COMMUNITY VALUES AND SOCIAL COHESION: TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Kelvin Chibenumoso Opara

Abstract

Indigenous practices enhance social stability by fostering collective identity, contributing to conflict resolution and act as networks of mutual support. This study examined the contributions of traditional African religious rituals in modern Nigerian society to community values and social cohesiveness. The research is anchored on the social identity theory. Through the use of the participant observation and interview approaches of the qualitative research method, the researcher sourced and analyzed his data. Findings suggest that indigenous African religious traditions have been met with challenges from urbanization, modernization, and religious pluralist festivals and rituals but have continued to contribute to society through the enhancement of traditional communality. The study concludes that modern Nigerian society will continue to benefit heavily from traditions as they continue to foster social cohesion and reinforce communal values.

Keywords: Community Values, Social Cohesion, Indigenous Practices, Social Stability, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country rich in cultural and religious diversity, with numerous communities depending heavily on traditional African religious rituals in their day-to-day activities. Nigeria is known

for its wide range of cultures and is home to many ethnic nationalities, each of which has its own customs and religious practices. Traditional African religions are among them, and many Nigerian communities have made them an essential part of their social fabric. These customs remain a vital part of Nigeria's cultural legacy even in the face of Christianity and Islam's widespread influence. Nigeria's social structures are profoundly ingrained with a range of customs, beliefs, and moral precepts found in traditional African religious practices. The goal of this study is to determine how these practices in modern Nigeria, continue to be relevant in fostering social cohesiveness and communal values.

African traditional religions are renowned for their communal aspects, with festivals and rites acting as important occasions that unite people and strengthen social ties and a sense of shared identity. In addition to being about spiritual ideas, these religious activities are deeply ingrained in the community's values and way of life, serving as channels for resolving disputes, encouraging one another, and upholding moral standards. The community character of traditional African faiths is one of their main features. Festivals and rituals are significant occasions that unite people and promote a feeling of shared identity and belonging. These get-togethers offer chances for social norm reinforcement, cultural values transmission, and community connection. For example, Adedeji opines that the Yoruba people's Osun-Osogbo festival is a cultural celebration that celebrates their heritage and connects the community, rather than solely being a religious function (p.72).

This study's methodology makes use of qualitative techniques, such as close observation of social events, fact-finding through discussions with adherents of traditional African

faiths, and a careful analysis of the body of prior research. A thorough grasp of how these religious traditions are upheld and modified in modern Nigerian culture, as well as their function in upholding communal values and cohesiveness, is provided by this mixed-methods approach.

This study is significant because it examines how traditional African religious practices still support relationships and social systems in Nigeria. It clarifies how flexible these customs can be in the face of urbanization, modernization, and religious diversity. Traditional religious practices have demonstrated amazing persistence in the face of these forces, frequently incorporating aspects of other religions and modern values to stay relevant. For instance, traditional beliefs are blended with Christian and Islamic rituals in many Nigerian communities, resulting in a syncretistic religious environment where traditional values endure (Hackett, p.270).

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical foundation is based on functionalism and social identity theory. Henri Tajfel and John Turner created the Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the 1970s. It is a social psychology theory that examines how people get a sense of identity and value from belonging to social organizations. According to this idea, people classify other people and themselves into different social groups, such as ethnic, religious, or cultural groupings, and these affiliations have a big impact on how they behave and view themselves. By enabling "Social Categorization," or the division of people and themselves into discrete categories (such as ethnic, religious, or cultural), the Social Identity Theory streamlines social interactions and offers a foundation for identity. Once more, this theory allows for "Social Identification," in which people take on the identity of

the group to which they are meant to belong. This identification shapes the attitudes, actions, and perceptions of both in-group and out-group members and is essential for maintaining self-esteem. In addition, the practice of "Social Comparison," which involves comparing one's group to others to preserve or improve that group's standing, promotes growth. While unfavourable comparisons may motivate attempts to elevate one's status within the group, positive comparisons increase self-esteem.

Within the framework of customary African religious practices, SIT contributes to the understanding of how communal rituals and festivals enhance group identity and cohesiveness. These religious pursuits provide participants with a feeling of community by acting as important symbols of cultural and ethnic identity. As an illustration, Yoruba participants in the Osun-Osogbo celebration uphold their cultural identity and solidarity in addition to celebrating their spiritual beliefs (Adedeji, p.72). This sense of collective identification fosters social cohesion and offers psychological advantages like heightened self-worth and less feelings of loneliness by making people feel more a part of their community.

In contrast, functionalism is a theoretical paradigm in sociology that sees society as a complex system whose components cooperate to foster stability and solidarity. This viewpoint, which draws inspiration from the writings of Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, and Emile Durkheim, emphasizes the roles that social practices and institutions play in preserving society's cohesiveness and ability to operate. Functionalism emphasizes how traditional African religious rituals support social cohesiveness and stability. Customary practices and celebrations fulfil several societal purposes:

Reinforcement of Social Norms and Values: Important community values like respect, integrity, and shared responsibility are instilled and reinforced through religious instruction and group activities (Gbadegesin, p.45). For example, communal festivals and rites promote the Igbo principle of "Igwebuike" (strength in togetherness), encouraging group activity and mutual support Kalu p.23).

Conflict Resolution: Priests and chiefs, according to Nzewi, among other traditional religious authorities, frequently resolve conflicts within the community to ensure that justice is served in a way that is consistent with regional norms and beliefs (p.125). This conventional justice system lessens the need for formal judicial interventions while promoting social harmony.

Mutual Support Systems: Religious traditions include social safety nets for the elderly, widows, and orphans, among other vulnerable community members. (Olupona, p.211). Social solidarity is strengthened by these support networks, which make sure that every member of the community is taken care of.

Social Integration: Celebrations of all kinds, including festivals and rituals, unite people and strengthen social ties. Ajayi says occasions like the Igbo people's New Yam Festival offer chances for group feasting, dancing, and celebration, enhancing interpersonal bonds and the sense of community (p.88).

Traditional African Religious Practices in Nigeria

The cultural and social lives of Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups are intricately entwined with traditional African religious customs. These customs and beliefs cover a broad range and are based on the veneration of gods, ancestors, and the natural world. In addition to their spiritual functions, they support cultural identity, social values, and communal cohesion. There

are several gods in traditional Nigerian faiths, and each one is in charge of certain facets of nature and life. For example, the Yoruba people worship Orisha, according to Adedeji (p.73), with prominent deities including Ogun (god of iron and war) and Osun (goddess of fertility and rivers).

The significance of traditional African religious activities in modern Nigerian society has not diminished. They nevertheless provide people with a feeling of continuity and identity, particularly in rural areas where cultural traditions are more firmly maintained. In urban environments, where they coexist with different religious traditions and adjust to contemporary circumstances, these activities are especially significant. Nigeria's traditional African religions are as varied as the ethnic makeup of the nation. The majority of these religions are polytheistic, honouring several gods and ancestors. Rituals, festivals, and moral code compliance are important practices for Awolalu, as they are thought to preserve equilibrium between the spiritual and material worlds (p.1).

Community Values Embedded in Traditional Practices

African traditional religious rituals have strong ties to communal ideals that foster social cohesiveness. For example, according to Gbadegesin (p.45), the Yoruba idea of "Omoluabi" stresses characteristics like respect, hard work, and honesty, which are reinforced through religious teachings and communal activities. Again, according to Kalu, the Igbo philosophy of "Igwebuike" (strength in unity) emphasizes the value of group effort and mutual support, which are frequently shown in rituals and celebrations held in the community (p.24).

Nigerian communities' spiritual, social, and cultural lives are greatly influenced by the diverse and dynamic traditional African religious practices. Their sustained importance in the

face of contemporary challenges is ensured by their ability to uphold social standards, promote community cohesion, and adjust to modern circumstances. Through these customs, Nigerians can stay connected to their roots and handle the challenges of modern life with a feeling of purpose and unity.

Rituals and Festivals

In Nigeria, rituals are an essential part of traditional African religious activities and play a major role in upholding social cohesiveness and community values. According to Kalu, these rituals, which include thanksgiving celebrations, purification rites, and rites of passage, are firmly ingrained in Nigerian communities' cultural fabric, (p.125). They offer an organized means of commemorating important life events like marriage, puberty, birth, and death, strengthening the community's overall identity and continuity, Mbiti (p.94).

Another important component of traditional African religious rituals is festivals, which provide a colourful way to show one's cultural identity and ancestry. According to Nabofa (p.44), these gatherings frequently entail intricate planning, group feasting, music, dancing, and theatre, all of which foster social cohesion and communal engagement. According to Ejizu (p.203), festivals like the New Yam Festival for the Igbo, the Egungun Festival for the Yoruba, and the Argungu Fishing Festival for the Hausa are not just occasions to celebrate cultural heritage but also to uphold social norms and communal togetherness.

Traditional African religions revolve around rituals and festivals, which act as opportunities for social bonding and community gathering. According to Adedeji, celebrations like the New Yam Festival among the Igbo or the Osun-Osogbo festival among the Yoruba bring people from all walks of life

together and promote a sense of shared ancestry and belonging (p.72). These gatherings frequently feature music, dance, and group dining, all of which enhance interpersonal connections and the sense of community, (Ajayi, p.89).

In traditional African civilizations in Nigeria, the preservation of communal values and social cohesion is contingent upon the celebration of rituals and festivals. They are potent symbols of cultural identity, tools for resolving disputes, and ways to strengthen social ties and community involvement. These customs have withstood the obstacles presented by modernity and are still essential to Nigerian communities' social and cultural life.

Social Functions of Traditional Practices

Several social tasks carried out by traditional religious activities support communal cohesion. In Nigeria, traditional African religious rituals play a vital role in upholding social standards and values throughout communities. According to Mbiti, these customs convey and preserve the moral principles and ethical norms that direct social interactions through rituals, ceremonies, and festivals (p.67). Furthermore, Olupona asserts that they guarantee the generational transmission of cultural norms and expectations by offering an organized framework for socialization, especially for the younger members of the community (p.134). They provide frameworks for resource distribution, social justice, and dispute resolution. For instance, Nzewi claims that priests and traditional leaders frequently arbitrate conflicts, making sure that justice is served in a way that the society finds just and equitable (p.125). Furthermore, through community welfare programs, Olupona claims that

these behaviours offer support networks for weaker segments of society, such as widows, orphans, and the elderly (p.211).

The fostering of social cohesion is one of the most important social roles played by traditional activities. These customs help to create a feeling of cohesion and belonging by including community members in events like festivals, rites of passage, and group prayers. According to Falola (p.115), they foster chances for cooperation and communal engagement, both of which are critical to preserving peace and unity within the community. Olupona, for example, claims that the Yoruba celebrate the Egungun festival, which unites the entire community in honouring ancestors' spirits and strengthens social ties and a sense of group identity (p.198).

Conflict Resolution

In restorative justice and conflict resolution as well, traditional practices are essential. Ritualistic methods are often used in African cultures to settle conflicts and mend social divisions. According to Awolalu (p.112), these customs frequently entail symbolic actions of reconciliation that aid in mending rifts in relationships and fostering peace, such as the sharing of kola nuts, the pouring of libations, and public apologies. Ehusani argues that these behaviours support the preservation of societal harmony and order by resolving disagreements within the context of cultural norms and values (p.45).

Falon argues that because traditional religious leaders are highly esteemed and respected members of their communities, they are essential in helping Nigerian communities resolve conflicts (p.47). Their ability to effectively settle disagreements stems from their spiritual and cultural credibility. Because it is thought to be more sensitive to regional norms and beliefs, this

traditional justice system is frequently chosen over formal legal institutions.

Mutual Support Systems

Systems of mutual support are essential to traditional African societies, especially in Nigerian culture. These systems, which have their roots in traditional African religious rituals, place a strong emphasis on group accountability, collaboration, and mutual aid (Mbiti, p.108). They ensure that people are supported through a variety of life obstacles and transitions by fostering a sense of solidarity and interdependence among community members, as Falola puts it (p.146).

Customary religious customs also include networks of mutual assistance that guarantee the well-being of every member of the community. According to Ejizu (p.3), for example, community members band together to offer financial, emotional, and social assistance during times of crisis, such as illness or death, reflecting the communal ethos inherent in these behaviours.

Mutual support systems in traditional Nigerian communities take the form of group sharing and help. This is a common practice in many facets of daily life, such as social ceremonies, building, and agriculture. For instance, Olupona asserts that communal labour systems like "Isusu" or "Ajo" (rotating savings and credit societies) are common in many rural communities. By allowing participants to pool resources and alternately lend money to one another, these systems promote mutual trust and economic stability (p.172).

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptations

Traditional African religious rituals in Nigeria are under threat from urbanization, modernization, and the growth of Islam and Christianity, notwithstanding their continued significance. However, to stay relevant, these traditions have shown amazing adaptability, frequently incorporating aspects of other religions and modern ideals, according to Hackett (p.271).

The effects of technology, urbanization, religious pluralism, and constrictive legal frameworks are only a few of the current issues that traditional African religious traditions in Nigeria must contend with. But thanks to modifications like technological advancements, syncretism, and cultural revival movements, these customs are still important in today's world and are still evolving. To preserve Nigeria's rich cultural legacy and foster social cohesiveness in modern Nigerian communities, we must comprehend and encourage these modifications.

Modernization and Urbanization

Nigeria's ancient African religious customs face tremendous threats from modernization and globalization. According to Falola (p.201), indigenous customs and cultural values have been gradually eroding as a result of the invasion of Western values, technologies, and lifestyles. Particularly younger generations are being impacted by other cultures more and more, which is causing a reduction in the number of people participating in customs and holidays. Olupona (p.239) claims that the internet and global media's widespread reach have also played a part in the decline of traditions in modern society.

Urbanization and modernization have led to changes in the way traditional practices are observed. Peel (p.59) states that in urban areas, where community ties may be weaker, these practices have adapted to new social realities, sometimes taking on more symbolic forms or being celebrated in diasporic

contexts. Nevertheless, the core values they promote continue to influence social behaviours and community relationships.

Syncretism and Adaptation

The mixing or merger of several religious traditions, beliefs, and practices is known as syncretism. Syncretism in the context of traditional African religious practices in Nigeria refers to the blending of components from Islam and Christianity into native religious frameworks. According to Kalu (p.144), this blending enables communities to adjust to the effects of dominant world religions while retaining their cultural and religious identities.

In modern Nigerian society, syncretism—the merging of several religious traditions—is a prevalent phenomenon. According to Ukah (p.603), a large number of Nigerians follow one of the major world religions and traditional customs at the same time, resulting in a distinctive religious landscape where modern religious identities coexist with traditional values.

For Nigerian groups who follow traditional religions, syncretism has various advantages. Maintaining historic rituals in a way that is acceptable within the prevailing theological perspectives, permits cultural continuity. Nabofa claims that by allowing people of many religious origins to encounter similar religious experiences, this blending promotes societal cohesiveness. Additionally, syncretism allows communities to change with the times without losing touch with their cultural history (p.112).

The processes of syncretism and adaptation are essential to the survival and perpetuation of traditional African religious customs in Nigeria. Nigerian communities navigate the challenges of religious diversity while preserving their cultural identity through the innovative blending of introduced and indigenous religious elements. Comprehending these

mechanisms is crucial to recognising the fluid character of religious customs and their function in promoting societal unity and cultural persistence in modern-day Nigerian culture.

Conclusion

In today's Nigerian society, traditional African religious rituals still have a big influence on fostering social cohesion and communal values. These native customs endure and change despite the pervasive impact of Islam and Christianity, and they are vital to preserving the social cohesion of Nigerian communities. The results of the study show how important customs and holidays are for maintaining social stability, strengthening ties among communities, and promoting shared values.

The study demonstrates the different ways traditional African religions foster communal harmony. Festivals and rituals are significant occasions that bring people together in a community by fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Through the participation of traditional leaders who are revered for their spiritual and cultural authority, these rituals can aid in the resolution of conflicts. Furthermore, these religious traditions' mutual support networks provide essential assistance to society's most vulnerable individuals, highlighting the group's shared accountability.

The amazing survival of indigenous African religious traditions has been met with challenges from urbanization, modernization, and religious pluralism. By incorporating aspects of other religions and modern principles, they have adjusted and are now relevant in a society that is changing quickly. These customs have been able to live alongside the main world religions thanks to syncretism, which has produced a distinctive religious environment where old and contemporary ideas converge.

The study's contribution to our knowledge of the continued influence of traditional African religions on modern Nigerian society is what makes it significant. It emphasizes how crucial these behaviours are for fostering identity, stability, and social cohesiveness. Nigeria's traditional African religious rituals continue to be an essential part of its social and cultural life, even as the country struggles to balance the challenges of modernization and religious diversity.

To sum up, traditional African religious customs are living, breathing systems that continue to influence and uphold Nigerian communities rather than being static artefacts from the past. Their resilience and ongoing significance are demonstrated by their ability to adapt and assimilate new influences while maintaining basic principles. The continuous growth and stability of Nigerian society depend heavily on these traditions because they foster social cohesion and reinforce communal values.

References

Adedeji, J. The Osun-Osogbo Festival: Performing Osun, Sustaining Community. *African Arts*, 47(1), 72-83, 2014

Ajayi, J. F. A. *Christianity and the African Cultural Heritage*. Ibadan: University Press, 1998.

Awolalu, J. O. What is African traditional religion? *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10(2), 1-10, 1976.

Awolalu, J. O. *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Ibadan: Longman, 1979.

Ehusani, G. An Afro-Christian Vision 'Ozovehe': *Toward a More Humanized World*. America: University Press of America, 1991.

Ejizu, C. I. African traditional religions and the promotion of community living in Africa. *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 11, 1-16, 2008.

Ejizu, C. I. *African Traditional Religions and the Promotion of Community-Living in Africa*. Enugu: Spiritan Publications, 2011.

Falon, T. Traditional methods of conflict resolution in Nigeria. *Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy*, 3(2), 45-60, 2005.

Falola, T. *A History of Nigeria*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Gbadegesin, S. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities*. Nigeria: Peter Lang Publishers, 1991.

Hackett, R. I. J. Religion in Calabar: The religious life and history of a Nigerian town. *Religion*, 17(3), 269-274, 1987.

Kalu, O. U. *Igbo Traditional Religion: A Study of Belief and Practices*. Enugu: John Wiley & Sons, 2003.

Kalu, O. U. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. Oxford: University Press, 2008.

Mbiti, J. S. *African Religions & Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1999.

Nzewi, U. M. Traditional justice systems in Africa: The case of Nigeria. *Journal of African Law*, 45(2), 123-137, 2001.

Nabofa, M. Y. *Symbolism in African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005.

Olupona, J. K. *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in time, space, and the imagination*. California: University Press, 2011.

Olupona, J. K. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Peel, J. D. Y. *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

Ukah, A. F. K. African modernities: Tradition, religion and the production of knowledge. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45(4), 601-622, 2007.