THE ROLE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN NATION BUILDING

Egege Ugiazibe
Department Of Religious Studies
Niger Delta University
Wilberforce Island, Amassoma, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria
francaegege@gmail.com
DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14770.12482

Abstract
The recent happenings around the world particularly Nigeria calls for a nation building. Nation- building is about having a common sense of purpose, a sense of a shared identity, and a collective imagination of belongings. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the role African traditional religion plays in ensuring nation-building using secondary sources. The result of the study indicates that African traditional religion has rich cultural activities that bring the Africans under the umbrella of unity and peaceful co-existence. It was also discovered in this study that despite the influence of western ideology, African traditional religion has maintained its cultural heritage. Hence the paper concludes that African traditional religion is a model for nation building.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Nation Building, Culture, Religion

Introduction

In recent times, the society is faced with diverse developmental and social challenges which undermine the goals of effective nation- building ranging from the decline in moral and ethical values to bad leadership, insecurities and the total disregarded of societal and religious values. It is the dream of every nation, institution or organization to experience peace, security development and progress at all levels. This is why in traditional African societies; there are ethics which guides and regulates the conduct and actions of individuals that is embedded in the people's traditional religion. The indigenous religion of the Africans known as African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a religion that fosters peace, unity, love and justice among members of the society. According to Ignatus cited by Agang, African traditional religion is the foundation stone upon which all African ethics are built. It is a religion that is so woven into the cultural fabric of the Africans, in that it has become part and parcel of the African heritage. Thus, the indigenous religion of the Africans does not only promote national unity by bringing the entire

African nation under the umbrella of peace through cultural activities and its social structures. But it has continued to influence the life of the Africans despite the influence of western ideology. The aim of this paper therefore is to examine how the structures of African traditional religion can be a veritable tool or model for nation building.

The Need For Nation-Building

Nation-building is the process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, languages, cultures and religions come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state with a unified constitutional and legal dispensation, a national public education system, an integrated national economy, shared symbols and values as equal to work towards eradicating the divisions and injustice of the past to foster unity and promote a community wide conscious sense of being proudly Africans.

According to Wikipedia, nation- building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. Nation- building aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. en.em.wikipedia (retrieved 19/4/2) For Ibrahim www.mafng.org (Accessed:10/5/2021 nation building is about building a political entity which corresponds to given territory based on some generally accepted rules, norms and principles and a common citizenship. It is also about building institutions which symbolize the political entity institutions such as a bureaucracy, an economy, the judiciary, universities, a civil service and civil society organizations. It is having a common sense of purpose, a sense of shared destiny, a collective imagination of belonging. Thus, the following are reasons for nation building.

1) **Peaceful co-existence**
   Peace is a fundamental component of community development, personal growth and survival of our planet. At the heart of every faith community, culture, lies a need to advance peaceful co-existence to enhance productive, meaningful lives and sustainable society. The present day society is becoming highly peace less and unsafe for both present and future generations. The world today is engulfed by an environment of tension, violence, declining values, injustice, reduced tolerance and respect for human rights, threatening the future of the youth who deserve a peaceful and better quality of life. Aldulrahman Marjan (2018).

He further posits that today the world faces different types of conflicts and the worst form is terrorism which has resulted in catastrophic loss of property and human life, hindering peace between communities, nations and religions providing opportunity and safe spaces for the youth to come together to build understanding, reduce misconceptions and develop healthy relationship will go a long way in achieving the aim of nation -building.

2) **Common use of resources**

For a nation to be built there has to be a common use of resources. There has to be equal distribution of the nation's economy. Every individual within that society need to realize that the nation's resource is for common good of the nation. Therefore, everyone has to come under the umbrella of unity and a collective decision that the development of the nation is of major importance. A common resource is one that can provide benefit to society but which is not owned by anybody in particular.

3) **Unity against external aggression**

There is a common saying that united we stand but divided we fall. For a nation to be able to withstand external aggression they have to be united. This is why political leaders need to have one common purpose, vision and voice to see to the development of its nation. Unity among leaders can foster development and progress of any kind. With one voice, one heart and one course, the peace of any nation is guaranteed. Another reason for the need for nation-building is so that we can:

4) **Benefit from one another:** This means that members of the society should look out for the success of one another. No one should harm any person for any reason. The success of one should be the success of all. This is to say that the quest for materialism and individualistic life style will no longer be the order of the day. This will mean the absence of conflicts, religious intolerance, terrorism, insecurity, bribery, injustice etc.

However, for these to be achieved, the structures of Africans traditional religion should be adopted.

Challenges And Prospects Of Nation-Building In Nigeria

Ibrahim G. (2008) in his well-articulated essay identified five main challenges in nation-building in Nigeria. And the first is **(1) Historical Challenges**. The fact that Nigeria was divided by the colonial masters into north/south with different land tenure systems, local government administration, educational systems and judicial systems makes nation building difficult. Because it is as though these are two separate countries, held together only by shared currency and transportation system. This historical challenge has not only

created division between indigenes and settlers but it has been a source of domestic tension and violence which has undermined the efforts of creating a common nationhood.

(2) The challenges of socio-economic inequalities. One thing that is of major importance to nation-building is the building of a common citizenship. The task of nation-building cannot be achieved in a country where some parts are more privileged than the other. A country where some parts are marginalized and denied of their right. As a result, the citizen is not motivated to support the state and society, because they fell that the society is not adequately concerned about their welfare. More so, the socio-economic inequalities across the country fuels fears and suspicions. These inequalities pose serious threat to nation-building in the sense that the socio-economic inequalities imply that different Nigerians live different lives in different parts of the country. In such situations a common nationhood cannot be achieved. Inequalities are therefore a threat to common citizenship. We thus need a social contract between the people on the one hand, and the state and nation on the other. The state and nation must put meeting the needs of the disadvantaged as a key objective of public policy.

3.   The Constitutional Challenge: The unbalanced nature of the constitution is another serious challenge that poses threat to the aim of nation-building in Nigeria. According to Benjamin (2019) this is due to the nature of our democracy, and the unending swing from federalism, to unitary and possibly confederalism. Hence there is a need to redefine the nature of our government to make it more inclusive rather than exclusive.

4.   The Challenge of Building Institution for Democracy and Development

Whether nations are able to manage their political and social dispute peacefully, without lapsing into conflict, or sustain economic growth without creating huge inequalities, critically depends on the quality of the relevant national institutions. Institutions should be set up with the aim of hiring persons with the technical expertise and moral competence to interpret the rules or implement the goals of the organizations; and ensuring that the institutions inspire public confidence by being transparent, fair and consistent. To this end, Nigeria needs to create or strengthen institutions that would help achieve the national goals of democratic governance and sustainable development.

5.   The Leadership Challenge

Since Nigeria gained independence, poor leadership has always been the problem of nation-building in Nigeria. The unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility of leading by example which is the hallmarks of true leadership has crippled the nation progress and development. In the words of El Rufai (2013) Current Governor of Kaduna State cited by Benjamin (2019) states: "We have surrendered the bulk of our political space to the dishonorable, the incompetent and worse, to the criminally-minded. This is the basic problem of Nigeria. The brightest Nigerians are either abroad, or at home in the academia, in the military or the private sector. This is an undeniable fact; the dregs of our society dominate the politics and have created a negative image that makes talented people spurn helping the country" Nigeria is in dire need of visionary leaders who will implement and address developmental policies and leaders who will make the interest of the masses their first priority.

However, the above challenge is a pointer to the fact that the Nigerian nation needs to reintroduce those African traditional religious belief systems that encourages peaceful coexistence and communal living despite our historical background and social differences. The challenge of nation-building can be achieved if our cultural values that promote unity, community spirit, ethical values and peaceful co-existence are encouraged. African traditional religion incite core religious values and principles embedded in African religions which despite the various deities involved, enabled citizens and different groups to appreciate each other based on universally accepted virtues of justice, truth, common good, love and peace. Given its unifying ties that link the whole of Africa as one in one indigenous African religious spirit, it is believed that those values that are commonly shared by all Africans irrespective of ethnic background can be revitalized and infused into the fabric of Nigeria socio-political institutions.

African Traditional Religion As A Vehicle For Nation-Building
African traditional religion is the indigenous religious practices and beliefs of the Africans. It is the religion that encourages peace, unity, love and justice among members of the society. It binds Africans together and gives Africans a sense of belongings. It is a religion that questions ill-gotten wealth, and reigns instant judgment on offenders. According to Friday and Stephen (2013) African religion is the product of the thinking and experience of African forebears. They formed religious ideas, formulated religious beliefs. They told proverbs and Myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.

African traditional religion is a rich heritage that presents to younger generations a rich religious and cultural ethos of our forebears Ignatius https://www.researchgate.net (Accessed; 5/05/2021).

According to the encyclopedia of African Traditional Religion unlike other world faiths, African Traditional religions have no pre-dominant doctrinal teachings. Rather they function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, presence of deities, ancestor veneration and divination. Hence African Traditional Religion through its belief systems, moral values or principles and ethical sanction plays an important role in sustaining moral coherence in the African societies. These principles or values served as a form of checks & balances between members and leaders of our country thereby leading to national progress.

In the view of Ekoepara and Ekpenyong (2016), moral values are the aspect of African Traditional Religion which deals with ideas that defend or sustain the life of the people in their relationship with one another and the world around them. They further posit that African moral values covers issues like justice, right and wrong, respect for people and property, truth, love, good and evil, the keeping of promises and agreement, trust, crime and punishment, praise and blame etc. These values shape and determine the entire systems of the African society. Systems such as the social behavior of the people, the political arena and the economic system. Hence, for the African nation to achieve the goal of nation-building, these values have to be emphasized. It is with these values that our nation can experience justice, peace, trust, love and harmony.

To this end, the African societies particularly Nigeria should return to their traditional religious practices and adopt its moral value systems which will serve as a catalyst that will bring positive change in people's characters thereby leading to the purpose of nation- building. Furthermore, According to Ignatius, given its unifying ties that link the whole of Africa as one in one indigenous African Religious spirit, it is believed that those values that are commonly shared by all Africans irrespective of ethnic background can be revitalized and infused into the fabric of present-day Nigerian Socio-political institutions. Values such as;

- Commitment to community service
- Value for collective responsibility towards community building
- Commitment to social justice and rule of law
- Respect for one another
- Value for social responsibility and accountability on the path of leaders.
- Religious tolerance and cultural appreciation.

To witness nation building which will lead to the development and progress of a society there is the need for religion to be repositioned to reflect African

traditional values which would promote trust and cooperation that will help ensure full and robust participation in economic development. There is need to appropriate values from African Traditional Religion which could be useful in ensuring good governance in order to propel it towards greatness. There is also need to inculcate values based on African and traditional principles of hard-work, integrity, service, truthfulness, love and accountability which are the true hallmarks of developed nations.

In African Traditional religion, ethical sanctions also played a vital role in the African Societies. It served as principles which guide the behaviors of individuals. It gave explanations as to why certain things should be done in a particular way and why it should not. According to Olademo (2008). Certain principles were put in place in African communities to guide the concept of and practice of ethics. These principles include the principles of being your brother/sisters keeper, taboos, covenant relationship etc. The unethical behavior of one individual may put at risk the destiny of the whole community. This is why members of the community are warned to be careful in their dealings. Taboo is also a guiding principle which stipulates certain acts in African communities. Punishments for violating such taboos are banishment and sanctions. Thus for the Nigerian nation to achieve the aim of nation building these ethical sanctions has to be emphasized and put in place. There is no nation that can experience development and progress at any level if the nation's economy is in the hands of few individuals. Ethical sanctions foster peace and unity in the community and a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere is the only panacea that will promote nation-building. Therefore, the Nigerian nation at all levels should introduce African Traditional ethical principles and practices as the deterrent punitive measures used in pre-modern societies into its legal systems. Ekporaan and Ekpeyong (2016).

African Traditional Religion Vs Western Influences

There is no doubt that the African religion has been influenced with western religion and ideologies. And that most aspect of African religion has been affected. But the fact remains that Africans will always be Africans in nature wherever they find themselves. Where ever the African mangoes, they carry their religious practices along with them because according to Mbiti the African man is notoriously religious.

Thus, this tells why even as the African man claims to have embraced the white man's religion, they still belief in their traditional religion which has been transferred to them from their forefathers and which is innate in them.

This is also why most Africans still sort for help from their traditional deities in times of trouble. The Africans who profess the white man's religion still go for spiritual cleansing and sort for spiritual powers and protection from the spirit of their forefathers. They pour liberations and partake in spiritual rituals; it is in the same spirit that some leaders (political, religious) who are known to have been influenced by western religion (Christianity, Islam) still summon their opponent to some sort of deities and swearing oath of allegiance. Because they believe that in the Africans settings, judgment of offenders is instant. Most Africans profess the western religion and its ideologies but in reality they are traditional religionist and practitioners. This is evident in marriage ceremonies, burial rites, festivals etc. In fact, in as much as there are some elements of western ideologies in African traditional practices, there are also elements of African religion in white man's religion. This can be found in the form of songs, mode of drumming dancing and relationship among members. This is evident as members of same faith care for one another by praying, giving and celebrating one another's success. Why, because they still believe in the spirit of oneness which are elements of African traditional religion of communal living.

According to Ignatius, African Traditional Religion has played a vital role in nation- building especially in the ancient traditional era when traditional settings of the society and its institution were very much in voyage. Today, the cultural role of African Traditional Religion in nation building is still in progress. Even when one thinks that Christianity and Islam has replaced African Traditional religion, it is still evident that African Traditional Religion is still viable in so many villages, towns and cities in African content through its sources. The African man is deeply rooted in religion such that where ever he goes, he carries his religion along with him. Even if one did not find any remnant of African Traditional Religion adherents in a certain area, one still sees it through its sources; art forms, sacred institutions and in oral traditions. African Traditional Religion is now known and practiced in many African countries and beyond and it as well makes those places viable, puts life into them, revitalize and develops them. Thus, through the African value systems, the Nigerian nation can be built or developed. The introduction of African Traditional religion as a vehicle for nation building does not mean the introduction of Pagan or Idol worship as some may think, rather it is for the revival of our traditional social and cultural institutions that will help bring back the communalistic life style of the Africans that once existed which was very viable during the time of our fore-bears.

This will help in inculcating moral values to this present generation., Such values include the value of hard-work, the value of truth telling,

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 5. (2021)
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University,
Umunya

accountability, value of life and protection of human dignity, respect for life and property, and respect for elders etc. Hence Nation-building is achievable through the cultural role of African Traditional Religion.

Conclusion

Despite Western influence, Africa traditional religion has maintained its cultural values by playing important roles in shaping the character and culture of the African people. It is a religion that has no written document but it has continued to contribute positively to the development of its society. This is evident in its propagation of peaceful co-existence and good relation with other members of other religious traditions within and outside its region as it accommodates people from different backgrounds, cultures and nationality. On the whole African traditional religion is a tool for building a just and peaceful society.

References

African Traditional. Religion Encyclopedia.com available@https:www.encydopedia.com (Accessed: 2014/2014).

Friday J. and Stephen D. (2013) "African Traditional Religious and National Development" Bassey Andah. Journal available @https.https.//liste.org (Accessed: 18/05/2021)

Igaius. U, "*African Traditional religion and nation-building*" available@ https://www.researchgat e.net (Accessed: 5/05/21)

Ibrahim G. "*The Challenges of Nation-building; the case of Nigeria* available @www.mafag.org (Accessed: 10/5/2021)

Ekeopara, C and Ekenyong.O (2016) "*African Traditional Religion and National Development in Nigeria*".available@ https://www.researchgate.net (Accessed: 6/04/2021).

Wikipeida https:// en.em.wikipedia.org (retrieved 19/5/2021).

Okademo, O. (2008). "*Theology of Africa Traditional Religion*". Available @http://www.non .edu.ng (Accessed: 5/4/2021)

Abdulrahman, M (2018) "*The need for peaceful co-existence*" Available @ https://gnrc.net (Accessed: 6/03/2021).

Benjamin. (2019) " *Nation-building in Nigeria: Realities, Challenges, Prospects*" Available @ https://www.researchgate.net (Accessed: 2/5/2021)