

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF WOMEN AS THE SUSTAINING FACTOR IN AFRICAN
TRADITIONAL RELIGION

ALOZIE CHUKWUNYERE IROANYA PhD

Hugh Goldie Lay/ Theological Training Institution

Arochukwu, Abia State

08032545503; revaciroanya@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is a critical evaluation of the role of women as sustaining factor in African Traditional Religion (ATR). African Traditional Religion is deeply connected to culture, morality, family life, and social organization. It shapes the worldview of African societies and serves as a guide for daily living. Within the structure of ATR, women occupy a very important position. This study therefore, seeks to critically evaluate the role of women in ATR by examining their contributions and the challenges they face. Accordingly, this study employed a descriptive survey method to evaluate the role of women in sustaining ATR. The findings revealed that ATR is sustained through a complex system of beliefs, rituals, oral traditions, and communal practices that are deeply embedded in African life. Within this structure, women occupy a central position as transmitters of cultural memory, custodians of moral values, and active participants in religious life. However, further findings showed that, a critical evaluation of their role requires both appreciation of their contributions and a clear understanding of the structural, historical, and modern challenges that shape their participation. While women remain essential to the survival of ATR, their influence operates within patriarchal systems, colonial distortions, and contemporary religious changes. It concluded that women in homes and fields, at shrines and markets, through healing, teaching, and ritual labor, have sustained the traditions that connect the living with the ancestors, communities with spirits, and the present with the past.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Religious identity, Womanhood, Spirituality, Sustaining forces.

INTRODUCTION

African Traditional Religion (hereafter ATR) remains one of the oldest and most enduring expressions of African spirituality, shaping the moral, cultural, and social life of African communities long before the advent of Christianity and Islam. Unlike religions founded on written scriptures, ATR survives primarily through oral traditions, rituals, symbols, and communal practices passed from one generation to another. Within this system, women occupy a central position as preservers of culture, transmitters of religious values, and active participants in spiritual life. In many African societies, particularly among the Igbo of South East Nigeria, women contribute significantly to the continuity of indigenous religious practices through storytelling, festivals, moral instruction, healing practices, and domestic rituals.

Mbiti observes that religion in Africa permeates every aspect of life, making every member of the community a participant in sustaining religious consciousness (1–3). Despite these important contributions, the role of women in ATR has often been underestimated or overshadowed by patriarchal structures and colonial interpretations that emphasized male religious authority. Contemporary scholars, however, have increasingly recognized that women are not merely supportive figures, but essential sustaining forces within African indigenous religion (Frost 1-21). Their contributions remain vital for the survival of African cultural and religious identity. Ultimately, the history of ATR cannot be fully understood without recognizing the central role of women. They are not merely participants within the religious system, but essential pillars upon which the continuity of African spirituality rests (Iroanya 40-43; Zimoñ 43-60).

In view of the above, the role of women in ATR has attracted scholarly attention over the years. Some scholars argue that women were marginalized in certain religious activities because of cultural taboos and male dominance. However, as Mbiti observes, ATR is fundamentally a lived religion sustained at the family and community level, where women play a foundational role in religious continuity (10–12). Thus, the reality is that ATR presents a complex relationship between gender, spirituality, culture, and power. It is very precious, therefore, to note that, women were both respected and restricted depending on the particular society and religious tradition. These studies emphasized women's transformative religious authority, ritual participation, and cultural preservation within ATR and related indigenous systems (Frost 1-24; Helleman and Sipungu 1-10; Magaji 350-372; Nwankwo 23-42).

This debate carries profound implications not only for accurate scholarly description, but for contemporary African women seeking religious resources for liberation and self-understanding. Accordingly, this study addresses a specific question within this larger debate: in what sense can women be understood as the "sustaining factor" in African Traditional Religion? Instructively, the phrase "sustaining factor" requires careful unpacking. This has created the need for the present study. Against this background, this study therefore seeks to critically evaluate the role of women in ATR by examining their contributions, the challenges they face, the influence of patriarchy, colonial legacy, the impact of modernization, and foreign religions on their religious roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purpose of properly providing guidelines for the clear appreciation of the conceptual framework of this study and its contextualization, it is pertinent to clarify some of the key concepts inherent in the theme.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous religious systems of African peoples that developed long before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. It is not a single unified religion with a central founder or sacred text, but rather a complex collection of beliefs, rituals, symbols, and moral values that vary across ethnic groups while maintaining certain shared characteristics (Awolalu and Dopamu 27 in Ekeke 357). These include belief in a Supreme Being, reverence for ancestors, and the recognition of spiritual forces that influence human existence (Awolalu and Dopamu 27 in Ekeke 357; Idowu 32-35). ATR is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of African societies, shaping social behavior, governance, family life, and moral conduct.

Scholars widely describe it as a "lived religion," meaning it is expressed through daily practices rather than formal doctrines alone. In this sense, religion and life are inseparable within African traditional contexts (Mbiti 1-3). Mbiti emphasizes this holistic worldview by noting that Africans are "notoriously religious," indicating that religion permeates every aspect of life (1–3). Within this religious worldview, existence is understood as a continuous interaction between the physical and spiritual realms. Human beings, ancestors, deities, and natural forces are believed to exist in a dynamic relationship that must be maintained through rituals, sacrifices, and moral living. In traditional African societies, this worldview informs social organization, communal responsibilities, and gender roles.

Several characteristics of ATR are particularly relevant for understanding women's roles. First, ATR is orthopractic rather than orthodox; that is, correct ritual performance matters more than doctrinal belief (Mbiti 15). This emphasis on practice creates space for women to exercise authority through ritual expertise even when formal leadership positions are restricted. Second, ATR is integrated with social structure. For instance, religious roles are often continuous with kinship roles, age grades, and gender-based social organization (Idowu 78). This integration means that women's domestic and reproductive roles have direct religious significance. Third, ATR is characterized by what scholars call "diffused religion", that is, religious beliefs and practices permeate everyday life rather than being confined to specialized institutions (Ikenga-Metuh 45).

WOMANHOOD

Women, in particular, occupy a significant position within this spiritual structure, even though their contributions have often been underrepresented in earlier scholarly accounts. Rather than being marginal figures, women participate actively in sustaining religious life through both formal and informal channels. They are deeply involved in rites of passage, agricultural festivals, healing practices, and the transmission of oral traditions. Contemporary African scholarship has therefore challenged earlier distortions by emphasizing the centrality of women in indigenous religious systems (Oduyoye 45–47). Historically, the roles of women in ATR have been shaped by a system of complementarity rather than strict hierarchical exclusion. While certain ritual offices were traditionally reserved for men in some communities, women still held influential spiritual and social positions that contributed significantly to communal stability.

They functioned as custodians of moral values within the family, ensuring that children were raised within the ethical and spiritual expectations of the community. Women also played essential roles in storytelling, song, and oral literature, which are key vehicles for preserving religious knowledge across generations. In many African societies, they were actively involved in fertility rites, childbirth rituals, and seasonal ceremonies that connect human life with cosmic cycles. Olupona notes that African religious life cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the active participation of women in both public and domestic ritual spaces (112–114). Despite these important contributions, the role of women in ATR has often been underestimated or overshadowed by patriarchal structures and colonial interpretations that emphasized male religious authority. Specifically, the interpretation of women's roles in ATR has been significantly influenced by external factors, particularly colonialism and missionary activities. Early European anthropologists and missionaries often approached African societies with Western patriarchal assumptions, which led to the misrepresentation or minimization of women's religious authority.

As a result, many scholarly accounts portrayed ATR as male-dominated, overlooking the nuanced and context-specific roles of women. This distortion affected both academic discourse and religious perceptions, contributing to the marginalization of women in later institutional frameworks (Frost 2–10). The point being stressed is that despite their significant contributions, women in ATR face structural and cultural limitations that restrict the full recognition of their religious authority. These limitations are often shaped by social expectations, gender roles, missionary activities, and institutional arrangements within traditional systems. Ostensibly, the introduction of Christianity, Islam, and Western education has significantly transformed ATR and reshaped the roles of women within it. Many indigenous practices were reclassified or discouraged, leading to the decline of certain female-centered ritual roles. Feminist scholars have since worked to correct this imbalance by re-examining African religious systems through culturally grounded perspectives. Oyewumi argues that Western gender constructs do not accurately reflect many African social systems, where roles were often defined by seniority, lineage, and function rather than rigid gender binaries (29–31).

In contemporary African religious studies, there has been a renewed focus on the indispensable role of women in sustaining ATR in the face of modernization, urbanization, and religious pluralism. Women continue to serve as vital transmitters of indigenous knowledge, ensuring that traditional beliefs and practices are preserved within families and communities despite increasing external influences. They maintain ritual continuity through participation in festivals, domestic spiritual practices, and moral instruction of younger generations. African feminist theologians argue that without the active involvement of women, many aspects of ATR would gradually decline or lose their cultural relevance. Oduyoye particularly highlights the importance of women's spiritual agency in African religious life, emphasizing that their contributions are foundational rather than supplementary (52–54). This background therefore establishes the need for a critical evaluation of women not as secondary participants, but as sustaining forces within ATR.

Against this background, ATR is deeply rooted in the lived experiences, worldview, and cultural structures of African societies, and it cannot be separated from the social identities that shape communal life, including gender. Within this framework, womanhood is not merely a biological

category but a socially and spiritually defined role that carries religious significance. In many African societies, including the Igbo of South East Nigeria, women are seen as vital participants in sustaining both the visible and invisible dimensions of religious life. ATR does not operate as an abstract belief system, but as a lived reality embedded in kinship, rituals, festivals, and moral expectations. In this sense, womanhood becomes a key instrument through which religious continuity is preserved across generations. Scholars of African religion emphasize that gender roles in traditional settings are often complementary, meaning that men and women perform different but interdependent religious functions (Mbiti 4–6).

Therefore, understanding ATR without examining womanhood results in an incomplete interpretation of African spirituality. In Igbo traditional society, womanhood is closely connected to fertility, morality, family stability, and spiritual continuity, all of which are central concerns of ATR. Women are regarded as life-givers, not only in the biological sense but also in the spiritual and cultural transmission of values. The Igbo worldview places significant emphasis on *umu nwanyị* (women) as preservers of lineage through childbearing, nurturing, and moral instruction within the household. Beyond domestic roles, women participate actively in religious festivals such as the New Yam Festival (*iri ji*), where they contribute through songs, dances, and ritual preparations that honor the earth deity and ancestral spirits. Their involvement is not peripheral, but central to the successful performance of communal rituals (Iroanya 40-42).

As Olupona observes, African religious systems are sustained through a network of social actors in which women play indispensable ritual and cultural roles (118–120). Thus, womanhood functions as both a social identity and a religious responsibility. However, the role of women in ATR, particularly in Igbo society, has often been misunderstood or underestimated due to external interpretations shaped by colonial and missionary influences. Early accounts of African religion frequently emphasized male religious authority, thereby overlooking the significant contributions of women in indigenous spiritual systems. For instance, patriarchal systems have played a significant role in shaping the structure of religious authority in many African societies, including Igbo culture. Pre-colonial gender relations were varied and complex; the rigid patriarchal systems documented by early ethnographers often reflected colonial policies and missionary teachings as much as indigenous practice (Amadiume 203).

Missionaries explicitly targeted women's religious roles for elimination. Female diviners, healers, and priestesses were condemned as witches or agents of Satan. Initiation rites were suppressed as pagan and immoral. The domestic rituals that women performed such as offerings to ancestors, or prayers at household shrines were dismissed as superstition. In their place, missionaries promoted Christian patriarchy: the male-headed household, women's submission to husbands, and women's exclusion from Church leadership (Johnson-Bashua 12). Colonial administrations reinforced this transformation. Laws criminalizing "witchcraft" disproportionately targeted women healers as in the medieval era. Colonial courts refused to recognize women's religious authority. Also, colonial education provided almost exclusively by missions taught girls that indigenous religions were backward while Christianity was modern and civilized (Johnson-Bashua 15). The cumulative effect was profound. Women who had been religious leaders became, in the colonial imagination, superstitious obstacles to progress. The knowledge they carried such as in medicine, rituals, and cosmology was delegitimized. The status they had enjoyed was eroded and the transmission of indigenous traditions, which had depended on women's teaching, was disrupted for generations.

This misrepresentation led to the perception that women were passive participants in ATR, rather than active custodians of religious knowledge and practice. In reality, Igbo women historically held influential positions in both domestic and communal religious life, including leadership in women's assemblies and participation in ritual decision-making. They also played important roles in maintaining moral order through community-based institutions such as *umyada* (daughters of the lineage), which enforce ethical conduct and preserve cultural norms. Feminist scholars like Oyewumi argue that African social systems should not be interpreted strictly through Western gender frameworks, as such perspectives distort the fluidity and functionality of indigenous roles (33–35). This insight is essential for properly understanding womanhood in ATR. Furthermore, womanhood in Igbo ATR is deeply connected to spiritual symbolism, particularly through the reverence of female

deities and ancestral figures. Goddesses such as *Ala* (the earth deity) represent fertility, morality, justice, and communal balance, and are often associated with feminine spiritual power.

The earth is considered a mother figure that nurtures life and enforces moral order, reinforcing the symbolic importance of womanhood in Igbo cosmology. Women often serve as priestesses, diviners, or custodians of sacred shrines dedicated to such deities, further demonstrating their spiritual authority within the traditional system. This reinforces the idea that ATR does not exclude women from spiritual leadership, but rather integrates them into its symbolic and ritual structure. According to Oduyoye, African religious thought consistently reflects a deep connection between femininity, spirituality, and communal survival, especially through maternal symbolism (48–50). In this way, womanhood becomes a theological category within ATR, not just a social identity. In contemporary Igbo society, the influence of modernization, Christianity, and urbanization has reshaped the visible roles of women in ATR, but it has not completely erased their religious significance.

Many traditional practices still rely on women as transmitters of oral history, custodians of cultural festivals, and preservers of family rituals in both rural and urban settings. Even where formal religious structures have changed, the underlying cultural respect for women as life-givers and moral educators remains strong. However, modern religious shifts have also created tensions, sometimes limiting women's participation in overt ritual leadership while maintaining their influence in domestic spiritual life. Despite these changes, scholars argue that women continue to serve as the sustaining force of ATR through cultural resilience and generational transmission of beliefs (Oduyoye 53–55). Therefore, Igbo society provides a clear example of how womanhood remains deeply embedded in ATR, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

SUSTAINING FACTOR

According to the free English dictionary online, sustain means to be the physical support of; carry the weight of, admit as valid, establish or strengthen as with new evidence or facts, supply with necessities and support, provide with nourishment, lengthen or extend in duration or space. It also means to preserve, maintain, or keep something alive. Sustaining factor refers to the core variables that ensure a program, business, or initiative continues to deliver value and maintain operations after initial funding or implementation. Therefore, women as sustaining factor in ATR refers to the ways women preserve, protect, promote, and transmit African indigenous religious beliefs and practices from one generation to another.

To put it more concretely, women are key drivers in human, economic, social, and environmental management in ATR. Women sustain religion through childbirth, child upbringing, moral instruction, ritual participation, traditional healing, preservation of sacred customs, supportive organizational culture, and transmission of cultural values. Women are often regarded as the backbone of African communities because they maintain family unity and cultural continuity. Through motherhood and socialization, they shape the religious consciousness of younger generations. Hereto, women are the sustaining factor in ATR because the daily care of shrines and regular offering at the shrines are ensured mostly by women. Indeed, the role of women as sustainers of ATR is crucial to the survival of the religion.

ROLES OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African Traditional Religion is a lived and dynamic system of beliefs in which every member of the community contributes to its continuity and survival. Within this structure, women occupy a particularly significant position because they function not only as biological reproducers of life but also as cultural and spiritual transmitters of religious knowledge. Their roles cut across domestic, social, economic, and ritual spheres, making them indispensable to the maintenance of religious traditions. In many African societies, including the Igbo, religious life is not separated from everyday existence; rather, it is embedded in family structures, festivals, oral traditions, and communal responsibilities. As a result, women's participation becomes both direct and indirect, visible and symbolic. Scholars such as Mbiti emphasize that African religion is a communal enterprise in which every individual has a role to play in sustaining spiritual harmony (6–8). Against this background, the

roles of women in ATR can be critically examined under various dimensions. The evaluation below therefore examines their role in a more detailed and structured manner.

1. Women as Custodians of Tradition

Women in African Traditional Religion serve as primary custodians of cultural memory and traditional knowledge, ensuring that religious values are transmitted from one generation to another. Through storytelling, proverbs, folktales, and lullabies, they preserve the moral and spiritual teachings of the community in ways that are accessible to children and young adults. In Igbo society, grandmothers in particular play a vital role in narrating ancestral histories and explaining taboos and sacred customs that shape moral behavior. These oral traditions are not merely entertainment but serve as vehicles for religious instruction and identity formation. Women also ensure the continuity of ritual practices within the household, especially those connected to birth, naming ceremonies, and family protection rites. As Oduyoye notes, African women function as “bearers of memory” who sustain religious consciousness within the family structure (49–51). Without their contribution, much of ATR’s oral heritage would risk gradual disappearance.

2. Women in Rituals and Religious Ceremonies

Women actively participate in religious rituals and ceremonies that mark important communal events such as festivals, harvests, marriages, and funerals. In Igbo traditional religion, women play significant roles during the New Yam Festival, where they contribute through cooking, dancing, singing, and preparing ritual spaces that honor the earth deity, *Ala*. They also participate in libation ceremonies and communal prayers, especially in domestic and family-centered rituals (Asubonteng-Manu & Boateng 3). In many cases, women are responsible for preparing ritual offerings, including food items and symbolic materials used in worship. Their participation reflects not only cultural obligation, but also spiritual responsibility in maintaining harmony between the human and spiritual worlds. Olupona observes that African ritual life is sustained through collective participation, where women’s roles are essential for completeness and balance (121–123). This demonstrates that women are not passive observers but active agents in religious performance (Asubonteng-Manu & Boateng 6; Amadiume 178).

3. Women as Moral and Cultural Educators

Women play a central role in shaping the moral and ethical values of African Traditional Religion through their position within the family structure. As mothers, they are the first educators of children, teaching respect for elders, reverence for the gods, and adherence to communal norms. In Igbo society, mothers instill concepts such as *ezigbo omume* (good conduct) and *egwu chi* (reverence for personal destiny), which are foundational to religious morality. Through correction, discipline, and storytelling, they ensure that children grow up with a strong sense of spiritual responsibility. Women also influence communal ethics by participating in women’s assemblies such as *umuada*, (daughters in Igbo land) which enforce moral discipline within extended families and villages. These assemblies can impose sanctions on individuals who violate communal norms, thereby reinforcing social order. According to Mbiti, African moral education is deeply rooted in family life, where women as mothers play a primary role in shaping religious consciousness (Mbiti 10–12). Their influence ensures the stability of both religious and social systems.

Consequently, the maternal role in procreation and cosmic order is sacred. The religious significance of motherhood extends beyond biological reproduction. Women are understood as “mothers” of the community, responsible for nurturing not only children but the community’s spiritual life. The title “Mother” attached to female religious leaders such as *Mama* in many contexts, *Mbuya* among the Shona, signals that their authority derives from maternal qualities: nurturance, protection, wisdom, and life-giving power. Chirara & Chisale show how the *musha mukadzi* philosophy articulates this maternal sacred: “a home cannot be a home without a woman or wife” (4). Women are not merely residents of the home; they constitute the home as a human and spiritual space. Without a woman, the domestic rituals that maintain ancestral connections: daily prayers, offerings, hospitality to spirits will

cease. Ostensibly, the home's religious life depends on women's presence and activity (Chirara & Chisale 6).

4. Women in Spiritual and Healing Practices

Women also serve important roles as spiritual healers, diviners, and custodians of medicinal knowledge within African Traditional Religion. In many communities, they are believed to possess spiritual insight that enables them to interpret dreams, diagnose spiritual ailments, and prescribe herbal remedies (Zimoñ 49-51). Among the Igbo, some women function as traditional healers who combine herbal medicine with spiritual rituals to address both physical and metaphysical problems. They are often consulted in matters relating to fertility, protection from spiritual attacks, and purification rites. In certain cases, women also serve as priestesses of specific deities, acting as intermediaries between the spiritual and human realms. This spiritual authority reflects the recognition of feminine power within ATR cosmology. Oduyoye highlights that African spirituality often integrates healing and religion, with women occupying key roles in maintaining communal well-being (52–54). Their contributions demonstrate the inseparability of health, spirituality, and gender in African religious thought.

5. Women as Priestesses and Spiritual Leaders

Contrary to the assumption that African Traditional Religion is entirely male-dominated, many African societies recognize female spiritual leaders. Women serve as priestesses, mediums, diviners, prophets, and custodians of shrines. Frost explains that African women historically functioned as healers, oracles, and spiritual mediators whose influence sustained indigenous spirituality even during periods of colonial and missionary suppression (4). Among the Igbo, women participate in the worship of *Ala*, the earth goddess associated with morality, fertility, and justice. Female priests are respected because they are believed to possess spiritual authority and closeness to the deities. In many societies, women become spirit mediums through possession experiences. During rituals, they communicate messages from ancestors or divinities to the community. Such roles give women spiritual influence and social respect.

Recent studies on Igbo masquerade traditions also reveal that although some ritual spaces restricted women; women still influenced ritual organization, oral traditions, and cultural preservation behind the scenes (Ugezu 1; Nwankwo 25). Priestesses of *Ala* supervise rituals related to land purification and communal harmony. Additionally, women also function as traditional healers and diviners. They interpret dreams, diagnose spiritual problems, prescribe herbal remedies, and conduct cleansing rituals. Their services are sought during illness, infertility, conflict, and misfortune. Zimoñ argues that women frequently occupy important religious offices because African societies associate them with life, fertility, healing, and continuity (45). This association strengthens their role as sustaining factors in religion. Women's leadership in ATR demonstrates that spiritual authority is not limited to men alone. Although some societies restricted women from certain rituals, women still exercised considerable influence within the religious structure.

6. Women and Ancestor Veneration

Ancestor veneration is a central feature of African Traditional Religion. Ancestors are believed to remain spiritually active after death and continue to influence the lives of the living. They protect, guide, bless, and sometimes punish members of the community (Frost 9). Women contribute greatly to ancestor veneration through family rituals, memorial ceremonies, and preservation of lineage traditions. They maintain family shrines, prepare ritual meals, and teach younger generations about ancestral heritage. In many African societies, women are responsible for organizing funeral rites and mourning ceremonies. Funerals are not merely social events but important religious ceremonies that help the deceased transition into the spiritual world of the ancestors. Women also preserve genealogies and family histories. Through storytelling and oral tradition, they keep alive the memory of ancestors and ensure that family identity is maintained. The connection between women and ancestor veneration is particularly important because women are viewed as mothers of future

generations. Through childbirth and nurturing, they provide continuity between the living, the dead, and the unborn.

7. Women in Oral Traditions, Songs, and Festivals

Women contribute significantly to the preservation and expression of African Traditional Religion through oral arts such as songs, chants, and festival performances. In Igbo society, women compose and lead songs during rituals, funerals, and festivals, using music as a medium of spiritual communication and communal bonding. These songs often contain moral lessons, historical narratives, and religious reflections that reinforce communal identity. During festivals, women's dance groups and vocal performances create an atmosphere of spiritual celebration and unity. They also play a major role in funeral rites, where mourning songs guide the transition of the deceased into the ancestral realm. Such performances are not merely cultural expressions but are deeply embedded in religious meaning and symbolism. As Olupona explains, oral traditions are essential to African religion because they function as living texts that transmit sacred knowledge across generations (124–126). Women, therefore, remain central to the preservation of ATR's expressive and symbolic life.

MENSTRUAL BLOOD: POTENCY AND POLLUTION

The most persistent and puzzling feature of women's religious status in ATR is the ambivalence surrounding menstruation. Menstrual blood is simultaneously recognized as profoundly potent associated with fertility, life-giving power, and spiritual energy, yet also as polluting and dangerous in certain contexts. Frost documents this ambivalence across multiple African contexts (536). Among the Yoruba, menstrual blood is understood to carry *àṣẹ* (spiritual power to create or change things). Yet this same potency requires restriction. Menstruating women are excluded from certain rituals, agricultural activities, and sacred spaces. Among the Igbo of South East Nigeria, menstruating women may not approach the *obu/obi* (community ritual), handle ritual objects or cook for the *eze nmo* (chief priest). Similarly, among the Balobedu of South Africa, only post-menopausal women can brew the beer for rainmaking ceremonies because younger women are considered "hot"—their menstrual potency disrupts the "coolness" required to attract rain (Setume 94).

This ambivalence is not easily characterized as either "oppressive" or "empowering." On one level, menstrual taboos exclude women from full participation in religious life, reinforcing their subordinate status. On another hand, the recognition that menstrual blood carries spiritual power that men do not possess provides women with a form of religious capital that cannot be dismissed. As Frost argues, the restriction is paradoxical: "the perceived potency of menstruation both limits women's ritual participation and marks them as spiritually powerful" (537). Nonetheless, if menstruation is ambivalent, childbirth and motherhood are unequivocally sacred in ATR cosmology. The ability to bear children is understood as participation in the divine creative power that sustains the cosmos. Women who bear many children, especially sons are honored as having fulfilled their religious as well as social purpose. Zimoñ explains that "nonliterate peoples consider life to be the fundamental value and that is the reason why their cultural and religious traditions put emphasis on woman's biological functions and see procreation as her main vocation and task" (48).

This emphasis on procreation as religious vocation has complex implications. It valorizes women's reproductive role, giving women who bear children genuine religious status. Yet, it also confines women's identity to reproduction, making childlessness a religious tragedy and potentially excluding barren women from full religious participation. The religious significance of motherhood extends beyond biological reproduction. Women are understood as "mothers" of the community, responsible for nurturing not only children, but the community's spiritual life. The title "Mother" attached to female religious leaders, *Mama* in many contexts, *Mbuya* among the Shona of Southern Africa; signals that their authority derives from maternal qualities: nurturance, protection, wisdom, and life-giving power. Chirara & Chisale show how the *musha mukadzi* philosophy (translated as "home is a woman" in Shona, or *umuzi ngumama* in Ndebele) articulates this maternal sacred: "a home cannot be a home without a woman or wife" (4). Women are not merely residents of the home; they constitute the home as a human and spiritual space. Without a woman, the domestic rituals that maintain

ancestral connections: daily prayers, offerings, and hospitality to spirits will cease. The home's religious life depends on women's presence and activity (Chirara & Chisale 6).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted sustainable livelihoods theory developed by Robert Chambers & Gordon Conway in 1992. Chambers & Conway define sustainability as self-sufficiency and an important ideology of long-term self-restraint and self-reliance. It is used to refer to life styles which touch the earth lightly; to institutions which can raise their own revenue; to processes which are self-supporting without subsidy. Women are sustaining factor in ATR because they can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance their capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation (6). Applying this framework to religion, a religious tradition is sustained when its practices, beliefs, and institutions are transmitted across generations, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain vitality despite external pressures. Chirara & Chisale applied this framework to women's roles in Africa, showing how the philosophy of *musha mukadzi* (women make the home) functions as a resource for sustainable livelihoods (5).

They argue that while this proverb can be used oppressively; that is, confining women to domestic labor and excluding them from decision-making; grassroots women reinterpret it as empowering, using its cultural authority to claim space for income-generating activities, household management, and community leadership (7). This study extends this analysis from economic livelihoods to religious sustainability. Women sustain ATR through multiple mechanisms: the transmission of ritual knowledge to children; the performance of domestic rites that maintain ancestral connections; service as healers and diviners who address daily spiritual needs; leadership in rites of passage that reproduce the religious community; and, increasingly, conscious efforts to revive and valorize indigenous traditions.

Women as sustaining factor in ATR implies that continuity, transmission, and daily practice of ATR depend disproportionately on women's ritual labor, spiritual agency, and cultural memory. Despite their marginalization, women sustain ATR through creative negotiation with the very structures that limit them. Hereto, sustainability is used in a more focused manner to mean the ability to maintain and improve religious practices, while maintaining or enhancing the local and global assets and capabilities on which ATR depends. Therefore, the theory provides a suitable framework for understanding how the continuity, transmission, and daily practice of ATR depend disproportionately on women's ritual labor, spiritual agency, and cultural memory.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative research design; collected secondary data from books, journal publications, and online sources. Content analysis of secondary data was employed to identify themes, patterns, and challenges. Content analysis was also used to move beyond description by examining relationships and underlying factors associated with the role of women in ATR, thereby helping to explain why and how its various roles continue to sustain the peoples' religion. This method of data collection was a deliberate attempt to narrow this study down to a specific concern, bearing in mind that collecting data based on real situations in the Igbo society will make the difference during analysis of data collected. This method is phenomenological.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects. Instead, the researcher relied on participant observation as the primary sources of data collection. The researcher also did not reveal any cultural knowledge that might be deemed sensitive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of findings in this study is presented in line with the research objective.

Objective One: The contributions of Women in African Traditional Religion

The findings reveal that women contribute significantly to the survival of ATR through multiple interconnected roles that sustain both belief and practice across generations. Their influence is most visible in the family structure, where they serve as the first point of religious instruction for children (Amadiume 178; Chirara & Chisale 6; Oduyoye 49–51). In Igbo society, women also maintain oral traditions and actively participate in rituals that strengthen communal religious identity. Their contributions ensure that ATR remains a lived and functional system rather than a forgotten heritage. The key contributions of women in ATR include:

1. Primary transmission of moral and religious values to children within the household.
2. Preservation of oral traditions such as folktales, proverbs, and songs.
3. Active participation in rituals such as naming ceremonies, marriages, and funerals.
4. Involvement in festivals like the New Yam Festival (*iri ji*) through songs, dance, and preparation of ritual foods.
5. Maintenance of domestic religious practices and ancestral reverence.
6. Participation in women's associations (e.g., *umuada* in Igbo society) that enforce moral order.
7. Acting as cultural memory keepers who preserve historical and spiritual identity.

As Oduyoye emphasizes, African women function as “bearers of tradition,” ensuring the continuity of spiritual and cultural identity within African communities (50–52).

Objective Two: Limitations and Challenges Faced by Women in ATR

Despite their significant contributions, women in ATR face structural and cultural limitations that restrict the full recognition of their religious authority. These limitations are often shaped by social expectations, gender roles, and institutional arrangements within traditional systems. The same traditions that empower women as mothers and healers also restrict them as menstruating and potentially polluting. While women are active participants in religious life, their roles are sometimes confined to supportive or domestic spaces rather than formal leadership positions. Key limitations and challenges include:

1. Restricted access to certain sacred offices and priesthood roles.
2. Limited participation in some male-dominated ancestral or political rituals.
3. Social expectation of prioritizing domestic and reproductive responsibilities.
4. Underrepresentation in formal religious decision-making structures.
5. Cultural restrictions placed on women in specific ritual spaces.
6. Misinterpretation of women's roles due to external (colonial) gender frameworks.
7. Reduced visibility of women's authority in written historical accounts.

Against this backdrop, women sustain ATR from positions that are simultaneously central and marginal. They are excluded from certain rituals and leadership positions, yet their everyday practice such as domestic offerings, healing work, initiation instruction, and ritual expertise keep the religious system alive. On this score, Oyewumi argues that African gender systems have often been distorted by external interpretations that imposed rigid hierarchies not always reflective of indigenous realities (34–36).

Objective Three: Influence of Patriarchy and Social Structures

It was found that patriarchal systems have played a significant role in shaping the structure of religious authority in many African societies, including Igbo culture. While women are deeply involved in religious practice, formal leadership and ritual authority are often structured in ways that favor men. Ironically, many of the sweeping restrictions now being imposed on women are modern inventions, projected backwards and falsely presented as ancient tradition. Our forebears were far more nuanced than many people imagine. They understood distinctions. They created different cultural institutions for different purposes and made room for women to participate in community life according to those distinctions. Nevertheless, patriarchy creates a tension between participation and institutional recognition, where women contribute extensively but are not always visible in formal decision-making roles. Key influences of patriarchy include:

1. Male dominance in kingship rituals and lineage leadership systems.
2. Control of major priesthood and ancestral cult offices by men in many communities.
3. Structuring of authority systems along patrilineal inheritance lines
4. Social prioritization of male religious leadership roles.
5. Gendered division between “public authority” (male) and “domestic spirituality” (female).
6. Restriction of women’s roles in some sacred or esoteric rituals.
7. However, there is the existence of powerful women’s institutions like *umuada* that balance authority in Igbo societies.

To underscore this, Olupona notes that African religious systems are diverse and cannot be reduced to a single patriarchal model, as women’s institutions also exercise significant social and moral authority (123–125).

Objective Four: Impact of Modern Religion and Western Civilization

Further findings showed that the introduction of Christianity, Islam, and Western education has significantly transformed African Traditional Religion and reshaped the roles of women within it. Many indigenous practices were reclassified or discouraged, leading to the decline of certain female-centered ritual roles. However, women have also adapted by preserving aspects of ATR within domestic and cultural contexts, ensuring continuity despite external pressure. Key impacts include:

1. Decline of some traditional female priesthood and divination roles.
2. Reinterpretation of ATR practices as incompatible with modern religions.
3. Reduction in public visibility of women in traditional ritual spaces.
4. Shift of religious authority toward Christian and Islamic institutions.
5. Continued preservation of ATR practices within homes and families.
6. Adaptation of traditional beliefs into cultural rather than formal religious practice.
7. Increased dual religious identity among many African women.

Mbiti notes that African religiosity persists most strongly at the family level, where women continue to play a central role despite institutional religious change (14–16).

Objective Five: Contemporary Relevance of Women in African Traditional Religion

Another major finding is that, in contemporary African society, women remain central to the survival and adaptation of ATR, even in the face of globalization, urbanization, and religious pluralism. Their roles have shifted from formal ritual authority to cultural preservation and identity maintenance, but their influence remains deeply significant. Women continue to ensure that traditional values, songs, and rituals are not lost in modern society. Key aspects of contemporary relevance include:

1. Preservation of cultural festivals and traditional celebrations.
2. Continued transmission of oral traditions and moral teachings.
3. Maintenance of family-based spiritual practices and ancestral respect.
4. Active role in cultural identity formation in urban and rural settings.
5. Sustaining intergenerational continuity of indigenous knowledge.
6. Acting as cultural bridges between tradition and modernity.

To underscore this, Oduyoye highlights that African women continue to embody resilience and cultural continuity, ensuring that indigenous religious identity survives within changing social environments (54–56).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the findings of this research, these recommendations are hereby proposed:

- i. For scholars of religion, the role of women in ATR as "religious authority" must be conceptualized broadly. Formal leadership positions are only one dimension of religious power. The authority to transmit knowledge, perform essential rituals, and maintain everyday religious practice may be equally significant for religious sustainability.

- ii. For African feminist theologians, indigenous traditions are resources for liberation, but not uncritically. The same traditions that empower women as mothers and healers also restrict them as menstruating and potentially polluting. Feminist reconstruction must engage this ambiguity, rather than dismissing ATR as irredeemably patriarchal nor romanticizing it as proto-feminist.
- iii. For practitioners seeking to sustain ATR in contemporary contexts, supporting women's religious roles is essential. Revitalization efforts that exclude or marginalize women are unlikely to succeed, for they would cut the tradition off from the very practices that have ensured its survival through centuries of change.
- iv. For ethnographers, further attention to women's own interpretations of how they understand their religious roles and negotiate their constraints, could deepen their understanding of religious agency.
- v. For women's religious status in African society and culture, they should continue to negotiate, accommodate, and transform. Their capacity to sustain ATR depends precisely on this negotiation, that is, on their ability to work within constraints while exploiting possibilities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of women as sustaining factor in ATR. The findings revealed that survival and continuity of ATR depends greatly on the active participation and resilience of women within African society and culture. Through their roles as custodians of oral tradition, moral educators, ritual participants, healers, and preservers of cultural identity, women have remained indispensable to the maintenance of indigenous religious life. Although patriarchal structures, colonial influence, modernization, and the spread of foreign religions have affected the visibility and authority of women in ATR, further findings shows that, their contributions remain foundational to its continuity, especially within the family and communal structure. The Igbo society clearly demonstrates that women are not peripheral participants in African spirituality, but vital sustaining forces whose influence continues to shape the preservation and transmission of traditional religious values across generations.

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