

## **Traditional Religion: A Panacea for Nigerian National Development**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The Africans has a religion which is indigenou, this religion permeats into the fabrics of an African man. This religion has no written evidence, but is founded in our myth, folklore, proverb, folk-dance and mythology. Africa traditional religion is a major religion in Nigeria thus it has some good potential that could empower the nation. Religion has been used to reflect human beings relationship with that which they regard as holy, sacred, transcendent, worthy of especially reference or divine. This divine dependence of man on the supreme is still very manifest in the life of every African. African religion is a way of life that bring an undisputable relationship between human and supernatural, that is why African are religious. African traditional religion helps in shaping the nation, it has both material and spiritual aspects. The paper adopts an investigative approach in tackling the subject matter. It is pertinent to state categorically, that African traditional religion has been relegated to the back and hastily condemned without giving a second thought. The missionaries who explored our system, condemned our culture, our medicine and used some derogatory terms like fetish, primitive and superstition to described our religion. This paper investigate and probe into the economic importance of African Religion like the judicial system, medicine and morality. It recommends that African Traditional Religion is still relevance in our national development

**Keywords: Traditional, Religion, Panacea, National Development.**

## Introduction

This work is an emphasis on the aspect of the Traditional Religion that provide the religious and moral substratum for national development and stability. The Traditional Religion in reality possess those intrinsic element to generate consciousness in the minds of Nigerians who appear to be genuinely seeking ways to improve their living standard. Nationalists who were in pre-colonial time developing positively and progressively populated African continent as a whole and Nigeria in particular. The community relation and fellowship were grounded in the Philosophy of humanistic socialism and it was the same attitude they related to their environment and the universe at large.

Unfortunately, with the forceful penetration of the Arabs and the Europeans, the continent experience mass poverty, unemployment, hunger and low standard of living. In contemporary times, these evils which are couched in development plans are still in African in the form of neo-colonialism and they affect the entire aspect of her endeavours. Therefore, the task of this paper is to identify how the traditional religion can enhance national development. Awolalu (1976), observed that African Traditional Religion is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africa and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans. Traditional 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 traditional religion cuts across all aspects of the Nigerian society and its influence shine on individuals found in institutions and policy making bodies. Traditional religion like other Religions have always had influence on our Nigerian politics. African traditional religion is an embodiment of the way of life of Africans.

## **Traditional Religion and National Development**

Religion like other social facts like economics, politics, and law interact with each other considerably. Religion holds the strongest power and conscious of every nation and therefore cannot be taken lightly or merely optional or treated with spite. It is an emotive stuff, no one or government meddles with it without being scattered. If not bridled, religion could become dysfunctional, exploit social differences and consequently weaken the stability of the nation. Religion is an indispensable recipe for building a happy and stable nation (Ezeanya, 1981). It is integrative but apart from economics and politics it poses a threat and challenge to various governments of the world, more so in Nigeria where with incessant reprehensible licentiousness resulting in series of religious bloodbath and mayhem, it has become a thorn in the flesh of progress. Generally, religion regulates not only matters spiritual salvation or moral development but also economic, political and social affairs. Man by nature is religious. Religion is part of man's nature; therefore solution to man's problems must be addressed towards his nature in so far as a religion stand uncompromisingly concomitant to the development of the nation. However, one of the saddest mistakes of our growing generation is to despise our traditional religion and cultural heritage as downright evil and primitive. (Ezeanya, 1981).

The building of a nation is first and foremost the building of the people that make up the nation, in nation building there is both the material and spiritual aspects. The three major religions in Nigeria have their own specific contributions to make for a united and peaceful structures for constructing solid national edifice. But most unfortunately, with so much fetish pursuit of wealth the basic religious principles are being trampled underfoot but of course with disastrous consequences. It must be noted. However, that the visible correlation between religion and real development is undeniable. According to Moral (1979), he observed that, consequently this has become virtually a central theme in the current discussion of growth possibilities in African development. It is equally an

indisputable fact that the slow rate of economic, social and political development in Africa is attributable to the neglect of our own economic social and political development and our inability to explore and exploit the natural endowments that lie abundantly idle for our development. J. E. CaselyHayford in 1922, rightly asserted that ever before the British had contact with our people, we were developed people having our own institutions and own ideas of government (Moral, 1979). This supports the assertion that there were flourishing civilizations in Africa some thousands of years ago, (after all Africa was the cradle of civilization). The Africans were politically free and economically independent. Africans then had their own social structures and their cultures were indigenous. Suffice it to say that the traditional religion imbued with authentic values and aspirations and when properly unearthed can aid development.

Pope Pius xii in his 1951 Encyclical message remarked:

*Let not the gospel on being introduced into a new land destroy or extinguish whatever the people possess which is naturally good, just and beautiful (Pope Pius,1951)*

This simply means that from time immemorial, it has been recognized that though there are some beliefs and practices of the Traditional religion, which hinder development, a lot of its principles and practices are good and beautiful to make for progress in social, political and even economical spheres of life. It is evident that other world religions and science have heavily descended upon the thinking and acting of the people. This invasion and infiltration have distorted and absorption of African life, but on all these the traditional religion does not seek to complete but to cooperate for fruitful dialogue and understanding the world in which mankind lives and is working for welfare of all people (Dunlop knight, 1964). This open arm of the religion has been criticized to be a mark of inferiority. But this is precisely false. The fact remains that the Traditional religion is unequivocally more of a way of life and since life is not static but undergoes series of change and process through its interaction with

environment, the traditional religion gets inevitably affected with the social system.

### **Traditional Religion and Moral Substratum for Nation Building**

The Traditional religion possesses such infantile values and aspirations that provide both religious and moral substratum for nation building. Traditional religion affirms and celebrates life because of large number of rituals, festivals and ceremonies which are usually carried out and by so doing the people dance, sing, dramatize, ritualize and revitalize the individual and the community. In the traditional society, justice forms the backrock of the rituals. For instance during libation, justice permeates into all parts of the religions. Justice is applied strictly and the traditional tools of justice are honesty, faithfulness and liberty. The concept of justice is so central to the ethical background of Africa Traditional religion and consequently is the most valued virtue (Iwe 1979). The traditional shrines therefore are the tribunal of justice and constitute the institution of civilization. They play some roles in administering justice. They control occupational morality and provide order and public security in the traditional society.

The Traditional religion gives fundamental layout of African development upon which subsequent development programmes are based because the religion borders on the nominative as it nurtures and sustains lives and development. It really makes provision for communal sanctions. There is existence of moral precepts to which every tribe submits and some of these have the forces of laws, they consist of customs, ancestral traditions and taboo and of these precepts are broken, the result in sanctions either of civil authority or by the deities.

Age grades and secret societies play major roles in communities. They are vital instruments for fostering communal and harmonious relationship among community members. They also constitute instruments of discipline and government as a means of socialization (Jacob, 1984). Equally, they help to enforce the laws thereby maintaining a coherent social order. Also they

serves as a means of social control, integrative institution that functioned largely to force a check against immorality social injustice and chaos. Traditional rituals which are the enactment of ultimate beliefs, have far-reaching socio-economic implications for the development of human and natural resources in any given society.

The celebrations express unconscious desires and attributes of the participants, which help to make them conscious. In the traditional African societies, rituals are occasions for consolidation for group solidarity and integration of one into social system. (Onunwa, 1985). They serve as mean of consolation security and integration in the society. It is observed here that man must be made to confirm to a particular patterning life in order to preserve the system. Such harmonious order usually encourages creativity and progress. For no progressive project can thrive in a quagmire of moral confusion. (Onuwu, 1985). The encouragement of societal discipline therefore could be achieved through enactment of laws and rules of life to guide all inhabitants of a given society. Such checks or social constructs are taboos, which the society makes for self-preservation and protection. In Africa the traditional religion gives validity and authenticity of such 'Constructs' and through religion, myths of origin could be contrived to give the taboos and totems some mark of originality for effective guidance and social development in the society (Onunwa, 1985).

African Traditional religion is full of festivals and ceremonies which aid cohesion of people. These ceremonies and festivals constitute a factor of unity and as an important aspect of the societal life, engender unity in the traditional society. In Africa in general, each village group or clan has its own annual festival. Such ceremonies carried with them both religious and social significance and served as opportunities when people deliberate and celebrate under the same umbrella not minding one's social status. Through such celebrations new friends were made and old ones renewed. Mutual trusts between villages were renewed and consolidated, peaceful co-existence is usually reassured. Ideally, such regular coming together of people is a very powerful instrument in cementing the bond of cordial

relationship and unity. Perhaps, the most important element of development in the traditional society is the traditional medicines. With the advent of modern medicine, the influence of traditional medicine was not extinguished, rather one complemented the other.

For certain illness that are not treated by the use of modern medicine, the traditional medicine are used as an alternative to buttress the laudable contribution of the traditional medicine in health care system, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the potentials of African traditional medicine, when in 1974, it passed into law a resolution to exploit herbal medicine and this would keep the goal of health for all by the year 2023 (Nana, 2008). The use of traditional medicine with modern medicine and the result on the improve health centre is very glaring. There is an African science who ingredients and vitality are potent and can tremendously supplement modern science if given adequate recognition.

### **Basic Values in African Traditional Religion for National Development**

African Traditional Religion contains basic value and aspirations, which can help in reconstructing the nation. Every Nigerian is born into a the natural changes and contact with external change agents have affected the traditional forms and values. It is worthy to note that the African worldview is cyclical. This mean that life moves precariously from birth to death and reincarnation (Ogbu, 1989). Political values that emerged from these world-view are completely religious. Order is persistently dominant and taboos determine the bounds of behaviour, and rules are endowed with the role of ritual agents while decision making is often clothed in ritual process. Certain values are accented; honesty, ability to deliver just decision in arbitration, dignity or well being and long cavity. But today political development has been misconstrued and has dangerously led to the neglect of these immense religious values in decision making processes in Nigeria. Perhaps that is why those calling for cultural revival find themselves after times between nationalism unbelief and the craving for change. But the traditional beliefs are embedded in our mental matrices and they

persistinspite of external change agents, thereby making for political stability (Ogbu, 1989)

African Traditional Religion has contributed much to the development of Nigerian judicial system. Today people are glamouring for the establishment of Customary Courts that would base their judgments on the customs and values of the society. These customs, values, beliefs, mores and norms had their roots in the traditional religion. The values, customs, morals, beliefs and practices that intrinsically, imbued in the traditional religion. The religion justified largely its immense contributions towards the stabilization, concretization of political values and ethos of the Nigerian society. The traditional Arts are not just cultural establishments but most of them are activities which give us psychological and mental satisfaction. They are primarily functional and religious, emphasizing the people's need for magic and charm through talismanic objects and amulets and as such other carvings that become the media of communication and contact with the spiritual world. Most importantly, the African genius has produced objects of singular beauty inspired by religious beliefs and social customs and the necessities of social and domestic life (Hailey, 1980). Indeed, the traditional art especially in a multicultural nation such as Nigeria with internal as well as external influence has immense role to play in the preservation for our cultural heritage. Perhaps, that is why Donaly Anderson once remark;

*Most of the information we gain about the world by way of visual processes. Many of the pleasurable experiences in life depend on seeing from...many fields of Science depends on systems of classification based on visual process, and it is safe to say that man's progress up to now is predicated on sight as a minimum condition*

There has been no civilization that has not had its artistic tradition. The role of art therefore, in Africa culture, thought and personality. Infact no emergent African state today can afford to ignore the urgent role of art. Art



is not static. Like culture, art changes its form with the times. Traditional arts served beneficial reinforcing roles with the traditional culture. Arts is as old as African people. Masks which are perhaps the most ubiquitous of the African art forms, also have an immense significance. In terms of varied functions, meaning, modes or forms from group to group. Their functions being primarily religious, they are the best expression of the African's dependence on symbolic forms and contact for emphasizing the intangible bonds linking man with the spiritual world. Some paintings of our traditional societies depict norms, law and regulations either natural or civic. These were designed to enforce good behaviour. In addition they serve to promote right conduct, sense of responsibility and interaction with all kinds of people, irrespective of their different temperaments. The realization of these moral heritages which were not quite different among the different cultures in Nigerian pluralistic society with alien religious bigotry, engender greater understanding and unity thereby enhancing development (Abraham 1981). Besides, in most parts of traditional Africans, the manufacture of local technological instruments such as hoes, metal war weapon etc are associated with religion. Metal work has always been associated throughout Africa with worship and ritual. One would then maintain that traditional art is indispensable and inseparable component of our cultural heritage, identity and development. (Onoh, 1981). As long as Nigeria continues to suppress the role of these indigenous arts with their wide range of social, religious economic and technological inspirations, we shall continue to wallop and gallop in object poverty; which is of course an inescapable characteristic feature of a poor country as ours. And if there is anytime this call for cultural awareness in necessary, it is today: for culture is no more viewed as "Pagan" or backward but rather as a heritage which should be maintained, incorporated and given rightful place in the new societies which have emerged.

African Traditional Religion has a lot of potentials which could be utilized to aid national development but this could only be possible. If those who parade and masquerades as our leaders sincerely and unequivocally

harness these indigenous values and aspirations. To this Leonard Senghor of Sierre Leone once remarked in 1959 that;

*The problem Africa had (then) was how to integrate African values into the world of 1995 of course this is still our problem today, the problem of identification, assessment, evaluation and also that of integration. According to Senghor, it is not a case of reviving the past so as to live in African museum: (Sunday times, 1982)*

What this implies is that by reaffirming our traditional human ideas we do not only seek to glorify the dead past, but that African culture can as well provide meaning continuity, and identity in our lives, as it did to our ancestors. All these can only be done by a very close study of the traditional past that would help to decipher those salutary elements that can aid development.

To the Africans, there was never a question of adherence to the faith handed down by the forebears without a corresponding practice which showed itself to morality. (Ezeanya, 1981). Furthermore, for African, good and evil behaviour and actions have their social dimensions. If God, the divinities and the ancestors are offended the offence if not quickly atoned for has its unfailing repercussions on man. It is this awareness by the unfailing sanction that was responsible for the prevalence of law and order in the traditional society. Unfortunately, our nation is plagued with armed robbery, bribery and corruption, embezzlement of public funds, wide spread sexual immorality at all levels of society, cases of murder, indiscipline in our tertiary institutions and shameless desecration of holy places by stealing and so on. These vices hinders the development of a society, but when the society was strictly faithful to traditional religion those crimes were very rare indeed. Thus, African Traditional religion emphasizes the importance of moral practice and insists that they extended into all areas of life for the welfare of the individual and the society at large. (Ezeanya, 1981). Nigerian should learn from the traditional set up to have

their country, respect the leaders and be ready to serve the nation and make veritable sacrifices for the welfare of the state. Everybody from all works of life should make ones own contribution in order to build a nation where they are no socio-economic and political vices. It is by so doing that national development can be achieved. No amount of sophisticated and deadly armory acquired for the defense of the nation, high percentage of literacy, modern structure and control of buoyant economy can save Nigeria from the quagmire having her today, for these alone cannot make man really happy because man is not mere, as J.S. Mbiti (1980), perceived "Man cannot live by bread of science and politics alone he also needs the vitamins of ethics and morals, faith and hope, love and security, comfort and attention. To this end, any project for the building of a nation which loses sight of or ignores the spiritual and material wellbeing of a man taken as a whole, cannot succeed. Although there are varieties of factors that can aid development, African Traditional religion is one of such factors especially when considered on the background of its ethical and social dimensions. In a strict sense, its tangible values and aspirations put together constitute significant qualities which for progress of the society. Therefore in this current search for national unity and identity some of the traditional elements which had bound a section of people together in the past can be modified and applied in a new context. No amount of philosophical principles, economic theories or political system which are all alien to Nigerians can in the present circumstance make a strong and permanent impact on their life in such a way as to change them to seek genuine peace, unity and progress based on mutual respect, justice and love (Onunwa, 1983).

Furthermore, it is unreasonable to ignore the religions factor in planning development. Planning for the development of human community must consider the whole gamut of what makes a human being (Ogbu, 1981). It is truism that traditional religion once proffered up certain ethical values which could stabilize the gyrating moral system of our days. Until these vales are extracted and integrated into the scheme of

development programmes and unless our leaders re-address their policies in this direction, national development would be mere paper work coached in flamboyant rhetoric.

### **Conclusion**

Generally speaking no single factor can be identified as being responsible for development or under-development in African. Rather a complex of factors aid and hinder development and unless it is viewed in this direction we stand the risk of misunderstanding the position of this work. To be precise, this work has tried to expound clearly the fact that African Traditional Religion possesses salutary elements with which to build and reconstruct this country. National development from whatever perspective can neither be achieved out of this thin air nor on the television screens, papers of newspapers and constructing beautiful melodious jingles. Mere propaganda and elaborate campaigns cannot achieve the recent call by various governments for a new national spirit, conscience or essence. All that is require is an awakening spirit to a new national and social order, which involves the development of the citizenry as to focus of every human organization, from thence underlies all other phases of development. Consequently, with regard to national development a proper understanding by man's true nature, his basic rights and his dignity become necessary. These basic ingredients can neither be imported from abroad nor can they be imposed by force. African Traditional religion undergrids the culture and life style of Africans and development in whatever sense must be related with African past within the modern context.

Nigeria is presently faced with social, political and economic vices. Lack of foresighted leadership, lack of dedicated research, ethnic chauvinism, selfishness, greed among others have all plagued the Nigerian Society. To debunk this bunkum that characterized our national lives, Nigerians and her leaders must in incorporate some of the salutary elements embedded in African Traditional religion and society unless these structure that lackadaisical attitudes toward progress are changed and the obsequious

citizens transferred to revolutionary leaders, Nigeria cannot of course achieve this goal of national development. Perhaps the most probable way to do this is to incorporate into her development programmes these indigenous and tangible values and aspirations which are intrinsically spelt out in the social, political and moral dimensions of African Traditional Religion. Rather than treating traditional religion with spite we must understand that any attempt to build this nation without recourse to religion or to the moral and socio-political values of the African past and religion is to hope to construct a massive structure upon the foundation of sand.

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