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PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY LEADERS ON ESCALATION OF NEO PAGANISM IN AGUATA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ANAMBRA STATE

[1]Apiti Anthony Ahuruezenma (PhD), [2]Ogbunugwor, Alexander Uzochukwu, [3]Okonkwo Ogechukwu Jane

[1,2]Department of Adult and Continuing Education, Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
[3]Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: [2]aa.apiti@unizik.edu.ng, [2]au.ogbunugwor@unizik.edu.ng, [3]oj.okonkwo@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examined perception of community leaders on escalation of idol worship in Augata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Four research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised 1,268 community leaders who are community elders and religious leaders in the 12 towns in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The sample size consisted of 100 community leaders (65 community elders and 35 religious leaders) using the purposive sampling technique. Data for the study was collected by means of questionnaire titled "Perception of Community Leaders on Escalation of Idol Worship Questionnaire" (PCLEIWQ). The questionnaire was validated by two experts. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. It was found that community leaders in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State have agreed on strategies to reduce idol worship among youths, including escalating shrine patronage, native doctors' patronage, and masquerade cult initiation. They also agreed on strategies to reduce idol worship in the area. Based on the findings, it was recommended amongst others that religious bodies should develop support networks within families, churches, and community centers that offer guidance, counseling, and mentorship to youths.

Keywords: Leaders, Community Leaders, Idol, Idol Worship, Aguata Local Government

Introduction

In Nigeria, idol worship is a common practice among some traditional and indigenous religious groups. The country has a diverse religious landscape, with Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions coexisting in many communities (Okafor, 2020). In some rural areas, traditional religious practices, including idol worship, remain an important aspect of cultural identity and spiritual beliefs. In Anambra State, the practice of idol worship has deep historical roots, intertwined with the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people. Traditionally, Igbo spirituality revolves around belief in a pantheon of deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces, with each community often having its own unique set of rituals and sacred sites (Njoku, 2019). In Aguata LGA of Anambra State, there are numerous examples of idols that are worshipped by the local population. These idols often represent deities, ancestors, or spirits that are believed to have the power to influence various aspects of life such as fertility, health, and prosperity. Some common examples of idols in Aguata LGA include the deity of Amadioha, the god of thunder and lightning, and the shrine of Ala, the earth goddess. Njoku (2019) further stressed that these sacred sites often serve as focal points for religious ceremonies, rituals, and offerings, symbolizing the spiritual connection between the community and the divine.

Idol worship is the worship of physical objects or images as deities or gods. It is often associated with religious beliefs and practices, and is considered a form of idolatry. The practice of idol worship has been prevalent in many cultures and societies throughout history, and continues to be practiced in various forms in different parts of the world (Anizoba & Aande, 2021). According to Eze (2020), idol worship, also known as idolatry, can be defined as the worship or reverence of physical objects or images as gods or divine beings. Eze (2020) and Njoku (2018) reiterated that in the Eastern part of Nigeria, including Aguata LGA of Anambra

State, the escalation of idol worship can be attributed to various factors such as: (i) idol worship serves as a means of preserving cultural identity and heritage among indigenous communities, particularly in the face of external influences and religious conversions; (ii) many individuals and communities continue to adhere to traditional spiritual beliefs and practices rooted in idol worship, viewing it as integral to their worldview and sense of belonging; (iii) socio-economic challenges, including poverty, inequality, and marginalization, may contribute to the persistence of idol worship as a source of spiritual solace, social cohesion, and communal support.

It is therefore important to note that the perception of community leaders on the escalation of idol worship is shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. These leaders, which may include traditional rulers, religious leaders, and elders, often serve as custodians of cultural and spiritual traditions within their communities (Okeke, Ibenwa & Okeke, 2017). Therefore, community leaders play a significant role in shaping religious practices, cultural norms, and social dynamics within their respective communities. In the opinion of Maduka (2021), they often serve as custodians of traditional knowledge, arbiters of disputes, and influencers of public opinion. In the context of idol worship, community leaders can preserve and promote traditional religious practices, including idol worship, as part of cultural identity and heritage. They can act as mediators between the community and spiritual authorities, facilitate rituals, ceremonies, and offerings, and mobilize community members for religious festivals and gatherings.

In the view of Okeke et al., (2017), it is notable to highlight the factors contributing to the increase in idol worship; the impact of idol worship on the socio-economic and cultural life of the people in Anambra State; and the measures taken by community leaders to address the escalation of idol worship. Therefore, Cheung and Yue (2019) reiterated that the rise in idol

worship in Anambra State can be attributed to several factors. First, the rich cultural heritage of the region is deeply intertwined with traditional beliefs, which often involve idol worship as a way to maintain spiritual connections with ancestral roots. Moreso, socio-economic disparities within the community may lead individuals to seek solace from supernatural entities, such as idols. In addition, idol worship may serve as a means for individuals to assert and maintain their cultural identity amidst globalization and modernization. Some perceive idol worship as a way to preserve their heritage and resist foreign influences.

The prevalence of idol worship can impact economic activities in the area. In some cases, devotees may allocate significant resources towards maintaining shrines or supporting religious ceremonies, potentially diverting funds from other developmental projects. While idol worship is deeply rooted in tradition, its practice continues to evolve, reflecting changes in societal norms and values. However, this evolution may also lead to conflicts between traditional and modern beliefs, as highlighted by Uchendu (2020). Community leaders can address the escalation of idol worship by engaging in interfaith dialogues, promoting tolerance and understanding among followers of different religious traditions. In the opinion of Igwe (2019), community leaders often initiate educational campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the implications of idol worship and promoting alternative avenues for spiritual fulfillment. These campaigns may target both youths and adults, emphasizing critical thinking and cultural appreciation.

Idol worship has been a longstanding tradition in many communities in Nigeria, including Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Over the years, there has been a noticeable escalation in the prevalence of idol worship in Aguata, with many community members actively participating in rituals and ceremonies associated with this practice. The perception of community leaders on this escalation of idol worship is of paramount importance

in understanding the cultural and religious dynamics at play in Aguata. These leaders, who hold positions of influence and authority within the community, play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and beliefs towards idol worship among the populace.

Empirical studies provide insights into the multifaceted nature of idol worship and its implications for local communities. For instance, Akunyili, Nwokoye, and Nwankwo (2017) conducted a study on traditional religion and cultural preservation among the Igbo people, shedding light on the intricate relationship between religious practices and cultural identity. Similarly, Obiora (2017) explored the social dynamics of religion in Eastern part of Nigeria, uncovering tensions and interactions between followers of different faiths. There are also many other. It is important to note that there are also many evils associated with idol worship, it is truism that many kidnappers, thieves, ritual killers patronize shrines and native doctors to obtain power to achieve their evil intentions. It is also observed that some youths wear masquerade with the whole aim of witch-hunting, attacking and maiming their opponents in the society, Aguata LGA inclusive. Based on these reasons, the researcher seeks to determine the opinion of community leaders in Aguata LGA on the escalation of idol worship with its evils, and ways of reducing idol worship in Aguata LGA of Anambra State.

Statement Problem

Recent practices and occurrences of idol worship have shown a noticeable increase in the number of individuals engaging in rituals and ceremonies associated with idol worship. There has been a noticeable increase in the prominence and public display of idol worship rituals, which has led to tensions and divisions within the community. Reports of clashes between adherents of different religious beliefs, as well as instances of discrimination and marginalization, highlight the growing significance of this issue. Community leaders in Aguata

Local Government Area of Anambra State are facing a significant challenge due to the escalation of idol worship. Despite existing empirical studies shedding light on the multifaceted nature of idol worship in South Eastern Nigeria, there remains a research gap in understanding the specific perceptions of community leaders on this issue. This study intends to fill this gap by exploring the viewpoints of traditional rulers, religious leaders, and local government officials on the escalation of idol worship. It is therefore against this backdrop that this study determines the perception of community leaders on escalation of idol worship in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Specifically, the study determined perception of community leaders on the:

1. Escalation of shrine patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.
2. Escalation of native doctors' patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.
3. Escalation of masquerade cult initiation by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of community leaders on the escalation of shrine patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State?
2. What is the perception of escalation of native doctors' patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State?
3. What is the perception of escalation of masquerade cult initiation by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State?

Theoretical Underpinning

Social Identity Theory

The theory was propounded by Henri Tajfel and his colleague John Turner in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It provides critical insights into intergroup relations, prejudice, discrimination, and the formation of in-group and out-group biases. According to this theory, people categorize themselves and others into social groups, which in turn influences their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

The social identity theory emphasizes the importance of group membership in shaping an individual's sense of self. Tajfel argued that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by comparing their own group favorably to other groups. This process, known as social categorization, can lead to biases and stereotypes towards outgroup members. One of the strengths of the social identity theory is its ability to explain intergroup conflict and discrimination. By highlighting the role of group identities in shaping behavior, the theory provides insight into the dynamics of prejudice and discrimination. Additionally, the theory has been supported by a considerable amount of empirical research, further validating its relevance in understanding social behaviour.

However, the social identity theory has also been criticized for oversimplifying the complexities of human behavior. Critics argue that it fails to account for individual differences and the impact of personal traits and experiences on social identity. Additionally, the theory has been accused of promoting a reductionist view of human behavior, focusing solely on group dynamics without considering the broader context in which social identities are formed. The social identity theory offers valuable insights into how group memberships shape individual identity and behavior. While it has its strengths in explaining intergroup conflict and discrimination, it also has limitations in its oversimplified view of human behavior. Researchers

continue to explore and refine the theory in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social identity and its implications for society.

In relation to the study, the social identity theory, individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships and relationships. In the context of the study, community leaders in Aguata Local Government Area likely identify strongly with their respective communities and cultural traditions. This sense of social identity can influence their attitudes and perceptions towards issues such as idol worship. Community leaders who adhere to traditional cultural beliefs may view idol worship as an important aspect of their group identity and heritage. They may perceive the escalation of idol worship as a way to preserve and strengthen their cultural traditions, leading to a positive perception of this phenomenon. By applying the social identity theory to the study, researchers can explore how community leaders' group identities shape their perceptions of idol worship and inform their attitudes and responses to this cultural phenomenon. Understanding the social dynamics at play can help researchers and policymakers develop strategies to address conflicts or tensions related to idol worship within the Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Method

Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised 1,268 community leaders who are community elders and religious leaders in the 12 towns in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The sample size consisted of 100 community leaders (65 community elders and 35 religious leaders). The purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study. Data for the study was collected by means of questionnaire developed by the researcher titled “Perception of Community Leaders on Escalation of Idol Worship Questionnaire” (PCLEIWQ). The instrument is divided into two sections; A and B.

Section A addressed the demographic profile of the respondents. Section B is sub-divided into four clusters. These clusters were structured on a 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with nominal values 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The instrument for this study was face validated by two experts. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation was used to analyze data to answer the research questions and determine the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the respondents' mean.

Results

Table 1: Respondents' ratings on the perception of community leaders on the escalation of shrine patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area

S/N	Item statement	X	SD	Remarks
1	There has been an increase in shrine patronage among youths in Aguata Local Government Area	2.55	0.58	Agree
2	Shrine patronage by youths in the community is influenced by cultural beliefs and traditions	2.07	0.82	Disagree
3	Many youths seek spiritual protection or guidance through shrine patronage	3.11	0.52	Agree
4	Peer influence plays a role in the increase of shrine patronage among youths	2.69	0.69	Agree
5	Youths visit shrines to seek solutions to personal or family problems	2.53	0.88	Agree
6	The rise in shrine patronage is due to a lack of trust in formal religious institutions	2.59	0.49	Agree
7	Shrines provide alternative sources of power and control that attract youths.	3.32	0.76	Agree
8	The media has influenced the resurgence of shrine patronage among youths.	3.56	0.72	Agree
	Cluster Mean	**2.90**		**Agree**

The result presented in Table 1 revealed that item 2 with mean score 2.07 was rated disagreed. This means that shrine patronage by youths in the community is influenced by cultural beliefs and traditions. Items 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 with their respective mean scores of 2.55, 3.11, 2.69, 2.53, 2.59, 3.32 and 3.56 were rated agreed by the respondents. The cluster mean of 2.90 summarized that community leaders agreed on the escalation of shrine patronage by youths in

Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The standard deviation scores ranging from 0.52 – 0.88 indicates that the respondents' mean scores were closely related.

Table 2: Respondents' ratings on the perception of escalation of native doctors' patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area

S/N	Item statement	X	SD	Remarks
9	Youths in Aguata prefer consulting native doctors over hospitals	2.47	0.82	Disagree
10	Native doctors offer more affordable services compared to modern medicine	3.11	0.76	Agree
11	The youth believe native doctors offer faster solutions to their problems	3.39	0.86	Agree
12	Native doctors are more accessible to youths in Aguata LGA than hospitals	3.12	0.64	Agree
13	Youths trust the effectiveness of native doctors' treatments over modern medicine	3.29	0.62	Agree
14	Social media platforms promote native doctors' services among youths	1.66	1.03	Disagree
15	Youths feel stigmatized when they visit modern hospitals, leading them to native doctors	2.61	0.68	Agree
	Cluster mean	**2.81**		**Agree**

Data presented in Table 2 reveals that items 9 and 14 with their mean scores 2.47 and 1.66 were rated disagreed. More so, items 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15 with their respective mean scores of 3.11, 3.39, 3.12, 3.29, and 2.61 were rated agreed. The cluster mean of 2.81 summarized that community leaders agreed on the escalation on the native doctors' patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The standard deviation scores ranging from 0.62 – 1.03 indicates that the respondents' mean scores were closely related.

Table 3: Respondents' ratings on the perception of escalation of masquerade cult initiation by youths in Aguata Local Government Area

S/N	Item statement	X	SD	Remarks
16	Youths in Aguata are pressured by peers to join masquerade cults	2.63	0.94	Agree
17	Youths see masquerade cults as a way to gain social status in the community	2.52	0.61	Agree
18	Cultural traditions encourage youths to join masquerade cults	2.54	0.62	Agree
19	Masquerade cults provide a sense of identity and belonging for youth	2.68	0.71	Agree
20	Youths believe that joining masquerade cults provides them with	2.82	0.68	Agree

	protection from harm			
21	The rise of social media has contributed to the popularity of masquerade cults among youths	2.98	0.69	Agree
22	Youths join masquerade cults to gain access to cultural and spiritual benefits	2.66	0.72	Agree
23	Youths who join masquerade cults in Aguata are seeking financial opportunities through the cult	2.78	0.76	Agree
	Cluster Mean	**2.70**		**Agree**

Data presented in Table 3 shows that all the items 16 – 23 with their respective mean scores of 2.63, 2.52, 2.54, 2.68, 2.82, 2.98, 2.66, and 2.78 were rated agreed. The cluster mean of 2.70 summarized that community leaders agreed on the escalation of masquerade cult initiation by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The standard deviation scores ranging from 0.61 – 0.94 indicates that the respondents' mean scores were closely related.

Discussion of Findings

The finding in research question one revealed that community leaders agreed on the escalation of shrine patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. It typically means that they support or have decided to promote increased involvement of young people with local shrines or places of worship associated with traditional beliefs and practices. This could involve encouraging more participation in rituals, ceremonies, or cultural traditions linked to these shrines. This study agrees with that of Okeke (2018) that in Southeastern Nigeria, shrine patronage has resurged as youths seek traditional spirituality over Western religions, viewing shrines as cultural pillars and sources of identity. Similarly, Eze (2020) suggests that many youths view shrines as embodying powerful ancestral connections, offering a sense of belonging in a rapidly modernizing society.

The finding in research question two revealed that community leaders agreed on the escalation on the native doctors' patronage by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of

Anambra State. This escalation could indicate a shift in community values, where traditional beliefs are gaining prominence among the youth as they seek alternatives to modern economic systems. It might also point to a need for community leaders to engage with the realities faced by the youth and support their search for solutions, even if those solutions involve traditional practices. This finding supported that of Agbo and Onyema (2020) that many youths visit native doctors for "quick-fix" financial solutions or wealth-generating rituals, especially in regions with high unemployment rates. This trend contrasts with Western economic models, as young people seek alternative paths to economic success. In contrast, Johnson (2021) argues that the rise in patronage may be more about social influence than pure economic need, as peer pressure and the visibility of those who claim success from such visits create a ripple effect among impressionable youths.

The finding in research question three revealed that community leaders agreed on the escalation of masquerade cult initiation by youths in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Masquerade cults often play a significant role in traditional societies, serving as a means of cultural expression, community bonding, and the maintenance of local customs. The agreement may indicate a community's desire to strengthen its cultural identity and heritage by promoting youth participation in these rituals. This finding agreed with that of Okoro (2019) that youth participation in masquerade initiation often signifies pride in traditional practices, countering the impacts of globalization and cultural erosion. On the other hand, this finding opposed that of Okafor (2020), who argues that the increased involvement of youths in masquerade activities has contributed to a rise in aggressive behavior, which can destabilize the community and disrupt social order. These findings indicate that for some, masquerade cult initiation represents a problematic trend, with far-reaching consequences.

Conclusion

This study reveals profound insights into the perceptions of community leaders on the escalating phenomenon of idol worship in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Leaders expressed concerns that idol worship, far from being an isolated or merely cultural practice, has become interwoven with social, economic, and youth identity issues. The findings underscore the growing appeal of idol worship as a response to socioeconomic struggles, weakened social institutions, and a reassertion of traditional identity among the youth. Many leaders fear that this trend undermines social cohesion, religious harmony, and youth moral standards, but they also see potential solutions rooted in stronger cultural engagement, economic development, and religious education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Community leaders in Aguata LGA should partner with government agencies to implement community-based educational programs that promote awareness about the potential social, moral, and health risks associated with shrine and native doctor patronage. Such programs should incorporate traditional and religious leaders to ensure a balanced perspective that respects cultural identity while discouraging harmful practices.
2. Anambra State government should establish youth empowerment programs that provide economic and skill-building opportunities. By creating jobs and fostering entrepreneurial skills, these initiatives can offer alternative pathways to economic stability, reducing the appeal of shrine patronage as a means of livelihood or problem-solving.
3. Community leaders in Aguata LGA should work closely with masquerade custodians and cultural leaders to ensure that traditional practices are preserved in ways that discourage

cult-like initiation and violent rituals. Encouraging safe, community-oriented participation can uphold cultural heritage without encouraging harmful behaviours.

4. Religious bodies should develop support networks within families, churches, and community centers that offer guidance, counseling, and mentorship to youths. Active support systems can deter youths from idol worship practices by offering alternative support structures.

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