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Religious Change and Quality of Work Life of Traditional religious Functionaries in Contemporary Ikeduru Society: Some Psychosocial Concerns

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Abstract

Everything under the universe undergoes a process of change except change itself which is said to be the only permanent thing on earth. Religious traditions of mankind have evolved from one stage of development to another usually from primitive to a more advanced state. Religious behaviour, activities and beliefs of a group or an individual equally undergo a process of change and such change is not without some psychosocial concerns in the society. It is on this note that this paper seeks to examine religious change and quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries in contemporary Ikeduru society: some psychosocial concerns. After clarification of key concepts used in the study, it goes ahead to look at traditional religion in the political landscape of Ikeduru ancient kingdom; religious change in Ikeduru traditional religion; causes of religious change in Ikeduru traditional religion; quality of work life and the place of traditional religious functionaries in Ikeduru ancient kingdom; religious change in the quality of work life of contemporary Ikeduru traditional religious functionaries; effects of religious change on the quality of worklife of traditional religious functionaries. Some psychosocial concerns on change in the quality of worklife of traditional religious functionaries; and prospects of traditional religious functionaries in contemporary Ikeduru society. The paper- finally concludes by remarking that the sharp decline in relevance of traditional religious functionaries is attributable to many factors, among which is, abuse of their sacred office through greed and connivance with unscrupulous individuals in the society in perpetration of evil practices- in the society for mere material gains. The paper, thus, recommends, among others, that traditional religious functionaries should channel their spiritual power to the subjugation of malevolent forces believed to be responsible for untimely deaths of youths, business failure, increased cases of terminal diseases, and inter community clashed in Ikeduru society.

Keywords: Functionaries, Ikeduru society, traditional religion, religious change, quality, worklife

Introduction

Traditional religion is an aspect of religion, a phenomenon that entails, among others, man's relationship with spiritual beings, beliefs and practices that are tended towards the maintenance of this relationship. Man identifies with religion for a galaxy of spiritual, emotional, moral, psychological, physiological, social, economic and political reasons among which are, the quest for spiritual fulfillment; the need for ethical and moral guidance; sense of purpose and belonging (Maceleru, 2016 in Iosif, 2023); to enjoy well-structured individual and collective identities; social cohesion and harmony; the need to shape governance and political ideologies of the society (Woodring, 2020); and to derive innovative ideas for enhancement of one's economic performance in the society. As observed by Iosif (2023), religion has been an integral part of human societies from their inception, influencing cultural norms, ethical principles and political structures. As a significant part of societies and human experience, it shapes how individuals react to the society in which they live (Aniekan, 2018).

African Traditional Religion, like some other religions can be found in all societies in Africa. It is the indigenous religion of

Africans founded by their fore-bears. It evolved from the life and culture of the Africans and has been in transmission from generation to generation (Aniekan, 2018). Igbo traditional religion, like other traditional Religions in Africa is fundamentally indigenous to the people and was communicated to the Igbo by their ancestors. Beliefs in Chukwu or Chineke, as the creator of the universe and all mankind, is central in Igbo traditional religion. Chukwu or Chineke is said to be working in synergy with certain deities or divinities in the theocratic governance of the universe, (Onunwa, 2005). Examples of such deities or divinities include, Ala, (the earth goddess) which is regarded as the chief divinity, Anyanwu (the sun goddess), Amadioha (thunder divinity), Agwu (the divinity in charge of herbal medicine), and Ancestors (spirits of dead members of the people's families and kindreds) who lived good life, died good death and were given befitting burials by their living kits and kins.

Igbo traditional religion has an array of religious functionaries who function in their capacity in teaching, inculcating, disseminating and sustaining norms, Values, beliefs, practices and praxis of the traditional religion among the people. The quality of traditional religion among the Igbo depends

on the quality of roles and services of the various functionaries serving in different capacities in the system. Cambridge Dictionary defines functionaries as persons who function in specified capacities, especially in organizations or government services; those holding offices in any organization. By implication traditional religious functionaries are those who perform specified functions in traditional religion and culture to ensure its existential sustainability in our environment. They are the main stakeholders in Igbo traditional religion and culture who bring the impact, the influence, and the reality of the religion and culture to the door steps of the people through their various services. Igbo traditional religious functionaries include priests and priestesses of different deities, diviners, traditional medicine men, witch doctors, traditional birth attendants, oji-ofor, Ndi-nze, Ozo title holders and Ndi opara (family clan heads) and so on.

In the recent time, Igbo Traditional society has witnessed a lot of changes with the advent of Christianity and other agents of social religious change, putting Igbo Traditional Religion in a precarious situation. Such religious change is described by Kalu (2002, p.365) in his general remark thus:

The state of Igbo religion and the traditional culture as a whole has remained precarious since the intrusion into the religion, from mid-1800, of the forces of the socio-religious change from the western hemisphere-Christianity, commerce and colonialism. The encounter of the Igbo with the Christian missionaries, European merchants and British Colonial Administration brought in its wake the events which gradually but surely dislocated and transformed Igbo traditional society.

Religious change is an integral part Igbo traditional religion, which like other traditional religions is not insulated from cross-cultural and external influences. Religious change, in this context is the process by which Igbo people come to forsake their traditional religions for Christianity or other forms of religions. Observation has shown that greater number of Igbo people abandoned their indigenous religious practices for Christianity when it came to shores of Nigeria in the mid 1800. This trend has continued till date.

Among the people of Ikeduru Local government Area of Imo state, Christianity and Western cultural influences have succeeded in eroding the rich cultural heritage of Ikeduru people, such as respect for Eke day and powerful deities like Ogbunshiegbe, Amaimo, Amadioha,

Eziema, Ezealaanyanwu and Ogwugwu (Akudinobi per interview 12/11/23). Shrines of their deities and sacred places dedicated for communal act of worship, sacrifice, prayer and performance of certain initiation rites have gone into extinction. Taboos (ritual avoidances) and sanctions that sustained and underpinned the sanctity and sacredness of sacred places and some traditional religious practices have been relegated to the background as a result of the people exposure to Christianity and modern ways of life. (Bethel Nwiwu, personal interview 22/11/23). Similarly, Christianity and other agents of religious change have continued to take their toll of the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries, causing significant variations and alterations in their approaches to services, quality and level of commitment. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to examine religious change and quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries in contemporary Ikeduru society: Some psycho-social concerns.

Clarification of Key Concepts

Concepts of Religious Change:

Different scholars have perceived religious change from different socio-religious and cultural perspectives. Kalu (2002)

conceptualizes religious change as a gradual but sure dislocation and transformation of people's religious beliefs and practices over time. Religious change, according to Kalu, is part and parcel of every human religious tradition and not only Igbo traditional religion.

Religious change, according to Study Smarter (2024) is reform within a single religion that changes the practice of faith from within the Church's administration. It can also mean converting to another religion, abandoning the beliefs of one faith in favour of another. Religious change can occur as the result of social and political change. Religious change can also be seen as a modification or alteration in mode of operation, doctrines, theology, beliefs, values and patterns of church-state and inter-church relationship of a particular religious group religion involves, among others, a system of social relationship which series of change in other parts. Religious change is often triggered by social in the society.

Traditional Religion

Olademo, Owolabi and Adewale (2018), describe African Traditional Religion as the indigenous religion of the Africans which was handed over from one generation to another by word of mouth until recent

attempts at documentation. The title “African Tradition Religion” presents an assumed unitary portrait of the religions of the Africa. Though it is true that many features of religion and its practice are similar across Africa, it would be erroneous to assume that all African religions are the same. Arinze (2021) describes traditional religion as belief in Supreme Being (God) and other divinities. It is a religion that stands as part of the cultural heritage of the people of Africa. It is found in all areas of their personal lives and dominated their thinking to such extent that it is bound up with the traditional way of life which in turn shaped the religion as well. According to him, African traditional religion has no written scripture or sacred book, but is written on people hearts and religious experience is one of the world recognized religions such as Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. Therefore, traditional religion is passed on from generation to generation through myths, proverbs, riddles, stories and legends.

Gehman (2021), sees traditional religion as a religion that is indigenous to a particular people which form their religious background. When things begin to fall apart and the centre could no longer hold, people quickly resort to their traditional religion as a way out. It is a religion that is planted within

the cultural and social realities of a people. African traditional religion as an indigenous religion of African people does not have a historical founder, scripture and codified doctrines. It evolved from the culture of the people and its scripture is the people mind and environment and is therefore found everywhere among the people of Africa. Amaechi (2005), conceptualizes African traditional religion as the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. According to him, it is traditional and indigenous to Africa. It could also be called the native religion of Africa. The religion is called African because it originated from Africa and is primarily practice by Africans.

Religious Functionaries

Hornby (1995) defines the [term "religious" as meaning "connected with religion or a particular religion". Thus, religions comes to mean being part of a particular religion or associated with religion. He defines "functionary" as a person with official duties. Cambridge Dictionary defines functionary as a person who functions in a specified capacity, especially in an organization or government service; one holding office in any organization. On this note, religious functionaries come to mean those who function in specified capacities in a particular

religion or religious organization; those with official duties to perform in a particular religion. If one domesticates the above definition in Igbo traditional religion, it becomes, "those with specified official duties or roles to perform in Igbo traditional religion.

Quality of Work life

Quality is defined by Hornby (1995) as standard of something when compared to other things like it; how good or bad something is. It can equally mean the worth of something, rank, level of performance or rate of grade desirability when compared to other things like something.

In this regard, quality of work life comes to mean standard of worklife in comparison to other work life; the worth of work life; how good or bad work life is. The state of work life in terms of whether it worths or does not worth it or whether it is what it is supposed to be from all available standards.

Traditional Religion in the Political Landscape of Ikeduru Ancient Kingdom

Traditional religion of Ikeduru ancient kingdom was built on the people's traditional political and administrative systems. It drew strength, unwavering relevance, continuity and popularity from the people's traditional

political structure. Thus, any change or alteration in Ikeduru traditional religious practices reflected significantly on their traditional political system. This shows the age-long relationship between traditional religion and politics in Ikeduru ancient kingdom. As observed by Thakur (19J96) cited in Olosif (2023), throughout history, the relationship between religion and politics has been complex and multifaceted.

In Ikeduru ancient kingdom, the authorities of the Eze (King), Ndi Nze (Chiefs), Ozo, heads of families (Ndi Okpara), heads of kindreds, heads of villages, council of elders, Umuada, age grades and secret societies (Ekpe, Mmonwu, Okonko) derived their legitimacy through the people's traditional religion. Most decisions deliberations and interactions that took place in their assemblies had religious undertones (Olisa, 2002).

Performance of political roles was guided by consciousness to maintain harmony with the gods of the land and with fellow men, hence, religious beliefs, norms, values, rituals and sacrifices were accorded a place of prominence in their religious, political and socio-economic schemes of things. The family, kindred and village heads were also holders of their family, kindred or village

ofos (the ofo is the sacred stick of office and authority in Igboland) (Onunwa, 2005 p 78). In this regard, they wielded a lot of power in the administration of family, kindred and village lands, property, omen and shrines (Nwosu, 2002). They performed all rituals and sacrifices necessary for the general wellbeing and safety of their family, kindred or village. Thus, they were regarded as carriers of burdens of the gods (Olisa, 2002), solicitors, representatives, and middlemen between the people and the gods (deities). Their services were a pretty combination of religious and political functions, though sometimes, with a tinge of social and ethical functions which made it very complex and highly challenging.

Religious Change in Ikeduru Traditional Religion

Ikeduru traditional religion has undergone and has kept on undergoing different levels of change in our contemporary time, given its contact with agents of socio-religious change in Ikeduru land. Traditional religious practices, beliefs, norms, liturgies, and certain values of the people have witnessed significant alterations, and some cases, total transformation. In some villages and communities marital rites, naming ceremonies, burial rites, traditional oath-

taking, pouring libation to the ancestors, traditional prayer, divinatory practices, widowhood practices, taboos, ritual observances and so, on, have changed from what they used to be in the olden days. Kalu (2002) is of the view that religious change is not peculiar to only one section of Igboland but a phenomenon that is sweeping through the whole Igboland with far-reaching effects.

Causes of Religious Change in Ikeduru Traditional Religion

Ofusaia and Eboh (2015), highlight some agents of social change in our contemporary society as education, government, mass media, Christianity and Islam, (religious institution), communication, economy, industrialization and natural resources. According to them, education, whether formal or informal, traditional or western is central to societal change and development. Government directs the actions of its citizens in order to bring about social change and reform for the good of the society. Through mass media (broadcast and print media) information which shape and influence the opinion and perception of the masses on certain issues or places of the government is disseminated to the people. Religious institutions such as Christianity and Islam are regarded as powerful agents for changing

human attitude and behaviour. People take their teachings and doctrines as divine principles that must be obeyed and cherished. Collaborations that result from trade and commercial activities among different group of people often lead to exchange of ideas and new relationships which eventually culminate in significant social changes. Industrialization which Ofusaia and Eboh see as a part of modernization process is said to work hand in hand with technological Innovation brings about social and economic change in the society. Aguwa (1995), observes that the advent of Christianity and other agents of religious to Igboland cannot be without signs of change on the people's religious and cultural environment. The change which was far less significant than what was intended by the Christian missionary agents merely succeeded in practices but did not erode all allegiance of the people to Igbo traditional religion.

Quality of Worklife and the Place of Traditional Religious Functionaries in Ikeduru Ancient Kingdom

In Ikeduru ancient kingdom, traditional religious functionaries were accorded high respect and they wielded enormous influence because of the sacred nature of their office as servants of the gods or mouth-piece of

deities. They served with utmost diligence, devotion and unalloyed commitment with the ultimate aim of pleasing the gods (deities) and members of their kindred (umunna) and village (Ndi-obodo).

Traditional priests were seen in the shrine of their gods everyday, attending to their services and performing daily ritual sacrifices. They accorded these services priority attention, regardless of the fact that there were little or no material gains associated with it. According to Eze Andrew Osuji (personal interview, 2023), the traditional priests had the personal convictions that they were called to serve the gods or deities, and as such made up their minds to render quality services just for the joy of it and for the general wellbeing of the community.

The Duruagwu - the chief priests that attended to the services of Agwu deity, a deity in charge of all manner of herbal medicine and healing, provided quality traditional health care services to the people. These were also known as dibia ogwu (medicine man), prepared and administered all kinds of medicine for the physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing of the people (Emukah, 2016).

Dibia Afa (diviners) among them, also rendered services of divination, provided people with information about the mind of the gods in important issues of life, reveal secrets about hidden things, causes of sickness, the right ritual practices or sacrifice to perform to effect a cure to such sickness and so on. They worked with self-esteem, integrity and sense of personal contentment, without placing priority on monetary gains. No dibia afa (diviner) in Ikeduru ancient kingdom spoke when the gods have not spoken, nor did any made crafty or smart move to extort money from any of their clients. Family heads, kindred heads, village heads, the Ozos, the council of elders, the Ofo holders, all of them rendered selfless services guided their actions with ritual property, personal integrity and honesty (Onuekwusi, 2023).

Religious Change in the Quality of Worklife of Ikeduru Traditional Religious Functionaries

The wave of religious change has cause many things to fall apart in Igbo socio-cultural and religious landscape, therefore, the centre could no longer hold. Anybody who tours round Ikeduru land in the recent time, will easily observe that most shrines have fallen down, while some have been overgrown by

bushes, an evidence of dereliction of duty on the part of traditional priests. Most of the traditional priests now operate on de jure and not on de facto basis. They merely assume such official position (as priests of the gods) but in actual practices, they show no serious commitment to that effect. They are now operating in secret as a result of low self-esteem, shame and lack of personal conviction about the worth of their office and call.

Few traditional priests available lack the characteristic honesty and integrity that guided the services of traditional priests in Ikeduru ancient kingdom. Materialism, love of monetary gain, immoral behavior, unethical practices that were originally antithetical to the sacred office of traditional priesthood have gripped firmly on these contemporary traditional priests who care not about moral decorum and dignity of office.

Observation has shown that most family heads, kindred heads and village heads. Members of council of elders, Ofo holders and other religious functionaries, do not accord priority attention to the well-being of their members, but to their personal interests. They nowpay inadequate attention to religious and cultural matters, and in some cases move around with corrupt and

unscrupulous politicians who make them tell more lies, sponsor violence and electoral rigging in their kindred, villages and communities.

As observed by Onuekwusi (personal interview, 2023), most dibia afa (diviners) now divine lies, just to extort money from their clients. They do not fear the gods any more, nor do they care for the spiritual welfare of the people, who inquire from them things to do to create harmony between the people in the kindred, village or community and their various deities. Dibia Ogwu (medicine men) now place more emphasis on money and how to enrich themselves quickly than on quality health care delivery among Ikeduru people. In some cases, fake concoctions are administered to their patients in the name of herbal medicine, just to make money. The change, which is too numerous to mention, has reduced the quality of their services among the people and ultimately their worth in the religio-cultural landscape of Ikeduruland.

Effects of Religious Change on the Quality of Worklife of Traditional Religious Functionaries

Onyenze (2017) expresses the view that Christianity, education, modernization and other agents of socio-religious change have

put in motion a continuous alteration of Igbo socio-economic, religious, cultural, and political structures in the recent times. According to her, the moral order in Igboland is no longer what it used to be were predominantly involved in the practice of traditional religion prior to the advent of Christianity in Igboland in 1857. Firmly embedded in Igbo traditional religion are the traditional system of life, beliefs, practices, norms and values that hold the society together and also help to maintain a seamless moral order.

The coming of Christianity and other civilizing agents to Igboland influenced negatively the primacy of good moral character believed to be one of the bases for blissful life after death and for re-incarnation in Igbo traditional soteriology. They also reduced people's respect for traditional family tie, authorities of the family, lineage, clan and village heads. It is the contention of Ibenwa (2004) cited in Adiele and Okereke (2019) that the Christian culture has attacked and altered the way our people do most of their things today. It has altered the way we greet and dress and also impacted negatively on our indigenous occupation and farming. On arrival, it constituted not only a religious force disrupting the initial idyllic, happy and harmonious life, lived and observed by the

Igbo (Nkwoemezie in Adiele & Okereke 2019). Christianity marked a turning point in the socio-cultural and religious set up of the Igbo people.

Some Psycho-social Concerns of Change in the Quality of work life of Traditional Religious functionaries

Religious change in the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries, is no doubt, associated with some psycho-social concerns due to the way Ikeduru people perceive them and their roles in the whole fulcrum of their religio-cultural life. Observation has shown that some people still recognize the presence and power of some deities in Ikeduru traditional functionaries, thus, gradual or sudden shift from what they used to be to something less than that, sends a fearful signal that something serious is wrong, not only with the traditional religious functionaries, but also with the entire Ikeduru traditional religion.

With the wave of religious change sweeping across the whole Ikeduru land and its influence on the work life of traditional religious functionaries, those who feel they can derive spiritual solution from their services (as Agents of the gods) are now jittery and ashamed of going to then openly to solicit for help, because almost everybody

has turned to Christianity and modern way of life. They now find it difficult to express their desire and feeling over what they are very much convinced is the best or surest solution to their personal problems. The wind of religious change puts them in a state of dilemma as they cannot fully identify with Christianity or traditional religion.

There is a burgeoning apprehension that the religious change could engender social instability, value disorientation, disruption of the socio-moral order of Ikeduru society as the traditional religious functionaries, who are said to be the custodian of the people's spirituality, moral norms and values are being overwhelmed by the uncanny wind of religious change. Reduction in the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries is a direct reflection of diminishing or declining religious and cultural values, collapsing political, social and economic structures of the entire Ikeduru society.

Traditional religious functionaries are the pillars, model of honesty and cultural promotion, and culture of the Ikeduru people is their bond of unity, hence any alteration in the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries, especially; negative alteration or change, will invariably affect the unity of

the people and the whole tapestry of their traditional religion and culture.

Prospects of Traditional Religious Functionaries in Contemporary Ikeduru Society

In the midst of pervasive wave of religious change which has caused disruption to the people's old good socio-religious and cultural order; affected the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries and their approaches to religious functions, they still have good prospect in contemporary Ikeduru society. Some people still have regard for powerful deities found in Ikeduru land such as Ezeala Atnyanwu, whose shrine is situated beside Eke Inyishi

Market, Amadioha, thunder-deity whose Ugoaku, a deity responsible for wealth shrine is located beside Afor Eziamma market, Ezeala and prosperous endeavours; Ezeala Ogbanshi egbe, a deity of war; Ezeala Ogwugwu, a deity responsible for punishment of those committed serious moral infraction; and Ezeala Igbugu, a deity that is invoked for the act of vengeance (Eze Andrew Osuji, personal interview 2023). The implication is that some of their secret priests will continue to enjoy secret patronage of some people in the present day Ikeduru society.

The practice of consulting oracles, diviners and native doctors has not been totally phased out by Christianity in some villages and communities in Ikeduru land. This indicates that the future of traditional religion and its various functionaries is still very bright in those villages and communities in Ikeduru land. This is in line with Ikenga-Metuh (1987) who observed that certain traditional religious practices have persisted among the Igbo irrespective of major changes brought about by Christianity and western civilization.

Traditional oath-taking has remained in vogue in Ikeduru land, enjoying uninterrupted continuity among the people. Both Christians and traditionalists alike have adjudged it efficacious in the settlement of disputes among the people (Onwuliri, 2024). This has made the services of family, kindred, and village heads (Ofo holders) to continue to be relevant in Ikeduru religio-political and social schemes of things in the contemporary time. ^L

Conclusion

Religious change is not a new phenomenon in Ikeduru traditional religious experience. It has wielded influence in the people's socio-cultural, traditional religious and political landscape since the advent of Christianity

and other agents of religious and social change in Ikeduru ancient kingdom.

The change eroded the allegiance of the people to certain Igbo traditional religious of Ikeduru traditional society. The traditional system of that held the people together and also helped to maintain a seamless moral order and social stability were altered. Moreso, it exerted enormous influence on the quality of work life of traditional religious functionaries, reduced people's respect and value for their services and jolted some of them in the mire of low self-esteem in the society. This development has engendered an array of psycho-socially concerns among Ikeduru people as traditional religious functionaries were believed to be the custodian of the people's morality, representatives of the people before the gods, and pillars of stable and united traditional Ikeduru society.

Recommendations

To help traditional religious functionaries improve the quality of their work life in the midst of religious change in contemporary Ikeduru society, this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Traditional religious functionaries should channel their spiritual power towards the subjugation of malevolent forces believed to be responsible for untimely deaths of youths, business failures, increased cases of terminal diseases and inter-community clashes in Ikeduru society.
2. They should make honesty, integrity, self-contentment, discipline and social justice their guiding principles as they discharge their functions. Exemplary life style will endear them to the hearts of the people and also carve a niche for them in Ikeduru religio-cultural scheme of things.
3. Traditional priests should avoid low self-esteem and be bold to identify with the services of representing their people before the gods (deities), and attend to shrines of these gods (deities) without shame or fear.
4. They should try to desist from obnoxious practices that portray them in bad light before the public.
5. Traditional religious functionaries should strive to align their services and functions with Christian practices and modern way of life so as to continue to be relevant in the present

time and to enjoy the patronage of large number of Ikeduru people who are Christians.

6. Traditional medical practitioners should endeavour to combine herbal medicine with western orthodox medical.

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