NEO-TRADITIONALISM IN IGBOLAND: EXPLORING HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON CULTURAL RESURGENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, examining the intricate interplay between historical and cultural influences on this cultural phenomenon. Neo-traditionalism represents a blending of traditional values with contemporary perspectives, driven by a renewed interest in Igbo cultural practices and identity. Through a qualitative research method incorporating cosmological, historical, cultural, and sociological approaches, this study explores the impact of key cultural and historical movements, such as the African Personality movement and the Cultural Renaissance movement, on shaping neo-traditionalist ideologies within the Igbo community. The significance of historical and cultural awareness in preserving and honoring cultural practices while adapting to modern contexts is emphasized, highlighting the dynamic fusion of tradition and modernity in Igboland’s cultural landscape. This research sheds light on the intricate relationship between historical and cultural factors and the rise of neo-traditionalism, providing valuable insights into the preservation and evolution of Igbo cultural heritage amidst changing societal landscapes.

Keywords: neo-traditionalism, Igboland, cultural heritage, historical influences, cultural resurgence.

Introduction

Cham (2022) sees Neo-traditionalism, as a new traditionalism which represents an ideological and cultural movement that has gained prominence in response to perceived cultural, social, and political shifts in contemporary society. In Igboland, the resurgence of neo-traditionalism reflects a renewed interest in Igbo cultural practices and identity, driven by factors specific to the region. Marleen (2012) notes that neo-traditional religious movements in Igboland strive to rehabilitate indigenous religious traditions in ways that are relevant to present and future contexts, forming an integral part of the experience of modernity (Marleen, 2012, p. 173).
A key aspect of neo-traditionalism is its endeavor to blend traditional values and practices with contemporary perspectives. Haferkamp and Smelser (1992) emphasize that neo-traditionalism seeks to synthesize tradition and modernity, acknowledging the necessity to adapt and respond to evolving circumstances while retaining the wisdom of traditional heritage (Haferkamp & Smelser, 1992). Furthermore, within the context of Igboland, neo-traditionalism places a significant emphasis on the importance of cultural roots and heritage. Dawson (2004) highlights that this movement aims were to promote a sense of identity and continuity with traditional cultural values, customs, and aesthetics, while also recognizing the imperative for cultural evolution. Additionally, neo-traditionalism in Igboland values community and social cohesion. Nowack and Schoderer (2020) note its recognition of the crucial role that strong social bonds, shared values, and a sense of belonging play in fostering social stability and overall well-being within the Igbo community (Nowack & Schoderer, 2020). This represents a dynamic fusion of tradition and modernity, aiming to preserve cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary realities and fostering social cohesion within the Igbo society. This paper therefore explores the diverse factors contributing to the rise of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, with a specific focus on historical and cultural influences. It aims to analyze the impact of key cultural and historical movements that have shaped neo-traditionalist ideologies within the Igbo community.

It is widely acknowledged that historical and cultural awareness plays a pivotal role in neo-traditionalism, emphasizing the significance of preserving and honoring cultural practices while adapting to contemporary contexts (Saaida, 2023). This acknowledgment underscores the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity, highlighting the necessity of connecting past traditions with present-day realities to maintain cultural continuity and relevance among the Igbo people (Ekwueme & Onah, 2019). Hence, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this work, a combination of primary and secondary sources is utilized. Primary sources included personal observations and oral interviews, providing valuable firsthand insights into the subject matter. On the other hand, secondary sources encompassed a wide array of published and unpublished materials, including journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, dictionaries, and other library materials. This holistic approach to data collection ensured a thorough exploration and nuanced understanding of the research topic.

Moreover, the study employed a qualitative research method, incorporating cosmological, historical, cultural, and sociological approaches. This multifaceted approach facilitated a deep interpretation of the gathered data, offering a contextual understanding of how historical and cultural dynamics have influenced the emergence and growth of neo-traditionalism in Igboland.

In essence, this paper aims to shed light on the intricate relationship between historical and cultural factors and the rise of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, providing valuable insights into the preservation and evolution of Igbo cultural heritage amidst changing societal landscapes.

The Significance of Historical and Cultural Awareness in Neo-Traditionalism

Cultural awareness is fundamental to understanding one’s own heritage and identity, encompassing various aspects such as history, language, customs, and traditions. It involves developing a deep appreciation for cultural roots and community principles. This awareness
forms the foundation for the emergence and persistence of neo-traditionalism, a cultural and ideological movement deeply rooted in cultural pride and identity (Obineche, 2021).

Neo-traditionalism, as noted by Obineche (2021), is not merely a nostalgic longing for the past but a contemporary response to the evolving cultural and religious landscape, particularly in African societies. It creatively navigates the changing dynamics of African religiosity, highlighting the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts in shaping modern belief systems and practices. Furthermore, traditional events and rituals play a crucial role in reinforcing cultural beliefs, transmitting customs, and preserving their significance over time. These events serve as anchors that connect past traditions with present-day realities, contributing to the continuity and resilience of cultural practices (Marleen, 2012).

Marleen (2012) also emphasizes that neo-traditional religious movements actively seek to renew indigenous traditions in forms that are relevant to contemporary society. This renewal process is deeply intertwined with historical and cultural dynamics, as it involves adapting traditional practices to address modern challenges while preserving the essence and authenticity of cultural heritage.

Understanding historical and cultural dynamics is essential for individuals and communities to navigate the complexities of cultural identity, societal change, and globalization. It enables them to appreciate the richness of their heritage, maintain a sense of belonging, and actively participate in cultural preservation efforts amid the pressures of modernization and globalization.

The Cultural Renaissance and Neo-Traditionalism in Contemporary Africa
The emergence of neo-traditionalism refers to a cultural or social phenomenon where traditional values, practices, or ideologies from the past are revitalized or reintroduced in contemporary society. It suggests a shift away from modern or progressive ideas and a return to more conservative or traditional beliefs (Luckham, 1994). This can manifest in various areas, including art, architecture, fashion, music, lifestyle choices, and even political ideologies. It often reflects a longing for the values, aesthetics, and structures of earlier times, as well as a critique of the rapid changes and perceived drawbacks of modernity (Galvan & Dennis, 2007).

While the specifics of neo-traditionalism can vary depending on the context and the particular cultural or social group involved, some common themes include a focus on preserving cultural heritage, a preference for traditional craftsmanship or artisanal techniques, an emphasis on family values, a rejection of certain aspects of globalization, and a desire for stability or a return to perceived societal norms (Bevir, 2007).

In the African cultural context, the emergence of neo-traditionalism can be seen as a response to various factors, including globalization, Western influence, urbanization, and social change. It reflects a desire among some Africans to reclaim and celebrate their traditional cultural heritage in the face of perceived threats to their identity and values (Kusuma & Wahyu, 2020).

Neo-traditionalism in Africa often involves a renewed interest in traditional customs, rituals, art forms, and social structures. It can be seen in the revival of traditional music, dance, and storytelling, the promotion of indigenous languages, the resurgence of traditional clothing styles, and the revitalization of traditional craftsmanship and artistic practices (Dawson, 2004).
One of the key motivations behind this resurgence is the preservation of African cultural heritage, which may have been eroded or marginalized over time. Many Africans view their traditional practices as valuable and meaningful, representing their history, spirituality, and community values. Neo-traditionalism provides a platform to reclaim and assert these aspects of African identity (Nowack & Schoderer, 2020).

**Historical and Cultural Influence**

Neo-traditionalism is indeed a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a variety of factors, including both cultural and historical elements. When examining the factors that have contributed to the emergence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland, it is crucial to delve into these intricate influences to gain a comprehensive understanding of this cultural resurgence.

The essence of cultural awareness lies in the deep understanding and appreciation of one’s cultural heritage, encompassing various aspects such as customs, language, social conventions, and traditions. This awareness forms the bedrock of neo-traditionalism, particularly in the context of Igboland, where historical and cultural factors have played pivotal roles in shaping the resurgence of traditional practices.

Neo-traditionalism in Igboland is deeply rooted in cultural pride and identity, driven by a desire to preserve and advance traditional cultural values and beliefs amidst the forces of modernization and globalization. As Obineche (2021) eloquently describes, it is a response to the unprecedented changes in the religio-cultural life of African societies, serving as a contemporary movement to reclaim and celebrate indigenous traditions.

Traditional ceremonies and celebrations hold significant importance in Igboland, serving as occasions for communities to unite, strengthen cultural bonds, and transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to another. These events are vital for cultural preservation and play a crucial role in sustaining the endurance and relevance of traditional practices, as noted by Marleen (2012).

Moreover, historical movements such as the African personality movement and the cultural Renaissance movement in Africa have left indelible imprints on the development of neo-traditionalism in Igboland. These movements emphasized the importance of cultural pride, identity, and the revival of indigenous traditions in the face of colonial influences. They served as catalysts for reclaiming and rehabilitating traditional practices, shaping the trajectory of neo-traditionalism in the region. In essence, the resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland is intricately intertwined with historical and cultural factors, reflecting a profound desire to uphold and preserve the rich heritage of the Igbo people amidst the currents of change.

i. **The Cultural Renaissance movement**

This movement led by figures like Cheikh Anta Diop has had a profound impact on shaping the emergence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland. Diop's advocacy for the African Renaissance, which aimed to revive African culture, science, and economy while challenging Eurocentric narratives, laid a strong foundation for cultural empowerment and identity restoration among African communities, including the Igbo people.
Diop emphasized the importance of cultural pride and celebrating Africa’s ancient civilizations to restore a sense of pride and self-worth among African communities. His ideas resonated with the Igbo community in Nigeria and contributed to fostering cultural awareness, historical collectivism, and a revival of traditional practices. This cultural revival was part of a broader movement towards reclaiming African heritage and challenging the legacy of colonialism and slavery, which had distorted African history and culture.

The emphasis on education, knowledge creation, and research in African history and culture advocated by Diop also influenced the intellectual and educational reforms within the Igbo community. The promotion of pan-Africanism and unity among African nations further strengthened cultural ties and identity consciousness among the Igbo people, aligning with the principles of neo-traditionalism that seek to uphold and advance traditional cultural practices and values. Thabo Mbeki’s propagation of Diop’s ideas about the African Renaissance also contributed to shaping the intellectual discourse and cultural resurgence within Igboland. The African Cultural Renaissance, inspired by Diop’s vision, led to a renewed sense of cultural identity, pride, and African-centered scholarship within the Igbo community. Therefore, the legacy of the Cultural Renaissance movements spearheaded by figures like Cheikh Anta Diop has significantly influenced the emergence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland by promoting cultural awareness, historical consciousness, and a revitalization of traditional cultural practices and values.

ii. The quest for Igbo-African Personality

The African Personality movement, originating in the mid-20th century, was a response to the negative portrayals of Africans during slavery and colonialism, aiming to foster a positive and authentic understanding of African identity and personality (Frenkel, 1974). Key figures like Dr. Edward Blyden and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah were instrumental in introducing and developing this concept (Blyden, 1881; Nkrumah, 1961). This movement emphasized African unity, self-worth, and pride while challenging the psychological impact of colonialism and racism (Akoi, 1970).

In the context of Igboland, the African Personality movement significantly influenced the emergence of neo-traditionalism by promoting cultural revival, identity formation, and a desire for authenticity (Frenkel, 1974; Okolo, 1986). Igbo elites played a crucial role in this movement, contributing to Igbo and African freedom struggles and shaping African political philosophy. Notable Igbo elites such as Chuba Okadigbo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Michael Okpara were pivotal in advocating for African unity, cultural pride, and self-determination. Nnamdi Azikiwe, for instance, known as the “Father of Nigerian Nationalism,” played a prominent role in Nigeria’s independence movement and promoted Pan-Africanism (Nnoli, 1980). His ideas on African unity and cultural resurgence resonated strongly in Igboland and beyond, contributing to the rise of neo-traditionalist sentiments.

Chuba Okadigbo, a Nigerian politician and philosopher, emphasized the importance of African cultural heritage and identity in political discourse. He advocated for grassroots empowerment and cultural preservation, which aligned with the neo-traditionalist agenda of revitalizing Igbo cultural traditions (Okadigbo, 1994). Michael Okpara, a prominent Igbo leader and former Premier of Eastern Nigeria, focused on agricultural development and economic self-sufficiency in post-colonial Nigeria. His vision for a prosperous Igbo society
intertwined economic progress with cultural preservation, fostering a sense of pride and autonomy among the Igbo people (Afigbo, 1991). These Igbo elites, along with others, contributed to the socio-political landscape of Igboland and Africa by championing cultural revival, identity empowerment, and the preservation of African heritage. Their efforts resonated with the ideals of neo-traditionalism, which sought to reclaim traditional values and practices in the face of modernization and external influences. Through their contributions, they laid a foundation for cultural resurgence and community empowerment in Igboland and Africa as a whole.

**Conclusion**

The resurgence of neo-traditionalism in Igboland is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a myriad of historical and cultural influences. This paper has explored the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity within the context of Igboland, shedding light on the factors that have contributed to the revitalization of traditional cultural practices and values.

Throughout history, various movements, such as the African Personality movement and the Cultural Renaissance movement, have played instrumental roles in promoting cultural pride, identity formation, and the preservation of African heritage. Figures like Cheikh Anta Diop, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chuba Okadigbo, and Michael Okpara have left indelible marks on the socio-political and cultural landscape of Igboland, championing the cause of cultural revival and community empowerment.

Moreover, the essence of cultural awareness and historical consciousness has been pivotal in the emergence and persistence of neo-traditionalism. By recognizing the significance of preserving and honoring cultural practices while adapting to contemporary contexts, the Igbo people have sought to maintain a sense of continuity and relevance amidst the currents of change.

In essence, neo-traditionalism in Igboland represents a dynamic fusion of tradition and modernity, driven by a profound desire to uphold and preserve the rich heritage of the Igbo people. As the Igbo community navigates the complexities of cultural identity, societal change, and globalization, the resurgence of traditional cultural practices serves as a beacon of cultural resilience, fostering a sense of unity, pride, and belonging among the Igbo people. Moving forward it is imperative to continue exploring and celebrating the diverse cultural riches of Igboland while also recognizing the importance of adaptation and innovation in preserving cultural heritage. By embracing the principles of neo-traditionalism and honoring the legacy of cultural pioneers, the Igbo people can chart a path towards a vibrant and culturally enriched future, rooted in the timeless traditions of the past.

**References**


