
African Traditional Religion and National Development

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Abstract

Religion is an age-old phenomenon that has played a part in all human culture. No history of any nation will be complete without the influence of religion. It has aided social progress, educational development as well as mutual understanding among people. It has totally transformed the structures of societies to bring about meaningful development in all spheres of life. In the light of these, it will not be wrong to say, there is a nexus between religion and national development. Traditionally, religion is so woven into the cultural fabric of the African in that it has become part and parcel of the African heritage. This paper examined the basis of African Traditional Religion as it relates to the question of national development, the problems and prospects for national development.

Introduction

Like many social phenomena, religion is not a static and pre-ordained given. On the contrary, it is such a complex and relative phenomenon that it hardly makes sense to discuss it outside specific socio – historical contexts. The close linkage between religion and social structure implies that changes in the later may occasion shift in the nature, character and composition of the former. Furthermore, since religion is so relative and volatile, it cannot be explained by static and insensitive universal laws which ignore cross – national differences in social structure and social relations. This paper is designed to examine the influence of r religion on national development and how African Traditional Religion can be a veritable tool for national development. The research adopted phenomenological methodology.

The approaches to the understanding of the concept ‘Religion’ have varied among scholars. Religion has been defined from various perspectives, such as anthropology, sociology, phenomenology, Psychology and Theology. For

instance, Asad (1993) opined that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion... because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process”. The earliest definition of religion is from the Johnson’s English Dictionary, which simply defined religion as “the belief in and worship of a supernatural controlling power especially a personal god or gods” it has to do with any practice that someone or some group is seriously committed to.

Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary form of Religious Life* (1912) defined religion as a “unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things”. That is to say things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community... all those who adhere to them. Emile Durkheim gives a sociological explanation of the nature of religion as follows; Religion is a creation of the society; it is a societal instrument for controlling people and moulding their minds. Thus religion is an instrument of social control. Durkheim believed that religion is essential to the maintenance of society. He points out that religion is a cultural phenomenon universal to all societies because not only that it basically meet all human needs but also it serves all important functions of human society. Ayuba and Zakka (2007) also point out that religion has to do with the whole human existence and not merely with some special sector of it.

Not minding the abundance of definitions by various scholars, what is most essential here is to have a definition of religion which is relevant to the understanding of the African Traditional Religion. Worthy of note is the definition given by Robin Horton in Turaki (2001). He refers to religion as “a system of theory and associated practice directed to the comprehension and practical control of events in the everyday space – time world. He shows that religion can explain, predict, control, manipulate and also have communal / national characteristics. He place man at the centre of religion and stress that he manipulates religion and his approach to religion is essentially programmatic and utilitarian. Man wants a religion that he can use to meet his needs and provide for his wishes.

Nigeria today is a multi – religious society. There are many religions in Nigeria such as African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, adherents of other minor religions such as New Agers, Atheist, etc which are foreign.

The Nature and Character of Africa Traditional Religion

African religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of African forebears. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.

Africa has a very rich heritage of what past generations of African people thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage forms a long line which links African forefathers with their descendants who now feel proud of it.

Africa heritage is rich. But it is not uniform. It has similarities, but there are also differences from time to time, from place to place and from people to people. Some of these heritage originated on the African soil; it is therefore genuinely African and indigenous.

Religion is an aspect of the cultural heritage, but we can consider it here separately. It is by far the richest part of the African heritage. Religion is found in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economics activities (Mbiti, 1975). We can say therefore, religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life. We cannot authoritatively say exactly how this belief in God originated because it is a very ancient belief in African religious life. But one thing we are sure is all African peoples believe in God. God is at the centre of African religion and dominated all its other beliefs (Turaki, 2001).

Mbiti, (1975) attributes the origin of traditional religion with the belief in God. He support that the belief in God may have arisen from people reflections concerning the universe. This presupposes that there was a creator of the universe. That creator is acknowledged to be God.

Another view has it that Africa Traditional Religion evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their life and reflected upon their experiences. Religious ideas and practices arose and took shape in the process of man's search for answer to the questions of the phenomena of nature, and as ways of making human life safer and better.

No doubt, many of the ideas and practices were later abandoned when they were found to be inadequate. But as time went on, these ideas and practices increased in number and spread as the people increased and dispersed. Many religious ideas and practices sprang up simultaneously in different parts of the continents, while others spread through contact among the different societies. For this reason, we find both similarities and differences in African Religion all over the continent (Mbiti,1975).

Africa Traditional Religion is very pragmatic and realistic. It is applied to a situation as the need arises. The followers of African Traditional Religion are not known by any authority which goes back in history. They just follow it as it has been handed down to them by former generations, changing whatever is necessary in order to suite their circumstances of life.

National Development

Development means difference things to different people. In general, it means more efficient, more productive, more progressive ways of doing things than was formerly the case, whether in economics, social or political matters (Adeola etal, 2006).

According to P.N. Njoku (2011), development is multi – faceted. It encompasses a lot of issues and processes; it has so many components and aspects.

Development is about the life of a man. There are issues that are ultimately related to development, these are industrialization, modernization, urbanization. But there is an important aspect that scholars have neglected over time which also plays an important role in development and that is what this paper intends to address. That aspect is religion. Religion plays a critical role in the process of enhancing and sustaining development at the local and national levels.

Culture is the bedrock of the development of any given society and religion is the most important characteristics of culture. Alanana (2006) stressed that there are two aspects of culture which influence development of any society. First is the aspect which addressed the impacts of more developed culture on less developed culture of Africa. The second aspect deals with the indigenous cultural decay that has a dire consequence for the development process of the nation.

Going by history, Africa is the cradle of human civilization. But the historical reality that confronted Africa at the epochs of slavery, colonialism and neo – colonialism destroyed the African value system and reversed its direction of change and development. It should be emphasized that the relationship with the Western world is largely responsible for where we are today as a nation. All the critical developmental issues / problems confronting us today e.g. poverty, inequality, political instability, ethno – religious conflict, insecurity, technological stagnation, etc cannot be separated from contact with Europe (Rodney, 1972).

Africa was developing at its own pace before the western incursion which diverted the direction of change. In terms of culture, Africa reached the peak of culture as manifested in its arts e.g the Nok terra – cotta in Northern Nigeria, the Ife bronze in Western Nigeria, and the Igbo – Okwu iron cast in Eastern Nigeria, the Egyptian Pyramids, etc. These dates back to several decades / centuries before the coming of the white man to Africa. The type of formation which came with independence is at the root of whatever is now in existence in Africa. This has great implication for national development.

The Impacts of Foreign Religions on National Development

Nigeria is a nation with different peoples, culture and religious faith. The coming of the British into the region and bringing together of the different ethnic groups under one political community in 1914 brought the diversity of conflicting values which consequently created ethical problems at the national level. The main sources of these influences are Islam and Christianity. Both religions provided certain values which provides group superiority over others, parochialism, dominance, subordination, prejudice and discrimination. All these makes for division rather than integration. Some of the Islamic and Christian values negate the ‘we feeling...’ and the desire for group solidarity that existed among the traditional communities. The strong connection between society and the person was weakened. Instead of members to see themselves as belonging to one big family, they look at themselves simply in terms of being a Muslim or

Christian. This led to favouritism, unhealthy competition mutual distrust and suspicions. All these gave room to the pursuit and concern for group interest rather than collective interest (Chidili, 2008).

In the colonial period, the major religious groups were not allowed to mix with others. In fact, one of the reasons for injustice and lack of development in this country is that the social structure we inherited from the imperialist colonial era that were unjust have not been corrected by post colonial programs of nation – building. Collectivism is central to African values and development but it was grossly eroded by foreign values. Training in schools and colleges promotes individualistic values which is foreign as against the collective values which Africa is known for. The collective values promote developments in Africa in the past. Resources for example were pooled together and equitably distributed to all members of the community.

Again, because of the historical reality articulated earlier, modern family and marriage play some roles in national development. In traditional African society, polygamy is the dominant marriage system. This allows a man to create a village of women by marrying a large number of women. Polygamy is a factor in development because it is an asset as men who are into it transformed the women or their wives into forces of agricultural production. Women have been actively involved in food productions and distribution, domestic chores; they socialize the children and above all, they are custodians of society's values and traditions which ensures stability. Because of this central role women played to ensure food availability and affordability, the imposition of foreign values shattered the structure of polygamy and encourages monogamy via the Christian mission.

In view of the above, beliefs and practices in Africa as already observed has been influence to a certain degree by external forces. The advent of Western civilization has changed the simplicities of traditional life and thought. Foreign religions, especially Islam and Christianity have also had their toll. They have transformed all that is left of the traditional society and have in consequence set a new process of social formation and transformation in Africa. This has often resulted in fear, suspicions, tensions and conflict among groups. Thus all that is good in traditional morality is lost in the name of Civilization.

The Role of Religion in the Development of the Economy of a Nation

Basher and Khan in (Chidili, 2008) point out that religion and economic development cannot be separated because religion drives people's behaviour and actions in more productive direction. In an integrated world economy, it has become profoundly clear that just peace – making and dialogue with other religions cannot be toyed with. That is to say, "a peaceful coexistence of various religious groups within a country with multiple religious affiliations remains the essential prerequisite for growth and development. It is widely believed that religion played an important role in the process of economic development in the very early years of world history.

Basher and Khan in (Chidili, 2008) further pointed out how the world acclaimed economist, Adam Smith (1776) in his “An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” wrote that one of religious most important contribution to the economic development process was its values as enforcement mechanisms. Smith argued that in societies where there was a widespread belief in God, the value of honesty and integrity were more prevalent and fewer resources would be devoted to determining the veracity of an individual’s or firm’s business ethics.

They also opined that religion also affect productivity through certain personal traits such as work ethics, thrift, honesty and openness to people. These traits, in turn may make people more or less economically productive. For most religions, hard work is a norm. Work is a duty to God and one should put diligent effort in his work. To the believers, work not only helps them to stay away from a sensual immoral life but also is the best means for glorifying God. Thus, from religious point of view, one must avoid idle conversation, or oversleep to have maximum time for work. Being idle and unproductive is often stressed as ‘evils’ to the extent that people internalize this view; it is likely to raise productivity. (Bashar and Khan in Chidili, 2008).

Since the concept of “truthful living” is a major emphasis in religious practice, it induces people to bring a sincere attitude in all interactions and dealings. Religion may increase levels of trust and reduce levels of corruption and criminal activity. It may also encourage frugality, which will stimulate savings and investments and therefore economic growth. (Chidili, 2008).

The above idea was also corroborated by Max Weber in his “Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism”. He asserts that religious teachings of John Calvin are directly related to the rise of Capitalism. According to the protestant ethic, those who have faith perform good works, and achieve economic success are more likely to be among the chosen of God. As a result, people work hard and save their money, and do not spend it on worldly frivolity. Instead, they reinvest it in their land, equipment and labour (Weber, 1912). By this position, Weber is implying that the development of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century could be traced to the religious values and teaching propagated at that time.

Religious rituals also play a significant role in economic activities’. They promote in-group trust and cooperation that help overcome collective action problems. This helps an economy to be more open in terms of trade, investment and skilled migration.

Religion also helps maintain social control in society by conferring supernatural legitimacy on the norms and laws of a society. Niccolo Machiavelli a sixteenth century scholar and politician wrote that it was the duty of princes and heads of republics to uphold the foundations of religion in their countries for then it is easy to keep their people religious and consequently well conducted and united (quoted in Chidili, 2008).

As a result of the foregoing, it can be said that religion has aided social progress, educational development, interpersonal and international cooperation as well as mutual understanding among people. It has totally transformed the structures of societies, the lives of countless individuals and institutions all over the world.

African Tradition Religion: Path to National Development

People apply religion on their social, political, economic, emotional, intellectual and spiritual life. They believe that religion is relevant in all these areas of their life. In the case of African Traditional Religion which enters all aspects of life of an African, it has been responsible for cultivating the whole person (Mbiti, 1975).

To witness national development like never before, there is the need for religion to be repositioned to reflect Africans Traditional values which would promote trust and cooperation that will help ensure full and robust participation in economic development.

There is need to appropriate values from Africa Traditional Religion which could be useful in ensuring good governance in order to propel it toward greatness.

There is equally the need to develop values of development based on Africa's traditional principles of hard work, integrity, service, truthfulness, love and accountability, which are true hallmarks of development in emerging nations such as China, India, Brazil Malaysia, South Korea, and Indonesia, among others.

Development is an action and it involves conscious effort of the state to induce development in the nation. Religious development is necessary for economic and socio-political development because the stability resulting from religious development is a necessary condition for the development of other sectors. Thus, religion if properly manage could bring about national development.

Conclusion

Having shown the areas of African life where one finds traditional religion, they lead to the conclusion that it is seen in all aspect of life and influences all areas of life. Africa Traditional Religion has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African peoples throughout the centuries. Even if it has no sacred books, it is written everywhere in the life of the peoples. It has been able to move with the times and it has produced no religious controversies. People are free to hold different views and beliefs without the danger of being accused of heresy or falsehood. To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious.

In the final analysis, we cannot say that African Traditional Religion is better or worse than other religions. It is simply the religious system which African forefathers developed in response to their life's situations. Up to a point it gave them satisfactory answer to their problems and helps them to find an integrated

and meaningful interpretation and understanding of the universe. Man is forever expanding his horizon of knowledge and understanding. African Traditional Religion has contributed to that ever expanding horizon. No doubt it will continue to contribute something but without ever pretending to supply all the answers for all people at all times. Every way of thought has its own limitations and it will be completely wrong for anyone to stretch Africa Traditional Religion beyond those limitations.

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