

Woke Culture and the Challenges of Nigeria's Cultural Values: A Case Study of Enlightenment Secularism in Europe

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Abstract

New discoveries and revolutionary ideologies normally produce fascinating sentiments among the people. When the content of such ideologies strikes a contemporary note, vast reception is assured. However, while in some cases such ideologies provide amicable environment for positive transformation, it can also create problematic situations or radiate unpleasant tendencies targeted at cultural values and norms. During the enlightenment period, Europe excitedly embraced the message of rationality as the key to progress. The reception was impressive but somewhat unchecked. Long standing moral, religious and cultural values fell victims to the suspicions of reason. The Nigerian society, especially the younger generation is gradually but daily confronted with contemporary tenets especially the 'woke culture'. Woke in this sense refers to the growing trend of secular progressivism that tends to confront and create awareness towards cultural and social systems that are considered oppressive, while offering alternatives that are intended to promote equality, individual freedom and happiness. Through a comparative historical analysis, whereby the European encounter with the enlightenment culture will be juxtaposed to the gradual infiltration of woke culture in contemporary Nigeria, this article proposes a tenacious and systematic caution on unchecked reception of the tenets of the wokeness in order to reduce or possibly avert the risk of a corrosive loss of genuine socio-cultural and religious values.

Keywords: Woke Culture; Values; Enlightenment Secularism; Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Humans are very sensitive to change. Right from the cradle of civilization, through the renaissance, scientific revolution and technological advancement of the present age, societal transformation has remained a constant yearning of all ages and peoples.

In European history, the Dark Ages, between fifth and fourteenth centuries, was propagated as a period characterized with cultural, intellectual and economic decline by the renaissance humanists (Thompson, 1996:13). Europe bought into this stereotype or renaissance propaganda, Petrarch asserted that the loss of the Dark Ages made Europe poised with enthusiasm for a change (Mommsen, 1959:109-129). Hence, when the enlightenment period arrived with its emphasis on rationality as the key to a stronger and more successful Europe, it received an overwhelming support. The ‘enlightenment’ was adopted for the modern age as a contrast to the medieval age, thus suggesting an imagery of light-versus-darkness, with light representing the scientific knowledge of the modern era while the darkness symbolized the ignorance and error of the medieval (Mommsen, 1959:109-129). For critics of the medieval age like the humanist thinkers, Europe was merely and barely existing in the Middle Ages, while in the enlightenment, Europe experienced great transformation and development, thus realising its true destiny and purpose (Rahman, 2003).

Indeed, at the dawn of Europe’s enlightenment, great strides in science, politics and economics defined the new order. Social and industrial progress marked success (Zafirovski, 2010:144). However, Adorno (2014), also observed that certain socio-cultural and religious identities of Europe were not part of the transformative plan of the enlightenment. Gradually, community spirit was replaced by individualism, and morality was relegated to the whims and caprices of individual freedom.

Nigeria is a deeply religious and culturally sensitive society. Values attached to religion or culture are considered sacrosanct. In modern parlance, Nigeria can be considered as a conservative society. However, just like other societies, Nigeria is daily confronted with the contemporary waves of the woke culture in its intensity. With its message of positive revolution and liberal culture, the woke sensitivity is appealing mostly to the younger generation, consolidated by the influence of the social media. One can say that there is an enthusiasm among younger Nigerian parents and youths towards the ‘woke’ culture, which, in fairness, contains some positive incitements. However, caution has to be placed to see that core socio-cultural and religious values are not sacrificed on the table of an ideological breakthrough.

Woke Culture

Contemporary society is gradually adapting to a new social consciousness that is conventionally identified as woke culture. This cultural awareness, more prone in developed countries has emerged as a recurrent topic in present-day social discourse. Generally, ‘woke’ refers to the disposition of being conscious of systemic and societal sensitivity towards the plight and affairs of minorities, with the resolve to stand against all forms of injustices towards them (Romano, 2020). It speaks of the awareness of social and cultural issues and a dedication to confronting oppressive systems and institutions like racism, sexism, and other forms of minority insensitivity or oppression in the context of contemporary advocacy for the rights and dignity of minorities.

‘Woke’ was originally used to characterize someone who was aware of social injustice (Romano, 2020). It was initially used during the civil rights movements and has since spread

and developed to a universal phenomenon (Zimmer, 2017). Its growth was greatly aided by social media platforms, which made it possible for people all around the world to share their experiences of oppression and resistance (Lewis, 2023). It has developed into a more general and global culture that encompasses a variety of progressive values over time.

In terms of importance, woke culture creates active awareness of issues like abuse of human rights, gender inequality, systemic racism and neglect of environmental protection (Lanzic, 2025:107). Promoters of this culture have used the principles of woke to challenge traditional structures, cultural and religious norms that tend to promote discrimination, emphasizing the need for inclusion and respect of privacy, freedom and identity. In civil affairs, woke culture have been directly used to demand accountability from governments, corporations, and individuals.

While the woke sensitivity differs from the Enlightenment consciousness of the modern Europe in terms of content and emphasis, both share a similarity of possessing a strong fascinating and appealing influence on their contextual societies. The Enlightenment prioritized reason and knowledge as the catalysts of a better society, while the woke culture advocates for equality and secular liberalism as the sureties of social progress. However, both the Enlightenment consciousness and the woke sensitivity share an appealing similarity on their insistence to confront and challenge institutionalized cultural and social systems. While the Enlightenment placed a focus on religion, monarchy and superstition, the woke culture confronts oppressive socio-cultural systems that promote inequality and exclusion of the minority. Hence, a historical analysis of Europe's reception of the Enlightenment message aims at placing a cautionary consciousness as the Nigerian society encounters the woke culture.

Renaissance – Precursor of Enlightenment Revolution

With the fall of Rome in 476 CE and seventh century invasion of Arabs in some European settlements like Spain, the strength and vigour of Europe dwindled gradually (Halsall, 2007:270-274). The architectural, intellectual, social, political and cultural supremacy of Europe experienced some cracks. From the 7th century CE through the 14th century, Europe became a cradle of religious industry and imperial dependence. Superstition was applied to all spheres of life (Bailey, 2013), challenges like sickness, death, bad harvests, childlessness had spiritual explanations. On the other hand, feudalism placed the material resources within the behest of the imperial court and the feudal lords.

It was natural therefore to discover that in the medieval times, there were mainly two sources of truth, authority and social cohesion: the church and the imperial court (Brown, 2013), and the pace of civilization was controlled by these two institutions. The reputation of the church and the crown as indispensable pillars of the society was further strengthened by the limited literacy and cultural stagnation of the medieval period. Classical knowledge was preserved in the monasteries and education restricted mostly to the clergy and the royal families (Southern, 1970). There was a dearth of enthusiasm among the ordinary citizens for rational objectivity accompanied by a limited zeal for new discoveries. The medieval was characterised by a superiority of tradition over systematic observation and experimentation.

For these considerations, the renaissance humanists propagated a notion that the medieval period was a dark age that stagnated human potentials and retarded social cohesion and development (Gies, 1994:2). The renaissance steered the societal focus towards the need for a change, an overhaul of societal structures. Renaissance philosophers and humanists became

very vocal in declaring their interest in engaging in a profoundly different intellectual and cultural revolution than the one they had known during the Dark Ages (Mezzadri, 2014).

These Renaissance thinkers insisted that for society to progress, the cultural and political institutions that held sway during the medieval must be brought to scrutiny, since their influential leverage on the people was considered a cog in the wheel of social progress. Hence, the church and the crown became the targets of renaissance revolution, while humanism was projected as the inevitable alternative and catalyst of social progress (Bonazzi, 2024). The impact of the renaissance was both intellectual and cultural. People began to turn from traditional or conventional knowledge and towards empirical observation and verification. Such disposition incited the courage to ask questions and express doubts even to established civil and spiritual authorities. This was the renaissance revolution which in the words of Immanuel Kant, woke Europe from its ‘superstitious slumber’ (Rohlf, 2024).

The Light of Enlightenment

The seeds of intellectual and cultural advancement planted by the renaissance gave rise to the scientific revolution that engrossed Europe from the 17th century, otherwise known as the Enlightenment. It was a key moment that challenged old traditions and inspired new ways of thinking about the world and humanity's place in it. Consequently, long-held beliefs about society, government, and the natural world were subjected to the process of verification (Badger, 2010).

The Enlightenment message was clear and attractive: rationality is the key to knowledge, progress, freedom and happiness (Padgett, 2003:49). This was revolutionary as few centuries back; these values were attached to piety and imperial patriotism. The Scientific Revolution introduced empirical methods and discoveries by luminaries such as Galileo and Newton, instilling confidence in human reason as a weapon for advancement. The progress and success of the Enlightenment was pushed by firebrand thinkers and scholars who revolutionized different spheres of society. Voltaire criticized aristocratic corruption (Shank, 2024); John Locke advocated human rights and civil liberties as opposed to religious and civil obeisance of the medieval (Rickless, 2026); Jean-Jacques Rousseau focused on educational reforms that will make knowledge assessable to all and not restricted to the clergy, Adam Smith advocated for free trade as a driver of societal prosperity (Schabas, 2026).

The Other Side of the Enlightenment – Instructive Caution for *Wokeness*

The revolutionary results of the enlightenment period were valuable, contributing immensely to the grandiose civilization and advancement of Europe from the 18th century. The emphasis on reason as the fulcrum of human progress led to the remarkable improvements in science, technology, healthcare, politics, socio-cultural development, economics and even religion (Bristow, 2023). Similarly, in our contemporary context, the woke revolution, with its progressive insistence on social justice, has immensely incited societal sensitivity to the plight of the minorities and to the need to stand together against oppressive systems.

As the gains of Enlightenment are acknowledged, it has been pointed out that it also displayed some form of dogmatism and ideological rigidity that became counterproductive in some aspects (Badger, 2010). In other words, shortfalls have been identified both from the enlightenment line of thought and the manner of its reception and infusion in the society.

One of the deficits of the enlightenment was from its core message, the enthronement of reason as the key to progress and happiness (Duignan, 2026). Enlightenment thinkers over stretched the role and significance of reason to the extent of domination. This dominance of reason made it the absolute and only essential composite of the individual. In contrast, anthropology has shown that the essence of the individual is a combination of psychic, rational, cultural, biological and social aspects (Wandsnider, 2024), hence the different branches of anthropology that deals with each of these aspects. When enlightenment promoted a dominance of reason, it deemphasized the roles of other human components. Consequently, enlightenment endorsed an immoral or amoral concept of the individual which was inherently contradictory. Edmund Burke branded this flaw as the ‘hubris of reason’, which when not checked leads to destruction (Burke, 2006). Burke blamed the atrocities of the French Revolution on the revolutionists naive and unedited reception of the enlightenment’s dominance of reason. Burke insists that reason alone is an unreliable basis for moral action and tends to be easily perverted. In other words, anything can be rationalised, and plausible reasoning might lead us down a slippery slope which ends at the guillotine (Burke, 2006). On this note, the Enlightenment’s dominance of reason has been accused of being the destroyer of morality; the harbinger of selfish individualism; a thief robbing human life of meaning; a form of cultural imperialism, which is directly or indirectly responsible for everything from the holocaust to global warming (Badger, 2010).

Ethics or morality is an integral and determinant facet of the society. The individual by nature is a cultural being who exists within a social space. For the pursuit of the common good and even for harmony and happiness, there should be necessarily a system of principles that guides and guards the individual in relation with others (Gert, 2025). The wheels and custodian of morality in most cases are religion and culture. In some instances, the formulations or interpretations of some ethical codes may have been influenced by particular or conventional contexts, thus leaving room for imperfections. However, just like the essence of humanity is not restricted to rationality as erroneously assumed by enlightenment enthusiasts, so also culture and tradition are not just gaskets of morality but endowed with other valuables of societal and existential consistency (Graham et al, 2010). One of the features of woke culture is its confrontational assessment of socio-cultural and religious foundations (Roderick, 2022), citing certain imperfections as solid basis for abrogation. Just as the dominance of rational objectivity led to Enlightenment’s failure to recognize the complexity of the human person, the woke culture’s obsession with progressivism may lead to a counterproductive confrontation towards established socio-cultural and religious values.

Enlightenment succeeded in redirecting the individual to focus on the potentials of rationality. It created a cultural force, but it failed to capacitate rationality with its complementarity which is morality. Adorno and Horkheimer, the founders of the Frankfurt School, identified a contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment thinking. On the one hand, the Enlightenment delivered the goods in terms of our technical understanding of the world and our capacity to manipulate it. However, it failed spectacularly to provide us with the moral understanding to avoid replicating the barbarity of less technological ages on ever-more-grotesque scales (Adorno, 2022:11-12). In enlightenment, reason remained a slave of the passions. Anything can be rationalized, but not everything can be moralized. Hitler rationalized the holocaust but that does not make it moral or ethical. For Burke, this hubris of reason led to the guillotine horrors of the French Revolution; and for Adorno, the Enlightenment journey led to Auschwitz and its gas chambers (Adorno, 2022:12). Equally, social justice is undoubtedly a desirable value, however, when social justice is presented as the unique and most essential value as woke

culture tends to do, societies run the risk of sacrificing valid and communally established values and systems to the whims of social justice.

It is however true that the apparent effort of the Enlightenment to dismantle solid foundations of morality and instituting the tyranny of intellectualism was considered redemptive for some liberal thinkers. Liberals like John Rawls, on the assumption that morality is essentially attached to religion, considered Enlightenment's enthronement of reason as constituting true freedom for the individual (Wenar, 2025). Rawls, in proposing a total separation of religion from society, propounded a relativistic morality where the individual uses his or her own reason to seek out moral truth, perhaps aided by like-minded people (Rawls, 1979). Nonetheless, moral liberalism presents quite a dangerous permutation for the society. The virtues of a society set a guiding ideal for human life (Macintyre, 1984). What Rawls and other liberals intend is a sort of moral relativism in which the individual is separated from any sort of shared ethical or moral standard. In other words, morality is reduced to a consumer choice, each individual finds their own path in more or less splendid isolation. On this note, Berlin recognised that enlightenment established a rational morality which aspired to enthrone a shared moral truth on the grounds of rational consensus between autonomous individuals (1951). What is good then is determined not from its intrinsic essence but if the rational judgement of the majority deems it to be true. Such relativism can only produce a chaotic life, a retrieval of Hobbesian 'state of nature' (Lloyd, 2022).

Woke culture's sensitivity to the plight of the minority has been defended by its proponents as an essential feature of true social structure (Znamenski, 2025). However, it is also important to first determine an objective meaning of 'the minority'. Woke culture, in its bid to be over-zealous with progressivism, presents the minority as a kind of unique social sect, pre-determined by race, gender or religion. The problem of such assumption is the tendency to treat anybody outside 'the sect' as different, thus, creating the same 'cultural seclusion' it claims to solve. Anybody can fall on the side of the minority depending on the issue or context at stake.

The aftermath of the enlightenment was a Europe with a shaky moral and cultural foundation. The dominance of rationality made the individual a-cultural and a-social, seeing less the need to be in relation with others. Gradually, communitarian values started dwindling in Europe, leading to individualism. Values like family, faith, religion, community became victims of the hubris of reason. As the years went by, the cultural and religious identities of Europe grew weaker. Similarly, Africa, and Nigeria in particular runs the risk of losing her cultural and religious identity if caution is not placed on the modality and extent of woke influence in the society.

Receptibility of *Wokeness* in Nigeria – Need for Caution

The woke culture, like the Enlightenment Age of Europe, is a reactionary and purpose-driven response to contemporary social situations. Ignited by the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, it sought to create a cultural sensitivity against ideas and practises that seem objectively wrong but conventionally accepted (Romano, 2020). Issues like systemic racism, subjugation of women, gender discrimination, homophobia, religious bigotry are recurrent issues in today's world (Hess, 2016). On this note, woke culture stands as a guard, maintaining a strong advocacy against these negative tendencies. With the aid of the social media, such advocacy has both a strong platform and a wide audience.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and religiously tensed society with strong attachment to cultural prescriptions. Some of these cultural assumptions may be described as insensitive or oppressive

to certain groups. For instance, the assumed inferiority of women by some cultures, aggressive homophobic disposition, injustice of the rich towards the poor, ethnic and religious subjugation. On this note, the woke culture has the tendency to be seen as the ‘light’ by some Nigerians, just as the enlightenment period was assessed by modern Europe. Of course, the advocacy of the woke culture against the oppression of the minorities is something commendable and should receive both civil and religious advocacies.

However, despite the positive impacts of wokeness in the society, the woke ideology and practises inherently radiates incongruent tendencies that makes caution an essential caveat especially for Nigeria. The case of Nigeria is quite sensitive as it is still grappling with the negative effects of westernization and colonialism which has pulverized the socio-cultural foundations of the society. In such a scenario where authentic cultural identity is gasping for breath, an unchecked embrace of the woke culture will imply an annihilation.

Like Enlightenment, woke culture subjects traditional and conventional institutions and norms to scrutiny, with the aim to sieve out elements that promotes indifference and discrimination towards minorities. However, like Enlightenment, woke culture has no limits and lacks prudence, it places a blanket suspicion on all cultural content with the aim of a total replacement instead of a productive review (Butterworth, 2021). The Enlightenment enthusiasm alienated socio-religious and moral foundations in Europe, with traditional structures such as family, morality, faith, cultural virtues put under trial. Woke culture radiates same tendency, it is apprehensive towards all ideas, customs, beliefs, values and moral norms of a people, coercing all contents to a woke conformity.

In so far as woke culture tries to create positive awareness to structural and social problems, it eludes an imprudence and impatience towards any culture that, though is positive in its nature but ‘un-woke’ in its style. In as much as sensitivity and respect should be accorded to choices, African or Nigerian culture is still reluctant towards certain orientations like same-sex marriages. Although such reluctance should not translate to active discrimination, such cultural content should not be adjudged as ‘unjust’ just because it seems ‘un-woke’.

Woke culture advocates that there is only one test of authenticity and this is wokeness. This is a reflection of the dominance of reason during the enlightenment period. In the words of Burke, ‘the hubris of wokeness’ exclusively identifies an authentic and reliable person as someone who accepts all ideas and tenets of wokeness. Likewise, any cultural, religious or social value can only be genuine and legitimate if it conforms to the woke ideology. There is some sort of ideological tyranny that radiates from the woke culture (Sobande et al, 2022).

Nigeria is a religious country. Nigerians are described as intensely religious. Islam and Christianity control the religious atmosphere in the country, each having almost half of the population as adherents. Minority lies mostly with adherents of African Traditional Religion. Nonetheless, amongst these three religions, fidelity to doctrine, norms and precepts is statutory. In the ethical or moral codes of these religions, certain identities and orientations are considered unacceptable. In as much as no religion should encourage any form of discrimination or hatred towards a person for his or her choices, faith and religion should not necessarily be subject to progressive ideologies for it to be genuine (Sobande et al, 2022). Freedom of religion also behoves on each religion, the right to formulate the modalities of its faith provided that these modalities do not infringe on any objective right of the individual. Although the woke proponents may consider such religious precepts as a repression of the minority, such prescriptions, to the extent and context of religious identity, remain functional pillars of social cohesion that cannot be abruptly dismantled without societal collapse.

In Nigeria, there is some premium placed on native culture. In spite of western influence, the typical Nigerian has some form of attachment and regard towards culture, especially tribal norms (Udo et al, 2026). Tribes and ethnic groups have their specific norms, values, ethos and worldview. On the other hand, there are also some similarities or common culture that is mutual among different tribes: values like respect for parents, respect for elders, sacredness of life, community-character of marriage, communal responsibility and so on. In most cases, there is a unison despite the diversity of cultures when it comes to cultural values. For instance, in all tribes of Nigeria, a thief is regarded as both a private and communitarian problem, the thief brings shame to his or her person but also to the family and community (Idang, 2015).

Unfortunately, woke culture has the tendency to subject these tenets to suspicion and demands conformity as a test of genuineness (Sobande et al, 2022). However, some of these cultural tenets have intrinsic values established and tested within the course of history. For instance, the communal character of marriage, that is, that the two families are actively involved in the ceremonies and procedures, is common in almost all ethnic groups in Nigeria. This traditionally established custom is presently being challenged because it does not conform to the woke advocacy for individualism, privacy and absolutism of freedom. Although sometimes this cultural content creates pressure on the choices of intending partners, but it still retains the inherent values and merits therein.

Furthermore, cancel culture, which is the segregation of people according to identity and political convictions, can result from woke sensitivity (Volokh, 2021). In this way, individuals or organizations are publicly accused or ostracized for their opinions, often without room for dialogue or understanding. This can stifle free speech and foster a climate of fear, discouraging meaningful conversations (Bacon, 2021). As such, people tend to retreat to their safe havens and be unwilling to ask questions for fear of being called "anything-phobic" or prejudiced. The public court of the social media is a major platform for such segregation and exclusion, difference in opinion is considered dissenting and rebellious (Volokh, 2021).

As such, the Nigerian society runs the risk of becoming more divided across tribes and bigoted with the social media. Extreme wokeness can lead to divisiveness, as it may focus on highlighting differences rather than finding common ground. On this note, critics label wokeness as polarizing, arguing that it occasionally prioritizes identity politics over finding common ground. Pluckrose emphasised this aspect when she opined that political correctness and wokeness are comparable (Pluckrose, 2023). Activists employ both postmodernist perspectives to defend censorship, cancel culture, and other illiberal actions. Pluckrose maintains that for this reason, woke culture "is not a solution to minority oppression or any form of discrimination. It is rather a problem in and of itself. It is not a way to bring people together but a way to create more division and more hostility" (Pluckrose, 2023).

Additionally, moralism, which implies judging others only based on their affiliations and beliefs can result from wokeness. This inclination can be prejudiced, discriminatory, and polarizing in and of itself. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-tribal nation. To give the oppressed or minority a sense of identity and belonging, wokeness can positively assist in challenging discriminatory customs and beliefs. However, because it tends to be careless and impatient, it can sow a deeper seed of distrust and division. Balancing advocacy for change with open dialogue and mutual respect is essential to avoid these pitfalls.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this work is to present a historical comparative analysis involving the effects or aftermath of an uncensored reception of the Enlightenment revolution in Europe as a precautionary consideration for the Nigerian society, especially the younger generation as they encounter and accommodate the woke culture. Just like the Enlightenment message of rational objectivity, the woke culture's sensitivity to social injustice is inherently positive. However, such positivity should not be translated to tyrannical dominance. Nigeria is a culturally determined society with established values that prioritizes family, community, mutual responsibility, respect for elders, and social interrelation. There is need for a balanced and critical reception of the woke ideologies so that the society can still protect the rights and liberties of vulnerable groups without sacrificing the foundational communal values that have shaped the Nigerian society.

Socio-cultural prescriptions should be diligently assessed so as to identify and courteously redefine any imperfect formulation that tends to promote or kindle any form of social injustice. This requires an informed and patient interaction between the custodians of culture and the proponents of wokeness. Such a dialogue must proceed with respect and prudence so as to achieve functional results. For instance, Nigeria can recognize the rights of individuals while maintaining the traditional belief that people have obligations toward their families and communities. Such a dialogue should also be sensitive to the uniqueness of each culture. Woke culture is not a universally determined phenomenon but stems from the sub-structures of particular cultures, hence, the tendency to impose foreign values while suppressing local identity must be avoided. Progressive ideas should be adapted to Nigeria's particular historical and cultural circumstances. The goal should therefore not be to replace Nigerian values with foreign ideologies, but to develop a social order in which individual rights and communal responsibilities reinforce rather than undermine each other.

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