

## AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*African Traditional Religion has severally been defined as the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans. The call for national development has been the most re-echoing political topic in Nigeria's recent history. Economic dependence is the major impetus used to support the call for regional independence. African Traditional Religion is a major Religion in Nigeria thus it has some potential that could empower the nation. Religion has been used to refer to human beings relationship with that which they regard as holy, sacred, transcendent, worthy of especial reverence or divine. This divine dependence of man on the supreme is still very manifest in the life of every African. It is important to note that African religion is not just about humans' relationship with the supernatural or sacred as found in other religions, but African Religion is a way of life; thus the saying that that Africans are chronically religiously. The missionaries saw the religious culture of Africans in contrast with the tenets of Judeo-Christian religious culture because African religious culture has no sophisticated symbolic religious and cultural structures as Christianity such as written history or Holy Scripture, temples and other recognizable oriental order. As a result, the traditional religious culture was hastily condemned without second thought. Having condemned the culture, her medicine and other positive aspects were also condemned. In this work, the researcher brought out the economic relevance of African Religion like her medicine, consultations and tourism which if annexed will generate fund for National development.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Peace, and Human Development, social cohesion.

### Introduction

Religious ideologies have a lot to offer for the development of a nation. African Traditional Religion which Mbiti (1975, p.12) calls "the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers..." is endowed with great propensity to promote peace, attract tourists, promote good eco-system and security to

mention but a few benefits. As observed by Awolalu (1976) African Traditional Religion is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africa and which is being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans. This religion has gone beyond the conventional false coating presented on African movies as a dirty religion only associable to magic and bad witchcraft to correcting certain ills in the society and boosting the economy. The high influence of African traditional religion cuts across all aspects of the Nigerian Society and its influence shine on many individuals found in institutions and policy making bodies.

The phenomenological research method was used in ascertaining the role of African traditional Religion towards national development. Phenomenological method will help to present without bias the role of African traditional Religion in Nigerian national development. This work seeks to challenge the conventional role of African Traditional Religion as a religion confined and fraught only with evil. African Traditional Religion is indeed a motivating factor capable of calming nerves in the face of violence. Most crises in Nigeria seem to be religious in nature thus portraying the idea of religion as being an instrument of peace as an irony. Religious leaders usually argue that violent people by definition are not religious. The Islamic bodies in Nigeria have often argued that the dreaded terrorist groups be it Boko Haram or Herdsmen are really not Muslims. Christians on the hand spend so much time preaching and condemning members of other religions and recommending virtues that are wanting in their lives. This is because such groups do not really understand the meaning of religion as instrument of peace. African Traditional Religion like other Religions have always had influence on politics in fact one cannot separate religion from Nigerian politics. In Islam, the Muslims themselves make no such separation. Christianity on the other hand is not primarily a set of doctrines, but a lived historical experience embodied and shaped by the empirically observable actions of Christians which cut across politics, economic and all aspects of life. African traditional religion is an embodiment of the way of life of Africans.

## **Relevance of African Traditional Religion to National Development**

### **National Peace**

Evidence abounds that civilization started in Africa if that be it, then, man's interaction with his God also started in Africa. The Egyptian pride of being the cradle of civilization still has contemporary impetus. Peace is a universal

phenomenon that everyone desires and wishes to enjoy endlessly. African Traditional Religion has potent prescriptions to attaining and enjoying peace. African Traditional Religion is the only Religion world over that does not use violence to achieve its aim. The undiluted African community had nothing like religious wars. Granted crisis is part of man, however no religious war was recorded prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam to Nigeria, there could have existed tribal wars triggered by boundary issues but not religion. Violence and forceful mental tortures and persuasions found in other religions are never associated with African Traditional Religion. Whenever and wherever there is peace there tends to be development and longevity. Longevity prior to the advent of European and Arabian religions was a basic attribute enjoyed by African forbears. African Traditional Religion which is still the most popular/powerful religion in the world, (popular/powerful because even foreigners secretly consult African spiritualist and on this ground it is still powerful/popular); teaches peace and encourages all adherents to the faith to pursue peace and live peacefully with one another. Islam and Christianity cannot make such claims as majority of Nigerians believe that the crises rocking the nation today are caused by the feud between Christianity and Islam. Scholars like Kimball (2002) had already observed that religion is the cause of conflicts. While most Arab and some European countries are faced with intra-religious conflicts, Nigeria is faced with both intra and inter-religious conflicts. Nigeria, which is popularly known as Africa's most populous black nation with a population of now about 170 million people, with more than 250 ethnic groups has Christianity and Islam as its predominant religions.

Christianity as a word means followers of Christ or Christ like. Christians therefore are those who follow and act the teaching of Christ in all ways of life. One of the climaxes of Christianity or Christian virtue is peace. Christians are enjoined in the Bible to embrace and live peacefully with their neighbours'. Smith (1962) asserted that peaceful co-existence is the real "Meaning and End of Religion". A lot of passages from the bible and Quran support peace.

One of the key things Jesus came to give humanity is Peace and expects us to live in peace as can be cited in different scriptural verses in the bible and Quran. Peace was not only what Jesus taught but He also lived it, this in most cases is what scholars call pacifism, as Jesus never taught violence.

Most followers of Christ in Nigeria do not act according to the teachings of their master, though they are willing to, but for the fact that Christianity and Islam are not part of Nigerian people's culture they tend to physically express adherence to

these Religions but fail to live it to the full. African Traditional Religion teaches and also shares a belief in peace and communalism. What affects one affects the other. Peace and brotherhood are of vital importance to the African religious practitioners.

### **National Development**

Presented above are the roles of African traditional Religion towards ensuring peace and having presented the African Traditional Religious role in ensuring peace its pertinent to show how African Traditional Religion can development a nation since where there is peace there is development. Rodney (2005:1) states that development in human society is a mere-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Some of these are virtually moral categories and are difficult to evaluate depending as they do on the age, in which one lives, ones class of origin, and on one's personal code of what is right and what is wrong. As observed by Achimugu (2000) the prosperity of a country depends not on the abundance of its revenue nor on the strength of its army nor on beauty of its public building but its citizens whose men are enlightened and religious, who work for the development of their country. However what is indisputable is that the achievement of any of these aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society as a whole.

Democracy is in the actual sense the best system of government however, this form of government is alien to the African people and it is only the government that can give her people meaningful development. Having wittingly accepted democracy in place of oligarchy practised in Africa prior to the advent of the slave master the onus for meaningful development lies in African Traditional Religion. This onus is made manifest in the potent shrines found all over Nigeria. Instead of using the bible to swear with the last words "so help me God" African traditional Religious way of swearing can be employed. In Africa when people swear or take oath they do that with a personal responsibility; for example the man swearing with the Igbo "Amadioha" will end his oath with the saying "Amadioha kill me if I fail to do what I promise" and Amadioha will surely kill such a person. African gods are very potent because they are agents of the almighty God whom other religions still serve deceptively. The agents of God manifested in African deities are very effective but foreign religions have diluted the efficacy of these gods are have either gone on recess or retirement.

The great number of missionary groups who visited Africa shows that there was more to their intentions other than the evangelization of the continent. As

observed by Agha (2004) “the genesis of the different missionaries in Nigeria varied from one denomination to another. Their port of entry, growth and expansion differs significantly. What is of particular interest and noteworthy is that each of them had a specific objective, message and vision for the evangelization of Nigeria and Africa in general.

Nigerians have a higher fear for what is traditionally sacred when compared with what is held sacred in other religions. A simple example can be observed when a red cloth is tied to a tree of orange and when a crucifix is tied to another orange tree to prevent theft, experience shows that the typical Nigerian thief will steal from the orange tree with the crucifix rather than from the one with the red cloth tied to it. The deity Ekwensu is a major deity in African traditional Religion for example that the European Christianity has bastardized. Opata (2005:27) rightly opined that “*Ekwensu* is not a conceptual equivalence of the Christian devil. There is impetus to this fact because the Igbos had the idea of Ekwensu before the arrival of Christianity. Ekwensu among the Ibusa people of Delta State and some other parts of Igbo land is a deity responsible for punishing those who disobey the taboos of the community and punish people when they fail to help their communities, but when the missionaries came they misinterpreted this doctrine. Umeh (1999:27) supported this view when he asserted that Ekwensu is the beautiful one in Igboland and in ancient Egypt, it is a war god with countless victories as *Oha Obala/ora Obala*. In *Igbo Afa*, it is saluted as *Ekwensu Ugo tagbulu Agwo* i.e. Eagle that pecked the evil serpent to death ... *Ekwensu* the eagle spirit of war and victory glides down the earth with countless victories... *Ekwensu* is also confirmed to be one of the benevolent lunar deities ... It is indeed a ridiculous absurdity for any *Igbo* person to talk of *Ekwensu* as a devil because *Ekwensu* has never been associated with evil or evil ones but have always been associated with achievement, good victory, and success.

Religion, next to family, is the second oldest institution *Meredith* (2007). It governs the social as well as personal behaviour of man by providing guidelines, laws and principles relating to his interaction with his fellow man, believed that this was one of the strongest forces which used to maintain peace in the society.

One of the main aims of African traditional Religion is to promote peace and human development anchored on justice and equity. Since justice is one of the main pillars of peace, the elements of peace and religion are same. Peace can be achieved only when there is law and order, and a state of harmony and mental calm prevails. From the beginning of the world, African traditional Religion has

existed to help individuals, groups and communities to achieve justice and peace.

African traditional Religion is one of the strongest institutions that help a person believe in life after death an idea that is important to control human behaviour. African traditional Religion is not only a promoter of peace but it has also worked in the field of conflict prevention and resolutions for ages as elders are usually seen attending to cases.

**Tourism:** Nigeria has one of the best tourist attractions world-over, best because these tourist sights are still in their natural state. African traditional Religion is the sole preserver of these tourist sites ranging from Osun Osogbo grove which is a tourist destination in Nigeria that has sacred shrines, sanctuaries, sculptures and art works that are created in the honour of the goddess of fertility, Osun. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site situated along the Oshun River ([www.cometonigeria.com](http://www.cometonigeria.com)).

Olumo Rock is another tourist attraction that is preserved by The Egba people of Ogun State who believe that Olumo rock has a shrine that protects them and offer annual sacrifices to the deity. It is a monument of African traditional religion of Egba people and a source of pride to them. The peak of the rock is 137m above sea level and the rock is naturally by caves some of which up to 20 feet long and 25 feet wide. Olumo Rock is a favorite tourist's attraction which when annexed properly will attract both local and foreign tourists thereby generating fund for the nation.

Without efforts from African traditional Religion, the warm hospitality of Nigeria and their caring nature which makes Nigeria a place to be would have waned down.

### **Emotional Roles of African Traditional Religion and National Development.**

In African traditional setting it was and still believed that religion offers emotional, spiritual and material support to its members in times of tension, stress or hardship. The poor and wretched ones are given alms or gifts from the rich ones among them. Among the core Nigerians a widow is permitted to go into a farm and harvest exactly what she needs to eat with her family. Among the Ibusa people of Delta State, when a man dies the wife is mandated to choose a new husband amongst the husbands kinsmen. This could be her son or any male she likes, there might not be any sexual intercourse however the underlying reason is to ensure that the woman is still married within the family.

The sickness of a man is the communal responsibility of the community. During farming season the farm of a sick man is usually cultivated communally for him. During marriages or funeral ceremonies the women gather fire wood and water to ensure that the burial goes as planned. Victims of natural hazards or wars are aided and their life must be protected as a sacred entity and peaceful coexistence of the society, all inspired by the bound inspired by African Traditional Religion.

African Traditional Religion serves as a powerful means for solidarity among the African people. Its members and nearly all who have contact with the real African people learn to co-exist in solidarity, when there is conflict the elders gather all the conflicting members to settle them. When inter-communal crises arises the two communities usually come together to settle the conflict amicably. It is an understatement to assert that African Traditional Religion regulates social life of the Nigerian intra settlements by creating some sort of order for its members to live together. In Nigeria people travel back to their various communities to celebrate their marriage. When someone dies he/she is usually taken to their various villages for funeral. African Traditional Religion encourages solidarity, consensus, cordiality, harmony, cooperation, unity, stability, security and peaceful co-existence. As noted by Johnson (1996:232) religion not only provides responses to enduring human problems and questions but also forms the basis for social cohesion and solidarity.

### **African Traditional Religion as tool for Human Development**

As defined by United Nations Development programme in Okafor (2004:3) Human Development means creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests.. Development is much more than economic growth which is only a means of enlarging people's choices. Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capacities. In the African Traditional Religious worldview, the most basic testimony to the type of life one has lead is long and healthy living, one may be alive but not healthy. It is believed that when an individual leads a good life then the ancestors will help prevent ill health.

African Traditional Religion creates conducive environment leading individuals to be knowledgeable, and to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. African Traditional Religion encourages Africans to share things equally with all. In African setting the land belonging to the community is shared equally among all male children with the first son inheriting his father's compound.

A close observation of Africa and its societies will reveal that religion is at the root of African culture and it is the determining principle of African life. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that in traditional Africa, religion is life. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do, farming, eating, drinking, fishing or hunting. Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives; both in this world and the next. It is hence not an abstraction but a part of reality and everyday life. As noted by Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004:111) in African Traditional religion observing the norms of the society faithfully attracts favour to an individual and the society. It is against the African Traditional Religious dictates to ferment trouble against the entire community. Elders who are closer to the ancestors will often advice the younger ones with proverbs like “when a man cooks for the community they will finish the food but when the community cooks for an individual it might be difficult for him to finish it” this proverb simply discourages people from the bad habit of fermenting trouble in the community. This goes to justify the truism that in a state of crisis, the place of progress which defines human development is slim. Human development which entails the process of enlarging people's freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being cannot be created in the face of crisis. Human development is about the real freedom ordinary people have to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live. The only major institution that helps to emphasize this right is African Traditional Religion.

The human development approach focuses on improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead, automatically, to greater opportunities for all. Income growth is an important means to development, rather than an end in itself. Okafor (2004) noted that human development shares a common vision with human rights. The goal of development is human freedom. People must be free to exercise their choices and to participate in decision-making in matters that affect their lives. It can thus be said that human development and human rights are mutually complementary.

In a country like Nigeria where the politicians decide and determine what rights her citizens should enjoy based on their religion and political affiliations, religious leaders ought to have been constantly on the peak of call for delivery of human rights to all. African Traditional Religious practitioners; who are better feared than practitioners of other religions can compel leaders to deliver factors necessary for quality human development. Human development is about giving people more freedom and opportunities to live lives they value. In effect this means developing people's abilities and giving them a chance to use them.



## **Conclusion**

African Traditional Religion plays a significant role in ensuring peace and stability of the people and Nation Nigeria. It is also true that violence is inherent to human nature, and human beings are easily swayed by emotions and irrational behaviour. Many factors incite them into violent behaviour, and religious attachment or loyalty happens to be one. Political and ideological differences may also lead to lack of National development, however, African Traditional Religion known also as non-sentimental religion has the capacity to check the excesses of religious-based factors of division. In the forgoing discussion, we focused upon how African Traditional Religion can serve as tool for national development.

African Traditional Religious leaders can help encourage inter-faith relations, manage crisis, negotiate and mediate in conflict situations, served as a communication link between opposing parties, provided training in peace making schemes and strive to orient members on the need to evade crisis in the society. People may misuse their religious identities to capture political power, or use that power to oppress others, but African Traditional Religion can help checkmate this as it is a religion of truth whose pantheon of gods are known for justice.

The primary purpose of any religion is to see life from a wider perspective and understand its significance in the evolution and elevation of human development and African Traditional Religion embodies this. Religious ethics contributes to peace and development. African Traditional Religion encourages the principle of honesty, prudence, industry, punctuality and justice in business, creates freedom from fear of cheats and dupes, and offers a peaceful state for commercial and national progress. African Traditional Religion encourages hard-work/industry, saving money and financial discipline, the diversion of business wealth to economically unproductive activities is discouraged, thus; there should be no laziness and extravagancy which necessitates evil. African Traditional Religion helps to re-echo the need for economic gains to be spent in a manner that could give glory to God and for the benefit of human development. Thus, if the economic relevance of African Traditional Religion in society can be appreciated, then Nigeria will enjoy better development.

## **Recommendation**

For the good of human and for the cause of peace, let us hope that all our religious leaders will stretch out their hands in friendship to one another and to

all people irrespective of race or creed as exemplified by African Traditional Religion. With a genuine feeling of love and peace, African Traditional Religious ethics should be revitalised to help restore sanity to the society. Religious leaders from Islam and Christianity should be mobilized to facilitate national development especially between these two major religions in the country using the docility found in African Traditional Religion as model. Adherents of various religions should promote peace and unity through their activities in the society for peaceful co-existence. This will ensure sustainable national development.

A major role of religious bodies is to hold the society together as a form of “social glue”. Thus African Traditional Religious leaders should see this as a duty and serve as a social bond that can hold the society together. Respect for African Traditional Religion by all Africans helps to strengthen the basis of belief and values of the society. It stresses for the social cohesion of all its members to live in unity and peace. This supports the opinion of Lauer (1978) who pointed out that when religion solves social problems, the quality of life is usually improved.

The Nigerian ministry of culture and Tourism should encourage Nigerian festivals and ceremonies as African Traditional Religious ceremonies are performed to remind people that they have a common history and identity, thereby ensuring the continuity for the existence of a better society and national development.

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