Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.8 No.1 March, 2025; p.g. 111 – 119; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

URBANISATION AS IT AFFECTS AND CHALLENGES THE PROGRESS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Man has been living in his natural habitat and adopting different methods of settlement. In the course of time, some people were forced to leave their areas of settlement to other areas, maybe looking for greener pastures or to avoid or cushion the effects of natural disasters; this migration and its positive impacts as new habitats with improved living conditions, structures and facilities lead to urbanization in more examples than one. This rapid shift from rural to urban society has significant impacts on African Traditional Religion (ATR) and these effects and challenges are what the author discussed in this work. In looking at it, he employed socio-cultural approach to enable him study both the socio-cultural life of the people. It was discovered that urbanization has brought about dividends such as better living conditions and social amenities,. It also was discovered that this urbanization affected African traditional religion in so many ways like loss of community consciousness and structures, social life, marginalization and misrepresentation of African Traditional Religion, decline in ritual practices etc. It recommends that some accolade should be given to urbanization but it should allow the people to move with their culture, tradition and religion. Certain traditional values like religion, language etc. should be upheld.

Keywords: Urbanization, Impacts, Challenges, Progress, ATR.

INTRODUCTION

Man has been living in his natural habitat and adopting different methods of settlement. In the course of time, some people were forced to leave their areas of settlement to other areas. These forces of migration may come in the form of natural disaster (flood, tsunami, earthquakes, landslide, erosion, fire outbreak, etc.), war, terrorism, oppression, search for greener pastures. As World Bank (2018) would put it, this shift is driven by factors such as the search for better employment opportunities, improved standard of living, and access to services and amenities. United Nations (2018) projects that by 2030, approximately 50% of Africa's population will reside in urban areas.

This rapid shift or migration from rural to urban society has significant impacts on the African Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion (ATR), which is rooted in the rural-communal settlements of the African continent, is being challenged by the progress of urbanization in Africa. Urbanization, which comes with modernization, secularism,

pluralization of religions, etc., affects the demographic composition of an area, and also causes significant modifications in the practice of African Traditional Religion.

This research paper is an attempt to examine the influence of urbanization on African Traditional Religion. It will give us a clue on how urbanization has led to changes in religious observances, beliefs and practices, the challenges African Traditional Religion faces in urban areas, and how African Traditional Religion can navigate these challenges.

DEFINITION AND OVERVIEW OF URBANIZATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT.

The term urbanization is rooted the Latin word "*urbanus*" which means "of or pertaining to a city". The suffix "ization" implies the process of making or becoming something. Urbanization refers to the process of people moving from rural areas to cities. Urbanization can technically be view as the process by which large number of people migrate from rural areas to urban areas, which leads to the growth, development, and transformation of the urban areas both economically, socially and culturally. For Nweke (2017), urbanization implies the expansion and multiplication of towns in the urban areas at the expenses of the rural areas. The people living in the rural areas leave for the urban centers in the search of greener pastures (p. 159).

In Africa, urbanization is tremendously growing, which has significant implications on the social, economic, cultural and religious terrains. In Africa, urbanization comes with a blend of traditional and modern influences, where traditional practices and beliefs from the rural areas interact with the urban lifestyle to give birth to a transformed culture. With the high birthrate in Africa, United Nations projects that by 2050, 1.5 billion people will live in African cities. Since urbanization is linked with economic activities, it implies that the urban areas, serving as the hub of economic activities, will give rise to infrastructural and economic development.

TRENDS IN URBANIZATION ACROSS AFRICA

Trend refers to the observable and general direction or pattern a concept or thing follows as it develops and changes over time. Trends can be seen in fashion, culture, economy, technology and social and religious behaviours. They help us to know the transitional shift in preferences, behaviours or social norms over time within a given area. In Africa, urbanization presents several trends that reflects the unique challenges of the continent. These include:

1. **Regional variations**: Urbanization pattern in Africa varies across the different regions. The different regions exhibit distinctive urbanization pattern which is informed by such factors as economic development, colonial history, cultural and topographical circumstances.
2. **Economic transformation**: Through the process of urbanization, which is closely link to economic development, cities serve as hubs for economic activities. This transformation contributes to job creation, poverty reduction, which is a boost to the economic growth.
3. **Rapid urban growth**: The population of the urban areas is increasingly growing at an unprecedented rate. This growth is due to both high birthrate and significant rural to urban migration of people seeking for greener pastures.

4. **Youthful urban population**: The African urban population is predominantly youthful in nature, with a high proportion youths migrating to the cities for either education, employment opportunities or a better living condition. This will give rise to economic innovation, and growth but not without criminal cases.

CAUSES OF URBANIZATION IN AFRICA

Economic Pressures: Poor economic conditions in rural areas have driven people to move to cities in search of better economic opportunities

lack of social amenities: Lack of access to essential needs such as water, healthcare, and education in rural areas has compelled people to migrate to urban centers where these resources are more readily available

Disasters and Conflicts: Natural disasters like drought, fire outbreak, flooding, erosion, and conflicts, wars, terrorists, banditry, kidnapping have force people to leave rural areas thereby leading to urbanization

Employment Opportunities: The availability of jobs in industries, and public offices, which are not readily available in rural settings do attract people to urban areas

Better Living Standards: The perception of a higher quality of life, including modern housing, better healthcare, and access to goods and services, draws people to cities

Education: Better educational facilities and institutions, as well as a wider range of educational opportunities for children and adults, have been a significant pull factor.

2.0. OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the African people, prior to the influence of Christianity, Islam, and other external religions. Simply put that "it is the way Africans worship their God" (Nweke, 2017). These beliefs and practices of Africans are institutionalized. They are strongly rooted in the African religious culture (Ekwunife, 1990).

There are certain things characterizing this religion such that when those things are seen, then you can say you have arrived the domain of the African Traditional Religion. They are such distinguishing characteristics that very clear. Firstly, the traditional religion of Africa is a holistic religion that integrates spiritual, social, and physical aspects of an African's life. It is a communal religion, emphasizing the importance of community and social relationships. It is a religion that relies heavily on oral tradition, with stories, myths, and legends passed down through generations. It is very important to mention that this religion is very dynamic and even simply adaptive. This simply implies that it evolves over time to accommodate changing social and cultural contexts.

2.1.1 Core Beliefs

Many African traditional societies believe in a supreme being or creator god, often referred to as the Supreme God. Ancestors are revered and believed to continue playing an active role in the lives of their descendants. African Traditional Religion recognizes a spirit world that interacts with the physical world, including spirits of ancestors, nature spirits, and other supernatural beings. Divination is a common practice in this religion of Africa, for it is used to communicate with the spirit world and gain insight into the future.

Practices

Various rituals and ceremonies are performed to mark important life events. Such life events are memorial because of these ceremonies and rituals. Such events like birth, initiation, marriage, and death mean a lot in the life of an African and they all require such significant rituals and ceremonies. Also, African Traditional Religions does not joke with sacrifices and offering for they are life wires for communication with the spirit world. Sacrifices and offerings are made to the gods, ancestors, and spirits to maintain balance and harmony in the community.

Do not tell a true African that medical care is foreign. What is foreign is the term hospital brought to us by orthodox medicine but the act of obtaining treatment and healing are not ideas foreign to us. Traditional healing practices, including the use of herbs and rituals, are employed to treat physical and spiritual ailments. Healing is wholeness to an African. This explains why medical diagnosis ATR is done spiritually, physical, morally, socially, and even psychologically to be able to determine the real cause of the sickness (Nweke & Mbama, 2023). The social life of Africans is very active. Our market squares were very active during moonlight plays and many other social activities. African Traditional Religion emphasizes the importance of community and social bonding. There are even many rituals and ceremonies serving to strengthen social ties.

2.2 Importance of African Tradition Religion in African Culture and Society

African Traditional Religion (ATR) plays a vital role in African culture and society, and its importance cannot be overstated. Here are some key aspects of the significance of ATR:
Culturally, African Traditional Religion helps shape African identity and cultural heritage, providing a sense of belonging and connection to ancestors and the community. The religion preserves African cultural values, traditions, and customs, passing them down from generation to generation. Lastly in this perspective, initiation rites and ceremonies mark important life transitions, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

Socially, African Tradition Religion fosters community cohesion and social harmony, promoting unity and cooperation among community members. Also, African Traditional Religion provides mechanisms for conflict resolution, such as divination and mediation, helping to maintain social order. African Traditional Religion offers emotional and spiritual support to individuals and families, particularly during times of crisis.

Spiritually, ATR provides a spiritual connection to the divine, ancestors, and nature, promoting a sense of transcendence and meaning. ATR's traditional healing practices promote physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. ATR offers moral guidance and ethical principles, shaping individual and communal behavior.

Economically, ATR's rich cultural heritage and traditional practices attract tourists, generating income and promoting cultural exchange. ATR's traditional healing practices contribute to local economies through the sale of herbal remedies and other traditional medicines. ATR inspires various cultural industries, such as music, dance, art, and craft, providing employment opportunities and promoting cultural expression.

Summarily, African Traditional Religion plays a vital role in African culture and society, providing cultural, social, spiritual, and economic significance. Efforts to promote and revitalize ATR are essential to preserving African cultural heritage and promoting sustainable development.

IMPACTS OF URBANIZATION ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Herein, we shall be looking at the impacts in two broad perspectives:

❖ DECLINE IN RITUAL PRACTICES AND SACRED SPACES

In ATR, the use of signs and symbols are very customary is rituals, they have core meanings they render during rituals and sacrifices. The ritual practices and sacred spaces of ATR are very integral to its identity and functioning because they are done in praxis. However, urbanization has disrupted these means of ritual practices, because there would be no seemingly perfect ATR without rituals and sacred places.

Decline in Ritual Practices

Rituals in ATR often require communal participation and a connection to nature. Urban living, gives little or no time for traditional rituals. Hardly would people gather as a community to perform some basic rituals. This is caused by the prioritization of modern lifestyles over cultural practices, and which eventually result to the gradual disappearance of ATR practices. Few instances of this ritual decline are;

According to Quarcoopome in Ugwu, C.O.T & Ugwueye, L.E. (2004, p 133), "traditional rites like puberty, which ensures the smooth transition from childhood to adulthood by giving the youth a sense o moral directions, are no longer performed." This simply happens because the custodian of traditions and such youths are now anonymous entities in the community.

Among the Igbo people of south eastern Nigeria, the idea of *Ima/Iba mmuonwu* (masquerade initiation) for the males is almost getting to extinction due to urbanization. The *Ima/Iba mmuonwu* is one that takes the male child through the formation of adulthood and squarely to upholding the sense of duty, responsibility, community, love, social justice… to the cause of the community. (Ezeuchenne, E. A., 2013).

Decline of Sacred Spaces

ATR is a religion that holds ties to natural elements such as water, trees, mountain, stones, rock and earth. However, these are increasingly difficult to perform in urban environments where such resources are politicized by the government. Urbanization often necessitates land and water development for infrastructures like housing, marketing, education etc. In this process, sacred spaces that were once central to traditional practices are destroyed or repurposed.

Some examples of this decline are as follows;

In the case of ritual cleansing of ancestors' spirits, people are no longer allowed to using river water in some urban places to avoid water contamination (Akintunde, 2021). A clear one is the Nike Lake in Enugu state has long witnessed Urbanization and this overhauled every ritual practices therein. These Sacred places which were historically helps for rituals and our

communication with our ancestors, have now been replaced infrastructural developments (Grillo, 2019).

Hence, when one loses connection to these sacred places, the rituals lose their essence and the spiritual supremacy.

❖ INFLUENCE OF MODERNIZATION

The advent of modernization actually improved the welfare of the society. It being a vital aspect of urbanization comes with such things like new religions, technologies, ideologies, political system etc. However; these things do conflict with the core beliefs of ATR, leading to significant misbalance ritual and belief practices.

Monotheistic Religions

The monotheistic religion of Christianity and Islam have wavered the faith of ATR practitioners in urban areas. They made ATR to be seen as paganism or inferior religion with other numerous derogatory words attached to it. This is simply done because pupils and students in urban areas are mostly educated in Christian or Islamic schools, where their educational system make them to detest or reject their indigenous traditional faith for the monotheistic doctrines of Christianity and Islam.

Science and Rationalism

Urbanization bridles education and technology, which ultimately enhances scientific knowledge and rationalism. For Nweke, I.O. (2020, p 179), "education is one of the most important cornerstones of all human societies. This scientific knowledge and rationalism challenges the metaphysical or supernatural knowledge of ATR. For example, traditional healers, once held in high esteem for their spiritual and herbal knowledge, are provocatively overthrown by modern sciences through sophisticated laboratory findings. This overthrown has actual question the place of traditional healers and the real relevance of ATR in our society today.

Cultural Syncretism and Dilution of Beliefs

While syncretism can actually help ATR to be in space of time to the modern realities, it also dilutes its original traditional fabrics. For instance, the traditional festivals that are held in urban areas that incorporate modernized attire, music, food, drinks, and technology, will eventually transform them into entertainment events instead of its spiritual events when done in rural areas.

CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN URBAN AREAS

The rapid urbanization of Africa presents significant challenges that threaten the sustainability and relevance of ATR in urban contexts. These challenges include the loss of community and social structures, competition from other religions and secularism, the marginalization and misrepresentation of ATR, decline in ritual spaces and practices and identity crisis of adherents.

1. Loss of Community and Social Structures

Urbanization has eroded the community-based structures that are vital to the survival of African Traditional Religion (ATR). As individuals migrate from rural to urban areas, the communal fabric that sustains ATR is often replaced by a fragmented, individualistic urban culture. According to Shorter and Onyancha (1997), urbanization "modifies traditional cultures in a drastic manner, eroding traditional concepts and behaviors, impoverishing human sensibilities, and substituting material value for religious and moral ones" (as cited in Nweke, 2021, p. 106). This disintegration of traditional community life undermines the intergenerational transmission of ATR practices and values, leaving many urban dwellers disconnected from their heritage.

2. Competition from Other Religions and Secularism

ATR faces significant competition from Christianity and Islam, which dominate urban areas through institutional frameworks and modernized approaches to worship. Nweke (2021) notes that "colonial-era missionary activities devalued ATR by labeling its practices as fetish and idolatrous, a legacy that continues to influence perceptions today" (p. 98). Urban religious institutions, with their organized structures and social programs, attract urban populations in ways ATR struggles to match.

Secularism also undermines ATR by promoting a worldview that prioritizes individualism and rationality over traditional spirituality. In Nweke's (2021) analysis, "secularism has caused a "decline in religiosity" as urban residents adopt more materialistic and scientific perspectives (p. 95).

3. Marginalization and Misrepresentation of ATR

Urbanization often marginalizes and misrepresents ATR, portraying it as outdated or irrelevant. Nweke (2021) explains that "ATR has been "mishandled by many misinterpretations" from foreign investigators, leading to misconceptions that diminish its legitimacy" (p. 98). This narrative has discouraged many urban Africans from practicing ATR, instead driving them toward more dominant religions or secular ideologies.

Moreover, ATR struggles to compete for visibility in urban spaces, which tend to favor religions with formal organizational structures and institutional support. Thus, urban development policies often exclude traditional practices, further marginalizing ATR (Glasser et al, 2008). The lack of media representation and educational frameworks to support ATR exacerbates its invisibility in urban contexts, weakening its ability to attract adherents.

4. Decline in Ritual Spaces and Practices

Urbanization has led to the destruction or repurposing of traditional spaces essential for ATR rituals and ceremonies. In many urban areas, land previously used for sacred groves or shrines is now occupied by residential or commercial developments. This has forced ATR practitioners to abandon or adapt their rituals, often leading to a dilution of traditional practices. Nweke (2021) observes that "colonial and modern influences disrupted African religious spaces by labeling sacred sites as "fetish" and appropriating them for other purposes" (p. 98).

The challenge is further compounded by urban planning priorities that fail to recognize the cultural significance of ATR spaces. This highlights that urban policies in Africa focus on infrastructure and economic growth at the expense of cultural preservation, leaving ATR practitioners with limited options for maintaining their sacred traditions (Glasser et al, 2008).

5. Identity Crisis Among Adherents

Urban environments foster a sense of identity crisis among ATR adherents, as they struggle to reconcile traditional beliefs with modern lifestyles. According to Nweke (2021), "the influx of foreign beliefs into Africa has obliterated many indigenous norms, leaving Africans "empty and devoid of a central belief system"" (p. 100). This crisis is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where exposure to diverse cultures and ideologies challenges traditional worldviews.
It is also worthy of note that, urbanization often creates a disconnect between individuals and their cultural roots, as migration and reclassification uproot populations from their traditional environments. This alienation leads many urban Africans to abandon ATR in favor of more socially acceptable or globally recognized religions, further contributing to its decline (Glasser et al, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Urbanization is a transformative process that is currently shaping and reshaping the African socio-economic and cultural landscape on the continent. With the emergence of rapid urban development, and postulation increase projection to about 1.5 billion living in urban areas by 2050, African Traditional Religion would be significantly influenced. Urbanization brings both challenges and room for transformations for ATR. As the movement of people from rural to urban areas brings demographic shift, the traditional beliefs and practices are diluted. While modernization, secularism and fast-paced lifestyle pose significant challenge to ATR, the presence of other religious creates an obstacle for the preservation and practice of ATR
However, despite the challenges of urbanization on African Traditional Religion, it still plays significant roles in the urban community, providing a sense of identity and cultural continuity for the practitioners. It also provides a sense of belonging, social cohesion and creates a forum where individuals provide mutual support and aid to themselves. Some people form associations or groups which helps them to uphold and practice their religious beliefs.

Conclusively, while urbanization presents numerous challenges to ATR, it also offers opportunities for adaptation, transformation and resilience. Positively embracing these opportunities and addressing the challenges can afford ATR the chance to continue to be a vibrant and integral part of African culture.

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