

Exploring Paganism and Indigenous Spirituality: The Evolution of Igbo Religious Practices in Southeastern Nigeria

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DOI:[10.56201/jhsp.vol.11.no3.2025.pg186.192](https://doi.org/10.56201/jhsp.vol.11.no3.2025.pg186.192)

Abstract

This article explores the intricate relationship between paganism and the original religious practices of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, challenging the conventional understanding of paganism within this unique cultural context. It begins by defining paganism as a polytheistic, nature-based belief system that historically connotes abominable practices, especially in relation to the Igbo's own spiritual heritage, characterized by worship of the Supreme Deity, ancestor veneration, and diverse deities governing natural forces. Through an examination of the historical inception of paganism in Igboland, the study highlights the influence of external groups, such as the Igala, in propagating cultic practices which initially conflicted with the Igbo's traditional customs. The paper further explores the institution of idols – delineating the gruesome rituals involved in idol creation and covenant binding – and discusses the consequential fragmentation of Igbo society and the social rivalries arising from diverse idol worship. Additionally, it offers insights into methods employed by the community to undo the influence of idols, emphasizing the potential for renunciation in reclaiming cultural identity. The article consistently emphasizes the need for a genuine understanding of these beliefs and practices, suggesting strategies that combine cultural appreciation with contemporary spiritual frameworks to promote harmony and continuity in Igbo society in the face of challenges from neo-paganism.

Keywords: Paganism, Igbo Religion, Ancestor Veneration, Cultism, Idol Worship.

1. Introduction

Paganism is a term used to describe a diverse array of religious traditions that are typically polytheistic, nature-based, and pre-Christian (Farrar, 1999). Historically, the term "pagan" was employed by early Christians to refer to individuals who practised polytheistic religions. These religions were often deeply tied to specific cultures and regions, such as ancient Greek, Roman, Norse, and Celtic traditions.

However, paganism in Igboland must be distinguished from the traditional religious practices of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Prior to the spread of Christianity and Islam, the Igbo people adhered to a complex and rich spiritual system that entailed the worship of various deities and spirits, ancestor veneration, and the observance of numerous rituals and festivals (Ezinne, 2013).

Despite the influence of Christianity and Islam, many traditional Igbo religious practices persist, often blending with contemporary beliefs. This paper aims to explore the concept of paganism as it relates to Igbo society, examining its inception, its impact on Igbo culture, and its evolution into

a form of cultism. By delving into the historical and cultural context of Igbo spiritual practices, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how paganism was introduced and transformed within Igboland, and its implications on the social and religious fabric of the Igbo people.

2. The Original Religion of the Igbo People

The Igbo people are naturally inclined towards religiosity, with their spiritual beliefs permeating many aspects of their lives. They approach their daily lives with a strong sense of devotion, often manifesting in their thoughts, conversations, and actions.

However, the original religion of the Igbo people can be referred to as Acestorism, which shares some similarities with Judaism (Isichei, 2004). At its core is the belief in the existence of one Supreme Deity, known as Ezechitoke, who is considered the Creator, King, and Spirit. There are also numerous other deities associated with natural forces and aspects of life, such as Ala (the earth goddess), Amadioha (the god of thunder), and Agwu (the spirit of divination) (Ezinne, 2013). These deities serve as intermediaries between humans and God.

Furthermore, they hold their ancestors in high esteem, referring to them as saints (ndiichie). This is where the name Acestorism is derived from. The Igbo people believe that their ancestors are closer to God and can influence Him to favour the living (Onwuatiegwu, 2023). In return, the living show gratitude by offering libations and other gifts (Ezinne, 2013). Thus, in Igbo-African tradition, there is a reciprocal relationship between the ancestors and their living relatives.

Key elements of traditional Igbo religion include:

Deities and Spirits: The Igbo ancestors believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, often referred to as Chukwu or Chineke (Onwuatiegwu & Osigwe, 2024). There are also numerous other deities associated with natural forces and aspects of life, such as Ala (the earth goddess), Amadioha (the god of thunder), and Agwu (the spirit of divination) (Ezinne, 2013). They recognized that this Supreme Being and other unseen forces played a vital role in the functioning of the world and the events that occurred within it. These forces were seen as powerful and beyond human comprehension. The Igbo people acknowledged their limited understanding and attributed the wonders of the world to the influence of these beings (Onwuatiegwu & Osigwe, 2024).

Agwu: Agwu refers to the spiritual force or deity responsible for endowing individuals with special gifts and talents. Some cultural contexts believe in negative agwu, also known as agwu okpanghasasi, which is regarded as an evil spirit that can hinder people's gifts, talents, or destinies (Igwezie, 2011).

Ancestor Worship: Ancestors are highly revered in Igbo culture. They are believed to influence the lives of their descendants and are honoured through rituals, offerings, and the maintenance of ancestral shrines (Ezinne, 2013).

Rituals and Festivals: Various ceremonies mark important events in the agricultural calendar, life stages, and communal activities. These include the New Yam Festival, which celebrates the harvest, and rites of passage like birth, marriage, and death (Igwezie, 2011).

Divination and Oracles: Divination is an essential aspect of Igbo spirituality. The Afa oracles and other divinatory systems are used to seek guidance from the spiritual realm, make decisions, and understand future events (Ezinne, 2013).

Sacred Spaces and Objects: Shrines, sacred forests, and objects like Ofo (staff of authority) hold significant spiritual value. They serve as points of contact between the physical and spiritual worlds (Igwezie, 2011).

Despite the influence of Christianity and other modern religions, many elements of traditional Igbo religion persist, often blending with contemporary beliefs and practices.

3. Inception of Paganism in Igboland

The name “alusi”, which is the Igbo equivalent of idols, implies abomination. It is derived from two Igbo words – alu and si. “Alu” means abomination (Ekwem, 1989) and “si” implies prescriptions. Idol worshipping is originally considered an abominable thing for the original Igbo man. Those who practised the worship of idols were considered as believers in abominable practices (what “alu” prescribed) (Onwuatiegwu, 2023). However, as the Igbo say, ‘abomination with the passage of time often turns into a tradition’ (alu gbaa afo o bulu omenani) (Nwala, 1985). Some of these abominable practices began to find their way into the cultural beliefs and practices of the Igbo people with time.

To demonstrate the fact that idol worship is abominable to the Igbo, let us consider the issue of death. At the death of a “familied” man in Igbo land, members of the family in those good old days were not allowed to cry until certain rituals were performed (Okoro, 1981). Such rituals included cleansing the dead person of any idol involvement. This also involved ritually tooth-picking the dead man’s teeth of any meat he might have eaten at the shrine of the idol (Achebe, 1958). It was done in order to free the dead from daint worship of idols (Onwuatiegwu, 2023).

After the ritual, the dead would then be dressed to lie in state and people would begin to cry. During the funeral, after undoing the dead man’s bond with idols, the reconciliation sacrifice and placation was made. This is called “aja eze enu” (sacrifice to the king of heaven) (Obi, 1992). Since the Igbo were now far away from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and as they did not have any particular altar for God, the sacrifice was hung between heaven and earth. It was done by planting two poles in the ground and joining them with a rope and the sacrifice hanging on the rope. This was a symbolic demonstration that life comes from God and to God every life goes back, and that God has the final say in matters of the judgement of the dead.

The traditional religion of the Igbo people is rooted in their civilised culture (Nwosu, 1984). Thus, it is argued that the primitivity and uncivil practices in the Igbo culture are owed to the influx of paganism into the Igbo traditional society. It follows that practices involving the spilling of blood and ritual killings were all accompaniments of paganism (Uche, 1990). For the Igbo, blood is held sacred no matter whose blood it may be (Onwubiko, 1983). Hence, the issue of ritual killings and human sacrifices is foreign to the original Igbo-African religious practices and, therefore, a contradiction to the Igbo ontological conception of life.

4. Paganism as Cultism in Igbo Society

Paganism started in Igbo land as a cultic sect and was practiced by few initiates. It was brought into the northern Igboland by the Igala people (Anozie, 2013). According to Anozie, “the Igala people were known for their paganistic cultic practices, which they brought with them when they entered into the northern Igboland” (Anozie, 2013). This was not a political inversion, but a religious invasion. As noted by Njoku (2015), “religion was used by the Igala people as an instrument of colonialism”. When the Igala people entered into the northern Igbo areas, they came

in with their paganistic cultic religion and the Atah of Igala people was collecting tax and enforcing discipline (or rather compliance) through the instrumentality of masquerades (Nwosu, 2012). The Nri people assisted in spreading Paganism to the other parts of Igboland (Anozie, 2013). Later on, the influence, though not by persuasion but by compulsion, started expanding and many more were roped into it (Njoku, 2015). After a period of time, it penetrated the Igbo culture and eventually usurped it. As noted by Igwe (2011), "the original religious beliefs of the Igbo people were not pagan in nature". However, as observed by Nwosu (2012), "the Igbo are known for their ecumenical mindset and accommodating way of life, as reflected in their philosophy of 'Egbe belu ugo belu' – meaning, live and let live". As a result, they welcomed the introduction of diverse deities and idols into their land, influenced by the various races and tribes encountered during their extensive travels.

5. Institution of Idols in Igbo Society

The institution of idols is the clear consciousness that it is engrossed in satanism and primitivity. To institute an idol, a pit of about ten to twelve feet is dug. Then an unfortunate person is kidnapped and his legs tied together with rope. The person is then hung upside down the pit with the legs across a strong stick. The individual will be struggling for life and gasping and cursing until the person dies. Once the person dies, they will cut the stick so that the corpse can fall into the pit. The pit is covered with mud until it remains about four feet deep. Some local herbs such as "anasi" and "okilisi" are burnt and put into the pit. After this, a powerful medicine man or woman – "oke dibia" – is hired to hinder the spirit of vengeance which they believe has possessed that portion of land against causing havoc on them. The dibia will either use a sheep or a goat and remove its eyes and throw the animal into the pit asking the spirit to go blind and not to be able to trace the perpetrators for vengeance. With other condiments thrown into the pit, the pit is covered (Onwuatuegwu, 2023). The second stage is covenantal bond. The people concerned then enter into covenant with whichever spirit (Eze, 2001) of vengeance that has possessed the place. They will name their demands. This includes that the spirit, instead of bringing catastrophe on them, should divert the havoc to their enemies or neighbours instead. On their own side, they will promise what they will be offering to the spirit every particular month each year. This is why each idol has a particular time or month of the year in which it is officially placated and worshipped (Onwuatuegwu, 2023). The third stage is the sealing of the covenant. A particular animal such as python, tortoise, lizard, snail, monkey, squirrel, grasscutter, etc. is used to seal the covenant with the idol. Little wonder it is a taboo to eat certain animals in some places (Umejesi, 1994). This is because there is the belief that once the animal is used to seal the covenant, undoubtedly, the spirit in question could appear in physical form as the animal in question. Hence, they avoid killing or eating such an animal to avoid incurring the wrath of the idol or god.

The fourth stage is binding the idol on oath. This is done by telling the idol that if it goes against the oath of understanding and begins to do the opposite, then the sea that swallows spirits will swallow it. This implies the destruction of the idol in question.

6. Ways of Undoing an Idol

There are two major ways to nullify the efficacy and effectiveness of an idol (Agbasiere, 2002), namely "njupu" and "nsubu".

The method of "njupu" involves contacting the community from which the idol was originally obtained and asking them to come and remove it. They will then specify their fee and the materials

needed for the idol's removal. Once these arrangements are made, they will come and perform their ritual incantations. At the end of the ceremony, they will strike young palm leaves against the location of the idol, symbolically removing it.

On the other hand, "nsubu" refers to the worshippers gathering in front of the idol to publicly renounce it. This act alone renders the idol ineffective.

These two methods are believed to be very effective among the Igbo people. It must be noted that once the devotees abandon or destroy a deity, the existence of the divinity is terminated (Onwuaturuegwu, 2022), and the divinity automatically becomes an object of ridicule and caricature or mere inanimate object (Barber, 2006).

7. Conclusion

The practice of idol worship is not only a religious phenomenon but also has social and cultural implications. It has contributed to the fragmentation of Igbo society, with different groups and communities worshipping different idols and engaging in rivalrous practices. This has led to conflicts and competition among different groups, which can undermine social cohesion and stability.

In light of these findings, it is essential to promote a better understanding of the roots and implications of paganism and idol worship in Igboland. This requires an insightful knowledge of the Igbo culture and traditions and, therefore better equipped to emancipate the Igbo culture from the crunch of paganism.

Admittedly, the challenge of neo-paganism in Igboland requires a comprehensive response that addresses both the spiritual and social dimensions of this phenomenon. By promoting a deeper understanding of Igbo culture, we can work towards a more just and equitable society where all individuals can thrive and flourish.

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