

# **PEOPLES & CULTURES OF NIGERIA**

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## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

### RELIGION AND ACTS OF WORSHIP AMONGST THE NIGERIAN PEOPLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND NATIONAL UNITY

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#### Introduction

##### Background to the Study

The belief in an ultimate supreme being has always been a way of life for Africans and the Nigerian people in particular. Religion is acknowledged as a powerful force that has a strong influence on social behavior and human interaction; it is deeply entrenched in the culture of the Nigerian people, and this is largely reflected in the various religious practices amongst the different ethnic groupings in the country.

Primarily, religion occupies a unique position in the national development programme of any nation. Therefore, it has been acknowledged as one of the bedrocks of socio-economic and political advancement of many countries in the world. Religion exemplifies morals and advocates uprightness and piety, as opposed to sacrilege and profanity. Religion is therefore one of the most powerful social institutions in the social system that is used as an instrument of social cohesion, unity and integration.

Amongst the Nigerian people of the west coast of Africa, three religions are dominant: Christianity, Islam, and Traditional religion. However, before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the traditional society had always been characterized by traditional religious beliefs and acts of worship. Every ethnic group in Nigeria at some point practises traditional religion handed down to them by their forefathers. The belief in spirits, witchcraft and extra-terrestrial beings are a common phenomenon among the Nigerian peoples which perhaps influences the belief in the invisible and supernatural world in the affairs of men, so much so that whatsoever may befall a man, be it good or evil, has always been attributed to the doings and makings of the spirit world. The various ethnic groups in Nigeria have their peculiar religions and modes of worship, and, unlike Christianity and Islam which have some forms of documented written materials (Bible and Quran), traditional religions have no written or documented material. However, they are rich in oral tradition which is usually passed on from one generation to another through the process of socialization.

The Igbo (also pronounced Ibo) of the Eastern part of Nigeria, for instance, are a profoundly religious people who believe in a benevolent creator, usually known as *Chukwu*, who created the visible universe (*uwa*). Opposing this force for good is *agbara*, meaning spirit or supernatural being. Apart from the natural level of the universe, the Igbo also believe that it exists on another level, that of the spiritual forces, the *alusi*. The *alusi* are minor deities, and are forces for blessing or destruction, depending on circumstances. They punish social offences and those who unwittingly infringe their privileges. The role of the diviner is to interpret the wishes of the *alusi*, and the role of the priest is to placate them with sacrifices. Either a priest is chosen through hereditary lineage or he is chosen by a particular god for his service, usually after passing through a number of mystical experiences. Each person also has a personalized providence, which comes from *Chukwu*, and returns to him at the time of death, a *chi*. This *chi* may be good or bad (Slattery, 2001). There was no shrine to *Chukwu*, nor were sacrifices made directly to him, but he was conceived as the ultimate receiver of all sacrifices made to the minor deities.



These minor deities claimed an enormous part of the daily lives of the people. The belief was that these gods could be manipulated in order to protect them and serve their interests. If the gods performed these duties, they were rewarded with the continuing faith of the tribe. Different regions of Igboland have varying versions of these minor deities. Listed below are some of the most common:

*Ala* – the earth-goddess, the spirit of fertility (of man and the productivity of the land)

*Igwe* – the sky-god. This god was not appealed to for rain, however, that was the full-time profession of the rain-makers, Igbo tribesmen who were thought to be able to call and dismiss rain.

*Imo miri* – the spirit of the river. The Igbo believe that a big river has a spiritual aspect; it is forbidden to fish in such deified rivers.

*Mbatuku* – the spirit of wealth.

*Agwo* – a spirit envious of other's wealth, always in need of servitors.

*Aha njuku* or *Ifajioku* – the yam spirit.

*Ikoro* – the drum spirit.

*Ekwu* – the hearth spirit, which is woman's domestic spirit, (Slattery, 2001).

Amongst the Yoruba of the South-western Nigeria also exist different forms of traditional acts of worship. The faiths of the Yoruba of Western Nigeria vary significantly from one part of the region to another; the same deity may be male in one village and female in the next, or the characteristics of two gods may be embodied in a single deity in a neighboring region (Horton, 1993).

Traditional Yoruba beliefs see the world made up of two connected realms. The visible world of the living is called *Aye*, and the spiritual world of the Orisas, the ancestors and spirits, is called Orun. *Ase* is the life force that is given to everything by the Creator of the universe. *Ase* is in everything: plants, animals, people, prayers, songs, rocks, and rivers. Existence is dependent upon *Ase* because it is the power to make things happen and change (Mullen, 2004).

The Yoruba believe in the Creator who rules over the entire universe along with many other gods that serve underneath him. The Creator of the universe is called Olorun. Olorun lives in the sky and is considered to be the father of all other gods. Olorun is the only god that never lived on earth. Olorun is the supreme god and has no special group of worshippers or shrines, like the other gods do. The Yoruba people worship over four hundred different deities. These gods are called Orisas. Some of the Orisas are worshiped by all of the Yoruba. Other gods are only worshiped by certain towns or families. Every person is given or receives a special deity to worship. A person usually worships the god of his father, but some worship the god of their mother. Some people are contacted by a particular god in their dreams and are instructed to worship them (Mullen, 2004).

Curiously, the Yoruba never actively worship their all-powerful god, variously known as Olorun ("the owner of the sky") or Olodumare (roughly translates as "the almighty"), among many other names. Unlike Shango, who has dozens of shrines erected to him, Olorun has not a single shrine; the Yoruba never make sacrifices to him, and he has no priests. He plays much the same role as do the Judeo-Christian and Islamic gods-- he is "the creator of all things, the almighty and all-knowing, the giver of life and breath, and the final judge of mankind" (Horton, 1993).

Some Yoruba legends have a pair of gods, Orishala (Obatala, Orisa-nla) and his wife Odudua, as supreme creating deities, either independent of almighty Olorun

or preceding him. One legend has Olorun creating the world and then leaving Obatala and Odudua to finish up the details; other interpreters have considered Olorun and Obatala one and the same. Obatala, often a sculptor-god, has the responsibility to shape human bodies; the Yoruba consider the physically deformed either his votaries or the victims of his displeasure. Olorun, however, reserves the right to breathe these bodies to life. In some places, Obatala also rules over all of the orisha, or minor gods, as king, although still subordinate to Olorun. The Yoruba explained to early missionaries that these minor gods descended from the single almighty god, just as Jesus was the son of the Christian god.

Among these orisha, the Yoruba see the god *Ogun* among the most important. The god of war, of the hunters, and of iron-working, Ogun serves as the patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors, and all who use metal in their occupations. He also presides over deals and contracts; in fact, in Yoruba courts, devotees of the faith swear to tell the truth by kissing a machete sacred to Ogun. The Yoruba consider Ogun fearsome and terrible in his revenge; they believe that if one breaks a pact made in his name, swift retribution will follow (Horton, 1993).

Some regions combine Ogun with the trickster god, Eshu. Eshu, or Legba as he is also known, had mistakenly been identified by Europeans with the Devil in the past. The Yoruba pantheon, however, has no evil gods; a more accurate comparison would be between Eshu and the Satan of the Book of Job, to whom God assigns the task of trying men's faith. One myth dealing with Eshu illustrates his mischievousness: Eshu, posing as a merchant, alternately sold increasingly magnificent gifts to each of a man's two wives; the ensuing battle for the husband's favor tore the family apart. Surprisingly, Eshu also serves as the guardian of houses and villages. When worshipped in this tutelary position, his followers call him Baba ("father"). Eshu also serves as the god of Ifa, a sophisticated and complex geomantic divinatory tool which uses nuts, signs, and increasing squares of the number four to predict all facets of the future.

The Yoruba treat their ancestors with great respect, as might be expected in a culture with only oral records of the past, but anthropologists debate as to whether the rituals dealing with ancestry are religious in nature or simply respectful. At least, a few groups believe that ancestors, after death, become demigods, but only once they have assumed the persona of a true deity (Horton, 1993).

Amongst the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria also exist some elements of traditional acts of worship. An example is the "Maguzawa", the animist religion, which was practised extensively before Islam. In the more remote areas of Hausaland, Maguzawa has remained fully intact, although it is rarer in more urban areas. It often includes the sacrifice of animals for personal ends, but it is thought of as taboo to practise Maguzawa magic for harm. What remains in more populous areas is a "cult of spirit-possession" known as Bori, which still holds the old religion's elements of animism and magic. The Bori classification of reality has countless spirits, many of which are named and have specific powers.

In the early twentieth century, the traditional religions of the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa altered significantly as a result of European rule. Where the modes of worship conflicted with Western mores, the ruling colonial powers placed restrictions on religious practice. The white rulers for example accused the Shoponna priests of spreading smallpox in order to keep their power and so outlawed the cult even before

the use of smallpox vaccine. Night gatherings, so vital to the worship of various deities in Igbo, Hausa and Yorubaland, were also severely restricted.

Christianity and Islam were thus introduced to replace traditional and indigenous acts of worship. The arrival of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria dates as far back as the 11<sup>th</sup> century and marked the beginning of a great change in the belief systems of the people. Christianity and Islam gained a widespread popularity and acceptance among Nigerians partly because of the accompanying civilization and literacy, and partly because of the aggressive evangelism of their adherents. Despite the influx of these foreign religions into the Nigerian society, it has been observed that Nigerians are still very traditional in their belief system. The practice of *syncretism* - the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions- is a common feature of some Christian denominations spread across the country. The "*Aladura*" churches, Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), as well as the Cherubim and Seraphim church movement dominant among the Yoruba community are prominent examples where the practice of syncretism is common. This local syncretic Christianity sect utilizes the bible and combines biblical principles with some aspects of African traditional beliefs. Past studies have also revealed that African traditional beliefs still hold sway in the hearts of people: a lot of people directly or indirectly still participate in traditional religious festivals. An example is the "new yam festival" among the Ibo ethnic group of South-eastern Nigeria. During this festive season, a lot of indigenes in different parts of the world always make it a tradition to travel home to participate in these religious festivals. Those that could not travel usually send money to facilitate these festivals. The New Yam festival of the Igbo (Igbo: *Iwa ji*) is an annual harvest festival by the Igbo people held at the peak of the rainy season in early August.

The *Iwa ji* festival (literally "*new-yam eating*") is practised throughout West Africa (especially in Nigeria and Ghana) and other African countries and beyond, symbolizing the conclusion of a harvest and the beginning of the next work cycle. The celebration is a culturally based occasion, tying individual Igbo communities together as essentially agrarian and dependent on yam.

Yams are the first crop to be harvested and are the most important crop of the region. The evening prior to the day of the festival, all old yams (from the previous year's crop) are consumed or discarded. The next day, only dishes of yam are served, as the festival is symbolic of the abundance of the produce.

Traditionally, the role of eating the first yam is performed by the oldest man in the community or the king (*igwe*). The *Igwe* offers the yams to God, deities and ancestors, and it is believed that their position bestows the privilege of being the intermediaries between their communities and the gods of the land. The rituals are meant to express the gratitude of the community to the gods for making the harvest possible, and they are widely followed despite the influence of modern society occasioned by foreign religions, (Christianity and Islam) and westernization in the area.

Another example that rightly comes to mind is the "Osun-Osogbo" festival in the South-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The festival which is annually celebrated by the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria in honor of the Osun river goddess is attended by people from all over the world. Every August, a grand and colourful cultural festival is usually organized at the "Osun" sacred groves in Osogbo, south west of Nigeria. The annual festival draws tens of thousands of believers and tourists from both within and outside the country. The former custodian and priestess of the



groves was an Austrian artist, late Susanne Wenger, popularly called "Adunni Olorisa". The festival marks the renewal of mystic bonds between the river goddess and the people of Osogbo, who represent all of humanity. Osun devotees dress traditionally in white clothes and believe that the river goddess brings divine favour and has healing and fertility powers. From the foregoing, therefore, we can come to the conclusion that religious beliefs and acts of worship constitute an integral part of the Nigerian society and culture.

Some years ago, the BBC announced that it had carried out a survey of the nations of the world and arrived at the conclusion that Nigeria was the most religious nation in the world (Onaiyekan, :2010). The data source however failed to explain the details of the criteria used to arrive at this conclusion. About the same time, other public opinion polls concluded with the assertion that "Nigeria was the most corrupt nation in the world". How we combine these two opposing remarks is a matter for deep reflection. Incidentally about the same time, it was also said that Nigeria was the happiest nation in the world. Whether this is in any way related to the fact that Nigeria is both the most religious and the most corrupt is not too clear (Onaiyekan, 2010).

Indeed, the incessant religious crises and political upheavals that have been pervasive in the country makes one wonder if, truly, religion has lived up to the expectation of engendering social cohesion and unity. One of the major functions of religion according to a great thinker and Sociologist, Emilie Durkheim, is stability and cohesion. For him, religion forms a balanced and cohesive moral community. It is a means of protecting individuals from anomie, alienation and the threats of disruptive mass movements and so maximises the individual's potential for happiness. Shared religious experiences provide the social cement for group unity and consensus. In the light of past and present religious squabbles in Nigeria, it is rather unfortunate that religion rather than fostering social cement for group unity has led to great disunity and disharmony among the people. The instrumentality of religion has been misused in different quarters of the Nigerian society. Religious bias and differences have been used as the basis for wanton destruction of human lives and property. Most of the ethnic and political violence in the country's history has been traceable to religious bias and intolerance.

The primary thrust of this paper is therefore to analyse the effects of religious beliefs and practices on Nigerian people with a view to harnessing the areas of strength and weaknesses for attaining the much needed peace, stability and development for the country.

### **The Concept of Religion**

Religion is often difficult to conceptualize primarily because it means different things to different people. Over the years, influential thinkers have offered their own definitions, with greater or lesser degrees of assurance and certainty. However, virtually all the definitions of religion have been found wanting by the majority of scholars.

There are several problems in trying to make a definition of religion that is not overly vague and general, but that still is "inclusive enough" to not leave out any of the beliefs and practices that seem religious to most people. By their nature, religious beliefs tend to motivate other aspects of human behavior beyond those which would strictly be considered to be of religious concern.

Emile Durkheim, the French Sociologist, was perhaps the first to recognize the critical importance of religion in human societies. He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things. According to Durkheim (1922), religious faiths distinguish between certain transcending events and the everyday world. Durkheim thus concluded that a religion is a unified system of beliefs 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 called a church, and all those who adhere to them (Henslin, 2006). The major elements of religion identified by Durkheim include:

- (i) **Beliefs:**– These refer to the principles which members of a particular religion adhere to. Beliefs are based on the existence of a supernatural being that has the power to control events in the real world of human existence. In a nutshell, belief is the basis of all religions.
- (ii) **Rituals:**– These are the practices required of a member of a religion, to honour the divine power worshipped and a ritual may be performed at regular intervals, or on specific occasions, or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by a group or by the entire community; in arbitrary places, or in places especially reserved for it; either in public, in private, or before specific people. A ritual may be restricted to a certain subset of the community and may enable or underscore the passage between religious or social states. Among the Egun of the Badagry area of Lagos State, for instance, Simpson (2001) notes that virtually all aspects of life find relevance in ritual observance. She adds that “it is, in fact, not difficult for the visitor in Badagry to realize that daily life in the town is shaped by, and in essence, comprehended in terms of the potency and pervasiveness of ritual.

The purposes of rituals are varied; they include compliance with religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bonds and demonstration of respect or submission. Rituals also involve stating one's affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some events or sometimes, just for the pleasure of the ritual itself.

- (iii) **Experience:**– This implies the feeling or perception of being in direct contact with the ultimate reality.

Bronislaw Malinowski in his own assertion viewed religion as reinforcing social norms and values and promoting social solidarity (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). For Karl Marx, religion is the opium of the people; it is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world (Marx 1844/1964, in Henslin, 2006). By this statement, Marx meant that oppressed people find escape in religion. For him, religion is like a drug that helps them to forget their misery. By diverting their thoughts towards future happiness in an afterlife, religion takes their eyes off their suffering in this world, thereby greatly reducing the possibility that they will rebel against their oppressors (Henslin, 2006).

For Sigmund Freud, religion is an illusion: it is a *fantasy structure from which a man must be set free if he is to grow to maturity*. Freud views the idea of God as being a version of the father image, and religious belief as at bottom infantile and neurotic. To him, authoritarian religion is dysfunctional and alienates man from himself.



According to the anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), religion is the belief in supernatural beings, and this belief originated as explanations to the world. In addition, religion encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history and mythology, as well as personal faith and mystic experience. The term 'religion' refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals, stemming from a 'shared conviction'. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* sees religion as "a set of shared beliefs and practices often centered upon specific supernatural and moral claims about reality, the cosmos and human nature often codified as prayers, rituals and religious laws". Religion, according to Reineke (1995:430), expresses and shapes the ideals, hopes, and needs of humankind. For Mbiti (1969:1), "religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or always possible to isolate it."

### Background Information on Nigeria

Findings from literatures reveal that more than 373 ethnic tribes call present-day Nigeria home. The three largest and most dominant of the ethnic groups spread across the six geo-political zones of the country are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (pronounced *ee-bo*) ethnic groups. Other smaller groups include the Fulani, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, and Edo. Prior to their conquest by Europeans, these ethnic groups had separate and independent histories. Their grouping together into a single entity known as Nigeria was a construct of their British colonialists. These various ethnic groups never considered themselves part of the same culture. This general lack of Nigerian nationalism coupled with an ever-changing and often religious and ethnically biased national leadership, have led to severe internal ethnic conflicts and a civil war. Today, bloody confrontations between or among members of different ethnic groups continue.

What is now called Nigeria is thus an arbitrary creation of the British Empire. Before the European colonization, these territories were occupied by different ethnic groups that interacted mainly through trade and, in some cases, warfare. They existed as autonomous socio-cultural, political and economic units. The North was dominated by monarchical feudal formations, the Hausa-Fulani emirates and the Igala and Jukun kingdoms. The South was dominated by several kingdoms and empires such as groups among the Yoruba and clans among the Igbo. In the Niger Delta region, the kingdoms of the Efik and Izon were predominant (Anikpo, 2002).

These were the formations and structure that the process of colonisation disrupted. The British intervention began with the colonisation of Lagos between 1851 and 1861, and its expansion to create the Colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Yorubaland in the 1880s and 1890s. By 1900, the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were created. It is 1914 however that is generally recognised as the year for the creation of Nigeria as it is today, with the amalgamation of both Protectorates.

After independence in 1960, following the colonial administration, the country was broken into units or regions which broadly corresponded to religious areas of influence: the Muslim North and the Christian South; the latter also divided in Catholic East and Muslim and Christian West. The region known as the middle-belt was predominantly 'pagan' and became the recruiting grounds for new advocates for both Christianity and Islam; the former being more successful due to western



inherit at least one-eighth of the dead husband's property and land. This share is frequently 'managed' and then taken by the brother-in-law.

### Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the fundamental religion of the indigenous African people in Nigeria. The belief and practices of ATR are based upon the faith of the ancient indigenous people (Ancestor) handed down from one generation to another. In comparison to other religions (Christianity and Islam) which are considered as foreign since their doctrines and practices came from outside Africa, ATR as a religious belief has been in existence from time immemorial and is being adhered to today by most Nigerians in spite of the influx of foreign religions like Christianity and Islam. This is reflected in the firm grip of ATR on common cultural practices such as widowhood and property inheritance modalities among the people. The statistics and geographical distribution of the followers of ATR in Angola, Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Niger, Nigeria, Sao-Tome and Sudan is 10-29% (*Camboni Missionary Magazine*, 2000: 2).

Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs persisted in African traditional belief system and were usually discussed as forms of medicine or as coming from "bad people" whose spirits or souls were diagnosed as the cause of misfortune. There also were special ways in which the outcomes of stressful future activity, long trips, lingering illnesses, family and other problems could be examined. Soothsayers provided both therapy and divinatory foreknowledge in stressful situations.

In the city-states of Yorubaland and their neighbours, a more complex religion evolved that expressed the subjugation of village life within larger polities. These city-states produced a theology that linked local beliefs to a central citadel government and its sovereignty over a hinterland of villages through the monarch. The king (*oba*) and his ancestors were responsible for the welfare of the entire state, in return for confirmation of the legitimacy of the *oba's* rule over his subjects. In Oyo, for example, there were a number of national cults, each with its own priests who performed rituals under the authority of the king (*alafin*) in the public interest. *Sango*, god of thunder, symbolized the power of the king and of central government; *Ogboni* represented the fertility of the land and the monarch's role in ensuring the well-being of the kingdom.

In the 90s, these indigenous beliefs were more or less openly practised and adhered to among many Christians and Muslims in various parts of the country. Thus, in a number of the northern Muslim emirates, the emir led prayers for the welfare of the state at the graves of royal ancestors. In many Muslim and Christian households and villages, a number of the older religious practices and beliefs also survived. On the other hand, research indicated that many, especially younger people, believed the older traditions to be apostasy so that it was common, particularly in rural areas, to see mixtures of local beliefs with either Christianity or Islam. Also, in some instances, although the overall trend was away from indigenous religions and toward monotheism, older people suffered such mental and physical anguish over denouncing inherited beliefs that they abandoned the newer one.

In spite of the declining number of followers, the ATR however continues to be the source of meaning, direction, and security for many Nigerians. Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Nigerian people had mixed religions. Their forefathers were traditional religious worshippers. Traditional religion is regarded as

the oldest of the three religions practised by most Nigerian communities today. Among the Yoruba ethnic group, for instance, traditional religion involves the worship of Olodunmare (Yoruba), meaning 'god' and its divinities, such as *Sango, Oya, Esu, Orisa-Nla, Orunmila, Ogun, Ela, Sonpona* and the like. The religion also has linkages with common Yoruba festivals like *Oro, Egungun, Agemo and Eyo* which are celebrated periodically by the followers. Although statistics are not available on the number of traditional religious adherents in Nigeria, due to absence of written records, the religion is acknowledged as comprising both the educated and non-educated members of the society. There exists evidence on how western civilization has greatly influenced the practice of traditional religion in recent time. For instance, human sacrifice which was once a common feature of the religion is now gradually eroded and replaced with animal sacrifice. The Nigerian people are made up of a large number of traditionalists. It is a common occurrence today to note that the traditionalists use both print and electronic media to advertise their businesses. Common traditional festivals such as *Oro* and *Egungun* are equally given high publicity on both radio and television. It is not however surprising to note that some highly placed individuals, educated elites and top government dignitaries secretly patronize priests and priestesses of traditional religion in our society.

Essentially, ATR represents the common religion and spiritual rooting of persons from the same ethnic group. This is reflected in persons who feel that as long as no harm is intended for the other person, one can go to a Christian church, pray in a mosque and offer sacrifices in an African Traditional shrine. In the religious world view of ATR practitioners, syncretism does not have a negative connotation, rather it recognizes the supremacy of the Supreme Being, yet it sees the lesser divinities merely as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and man, or agents of God (Opoku, 1978).

The practice of ATR varies so widely from one place to another that some people tend to refer to it as Religions, in the plural, rather than singular sense. Unlike other organized world religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, ATR has no written scriptures. It is however rich in oral ones. Through the traditions of the elders, all creed and functions are carried in the individuals' heart. These are reflected in its traditional philosophy and culture which embrace all aspects of life ranging from religion, custom, folklore, legends, myths, tales, song and lyrics. According to Abe (1993), all these project the tremendous richness of ATR's moral values or ethics. Isizoh (1998) argues that early Christian missionaries from Europe to Africa did not meet pagans, people without religion, but people with a high sense of the sacred and Supreme Being. In Gabon, for example, the earliest missionaries to the country equated traditional religion with fetishism and idol worship. The essence was to wipe away 'paganism', considered as barbaric by the colonizers. Its attendant consequence was the gradual disappearance of ATR as a religious institution.

### **Religious Intolerance: Cases from Nigeria**

Nigeria is a multi-religious society. This has created a suitable and conducive environment for religious pluralism and diversities. With the heterogeneous nature of the country, the tendency is for the various religions to gravitate towards parochial consciousness at the expense of collective consciousness that should generate national unity (Archibong and Okokon, 2008).



Ekwenife (1993), in Alanamu (2003), defines religious intolerance as blind and fixated mental and psychological negative attitudes towards religious beliefs and practices that are contrary to one's cherished beliefs and practices. Such negative attitudes constantly manifest themselves in violent riots that spill over the political and economic lives of the citizens. There is religious intolerance when members of the self-acclaimed true religion proclaim in practice that persons they consider to be in error have no right to live, no legitimate political, social and economic amenities unless they renounce their error and be converted to the supposed true religious views and practices (Ekwenife, 1993).

Relations between Christians and Muslims are tense in many areas of the country. Since the dawn of Nigeria's independence in the year 1960, numerous clashes between the two have led to thousands of deaths. The northern city of Kaduna has been the flash point for many of these riots, as local leaders discussed whether to institute Shari'a law in the region. Demonstrations by Christians against the idea soon led to violent confrontations with Muslims. The debate over Shari'a law and the violence accompanying it continue in many of the northern states.

These conflicts often take tolls of human and material resources and endanger the political and social lives of Nigerian citizens (Ekwenife, 1993 in Alanamu, 2003). Cases of these waves of religious violence abound. The tension created over Sharia (Islamic law) issue in the late 1970 (Wambutda, 1978), the religious disturbances in Kano (1977, 1979, 1980), in Zaria (1981), in Maiduguri (1982), in Kaduna (1982), in Kano (1982), in Yola and in Gombe (1984); religious disturbances in Saki (Oyo state), and Ilorin (Easter 1986), the Organization of Islamic Conference controversy (1986), the carnage in parts of Kaduna and Kano states (1987), and, the 1988 religious crisis in Kaduna Polytechnic (Osumi, 1988) are all evidences of the religious bigotry of the Nigerian state.

Other examples are the Bauchi religious crisis of 1991, Kaduna crisis of 2001; Jos religious crisis of 2001, the religious violence sparked by a blasphemous article on Prophet Mohammad (*Punch* November, 2002), the ethno-religious crisis of Yobe state in 2003, Kaduna crisis of 2004, Lagos crisis of 2004, Isale eko crisis of 2005, Kano and other northern states crisis of March 2008; recent Bauchi/Plateau crisis, and the very recent Boko-Haram religious disturbance, occasioned by suicide bombings, killings and wanton destruction of lives and properties.

The above exemplify a heightened religious upheaval in Nigeria right from the 1980s till this present-day. This gives a dangerous signal to national unrest and disunity and indicates an urgent need for national integration and unity. The problem of religious intolerance casts a serious doubt on the future of the socio-political and economic stability of the country. A glance at Nigeria's history reveals that certain constant factors breed and nurture religious intolerance with obvious consequences on the political, social, economic and moral lives of the citizens. These factors include monopoly of religious truth, religious fanaticism, unbridled actions of the press, unhealthy rivalry and incitement, aggressive evangelism, indiscriminate acts of the government and other external influences (Alanamu 2003).

### **Religion and Social Change**

Undoubtedly, imported religions (Christianity and Islam) have both positive and disruptive implications for the social structure in Western African societies, particularly, Nigeria. Religion can act as both an agent to keep the status quo, as well

as an agent of change and revolution (Fasina, 2010). The Catholic Church's supremacy through the Middle Ages is a clear example of how religion can be an effective instrument to keep and legitimize the status quo. More contemporary events illustrate the disruptive power of faith and how it can be a strong means to social change: the black civil rights movement in the US, Poland's Solidarity movement, the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, South Africa's anti-apartheid movement and the like (Smith, 1996).

There are a number of possible relationships between religion and social change as suggested by Haralambos and Holborn (2008). Religion may be a factor that impedes social change or it may help to produce it. Another possibility is that religion itself has no influence on changes in society, but that there is nevertheless a causal relationship between the two. From this point of view, it is social change in society as a whole that leads to changes in religion (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008).

From the foregoing, religion can act as a conservative, disruptive or revolutionary force. For the peaceful co-existence of the people and attainment of development in all spheres of political, socio-economic and educational lives, the positive strengths of religion from the revolutionary point of view should be harnessed.

### **Religion as a Conservative Force**

Functionalists, Marxists and Feminists have generally dismissed the possibility that religion can cause changes in society. They believe religion acts as a conservative force and that it is changes in society that shape religion not vice versa.

Haralambos and Holborn (2008: 399) opine that religion can be seen as a "conservative force" in two senses, depending on the meaning attached to the word 'conservative'. The phrase 'conservative force' is usually used to refer to religion as preventing change and maintaining the status quo. Functionalists have claimed that it acts in this way because it promotes integration and social solidarity. Marx had similar views, although he saw religion as maintaining the status quo in the interest of the ruling class rather than those of society as a whole.

"Conservative" may, however, be used in another way: it can refer to traditional beliefs and customs. Usually, if religion helps to maintain the status quo, it will also maintain traditional customs and beliefs.

In some instances, religion supports social change, while at the same time promoting traditional values. This often occurs when there is a revival in 'fundamentalist' religious beliefs. Such beliefs involve a return to what a group claims to be the fundamental or basic, original beliefs of a religion.

### **Religion as a Disruptive Force**

While functionalists and Marxists emphasize the role of religion in promoting social integration and impeding social change, Max Weber (1958) argues that in some instances, religion can lead to social change: although shared religious beliefs might not integrate a social group, those same beliefs may have repercussions which in the long term can produce changes in society. In certain places and times, religious meaning and purpose can direct action in a wide range of contexts. In particular, religious beliefs can direct social, political and economic action.



Religion can be said to have led to massive social changes in the nature and structure of the Nigerian society. The penetration of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam has greatly impacted on the way of life of traditional Nigerians. Christian and Islamic doctrines always put the African traditional religion in a bad light and have greatly succeeded in converting majority of Nigerians into their faith and beliefs. The success of the infiltration of these foreign religions has led to a great social change that is evident all around us today.

A cursory look at the Nigerian society today will reveal that religion has led to a lot of positive and negative social and political misdemeanours. The incessant religious conflicts that have been the order of the day in the country are a pointer to this fact.

### **Religion in Politics and Development**

Given that religion drives people's behavior and actions in a more productive direction, it is not possible to separate religion from development (Bashar, 2008). The belief in the existence of an invisible world contains spiritual forces that affect people's material lives. Opinion polls consistently show that Nigerians, like most Africans, have more trust in religious leaders than in politicians, often causing religious networks to fill the gap left by inefficient states. This is evident in the case of Nigeria in the light of the last election. It is the first time in Nigeria's recent history that the election result has exposed the huge division between the Muslim north and Christian south. The Incumbent President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, won in nearly all southern states, which are predominantly Christian, except one, while his main challenger Muhammadu Buhari won in the Muslim north-east and north-west. Both candidates shared votes in the north central area which has a substantial Muslim and Christian population.

Elections in Nigeria are not necessarily about issues but about ethnicity, religion and regionalism. Historically, elections have been won as a result of either a formal alliance by political parties or - more recently - an informal agreement within the governing PDP to alternate the presidency between north and south. For this reason, the winning candidate - irrespective of region, religion or ethnicity - normally commanded a wide national spread. In 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian from the south, won the majority of the votes in northern Nigeria. However, the rotation was broken when Dr Goodluck Jonathan succeeded to the presidency in 2012 after the death of Umaru Yar'Adua, a northerner. This election, described by international observers as the most successful for decades, seems to be compounding the country's regional and ethnic divisions on the basis of religious differences.

### **Conclusion**

Religion is a cultural universal found in all known human societies across the world. In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, three major religions are common: Traditional and foreign (Christianity and Islamic) religions culminating in different belief systems and acts of worship. Religion, whatever form it takes, constitutes a social and political reality (Ellis and Haar, 2007). Whatever else it may be, religion is a way of thinking about the world and about reality in the broadest sense. It is for that reason that religion has a role to play in development, a process that must be assimilated into people's ideas about their relation to the past and the future of their societies. Ellis and Haar (2007) report that in sub-Saharan Africa, religion arguably now forms the most

important connection with the rest of the world. Not only does religion remain a key element in the thinking of most Africans, it is increasingly evident in the public realm, including in politics with some governments explicitly proclaiming themselves Islamist, and some heads of state publicly claiming to be born-again Christians.

Nigerians are acknowledged as the most religious people perhaps because of the huge number of worship centres and worshippers across its nooks and crannies. The *World Factbook* (2009:2) reports that "The Largest Church Auditorium (The Living Faith Church Worldwide also known as the Winners Chapel) that seats about 50,000 worshippers at once is located in Ota city of Ogun state, south-western Nigeria". A typical Nigerian is very religious and superstitious by nature as demonstrated by the various religions and acts of worship. This informs why development practitioners need to pay serious attention to religion as a veritable tool for national unity, stability and development. The integrative force of religion can be harnessed to move the Nigerian people and society forward.

Finally is the clarion call for development planners and theorists to give a serious thought to the role of religion as a potential agent of development through seminars, workshops and scholarly researches. Much can be achieved therefore using religion as a tool for positive development, stability and national unity.

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