
THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF AFRICAN RELIGION

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Abstract

Skeptics and preachers of socialist ideologies have challenged the role of religion as a positive variable of development process of society arguing that religion has more negative value to offer to any society. However, scholars of religion have confronted, interrogated, and examined these views and have maintained that even though there are religious differences and diversities these differences and diversities have their positive values for mutual enrichment and development of societies. It is against this background that the paper has attempted to examine these views in relation to the role of African religion in the development process of Nigerian societies. The paper revealed that African religion has remained a critical factor in the development agenda of Nigerian communities; hence the repositioning of African religion and its values will promote and enhance development in contemporary Nigerian societies

Religion is a sacred engagement which is believed to be a spiritual reality and a worldwide phenomenon that has continued to play a part in all human cultures. An adequate understanding of religion must take into account its distinctive qualities and patterns as a form of human experience across human cultures.

By defining religion as a sacred engagement with what is taken to be a spiritual reality, it is possible to consider the importance of religion in human life

without making claims about what it really is or ought to be. Religion is not an object with a single, fixed meaning, or even a zone with clear boundaries. It is an aspect of human experience that may intersect, incorporate, or transcend other aspects of life and society. Such a definition avoids the drawbacks of limiting the investigative value of religion to biblical categories such as monotheism (belief in one god only) or to church structure or African rituals which are not universal.

For example, in African societies, religion, unlike the Christian church usually is not a separate institution but pervades the whole of public and private life. In Buddhism, gods are not as central as the idea of a “Buddha” (fully enlightened human being). In many traditional cultures, the idea of a sacred cosmic order is the most prominent religious belief. Because of this variety, some scholars prefer to use a general term such as “the sacred” to designate the common foundation of religious life.

Religion in this understanding includes a complex of activities that cannot be reduced to any single aspect of human experience. It is not only a part of individual life but also of group dynamics. Religion does not only include patterns of behavior but also patterns of language and thought. It is sometimes a highly organized institution that sets itself apart from a culture, and it is sometimes an integral part of a culture. Religious experience may be expressed in visual symbols, dance and performance, elaborate philosophical systems, legendary and imaginative stories, formal ceremonies, meditative techniques, and detailed rules of ethical conduct and law. Each of these elements assumes innumerable cultural forms. In some ways there are as many forms of religious expression as there are human cultural environments. This paper explores the elements of religion and religious traditions in the development of human cultural environment in Nigeria.

Attitude to Community Development in Nigeria

From the point of view of religion, ‘community development’ presupposes the pattern geared towards the promotion of the good of every man and of the whole man. This view is rightly qualified as complete and integral in the sense that it is concerned not just economic or political or socio-cultural development of human person but rather with overall well-being; it takes into consideration the entire needs of the whole human person as a being endowed with both corporeal/ physical spiritual/intellectual qualities. According to Owan (2011: 157), “the goal of development is to ensure that each human being can grow in humanity, can enhance his personal worth, and can become a person”. What Owan seemed to be saying here is that, the religious view of development is holistic and humanistic oriented. Accordingly, we can deduce from the view that the nexus between the work of different religious traditions and variables of development consists in the fact that, the latter, as a process of humanization is really inseparable from the responsibility of religion. It is not surprising therefore that citing John Paul II Owan(2011:157) made the assertion that “anyone (religion) wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and, of

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all people... would be betraying the will of God". Hence, it is legitimate to investigate the attitude and disposition of the religions in Nigeria towards the country's community development.

Against this background, Ayanrinde (2011) is of the opinion that many Government officials are not honest in their civic responsibility. This is because most of them do not take care of what belongs to other people or nation. This is why their attitude to development is below expectation. This account for the reason why many people behave the way they do because of greed. The parameter which, at a glance, gives insight into the status quo of Nigeria in relation to community development is endemic corruption within and outside the country. Corruption has become so pervasive that many now accept it as the Nigerian way of life or the Nigerian way of doing things. We have observed with worry that corruption has almost destroyed all aspects of our national life be it our social life, intellectual development, educational system, creativity, value system, interpersonal relationship and external image both as individuals and as a nation.

It is evident here that the Nigerian society, as it exists now, is lacking in attitudes of mind that can enhance and promote socio-cultural development. Such attitudes, as diagnosed and encapsulated by Owan (2011) include a realistic self image of Nigerians, and emphasis on national cake baking rather than sharing, active participation of all in tackling the socio-cultural problems, which is core technological independence, strict management of development plans and high consciousness and control of exploitative economic diplomacy in international relations.

Towing the steps of Ayanrinde and Owan, Musa and Olasupo (2012) lamented that in spite of series of reforms in Nigeria, it is sad to note that there has been unmitigated disaster on the masses of Nigeria as these policies neither change production mode nor alter moribund and exploitative property ownership. The reason for these failures is that none of these policies was implemented with the fear of God (religious orientation). This lackluster approach to development indicates that there is no clear distinction of the relationship between circular leadership and accountability in Nigeria. That is, leadership that initiates, maintains social structure and with resources relevant to goal attainment. As a good democrat, Socrates found it a duty to expose the incompetence of some leaders by criticizing any type of government for its shortcomings. Such criticism would be welcome in a government that has credible institutions that work toward safeguarding and promoting human activities as a basic human right for development. This accounts for why Socrates described "knowledge as virtue", when he identified goodness with wisdom. According to him, when somebody knows goodness, he will act according to it. Lack of knowledge is responsible for all moral mistakes (Kahiga, 2011: 156).

But the fundamental question is, what could the different religions in Nigeria with their strength and weakness do in the social situation of Nigeria which leaves a lot to be described? Though, as a point of departure Okolo (1986) citing Owan and Agi

call for one clear lesson for the Nigerian religions: “The people’s concrete needs and historical situation...should determine and shape the course of action and reflection of various religions”. This is a call for high priority by religious traditions for the purpose of raising the standard of living of people through community based values, culture, goals, aspiration and preference of the African community development

Religious Institutions as Credible Variables of Community Development in Nigeria

Religious institutions and community are two terms whose interface cannot escape our examination within the framework of this paper. Taking a leap from Oshita (2001), we may note that these terms inevitably attract each other and they coexist with the conflicts and tensions, which have become a national characteristic of their mutual endeavor in development. In Nigeria, community development is a product of painstaking and methodological application of various inputs of religious institutions. This is why Owan and Agi (2011:156) maintained that:

Religion and community development are elements that cannot be separated. This is because any attempt to separate the trio will certainly affect each and every one of them. Religion is indispensable in human society. All religions offer a fundamental ethics of life for their adherents Religion offers the community a guide to live in harmony with themselves and as a binding force between men and God.

For personal gains and benefits derivable from religion, it continues to receive patronage. Ajayi (2011: 144) opined that the satisfying and rewarding experiences that religion provides its community assists it long survival. It is evident that religion defines and provides good services to the people. Its orientation, its objectives and actions are open to scrutiny, and guarantee public participation, and opportunities of service engagements for community development.

The Christian religion for example, provides explanation to the essence and meaning of life. Citing M’uazam (2002) Alagbu (2011:26) observed that religion consists of values, cognitions and skills with conceptions and images of the world of all which help to guide man in his day- to-day life and to contribute to the development of the society in which he lives. The Christian religion is helpful in validating the core values of development such as equity, justice, mutual personal interaction in every society through its teachings, beliefs and practices. These values are vital in the social life of every individual in the society. More especially, the observation and practice of the tenets of freedom as emphasized by Christianity has the inherent capacity to breed healthy coexistence, peaceful and harmonious inter-personal relationship and hence community development for the common good of man and the society in general.

Considering the function of religion, Imaekhai (2011) maintained that throughout history religion has been a source of development. He emphasized that for centuries, religious institutions like the Church were among the first institutions to provide asylum for accused criminals through the influence of the established

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correctional chaplains. For Africa, religious institutions have been involved in education, health, and other developmental programs. According to Onejefu (2001), since the advent of Christianity (especially Catholicism) in Igede land in Benue State of Nigeria, the traditional life of the people has experienced some drastic mode of transformation in various ways. He viewed the transformation in the beliefs and practices whereby there was a paradigm shift in the ritual performance of *Akpang*, *Achukwu* and *imou* cult deities among the youth. Besides, the early missionaries' promoted high standard of education, introduced the art of writing in Igede language in 1940, translated the gospel of St. Marks into the language in 1953, and ensured a sharp reduction in youth migration to the cocoa plantations of the Western States of Nigeria.

Acknowledging the above view Gbadero and Adeleye (2011) said that the presence of religious institutions introduced the need for the rule of law, which includes political equality of citizens and the protection of their rights as well as those of minorities, which is however grossly lacking today and possibly have paved way for the growth of corruption in the Nigerian society. This is why Ogunkunle (2004) affirmed that a religious leader has confidence in God, seeks to find God's will, follow God's methods, delights to obey God, and motivated by love for God and man. There is no doubt religious leaders have significant roles to play in the development of Nigerian communities which has over 426 ethnic groups.

Abioje (2004) opined that Christianity pervade Nigeria to a large extent, at the community and societal or government levels. As a matter of fact, it would appear that many Nigerians are looking up to religion to help form the moral character and rectitude of Nigerians toward community development. This feeling might be proper because the religious leader can also influence some critical levels of development in the community by engendering progressive attitudes, dispositions and virtues that are necessary for the transformation of the Nigerian communities into an egalitarian and godly society, where propriety, justice, honesty and fraternity will reign.

Oladimeji (2004) maintained that Muslims have always believed that Islam is the ideal way of life because it provides a comprehensive and systematic arrangement for human beings to regulate their life in all ramifications. Thus, as a religion Islam does not confine itself to only spiritual matters, rather it also covers societal issues. Consequently there is separation of Islam and community, since both of them are fused into one entity which centers for the social- economic, intellectual, legal, and other aspects of human life. On educational development, Oladimeji (2004) notes that Islam established Qur'anic schools in some communities, in 1949, appointed teachers and provided materials for learning of modern skills which opened up access to community development.

African Religion as a Veritable Tool in Community Development

The only religion that is indigenous is the African traditional religion. It is the only religion that Africans practiced from generation to generation. It is the only

religion that has extended a hand of friendliness with other religions that came subsequently to African communities. Indeed, in spite of series of opprobrious terminologies like polytheism, fetishism, idolatry, heathenism, paganism, animism, and ancestral worship, used in describing it, African religion has continually and consistently remained friendly with even the opposing religions. To buttress this point, Ampitan (2012:169) citing P.A.Dopamu alluded:

When we look at the relationship between African religion and other religions in Nigeria, we find that African religion has related itself to them in a constructive manner, its purpose being to maintain peace and concord in the society. The relation between African religion and other religions are not basically competitive for competition brings division. The relation does not attempt to convert the whole world to its own view of ultimate reality, though it welcomes any that seeks solace, security, protection and spiritual satisfaction under its umbrella.

This seemingly friendly relationship is found in the shared interests of both African religion and other religions in Nigeria. Although some people express their views as why they would not subscribe to African religion in terms of its relationship with other religions in community development, Apenda (2011) noted that none of the modern theories of morality is sufficient to explain the place of morality in value orientation and community development. Through the use of traditional folklores, children were introduced to moral values and duties that were capable of engendering community development. He noted that folklores were indispensable and played a prime role in the education of children, which facilitated the process of community development. Khan and Abubakar (2011) stressed this point further maintaining that interest in moral education to promote community development among youth has been increasingly remarkable. It has generally been observed that children need a sense of purpose and direction in their lives, hence the process of becoming a moral person begin early in childhood to adolescent life.

The aim of this process is the development of conscience and internal control of the younger men who are in the productive group with focus on values, morals, and attitudes modeling, reasoning through solutions, and sense of direction towards community development. A survey of some definitions of development relevant to the traditional values in community development, Mijah (2011) is of the view that this is: An attempt to build better society; a society characterized by greater material prosperity and better life chances for the majority of the population: a society characterized by significant improvement in the people's capacity to understand, control and transform their environment for their own good and that of humanity in general, a society which opens up new opportunities for personal upliftment and cultural fulfillment; and a society which creativity, productivity, fairness and popular participation are enhanced.

According to Udo(2011), religion provides a standard of value in terms of which the established norms, values, and rules may be critically examined in

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community services. In so doing it hallows the norms and values, or culture of the society thereby aiding order and stability and thus enhances development. Akanmidu (1993) consents to this view adding that since religious experience in Nigeria is characterized with objectives that are socially inclined African religion has become a tool for social services. It is therefore interesting to note the mutual collusion of Christianity and Islam with African religion in the establishment of some ways of articulating acceptable religious attitudes of development in some Nigerian communities. Ezike (1994) considered this service role of African religion as the norms and values of the social group in general, of the ways of its day to day conduct of affairs and development processes.

Conclusion

Having noted the major points involved in the critical role of religious institutions in community development, one may seek to know the way forward between African religion and other religions in determining their critical stake in development in Nigeria. To seek solutions to the challenge, one may also seek to ask the following questions: firstly, whether it will be possible that all religious groups must widen their scope of activities to properly address community socio- economic and political issues in Nigeria; and secondly whether all religious groups in Nigeria have the responsibility of teaching their adherents the need to jettison negative attitudes that could dispel community development.

Against this backdrop, the paper argues that these disjunctions are to be properly reconciled among religious institutions for community development. In the past our culture and religion provided for us checks and balances. There were religious as well as political institutions that curbed the excesses of leaders and acclaimed promoters of development. The paper noted with concern that in the midst of our political, social, and economic uncertainties, we may find solace in culture and religion in terms of promoting community development in Nigeria.

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