HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NIGERIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Edited by:
Peter A. Essoh
&
Abiodun J. Oluwabamide

Chapter Eleven

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELGION: A CORE NIGERIAN HERITAGE

John O. Umoh

Introduction

The foreign religions of Islam and Christianity made their appearances on the Nigerian landscape in the 11ᵗʰ and 19ᵗʰ centuries respectively. With the arrival of Islam via the Sahara trade routes linking Northern Nigeria with Islamic North Africa and the Middle East, and Christianity penetrating Southern Nigeria through the Atlantic route, Nigeria has found itself playing host to three Major Religions African Traditional Religion. Islam Christianity. The above serial arrangement is important as it reveals the order of arrival of each of the religions on the Nigerian soil.

Religion in general is considered an important social institution to the people of Nigeria because people's daily lives can be said to be organized seriously along religious lines. The people of Nigeria, despite their ethnic differences can be described as having a common heritage in their attachment to religious background and sentiments. Beliefs and superstitions, which circumscribe local perceptions, creeds and folklore, are of utmost importance in shaping the ways of life of the people of Nigeria. Because of this commonality in approach the Nigerian people are held together as a moral and normative community. As a result of shared experiences in beliefs and meanings, people benefit from religion because religion reduces the intensity of frustrations and difficulties, which would otherwise overpower the individual in an attempt to do it all alone.

Religion, however, has been viewed differently by different people, depending on an individual's interest in, and assessment of the phenomenon itself Tshat explains why the topic of religion is always a highly emotionally charged subject matter. There are those who consider religion as a negative experience in human society and those who see it as performing a vital role and, therefore, a force to reckon with. Karl Marx (1818-1883), who is always associated with a negative approach to religion saw it as an opiate of the masses, a tool of oppression in the hands of the bourgeoisie and a metaphoric representation of the basic characteristics of the economic order" (Marx, 1844/1963).

With such devastating blow on religion, Marx regarded it as dead, and considered any intellectual attacks on it as nothing but useless. Marx's position in the 19ᵗʰ century thus provided the impetus to the conflict approach to religion in the social science literature.

For Karl Marx, therefore, a belief in religion is the most profound form of human alienation because by adhering to such belief people loose their sense of control over the social order. Karl Marx's conflict position has been supported by some of the bitterest strives and wars which have been fought in contemporary and ancient worlds in the name of religion as demonstrated by the histories of both Islam and Christianity.

In contrast to the above view, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), an approximate contemporary of Marx, and the pioneer in the field of sociology of religion, portrayed the phenomenon in a more positive light. According to Durkheim, the function of religion in human society is to create and maintain a moral

community. Focusing on religious rituals, which he observed among the Arunta people of Australia, Durkheim emphasized that religion reinforces group norms and values by adding a sacred dimension to everyday social pressure. Accordingly, religious rituals encourage social solidarity by bringing members of the society together to affirm their common bond as well as their social and cultural heritage.

In addiction, Durkheim accorded a primacy of place to religion over all other forms of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. By submitting that the basic categories of human thought, cause and time, all emerged after man developed religion, he further stressed that religion possesses in a unique way the ability to regulate human needs and actions. Thus, religious beliefs, cults and rituals function to give members of the community a common view of the world, thereby facilitating social interaction and social organization (Durkheim, 1912/1965).

Durkheim's position which has also been emphasized by others (e.g. Coser, 1967) has in turn provided what has been styled the functional approach to the study of religion. Some of the above universal functions that are emphasized by Durkheim and others have also been given prominent recognition by the African Traditional Religion, which by far predates the Durkheimian analysis.

Nigerian Traditional Religious Heritage

Traditional religion, which characterizes much of Sub-Saharan Africa, has clearly recognizable characteristics, which are common in the various countries of the continent. In much of

traditional African societies, communities exist and maintain their identities through a belief in a common ancestry to which individual communities can be traced. In the Nigerian society, although tribal marks are also used to differentiate memberships in tribal affiliations, families remain as single units based primarily on common identity and interests. Such beliefs and interests are often objectified through external symbols like community or family shrines, totems, identical ritual activities and common ways of worship. In every traditional family or community, religious or ritual heads and leaders are appointed to direct religious worships and ceremonies. The entire system of religious behaviour and social relationships that surround a specific religious and moral mode constitute an institution with a fairly predictable way of life.

Among the concepts used to describe Nigerian religious heritage as handed on from one generation to another and which also serve as a binding force to people of the various tribes include the following:

i.   **God as a Supreme Being**

God, as Creator is considered a Supreme Being who is all-knowing and all-powerful. This God pervades every facet of the created universe, yet remains distant from his creation. Many writers have devoted much attention and volumes to this view of a God so near, yet so far, which they describe with the concept of deus remotus, or deus absconditus or deus otiosus. The all-powerful God, seen as supreme and benevolent, commands a number of lesser gods who are charged with

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different responsibilities over various aspects of the people's life. In addition, ancestors or elders who have passed on are believed to also exercise protective roles over the living. Nigerians, and in fact Africans in general, express an attitude of reverence and awe in regard to the Supreme and the lesser gods as well as to the ancestors. The idea of high or Creator God has been recognized as central to the analysis of traditional African religions (Mbiti, 1969). This attitude is manifested in the frequency of prayers and offerings made in their regard. The above interpretation of the world of the supernatural and divine has serious implications for Nigerian, nay, African cosmology as explained below.

Ii   African traditional cosmology

Cosmology refers to the explanation and conception of the physical universe in its natural order. For the Africans, from which the Nigerian derives his conception, the universe is a hierarchical arrangement in a natural two-form order. According to Horton (1971) "The salient feature of the system is its two-tiered arrangement of observables. In the first tier, we find the lesser spirits, which are in the main concerned with the affairs of the local community and its environment i.e. with the microcosm. In the second tier we find a Supreme Being concerned with the world as a whole, i.e. with the macrocosm. Just as the microcosm is part of the macrocosm, so the Supreme Being is defined as the ultimate controller and existential ground osf the lesser spirit". The whole idea of the mediatory role of the lesser spirit in religious circles finds a parallel in the interaction pattern of the traditional daily interaction of the people. Just as the Supreme deity is approached through the intermediary role

of the lesser spirits as "middlemen," so the younger generation approaches elders through middlemanship. This attitude is passed on from one generation to another as an important cultural heritage and points to the respect and regard with which the Nigerian approaches his elders and those in authority positions.

iii   The Conception of man

For the Nigerian, the image of man is derived from that of his creator, the Supreme Being. He is a being made up of a physical self and a spiritual component. It is the spiritual element, called the soul, that gives life to the physical being, infusing it with intelligence and thinking faculty, thus empowering the physical element to undergo the daily activities. In the order of creation, man is considered next to God and so is able to manipulate the forces of nature and other creatures. He is also equipped with a free will, which enables him to choose between what is good and what is bad. The ability to make such choices depends on the state of the soul at the time. This capacity sets him aside and makes him higher than other animals.

iv.   Human life:

In the Nigerian cultural arrangement, human life, which begins from birth and terminates at death, is treated with utmost sacredness. It is simply sacred and considered an abomination to destroy life or tamper with it. Even the mere shedding of human blood, since blood itself is seen as a symbol of life, is deemed offensive and, therefore, punishable by the ancestors. Life is considered the greatest of all values,

including wealth and fame. The average Nigerian, before his conversion to Christianity and/or Islam believed in rebirth or reincarnation. It is believed that after death, the individual spends some time with the ancestors and may return to another round of earthly existence. Reincarnation is determined by the quality of life lived in a previous life situation. If the individual lived well, he will rest peacefully with the ancestors, but if it was a wicked kind of life, he will return, either to make amends, or to roam the earth in shame in the form of spirit. Unlike the good spirits whose names are generally known with sufficient familiarity, the wicked spirits are never known by name.

v.   **Prayer:**

The traditional Nigerian, true to his African type, ancestry and heritage, is characterized by a deep sense of love for prayer. It is believed that the African is naturally prayerful. This means that all his daily activities are shrouded in prayer. He begins his day by offering it to the god or the ancestors and ends it with a prayer of thanksgiving for a day well spent. Prayer then is considered an important element in African and Nigerian religions. The traditional Nigerian believes that it is through prayer that he establishes contact and communion with the Supreme Being as well as the gods and ancestors. Libation, the pouring of wine in honour of a deity or an ancestor, as a sign of communion with it, is a constant feature of African prayer. The types of prayer suitable to an occasion are determined by the occasion itself.

vi.   **Sacred and profane objects and places**

Before Emilie Durkheim documented that religion deals primarily with the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 12965), such classification had long received a

prominent place in African prayer disposition. What Durkheim did not include in his observation is the fact that when two objects establish contact with each other, the profane becomes imbued with the sacredness of the sacred. This is so in regard to people, objects and places, In traditional African mentality, sacred places, people and objects are by nature sacred. Examples of sacred objects include the shrines of deities, streams and rivers, and some cultic religious symbols, places and things. At times, certain images are considered sacred just for the fact of what they represent. In the traditional religion, certain persons are considered sacred because of what they represent or the positions they occupy. Such persons include diviners, family and tribal heads, and religious personalities whether in action or out of operation. The level of respectful recognition, of course, varies according to their roles and the type of deities they represent and serve.

African traditional religion has sometimes been misconstrued as a result of either ignorance or misinformation or outright contempt. Positions such as the above have led to a description of African Traditional Religion as "ancestor worship" (Spencer in Nwanunobi, 1992). But the fact is that the concern with the ancestors is a widespread feature of traditional African religions.

Others still, according to Onwubiko (1991), have erroneously described it as primitive, pagan, native or even juju worship.

Functions of African Traditional Religion

Religion in general as a social institution has been credited with a number of positive attributes in the sacred order. These according to Ekong (1988) include:

a.   Providing acceptable explanations for the unknown and irregular occurrences of nature e.g. flood, earthquakes, drought etc.

b.   The justification of human existence especially the role of

man in terms of a supernatural design.

c. The rationalization of individual suffering, frustration and hardship in the material world, thereby making such conditions bearable.

d. The celebration of human achievement. Most rituals are connected with some crucial periods in the society e.g. puberty, planting of crops, harvest, traditional marriages and betrothals, etc.

e. The promotion of group solidarity.

f. The strengthening of moral order and the promotion of social control; and

g. The provision of support for social organizations and institutions e.g. schools, hospitals and welfare agencies etc.

In addition to these universally acknowledged functions attributed to religion generally, the African Traditional Religion performs certain specific roles that relate distinctively to the African worldview. The following functions have been widely accredited to African Traditional Religion and as such, remain part of the Nigerian heritage:

1. Preservation and promotion of indigenous values. Such values as religiosity and respect for elders are considered important as they ensure smooth and peaceful social organization.

2. Protection and reverence for ancestral and clan shrines. This ensures contact and communion with departed community members whose efforts were recognized as vital for clan survival.

3. Observation of cultural taboos. Through such observation, the present is actively linked with the past.

4. Promotion of the positive values of the culture e.g. virginity, ethical standards and sound morality.

5. Recognition of the role of the elders in the community. The clan elders are seen as god's representatives in the

community.

6. Respect for authority. In the Nigerian tradition, authority is seen as being divine in origin and the authority figure must be treated with utmost respect and loyalty; and

7. Discouragement of all forms of antisocial behaviour, e.g. the tendency towards prostitution, premarital sex, theft, witchcraftcy, etc.

Conclusion:

African Traditional Religion can be considered as the basis on which the Nigerian religious heritage is founded because the latter seeks to promote those values that enhance the survival of Nigeria as a people. Since nationhood requires self-identity, it is important that those cultural values that set Nigeria apart from other nations be sufficiently emphasized. That, in fact, is the essence of the Nigerian heritage.

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