi* is the ritualization of human epic or epochal experience in engaging with the Igbo universe. In a generic sense, *Arusi*, *Mmonwu/Mmanwu/Mmuo/Maa*, *Okpesi* or *Dibia* are entirely the creation of human beings as a response to their existential predicament. Yet it will be wrong to leverage on this knowledge and regard these as merely physical when in a socio-religious sense, they are spirits. This is the way to understand *Nwanyi/Ogbodu mara Mmonwu, ya jee tite* (If a woman/non-initiate boasts of the knowledge of *Mmonwu*, let her/him cause it to manifest). In other words, phenomena or ordinary human actions among the Igbo may be dubbed spiritual, understood and treated so by initiates and non-initiates. If a non-initiate as much as claims knowledge of the ordinariness of phenomena, he/she dares not perform the rituals of it.

We have consistently presented these matters with a lot of diligence and carefulness so as not to tip over the slippery slope. May be it is now expedient to repeat, that the spiritual force of the Igbo universe is actually founded on or springs from a social force. However, the custodians and handlers of this social force are nothing without or outside the community which ultimately embodies these phenomena. Therefore, on the part of the custodian, reneging on the responsibility or demand to custody or handle the internal mechanisms of these forces, smacks of fatal consequences. While on the part of the *Arusi*, failing on the required effectiveness at the base of its covenant is also fatal. Hence the saying *Oo Nnewi si Edo nwere Nkwọ, Nkwọ jiri buru Nkwọ Edo* (It is the people of Nnewi who caused Edo deity to custody Nkwọ square, now Nkwọ square bears the identity of Edo's Nkwọ square). This gives the people of Nnewi the

power and authority to dispossess Edo of Nkwọ square by an act of the community, since it was the same community which empowered it to sway over Nkwọ in the first place. Among the Igbo, the community is everything, the community is *Arusi*, the community is *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu/Mmuo/Maa*, the community is *Dibia*, the community is religion, the community is society and the community is deity. Without the community, there is nothing.

The modern revivalist must pay attention to this truth which should suggest only one thing. It is the Igbo community which begs to be revived, not deities. The Igbo spirit is in the Igbo community. If the Igbo denizens have fallen short of their essence, and odds rare up heads against them, then it is the community which needed to be revived. The Igbo spirit will continue to be in exile until the Igbo community is revived and re-consecrated. This revival and re-consecration need not be within the compass of the old religious culture, it can be in the new, but there must be the bond and unity of community which is at the heart of Igbo spirituality. Having said all these, we come back to the question of whether the Igbo pays homage to a carved image. The answer will be 'No' simply because *Arusi* is not a carved image. The carved image in every groove or shrine is a physical evidence of a community's covenant, consensus or agreement among themselves and together with spirits. What is referred to as *Arusi* is the covenant, consensus or agreement which has been spiritualized with a ritual, reneging over which smacks of dire consequences.

At this juncture, let us also note that using abridgements for coding is not foreign to the Igbo; it is in fact central to their communication system. This is part of why a lot have been lost with the shrinking and near extinction of experts whose onus it was to interpret these codes. *Arusi* is, most likely, an abridged word. Not being sure of what it stands for, it has been suggested that *Arusi* derives from either of these three suggested ideas:

Arụ kwusi: This lays credence to our earlier position that the Igbo live, engaging with the natural and spiritual forces enhancing or opposing their continued existence in whatever environment they found themselves. Whatever opposes or poses a (mortal) challenge to the Igbo is easily regarded as taboo or abomination. *Arụ kwusi* simply implies an imperative to the cessation of taboo or abomination. In this sense, *Arusi* is the community's covenant, consensus or agreement to cause the cessation of taboo or abomination. For instance, a community may discover that a particular bush breeds giant snails without human intervention. The community might decide to restrict or completely ban human activities in the bush merely to preserve that specie in its natural ecosystem. To achieve this, they may decide to institute *Arusi* in the Area. Assuming they decided that the *Arusi* will be *Udo* because *Udo* is a male spirit which seeks justice for the wickedness meted out to it by those whom his father died saving; who even schemed the death of his father. They may reason that *Udo* will be angry enough to deal mercilessly with whoever contravenes their covenant, consensus or agreement. To institute that spirit as *Arusi*, the community, the kind of punishment for culprits, the ransom payable by the community for both the institution and renewal of the covenant will be ritualized. In this way, the community has categorized hunting snails in that bush as *Arụ* (Taboo/abomination) and having performed this ritual, hunting (the taboo) will cease (*Kwusi*). Considering this interpretation, *Arusi* is the abridgement/contraction of *Arụ kwusi*.

Arụkwu si: *Arụkwu*, *Achụkwu* or *Achịkwu* is an Igbo codename for spirit. *Arụkwu si* simply means "Thus spoke the spirits". A spiritual proclamation/injunction bears a spiritual force. If a community makes a declaration and causes it to become an oracle of the spirit by corresponding

ritual performance, that oracle becomes *Arusi*. For instance, there may be an existential situation of territorial integrity or boundary dispute and the invading community was far more powerful. So this community decides to institute *Ekwensu* spirit as deity on the disputed boundary area. *Ekwensu* is a spirit force notorious for its penchant for vengeful fight (Okpalike and Chukwu, 2022). No human or spiritual force is closed to its dare; it is always referred to as ruthless, merciless and unrelenting. Resorting to *Ekwensu* is precarious and dicey in a sense that once it is set on its way for a summary decimation of the enemy, even those who mobilized it cannot dare to stand on its path because even they are not safe. It is difficult to gauge or control the energy of *Ekwensu*: it is always likely to exceed its terminal. In contracting *Ekwensu*, it may demand that a human head must be sacrificed every seven years while the spirit in turn keeps their invading enemies in check. Notably, contract with *Ekwensu* is amorphous and uncertain; it can arbitrarily change terms at any time (Ndubuisi, 2019). The sacrifice of a human head thus becomes the oracle of *Ekwensu* and the secret of its effective protection of the community's boundary. This particular *Ekwensu* deity is energized on the community's acceptance of the spirit's oracle. Again, going by this narrative, *Arusi* is the abridgement/contraction of *Arukwu si* (Thus says the spirit).

Arusi Uka: *Arusi/Arushi Uka* simply means 'Cast no doubt'. In this sense, *Arusi* is that which can never be subjected to doubt. In other words the terms of institution and consecration is not subject to any doubt. The community which such *Arusi* serves are subject to any oracle emanating from it, favourable or unfavourable. Doubt or refusal to comply to demands made by the spirit, will smack of dire consequences and in many cases, death. *Arusi* is that about which the community is not free to reason or doubt; response to *Arusi* is an unflinching 'Yes'. For instance in the case of *Ekwensu* spirit force cited above, the spirit can rise any day and demand a human head, even outside its terms. The community which hosts it has no more option than aye. In this sense, *Arusi* is a ritualized symbol of the community's undoubted 'Aye', abridged or contracted from *Arusi/Arushi Uka* (That which is not subject to doubt).

This exercise shortly undertaken was to explore the essence of *Arusi* which is that often referred to as Idol in English translation. According to Onebunne (2021), "idol is synonymous with arusi as such" (p. 114). This is the point missed by most writers in Igbo religious culture. *Arusi* is not idol; it is spirit and to be more precise, it is the spirit of the people. Although the idea of Osewa (2005) quoted in Onebunne (2021:115) that *Ala* (Earth), *Igwe* (Sky), *Anyanwu* (Sun) and *Amadioha/Kamalu* (Thunder) are major deities, whereas *Ogwugwu*, *Uras* or *Ulas*, *Ich*, *Uchu*, *Iyi*, *Agwu* etc are lesser deities, could be acceptable, even then the Igbo reckons spirits according to the power and influence. Apparently, considering what has been said above, *Arusi* is not that carved image, sculpted earth or consecrated tree; *Arusi* is spirit, deity or force and is immaterial, intangible and invisible.

Meanwhile, Idolatry is the worship of a carved, sculpted or consecrated cult-image as though it were deity. That is not what the Igbo do. However, this does not negate the fact that not every Igbo has this depth of knowledge about *Arusi*. Some Igbo could actually think that veneration or reverence, or even in a general sense, worship, is paid to the effigy. However, the *Dibia* and other knowledgeable Igbo know this and would even prefer to keep the ordinary folk in ignorance of it as a means of exclusive possession of knowledge and social control which is often the case among the Igbo. Again, observation of the devotee of *Arusi* right in the shrine may suggest that *Arusi* is Idol, but in sincerity, what difference will a devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary make in her dedicated shrine? The ignorance of the devotee or observer does not

offer information as to the real understanding of any phenomenon in religion. *Arusi* is not Idol and even if it is, the Igbo does not worship either Idol or *Arusi*.

The word which transliterates worship in Igbo is *Ofufe*. In its full rendition, it is *Ofufe Nru/Nhu* which could have derived from *Ofufe Nrunye/Nhunye*. *Nhunye/Nrunye* is outpouring, it depicts the form of the act of *Ofufe*. Items for *Ofufe* is poured out to show abundance and reverence at the feet of the receiver. In traditional Igbo society, especially among parts which did not have monarchical tradition, there were chiefdoms; chiefdom in Igbo is *Umunna*. *Umunna* is not necessarily a collection of people marked by bloodline; they are a collection of people under the protection and leadership of a chief. Among them, with the biological descendants of the chiefs, could also be slaves too, sometimes the sacred *Osu* group, specially dedicated to religious rituals, minorities and migrants whose survival is predicated upon the chief's protection. This chief receives *Ofufe Nru/Nhu* from his subjects especially those under his protection who are not his progenies. *Ofufe Nru/Nhu* is pledge or gesture to renew loyalty which in its ceremonial and ritual form comes in the form of royalty paid during the season of harvest, because the land cultivated by these people definitely belong to the chiefs. Interestingly, this is the word which comes close to the English word 'Worship'. For *Arusi*, the Igbo use words like *Igo* (Invoke), *Ime* (Celebrate), *Iri* (Feast), *Ibu* (Minister), *Itu* (Appeal) and so on, never *Ife* (Paying homage). *Ife Arusi* is a Christian expression of what it deemed the Igbo do. As a matter of fact, *Ofufe* is also ritualized as a spirit force which custodies the loyalty of those under the chief's protection.

To understand the essence of *Arusi*, it is important to appeal to *Afa*. In *Afa* codex, *Aka*, *Akwu*, *Ete*, *Ijite* are concepts associated with *Arusi*. Meanwhile meanings in *Afa* emerge with dualities; in other words, the dual combinations of these concepts opens the world of its meaning. For instance, *Ijite Ete* is *Arusi*, without qualification. *Aka Akwu* is *Ndi Ichie* (Ancestors). *Ete Aka* is *Ihe mere gboo* (primordial event). *Ijite Aka* is *Ndi gboo* (Primogenitors). *Otule Aghali* is *Okwu ekwuru nuo iyi* (A proclamation founded on a covenant). Therefore the ontological fusion of *Ijite Ete sitere n'Aka Akwu* makes *Arusi* ***Ihe Ndi gboo debere nuo iyi*** (Deposit of ancestral covenant), *Oha zuru mee* (An act of the community), *Ekike ndi mbu na ndi egede* (Primogenitors' knot).

For the Igbo, God is One, Supreme, Infinite, but unapproachable and remote. Without the Christ factor, this description fits with the Christian God. It is important that in spite of the fact that Jews do not admit of the Christ-dimension of God, yet Christianity does not label the pagans. In that same reasoning, the Igbo is not pagan. Christianity admits of angels and spirits at the service of God and can represent these in crafted images. So also the Igbo believe in spirits of different kinds, some of which they believe are God's emissaries or intermediaries between God and human beings (Odiike, 2025). In the same vein, Christianity represents spirits in images, they do not worship them, but venerate them as sacred; the Igbo do the same, knowing full well that those are neither gods nor God. It is Christianity which created a different narrative.

The Revivalists' Albatross

Arusi is nothing in a physical form. It is essentially the spirit of a people. In a sense, their collective agreement, faith and will for which life and death makes no much difference. However, the Igbo also developed the capacity to conjure and expel the spirit forces of *Arusi*, though not outside conformity to their essential nature. This essential nature includes its *raison*

d'être, the community's purpose for instituting the *Arusi* in the first place and the terms on which the *Arusi* was instituted. All these are ritualized at the first instance of the institution of *Arusi*. There are very simple rules which govern the Igbo religious/spiritual spaces/practices, outside of which the energies they govern cannot be effective. For instance,

1. The *Arusi* of a community cannot be conjured or expelled without the community. The Igbo say "*Arusi anaghị enwe ọha, ọọ ọha na-enwe Arusi*" (*Arusi* does not own the people, it is the people who owns *Arusi*).
2. A single individual or group of individuals who do not represent the community of *Arusi* cannot revive *Arusi* initially expelled/abandoned by a community consensus.
3. An individual cannot bring in a personal *Arusi* in a property he/she does not own. *Onye enweghị Ala, tọọ ya Arusi, o mere ihe mmuo* (If one appeals to *Arusi* on a land which does not belong to him, he incurs the wrath of the spirits).
4. If a man had his personal *Okpesi*, *Agwu*, *Ikenga* or *Ofọ* which he did not hand on to any of his progenies, they die with him.
5. If a progeny decides to go the way of traditional religious culture, it is up to him or her to consecrate a fresh *Agwu*, *Ikenga* or *Ofọ*, so it will be wrong for such a person to think that he/she is mystically connected to *Arusi*, *Okpesi*, *Ikenga* or *Ofọ* in an ancestral line of descendants, if there was no proper handing on of same.

So the question of what the revivalists have actually revived lingers. The Igbo's is not just a religion in the modern sense, it is a culture deeply rooted in religious tradition, and as have been said, the Igbo lives religiously and dies religiously. More than systems and tenets; elements and objects, the Igbo believes in the possibility of possessing the power to run life according to his will. Nothing is outside their reach. Systems and tenets; elements and objects are at their service to achieve the next possibility of his dreams. The faith of the Igbo is not the kind taught by Judaism, Christianity and Islam; a faith in which human beings look up to elements and objects of religion helplessly and haplessly; holds on to systems and tenets even when they do not make sense of it. The Igbo do not accept mysteries to believe it, they create mysteries to deploy them to govern their space. Therefore the Igbo are fundamentally and unrepentantly Igbo whether they are practicing Christianity, Islam or Judaism.

The revivalists are trained in the Christian version of faith. They understand traditional religious culture as an alternative to Christianity. Therefore, they resurrect and improvise practices, believing them as mysteries. If they had good understanding of the Igbo religious spirit, they will know that being Igbo is the real religion which even Christianity cannot obliterate. Reviving the Igbo religious spirit is more potent than reviving systems and tenets; elements and objects. This religious spirit is intrinsically tied to natural moral demands. When that is done, it will not matter whether the Igbo is Christian, Islam or Jewish. Meanwhile, the Vatican Council II made clear the possibility and ways of being Christian and Igbo all at the same time. There are three Vatican II Council documents which emphasized inculturation, they are: (1) *Sacrosanctum Concilium* which emphasized the adaptation of the liturgy to local cultures and contexts. (2) *Gaudium et Spes* called for the Church's engagement with different cultures of the world and discern ways of interfacing with various traditions to foster a better humanity. (3) *Ad Gentes* charged the Church to learn from new cultures evolving with time

and adapting the gospel to specific needs of those cultures. The twenty first ecumenical council, Vatican II was convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and was concluded by Pope Paul VI in 1965. Before then, a renowned Igbo, Msgr Martin Maduka, was already on his way practicing inculturation because he believed that the Church should “substitute, and not obliterate or destroy the people’s culture”.

These revivalists seem ignorant of the pioneering efforts of some Igbo Catholic priests at inculturation of Christianity even before the Vatican II recommended it. Msgr Martin Okeke Maduka is a name which resonates with such efforts. According to Okafor and Onebunne (1996) on December 12, 1947, together with his brothers and friends, he launched a masquerade dance called *Achukwu Ndi Uka* (Christian *Achukwu*) in Ekwulobia (p.13). *Achukwu* is a masquerade dance originally from Ukpo in Dunukofia Local Government Area of Anambra State, in which some young people from Ekwulobia in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State were trained. They took the dance back to Ekwulobia and indigenized it. It became the most popular masquerade dance in pre-Christian Ekwulobia culture. Martin and his group were able to appropriate and convert it to a Christian way, causing the pre-Christian form to shut down. Martin took his inculturation ideas into Europe, especially North Wales, through intellectual rigours at Collegio Propaganda Fidei, Rome by 1950. He captioned this intellectual rigour and practice: “Theology of Incarnation”, ahead of Vatican II (Okafor and Onebunne, 1996, p. 16). Mmonwu/Mmanwu is at the heart of Igbo socio-religious tradition and as such it was not an easy feat for Martin and his colleagues to achieve this feat; they did even under the threat of spell and sorcery. He knew the internal dynamics of these phenomena, but did not denigrate them because he also knew their place in the Igbo religious reflexes. He rather found ways of harnessing them to boost understanding and adaptation of the Christian message among his people. His model of inculturation rendered the current revival efforts impotent. He pre-empted this era and charted the clear path to being Igbo and Christian at the same time.

Conclusion

The pre-Christian Igbo do not fall within the categories of paganism. Therefore, it is wrong to label them ‘pagans’. In accord with the criterion set by this work, in as much as God is found in the traditional Igbo religious culture which bears the character of the Christian God, at least in the accepted Jewish version of him, the Igbo is no more or less pagan than the Jew. Neo-paganism in the West is entirely a different kettle of fish. Witchcraft, Sorcery, idolatry, Druidry, Magic, Divination, Nature-based rituals, Heathenry and so forth are practices in nature worship, animism, pantheism, polytheism and so forth. Traditional religious culture in Africa and Igbo land from its ancestral root is service and subservience to God, spirits and powers at whose mercy human beings continue to exist. Paganism in the West is harnessing, exploiting and utilizing the power of nature by human beings. This distinction has to be made, so that the western criterion upon which practices are identified among Africans and the Igbo as equivalent of ancient western religious practices need to be re-examined.

This work found that God, even if it be of the Jewish version, is not absent in Ancient African religious culture. The worship of idols and perverted religious practices as deemed in the bible of Ancient Near East, or deemed in Christianity of the West, is not found in Africa. If Christian missionaries deemed it so, it is time Africans who converted to Christianity changed that narrative. Christian authenticity does not exclude native or natural identity. Models of Christian belief systems can be found in ancient African and Igbo religious culture like we established

with the female *Ogwugwu* spirit. The Igbo common folk may look upon or regard images and effigies of spirits as the object of reverence, invocation, appeal or conjuration, but those who have and custody the real Igbo understanding of these phenomena know that more than those, the unseen God and spirits are the real objects of their religious culture.

This work concludes that the times and environment in Africa has changed. Culture changed with these too in a very significant way. The ancient Igbo religious culture which we used as paradigm in this work is essentially environmental and time constrained. It is environmental in a sense that it is interiorly tied to architecture, landscape designs, environment and most importantly family and community cohesion. It is time constrained in a sense that the Igbo keep faith to it as long as it is evidently effective in their day to day existence and affairs. The Igbo has the tendency of abandoning or even severing connection with spirits or religious systems which failed its denizens especially in their times of need. If the Christian religious system and their God proves more effective for the Igbo at this time, it is still Igbo by nature to let go of their former religious ways to embrace it. Converting to Christianity is being Igbo which even the ancestors endorsed, fostered, nurtured and encouraged. This is contrary to the idea of the revivalists. Furthermore, the new Igbo environment was crafted to excise the Igbo from the spirits and elements of the ancient religious systems, its religious forms cannot be revived in the present environment.

The new or foreign religions have come to stay and have created a new generation of Africans who have isolated religion as an aspect of life. They are different from the ancient Africans for whom religion is life itself. However, since they must continue to be Africans, in whatever religion they find themselves, they still bear the immortal evidence of that ancient religious reflexes, which in their westernized minds, they had reneged from. This is because to be African is to be that religious being whose ontological existence is religious. Therefore, the African brings his/her naturally religious self to a new religious environment to be Christian or Muslim. Therefore the revivalist is not more Igbo than the faithful Christian and the faithful Christian is not more Christian than the revivalist except that the two have not struck that chord of commonality which will generate the third religious force. This religious force may be Christian, but not less Igbo. Those who are called neo-pagans among the Igbo are Christians who apostatized. Igbo Christianity should look on them as fallen children whose fall was not entirely their making. Igbo Christianity have the need to look back on the ancient Igbo religious culture and see open avenues through which their healing may come, but most importantly, areas of connecting with the Igbo religious culture to build a firmer foundation for itself.

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