Traditional Religion and African Common Norms: Influence on Igbo Language and Literature

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Abstract
A basic persistent trait of African societies is the importance of religion. It falls like a shaft of light across the entire spectrum of life, faced and undifferentiated at one end, and refracted and highly refined at the other. In art, language, law, and so on; religion occurs with authoritative force. African communities have consequently lived, moved and had their being in religion. Igboland, being a part of the African community, equally shares in this high religious consciousness. This paper however, gave the contributions of African traditional religion in shaping the norms, language and the literature of African communities. The writer articulated how the African reality is rooted in African religious expressions and in a complexity of norms and everyday life which together pervade the entire field of human existence. The writer further examined how these African values were shaped by the colonialists and western thoughts. The writer also investigated how the coming together of the African and western traditional values have either hindered or engendered African development so as to chart a way forward for African nations. The study portrayed how Chinua Achebe employs his key characters and scenes to portray Igbo philosophical values in its socio-political, metaphysical, religious and ethical aspects. This will help to strengthen the arguments of this study that Igbo norms and religious values can compete most strongly in substance and form with their western counterparts. Moreover, the scope of this study is Igbo area as one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria. The study employed the use of both primary and secondary sources of data collection.
Keywords: Traditional Religion, African Norms, Language, and Literature

Introduction
In a broad sense religion stands as the complex relationships between man and the divinity which also comprises all man's duties toward God. When the relationship is in the natural order, it is seen as a natural religion. When it is in the supernatural order, it is revealed religion. It is either in a natural and supernatural order that man renders to God such acts that befit the fact that He is supreme. It is also in the subject of religion and religious practices that man unravels the knowledge, moral philosophy, and the wisdom of God which defines his norms and values of existence. It is however these supernatural realities that contain the supernatural truths whereby God reveals Himself beyond the ordinary course of nature. In the ordinary course of nature God teaches man through created things, through the voice of man's conscious needs and desires.

The African traditional norms and religion arguably makes an excellent distinction between religion and morality. Of all the ethos of African traditional religion, moral virtues hold the first place. The prime virtue of African traditional religion is connected with the virtue of justice which connotes the idea of fairness as in doing unto others as one would want men to do unto him. Achebe (1986) notes that the African common norms can be ascertained through their myths, proverbs, metaphors, customs and taboos. The Igbo people as part of African society gives some glimpse of the African norms as enshrined in their everyday sayings thus:
   (a) Uwa di egwu (the world is an unfathomable mystery)
   (b) Uwa bu nke onye (no body owns the world).
These sayings and convictions reflect the people's idea of justice, good and evil, honour and dishonor etcetera. African society is a vast network of mutual agreements. The traditional norms and values are transferred from generations to generations to maintain continuity to social and civic customs. From the traditional society through modern periods, social morality is held overwhelmingly high. Literature is an undisputable social force known for exposing evil or commending good. It deals with universal truth attempting to control, direct or influence the future action of human beings with directive uses of languages (Roberts, 1999). Literary artists condemn the vicious attitudes predominant in their day or environment.

In traditional African society, moral ideas are enshrined in folktales and folklores. Finnegan (1971) avers that the folktale involves a command and a satire on human society and behaviours. It is thereby through this process that character building and social responsibility are taught and achieved in children. However, it is the outright erosion and breakdown of these traditional African values and culture that constitutes a moral decay which is detrimental to the society in general. The result has always been wrecked families, rootless children, prostitution and crimes of all sorts. A situation whereby the youths have fixated choice of passion for money regardless of endemic consequences of ill-gotten wealth.

Since building of a nation necessitates the building of the individuals, the African norms strives to building and cultivating the essential human values. These values ensures an egalitarian and equalitarian society. Mbiti (1967) writes that the African values are religious in essence which means that religion permeates every aspect of his life. This has made it difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between religion and culture. They are knitted and inseparable that religion is an essential part of African culture. Religion is as old as humanity and man's onward relationship towards the divine is a pervasive feature of its life. However, the researcher wishes to show in this study that traditional religion of the Africans has the potency of restoring the lost African values that have long been submerged by the flood of westernism and neocolonialism. Exactly what Chinua Achebe had toiled in various ways towards the detoxication of the cultural poison planted by western scholars, missionaries, and administrators. Achebe in Things Fall Apart is both an expounder and advocate of African norms and values in the widest sense of it. Africa's rich cultural heritage as well as her intellectual culture stands as a strong antidote to western cultural bigotry and chauvinism. The African traditional norms are embedded in its religious values which are preserved in the people's oral literature, language and law. Anasiudu (1997) termed it oral culture; a term he used to describe the original condition of orality that prevailed in Africa before the writing system came. The goal of this research however is to x-ray the inter-connectivity between the traditional religion and African common norms while disclosing its enormous influence on language and literature.

Igbo Language, and Literature's Influence on African Common Norms
One cannot conveniently discuss Igbo traditional norms and religion without a good understanding of Igbo language and literature. This is because of the enormous influence it welds on the subject matter. The language and the literature of the Igbo people is one that is mostly performed orally; the original condition of orality that prevailed in most Black Africa before the writing system began. Generally, literature can be defined according to Igboanusi (1999), that it is an expressed in relation to the society that owns it. When literature is defined in relation to the society that owns it, that is when the concept of Igbo (African) literature comes to play. In this light, talking from Ezejideaku's (1986) point of view, Igbo literature is all works done in Igbo language which could be oral or written works of art. This comprises all aspects of creative art communicated orally. It includes traditional drama, stories (oral narratives) poem such as lyrics, satires, elegy, anecdotes, proverbs, riddles and so on. Oral literature serves as the foundation for African creative art in language form.

Oral texts which form the basis of all poetic performances, are traditional materials based on the experiences and observations of the life lived by successive generations. They reflect the people's cultural values, beliefs, and practices. They are a creation of the past to state the rules and ethics of the society. They are meant to entertain, inform, instruct and guide the young generation. In some cases they are rendered in form of songs with satirical notes rendered when an individual misbehaves. The purpose of such is to check and correct some of the ill-practices, in the early Igbo society. They prompt men and women to behave in a desired and acceptable ways of the society. This satirical song is called *ikpe* in the standard form of Igbo, and *Ogbe* in Nise dialect, a dialect spoken around Awka (Okeke, 2009). No right thinking Igbo native in the past, would like to be satirized, and as such would conduct his or herself in the society's common norms and values so as to maintain peace and tranquility. These are some of the behaviours that can attract *Ikpe (Ogbe)* in a given Igbo society: (i) when a woman or man steals, (ii) when a woman wears men's attire, (iii) when a man constantly beats his wife, (iv) when a married woman becomes pregnant outside her husband, (v) when a woman

leaves her village to another village's market, for business transactions, on the day that somebody died in the community. These and many more are the Igbo common norms that when broken would attract the wrath of law *Ikpe/Iwu* upon a given individual. These norms and value system that a victim of it either changes automatically, or leaves the village to another place, because shame may not allow such a person to continue residing in that community.

In Igbo society, it is believed that once a child is born, he or she is no longer owned by the biological parents alone but by all and sundry in the community. That is why anybody that misbehaves would be corrected and disciplined when necessary. It is the responsibility of every Igbo adult to ensure peace and harmony in the society. The common African/Igbo norms and values is describable as composing the elemental, social, psychological and cultural forces of morality, virtue, peace, patience, and faithfulness. Unfortunately, these mores enshrined in the oral literature appears to be fading away. The few remaining ones have been more or less modernized to the western style. Satirical poems women used to affect positive changes in the lives of erring members of the society are not performed orally again (Okeke, 2009). The reason for this could be linked to the modern life style which created no room for traditional oral literature. In the contemporary Igbo literature, this deliberate discontinuation of the ancient ideas and thoughts, which form the bulk of traditional literature is attributed to a strong and conscious break from traditional forms and techniques of expression in maintenance of law and order in Igbo society.

Traditional Religious Articulation of African Common Norms

The cosmological articulation of African norms portrays the hierarchy of values in African traditional religion. This means that African norms always suggests religious values and virtues in a traditional African society that are highly esteemed. According to Ubaekwena (2015), African common norms in outlook encapsulates African religious feelings in such a way that religion permeates and influences the life experiences of Africans. African norms in association with religious experiences centre round certain religious beliefs which accounts for the fact that they covers a whole range of religious sentiments (Ezeanya, 1967). The Africans' incorporation of religious beliefs and aspirations in their value system is because religion controls the elements as well as specific aspects of their very existence (Ilogu, 1985). Thus, the norms in consonant with the African religious beliefs helps to maintain their ontological relationship which in turn helps them to respond to the controlling effects of their objects of worship. The above function constitutes the reason why Africans enshrine aspects of their assumptive worldview in their religion. By incorporating their norms and values to religious principles it induces fear and compels them to adhere to the stipulated code of conducts. Based on this position, enshrining the aspects of African common norms to religious values is a way of instilling fear in the people to conduct their lives in a diligent manner. Glenn (1998), writes that religion is that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and sacred and man's relationship thereto but which relate them to the known world in such that the group is provided with or approved by the supernatural.

According to Ubahakwe (1982), the religious impact on African norms is based on the fact that African cultural heritage are highly influenced by religious worldviews. In relation to maintaining African identity, African norms remains an authentic way of ritual expression of a person's religious identity. Without it a person remains a nonentity since his conducts defines his personal identity (Ekwunife, 1996). By implication, when an individual character is being molded by the African values, it identify's him wherever he finds himself. If this is the case, it means that when a child loses an opportunity of being molded in African way of life; such a character becomes compromised. However, it is a common belief among Africans that Africans practice what they believe and that African norms are part and parcel of those elements of African culture that makes African personhood unique.

For Africans, religion is life, and vice versa. It is irrational and impossible to divorce religion from life. No person can make any headway in life if he divorces himself from religion which is a pervasive force in African world. To be is to be religious. Mbiti(1970) captures this thus: "Africans are notoriously religious and each person has his own religious system with a set of beliefs and

practices… religion being the strongest element in Africa exerts the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned. In a nutshell, the Africans lives in a religious environment and maintains the religious atmosphere throughout his life; this is the philosophy behind African beliefs, myths, customs, traditions, morals etc". (p.69). Pope Paul VI (1968) observed this pervasive nature of religion in Africa thus: "The constant and general foundation of the African is their spiritual view of life" (p.76). Mbiti (1975) writes that all African peoples believe in God and God is in the centre of their beliefs and practices. It is an established fact that the presence of God permeates African life as the prime controller of the universe.

The Relevance of African Common Norms in Maintaining Law and Order in the Contemporary Igbo Society

African religion and culture are reflected in the norms and values of the people that they are still very relevant in the present African/Igbo society. This is based on the fact that African world has both spiritual and physical roots which intermingle and communicate with one another and yet maintaining their unique functions. Through the cults of lesser gods, God the creator, is worshipped and honoured. The link between the ancestors and the living is recognized in Africa and is expressed in the concept of communalism. These ancestors take active part in family and community affairs and sacrifices are offered to the ancestors (Ndi Ichie/ Ndi Ani) to secure life. The ancestors have the power to punish evil doers. The ancestors are believed to be endowed with such great powers of protection and punishing the evil doers. For Mbiti (1970), the living-dead are in intermediary position between man and God and between man and spirits.

This assumptive principle are moral codes that regulates and controls the behavior of persons in Africa. In Igbo language the ancestors are referred to as *Ndi Ichie/Ndi Ani* whose sole obligation is to ensure that *Nso Ani* (offense against the land) is maintained. For instance, stealing of yam, cassava, abortion and killing is seen as abomination which attracts some afflictions or illness from *Ndi Ichie*. The ancestors ensure that any action which is forbidden in African traditional custom or law are not condoned. They occupied a recognizable place in African cultural life and regulated the behavior of people before the influx of Islam and Christianity. Since the influx of the two religions, African societies especially Nigeria have been saddled with political and religious instability owing to the political and religio-moral values which Europeans and Arabs left for Nigerians.

African traditional religion and morality are still very relevant and suitable in ensuring the stability and development of African societies. Nkwo (1984) insist that African norms and religion are capable of developing the people's minds. There will be greater tendency towards national reconciliation and integration if the traditional common norms are applied more in the enforcement of law and order in Igbo society and Nigeria in general. Every traditional values and norms are equal should be well respected. Anyone that considers one superior than the other is guilty of ethnocentrism. In Nigeria for instance, there are various ethnic and cultural values. The prominent amongst them are, the Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and other ethnic and cultural values. They all share in some elements and differ at some points. The conflicts that often arise are due to lack of information, ignorance and illiteracy. The people should be encouraged to respect each and every cultural value in Nigeria. The traditional religion of every people is at the foundation of their development.

In the traditional society, religion and morality is the place of succor and solace in matters of well being, providence, healing, etc. Idowu (1973) maintains that African religion and morality are capable of inculcating in the people a deep sense of communality which the people had always manifested in their socio-political life. This sense of communality when cultivated in Nigeria can generate social unity and guard against the erosion of ethnocentrism. It can revive a sense of familyhood or brotherhood amongst the people. Most essentially, the *Egwugwu* spirit cult and its role in *Umuofia* society as portrayed in Achebe's Things Fall Apart is an imaginary feature of the traditional African jurisprudence and social order. It parallels the role which the police and courts perform in western jurisprudence and social order. Above all, Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart showcases the African traditional common norms as a living feature in African way of life, love, and respect for man, society, corporate existence, social solidarity, freedom, social security, and humanism. Living by the

tenets of African norms means that the Western or imported life styles that have done more harm than good to African culture would be eschewed. There is really no philosophical or historical principle that justifies the western chauvinism and its attendant superiority complex over the African cultural norms and values. The current studies in post-modernist philosophy debunk such cultural superiority and insularity. The ineluctable logic of our globalised world also debunks it. The principle of African norms is an atmosphere of where God, the ancestors and every living person including the unborn are accommodated. In this kind of society, there is organization in such a way that everybody is taken care of and no one is allowed to misbehave so as not to attract the wrath of the gods. The establishment of this kind of ideology in Nigeria may reduce ethnic tensions and entrench peace and mutual love amongst one another. This will go a long way in making a Nigeria of our dream.

Conclusion

This paper gives the contributions of African traditional religion in shaping the norms, language and the literature of African communities. The writer articulated how the African reality is rooted in African religious expressions and in a complexity of norms and everyday life which together pervade the entire field of human existence. The writer further examined how these African values were shaped by the colonialists and western thoughts. The writer also investigated how the coming together of the African and western traditional values have either hindered or engendered African development so as to chart a way forward for African nations. The study portrayed how African Common norms of Igbo philosophical values influenced the peoples' socio-political, metaphysical, religious and ethical aspects. This study strengthened the argument that Igbo norms and religious values can compete most strongly in substance and form with their western counterparts. It is an established fact that traditional African norms can act as a factor of unity and agent of peace. It can foster the atmosphere of tolerance and co-existence. If we all imbibe the virtues of our values and norms inherent in our traditional religion, we can set Nigeria right in her quest for national integration, stability and development. There are lots of values which border on religion and morality that can be distilled for the accomplishment of our national reconciliation, integration, stability, and development. We can assuage ethnic rivalries and foster harmonious and worthy relationships in Nigeria by entrenching our traditional common norms and values in our collective existence.

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