

AN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Although, scholars have severally examined how inculcation of religious values could promote good politics, African traditional religious approach that may command individual's obedience to the rules and principles of good politics for societal development has been limitedly investigated. Hence, this study explored how African traditional religious approach would help to strengthen politics of development in Nigeria. Being qualitative and employing the method of content analysis, the research drew from both secondary and primary sources to explain how religious taboo, oath taking and sanctions could be used to elicit political compliance that is apposite for politics of development. The study concluded that African traditional religion from the dimension of taboo, sanctions and oath taking is a potent determinant for politics of development in the areas of electoral system, public accountability and administration of justice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religion, religious approach, politics, and development politics

Introduction

Over the decades, the apposite inevitability of politics as a dependable machinery of governments in the allocation of scarce resources for equitable development and growth within democratic nations, states and cities has continued to reoccur. Scholars, political scientists and management practitioner have continued to investigate the concept of politics in order to develop better approaches that are viable and instrumentally rational in the administration of power politics that creates enabling environment for societal development (Khemani, 2016). Hence, emphasis has been placed on normative ethical approach to promote integrity, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in governance,

especially in the formulation and implementation of public policies that are development-oriented (Abdelrahman, 2018; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2016).

Recently, some political commentators have equally averred that inculcation of religious dimensions into politics would not only promote good policies that elicit social and economic wellbeing of the citizens, but also catalyse development (Akpan, 2017; Isaac, 2020; Sunday & Lawal, 2016). These authors equally observed that people's religious beliefs promote societal values like integrity, honesty, and transparency that are fundamental components for growth and development in any social unit. Hence, when religion adherents bring their internalised religious values and beliefs to bear on public activities, it helps to break the vicious circle of self-interest seeking, corruption, nepotism, inefficiency and ineffectiveness that pervade the present political arena. Despite the obvious fact that most Africans, and Nigerians in particular, are religious people, the impact of their religious values and beliefs on politics that can elicit contextual development have not been visible in the country (Aniekan, 2020). This is especially in the areas of electoral process, accountability and administration of justice in Nigeria. Orji and Uzodi (2012); Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluye & Oyeyemi (2017) argued that the rules and regulations guiding the electoral system, public accountability and effective administration of justice in Nigeria are incrementally evaded and relegated due to permanent interest of politicians. This has inordinately created room for rigging of elections, electoral violence, corruption, and miscarriages of justice in the country. Based on this, there is need to adopt and adapt the African traditional religion in order to remedy the noxious political activities in Nigeria.

Crucially, the imperative context of African traditional religion, based on its environmental alignment is often overlooked. For instance, the peculiar nature of Nigerian environment, intertwined with the very existence of the people, in relation to the things they revere, honour, venerate and value cannot be explained by any other religion except the African traditional religion. The practice of this religion reveals that the cultural, health and political life of an African cannot be separated from the supernatural. Hence, during the pre-colonial era, native traditional religion was infused with both the private and political lives of the people. Indigenous religion was not only used to drive acquisition of authority, but also helped to strengthen transparency, accountability and justice system within the villages and communities in the traditional societies. Isaac (2020) reiterated that “all actions and mechanism of governance and endurance were clothed in religion” during the pre-colonial periods until the advent of colonialism that separated native traditional religion from governance. Hence, this study explored how African traditional religious approach would help to strengthen politics of development in Nigeria.

The structure of this paper consists of the following: Firstly, the introduction which does not only embody the existing reality of development, but also the statement of the problem, objectives and methodology of the study. The second part is the conceptual clarification and theoretical framework. The third dimension of the study is the nexus between African

traditional religion and development politics. The fourth section is the conclusion and recommendations.

Statement of the problem

Although, Nigeria is the most populous African country that is replete with both human and natural resources beyond measures, it has continued to wallow in social political instability, hostility, corruption, self-interest seeking, greed and poor macroeconomic management (Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluye & Oyeyemi, 2017). This overt situation in Nigeria has orchestrated palpable poverty, impoverishment, infrastructural decay, insurgency and terrorism, and lack of national integration. The lingering nature of the development problems in Nigeria has been linked to poor politics that has failed to instigate potent policies that are inherently indigenous and environmentally compactable for growth and development (Onuorah & Appah, 2012; Bello, 2001). Even though some scholars; Familusi (2010), Umeanolue (2020) have approached the unethical politics in Nigeria from the dimensions of religion, the extrinsically compelling dimension of African traditional religious approach that can elicit ethical politics and promote good and just society has been sparingly investigated. Hence, this study seeks to explain how African traditional religious approach to politics can elicit desired development in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. explain how African traditional religious approach promotes politics of development in the area of electoral system.
2. explore the link between African traditional religion and politics of development in the area of public accountability.
3. explicate how African traditional religion elicits politics of development in the area of effective administration of justice.

Methodology

This research is qualitative. Hence, perspectives were drawn from both secondary and primary sources. While secondary information was generated from the existing opinions of authors in form of policies, journals, textbooks and magazines, the primary data were generated through interviews with the two custodians of two deities purposively chosen. These popular deities, Alabida-Ojukwu and Mini-Ochamba are in Rumuobiokani and Elimgbu communities in River State. In order to cushion for possible risk of errors in qualitative research, various secondary sources were synchronize to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. This method was used to analytically access articles, journals, textbooks and other sources while thematic approach was adopted to analyse primary data.

Conceptual Issues

Development Politics

Politics, in the public sphere is a means by which policies that engender transformation for the benefits of the masses are elicited. Hence, politics is viewed as an ethical activity that is geared towards creating a society that favours its citizens. The inevitability of politics in

any society is noticeable in the divergent opinions of citizens on how public positions and resources should be occupied and managed equitably. Hence, politics is a social authoritative process of defining and selecting goals within a society in order to achieve citizens' preferences and priorities.

Development as a concept has a pluralistic perspectives base on the different viewpoints of individuals. For the citizens, it is an obsession to correct the wrongs of the colonial masters who were exploitative in their approach to governance. Hence, development is the ability of the people to manipulate and control their environment for the betterment of every member of the society (Orluwene, 2014). Based on this, development politics can be conceptualised as policies and processes that elicit palpable societal transformation for the good of all citizens. Development politics promotes the capacity of leadership and society to control and manipulate human and material resources for the general good of humanity. Thus, development politics is citizen-centric in the sense that it provokes man's inherent capacity to cause a change and live a good life.

Development politics engenders policies that guide people to utilize and manipulate their environment, including themselves and others for the good of every citizen. Unlike colonial politics, development politics is focused on improving the capacity and ability of the people in their political, social, and economic ventures for global relevance. It is an antithesis of any form of exploitation of man by man or policies that are anti-citizens. Hence, development politics in this study is conceptualised as all activities that are carried out in line with the stipulated rules and regulations of acquiring and using authority in the production and allocation of resources at all levels of government.

Based on the forgoing, development politics promotes good electoral system, accountability and system of justice which are apposite foundations for contextual transformation and good governance.

Electoral system

Electoral system is a process by which the electorates select their leaders into political positions to represent them in the affairs of the state. This process is driven by rules and regulations designed to create an enabling environment for effective participation of the electorate in the determination of the outcome of elections. Nwozor and Oshewolo (2017) pointed out that elections are processes of choice that involves selecting one or few people from among others who are equally contesting for the position. This means that it is constitutionally incumbent on the electorate in a democratic setting to exercise their power by voting the candidate of their choice into any position so that they can be ably represented in the administration of the affairs of the state (Alemika, 2011).

The apposite assumption of electoral system in a democratic setting is that it does not only allow the electorates to actively participate in the political process, but equally constitutes a medium for electorate to express their political preferences based on perceived leadership qualities of candidates (Nnamani, 2014). This means that the credibility and value of any electoral process is its ability to promote elections that are devoid of manipulation,

deprivation, ringing and violence. Dubagari (2017) asserted that the credibility of electoral process depends on its imposing guidelines that encourage neutrality of those who manage the process, checkmate electoral frauds, enforce all strategies for compliance and ensure friendly environment for the exercise of franchise. However, it has been observed that often times, the rules and regulations that provide direction as to how electoral process should be conducted are disregarded and thus giving room for manipulation, violence and loss of lives (Orji & Uzodi 2012). Hence, there is need to device a mechanism to ensure effective compliance to the guidelines of the electoral process so that capable and visionary leaders could be enthroned in the affairs of states.

Accountability

Accountability is one of the dimensions of development politics. It implies the ability of the government functionaries to be answerable for their actions at all times to members of the public (Okpala, 2012). It means the ability of those elected to stem the political affairs of government to justify their actions in alignment with the ethical and moral principles of governance. It demands that member of the public should know how public resources are being used for the development of their society (Anyim, Ufodiama, Olusanya, 2013).

Interestingly, accountability encompasses some essentials such as transparency, liability, controllability, responsibility and responsiveness which are fundamental for the improvement of efficient and effective management of public resources for societal development (Sunday & Lawal, 2016). Hence, it is an arrangement to ensure appropriate use of political power in alignment with the constitution and other public regulations that are vital for appropriate formulation and implementation of public policies (Gberevbie, 2013). The crucial aspect of accountability is integrity that leaders need to replicate in the dissemination of public information and use of resources for the designated official goals and programmes. This approach has the capacity to prevent public funds from being diverted to non-priority areas that only benefits the few at the expense of the general public (Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluyeye & Oyeyemi, 2017).

Justice administration

Human relationship at all levels involves observance and obedience to the rules and regulations that are germane to order and peaceful coexistence. Failure to abide by such rules and regulations is expected to attract commensurate punishment in order to encourage transformation, deterrence and retribution in the society (Idem, & Udofia, 2018). The capacity to put in place a transparent and effective justice system that adjudicates and holds any citizen culpable over criminal and non-criminal issues for stability, peace and order in the state is incumbent on the state (Sylvester, Garba, Agube & Aguye).

The state has the power to create an objective process of justice administration that is not selective, but treat every offender equally with the eye of the law (Omoleye & Eniola, 2018). This is because social vices such as fraud, corruption, conflict, and other crime related offences are inevitable in any social organisation. Hence, the will power to apply

and enforce law, rules and regulations in any society is fundamental to its transformation. For this reason, due process of justice is apposite in any society so that individual violators, irrespective of their positions, are tried in the law court and punished if found culpable.

In line with the forgoing, Shehu, Othman, and Osman (2017) averred that when justice is not bargained or driven by the dictates of social interests, societal transformation is given a solid foundation. Interestingly, they added that good justice process in any social unit or society does not only promote civilisation, but also engenders public confidence on the state. Contrarily, Fischer (2016); Hope (2017); and Michael (2016) explained that a country that has an erosion of justice system finds it difficult to earn the confidence of both the common man and the state authorities. This can lead to a state of anarchy where citizens resort to juggle justice that is inimical to societal development.

African traditional religion

African indigenous religion according to J.S. Mbiti (1969) is the summary of the belief and practices of the Africans. It is the vehicle that conveys mankind existence from conception to ancestor hood. The African indigenous religion establishes a relationship between man and his physical realities and his supernatural experience which is expressed in symbolic ritual, taboo and liturgy. African indigenous religion arbitrates for the value of moral and sanctity of the society thereby promoting order and coherence in the physical and spiritual realities of mankind. Idowu (1973) asserted that African traditional religion is the religion of all Africans that makes them understand their Africanness. It is a religion that carries the belief of the ultimate reality in relation to man.

Similarly African traditional religion according to Abanuka (2005), is an embodiment of mythical narratives which are orally expressed from one generation to the other. These myths are expressed in symbolic languages explaining the essence of existence from the supernatural perspective to the physical reality (Abanuka, 2005). Hence African indigenous religion is the primary culture of the African people.

Theoretical Underpinning

The theories, *telos*, hedonism, and egoism (Omogbe, 1993) are drawn from the perspectives of normative political thoughts to explain the reason why individuals need an external prompting for diligent behaviour in the public offices in Nigeria. *Telos* is a Greek word that depicts end, goal, or purpose. Aristotle opined that man is a teleological organism who is purpose-driven, either for self-interest or the interest of others (Omogbe, 1993). Jeremy Bentham explained that man by nature is psychologically hedonistic because he's a pleasure-seeking personality who only gets involved in activities that bring him pleasure (Wladyslaw, 1951). This means that pleasure is the driving force of all human activities. Another philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, heralded the theory of egoism and explained that man by nature is psychologically egoistic and engages in activities that only benefit him either immediately or remotely (McConnell, 1978). This theory claims that behind any human action there is always a selfish motive which prompts him as a driving force. It further says that it takes various forms, like desire for wealth, power, and money. If the

purpose, end, or goal of man is to engage in action that only benefits him because he's egoistic and hedonistic, who can control the man with political power? The simple answer is that it is only the supernatural.

African traditional religious approach and development politics in Nigeria

There are various aspects of African traditional religion that can promote politics of development in the contemporary society of Nigeria. In the traditional communities prior to the era of colonialism, ethos or norms were fundamental to the establishment of order and coherence. They were the vehicles that moved the political, law, and religious system harmoniously to the benefit of human beings and the supernatural forces. The ethical values and norms in relation to politics of development (electoral system, accountability and justice administration) are discussed below using perspectives generated through interviews from the custodians of Alabida and Ojukwu deities and Mini-Ochamba deity in Evo clan, Rivers State.

Taboo and Electoral system

Taboo is generally a prohibition that is expected to maintain and conserve order and coherence. Taboo arouses the consciousness of an individual to order his life in order not to incur the wrath of deities, divinities and other spiritual forces of the environment. More so, Taboo is a means by which human being preserves the environment following the indigenous religious norm. Taboo was the instrument African traditional religion used to mould African moral values in the pre-modern era. For example, it is a taboo for the communities in Evo-clan to have sex in the bush. This was regarded as a defilement of the deities that are in control of the environmental elements like land (earth deity), vegetation and plant deities (Tasie, 2021). As such, in anger the deities will inflict defaulters with various illnesses: swollen penis, virginal decay, and infertility of the soil (Obodoegbulam, 2019; Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020).

Electoral process in Nigeria has been adjudged to be violent, manipulative and misleading. Hence, it has not been able to produce the kind of leaders that are visionary and transformative oriented. The reason for this is that vested-interest individuals are not ready to abide by the rules and regulations of electoral process. They employ various strategies such as bribing of electorates, printing of ballot papers, snatching of ballot boxes, causing of violence during voting, and influencing electoral officials either by coercion or inducement in order to win elections (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2016).

Based on this, credible individuals who are supposed to contest in elections are scared away because they are not ready to get involved in 'dirty politics' and thus, they leave the entire electoral process for self-interest-minded individuals. Nevertheless, African indigenous Religion provides a window by which rules and regulations or agreements made by a group or society are supernaturally dedicated through the agency of the diviners, and such rules become divine injunctions or taboos that can ensure compliance. Any act of violation of such taboos is seen as an offence against the supernatural, and dealt with supernaturally.

For instance, when the question was asked 'do you believe that using African traditional religious is the best approach to improve electoral system in Nigeria' the oral informants responded affirmatively. They agreed that using the traditional means will ensure political compliance and expected outcome that is genuine. They explained that during the traditional societies before colonialism, using indigenous religious system of electing leaders was often the common duties of the deities in the communities in Ewo clan. The political electoral system was based on seniority (Epara: the oldest male member of the family) and confirmation of the family deity through divination by a diviner. This process although archaic was generally acceptable by the people since their appointments were divinely made. They added that the relegation of the verdict of the deity was a taboo that had severe implications. Hence, the process of election was authenticated by the deity and those that were appointed as leaders were obligated to serve the people sincerely with integrity for the good of the general society. It was not common to have electoral violence or conflicts since every person trusted the judgment of the deities.

In line with the forgoing, Ekeopara and Ekpenyong (2016) believed that the dread of the traditional gods for their immediate action in case of violation, guided the behaviour of people to comply with regulations during the traditional society. Hence, the adoption and adaptation of this approach will not only complement the card reader system that has failed in some cases during elections, but will also help to put a stop to all the electoral malpractices and behaviours that have made Nigerian politics to be pejoratively tagged 'dirty'. This is possible by placing the emblem of deities at every polling unit to ensure transparency, trust, and eligibility of voters and security of the entire process. Consequently, the behaviour of the people will be compliantly influenced and thus motivates credible individuals that will drive politics of development in the political arena to emerge since the people understand the outcome of violating taboos and supernatural injunctions.

Oath taking and accountability

Oath taking is a potent aspect of African traditional religion that can influence politics of development in Nigeria. Oath taking is a form of covenant between human being and supernatural forces. These spiritual forces are the custodian of the society that determines the existence, survival and transition of human being from the physical world to the hereafter. An oath is a pledge of allegiance between a lesser entity and higher entity to ensure mutual benefits if none of the partners fails in their covenant (Jennifer Millett-Barrett, 2019). In the traditional society that was politically intertwined with African traditional religion, people were required to take oath to prove their integrity, ask for protection, providence, prosperity and service.

Jennifer Millett-Barrett (2019) averred that oath taking in African indigenous religion in form of vowing and swearing before a deity is a key ritualistic principle that illuminates the behaviour and operations of individuals in the community. Ogunleye (2013) expounded that oath taking is a way the African traditional religionist in Yoruba share a covenant

relationship with the object of worship. Hence, oath was used to enthrone traditional rulers, village heads, community chiefs, and other public service holders who swore to be diligent and accountable to the people. This action compelled the people to be accountable and transparent in the delivery of public services in order to avoid the wrath of the divinity (Aniekan, 2020). Akpan (2017) observed that despite the introduction of western rational instrumentality and religious values approaches to engender development politics in Nigeria, the political sector is still characterised by corruption, bribery, rent seeking, and lack of accountability. These vices are potent obstacle to development in any society. Hence, oath taking is a possible panacea that can remedy the ills that characterise the Nigerian political system.

Some of the major challenges identified to have entangled Nigerian political leaders in their public operations are unethical behaviour and strong aversion to obey rules and regulations that guide individuals' behaviour for prudent management of public resources (Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluye, & Oyeyemi, 2017). It has been noted that the relegation of standards in the areas of award of contracts, inflation of contract costs, and diversion of public funds to private bank accounts through the manipulation of contracts award are inimical to the politics of development (Agbo, 2012).

For this reason, the adoption of oath taking as an approach from the perspective of African traditional religion will help to sanitise the political domain through the promotion of accountability for development politics. This is based on the fact that the gods of African traditional religion are not patient gods like the western God. This assertion is based on of the oral informants' response to the question concerning 'who gives or pronounces judgment when an oath is violated. They further averred that the emblems of deities like *Alabida* and *Ojukwu* in *Evo* created awe and fear in the mind of the people. In the explanation, they agreed that whenever individuals were summoned to the shrines of these two deities they made sure that they were innocent or else, may not return alive during the pre-colonial era. So, taking an oath in the shrines of either of *Alabida* or *Ojukwu* or *Mini-Ochamba* was done in complete carefulness to avoid the wraths of the gods which were always severe.

In the light of the forgoing, every public leader in Nigeria must be made to prove his objective interest to serve and be accountable to the people by taking an oath using a symbol of a local deity that does not have mercy on violators. This means that even after the public leader has sworn with the emblem of any foreign religion whose God patiently waits till the end of time before He punishes violators, the individual must still swear before the local deity using its symbol. This will not only ensure accountability in public sphere, but will equally drive public officers to practice politics of development.

Sanctions and justice administration

Sanctions are the punishments incurred by individuals or a group who have in one way or the other committed a taboo. Sanction may be instantly applied by the deities that have been offended or prescribed by a diviner after due consultation with the deity (Ekeopara,

Ekpenyong, 2016). In response to the question of what kind of sanctions an offender gets from the gods, the oral informants, said that sanctions range from death, curable and incurable diseases, deprivation of cultural right, and expulsion from social participation in community or society at large. They further explained that sanctions in African traditional religion can be divided into two; remediable sanctions and non-remediable sanctions. Remediable sanctions are punishment that the defaulters undergo by performing ritual cleansing in order to appease the deity. This type of sanction may not necessarily lead to death although the consequences are inevitable. The non-remediable sanctions are the punishment a defaulter carries out as a result of defiling the deity which may lead to incurable diseases and eventual death.

All these sanctions, as earlier pointed out are determined by the deities and divinities through divination. Hence, sanctions are verifiable means of judgment and justice given by the supernatural without human bias. The African traditional religionist in the pre-modern era avoided anything that would incur them the anger of supernatural entities that governed the affairs of the people. Based on the foregoing, there is need for Nigeria to adopt this approach of administration of justice rooted on African Traditional Religion since it is supernaturally driven. Today in Nigeria, people who are at the helms of affairs are no longer afraid to carry out their activities contrarily to the rules and regulations guiding their operations. This is because they have the financial resources, police, and the courts to support and defend their misbehaviours. Sometimes, obvious cases of financial misappropriation, corruption, and money laundering are dismissed for want of evidence and facts. This has not only negatively affected the development of Nigeria, it has also provokingly made people to get involved in unwholesome activities, such as kidnapping, breaking of oil pipeline, and apparent disregard to government policies. Since sanctions are supernaturally oriented, Nigeria will experience a just administration of justice that will transform, deter and retributively influence Nigerian society positively. Consequently, the public trust in the Nigeria government will also improve significantly when the justice system is rendered more effectively through the assistant of divination.

Conclusion and recommendations

African traditional religion from the dimension of taboo, sanctions and oath taking is a potent determinant for politics of development in Nigerian. It is an external inducement that can awaken the consciousness of individuals to obvious consequences of violating the rules and regulation that are apposite for politics of development in the political and public service arena. This approach has become relevant because religious values which some authors have advocated to be veritable instruments for individuals to be diligent and accountable in discharging public service when imbibed have not proven to be potent enough as individuals' driving force. Hence, the study recommended that:

- a. Taboo should be used by the state/government to encourage and guide the behaviour of political individuals so that electoral process will be free and fair for the citizens to select their credible leaders in Nigeria.
- b. Oath taking from the dimension of African traditional religion should be authorised by the government to be administered by a diviner to political office

holders to ensure their compliance with the rules and regulation for public accountability in Nigeria.

- c. Sanctions, from the perspective of Africa traditional religion should also be used by the government to ensure effective management of justice that is free from prejudice and selectivity in Nigeria.

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