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The Socio-Cultural Relevance of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Poverty Eradication and Wealth Creation in Ikwerre of Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT

Many years after the world wars, there is now a growing recognition of the importance of African Traditional Religion (ATR) for designing development programs and projects. However, the involvement of the religion of the indigenous people of Africa is not given the attention it requires. This paper therefore aims at presenting African traditional religion's voice in this important discourse by using it to create a measure for economic development. Despite its suffering from stereotyping African traditional religion continues to play a critical role in the lives of the traditional Africans. The issue of economic development, poverty eradication and wealth creation is not easy to define. The divergent theories on it points to this fact. The traditional African understanding of development, however is derived from their religious world views. The institution of chieftaincy, gerontocracy, institution of taboos, kingship ties and their attitude towards nature are some of the major development mechanisms among the Africans. Despite the devastating threats these mechanisms are undergoing today, the potentials of these indigenous mechanisms for development are not in doubt, hence the need for this work. The work recommends that African Traditional Religion remains a major contributing factor to poverty alleviation and wealth creation in Ikwerre ethnic nationalities

Keywords:

Socio-Cultural, Relevance, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Poverty Eradication and Wealth Creation

Introduction

There is no society or community that is anti-economic development. The concept of wealth creation and poverty eradication however is conceptualized by different people at different times. In other words, what may be seen as economic development may be relative to time and space. It is important to note that within the development discourse and practices, recent years have witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of African traditional religion for designing developments programmes and projects as posited by Denuelino and Bano

(2009:24). Unfortunately the issue of development using religion has been highly selective. That is, the focus has been mainly on the so-called higher religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and some eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The spirituality of the black Africans is not given the attention it deserves. It is this neglect of the so-called "primal" religion in the discourse of development in modern world that has given rise to the presentation of African Traditional religion's voice in this important discourse. This would be done by using our traditional African

society. Ikwerre in particular for a wider understanding of this paper as those who still hold on to the African indigenous religion bequeathed to them by their ancestors as opposed to those who have been influenced deeply by western cultures and other impinging faiths such as Christianity and Islam and offer some other foreign religious traditions. Even though the Ikwerre of North-Eastern Niger-delta region are been used here as a case study, other traditional societies such as the Akan of Ghana and even other African societies will also be used in the discussion where it is deemed necessary and appropriate.

African Traditional Religion as a Concept

There has been a long lasting debate whether, the spirituality of the Africans should be known either in the singular or plural form. That is, African traditional religion or African traditional religions by many scholars such as Mbiti (1969,1-2) Idowu (1970,103) Booth (1977,3) Ikenga-Metuh (1987;19) Alolo (2007) Ejizu (n.d). The arguments cannot be discussed here due to space constraints.

Permit me to use the singular form as I prefer. There is no doubt about the fact that African traditional religion can be said to be one faith that has suffered abuses in terms of its nature and meaning in the hands of people who claim to be scholars in the field, particularly the “arm-chair” scholars. In consequence, African traditional religion, the spirituality of a descent race has been described in highly objectionable, obnoxious, derogatory and pejorative terms such as paganism, fetishism, animism, polytheism, juju, heathenism, native religion etc. Many erroneously felt that Africans did not know God, and thus have to introduce God to the Africans.

Emile Ludwig, for instance said, “How can the untutored Africans conceive God? How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing (cited in Smith 1950,1) or take Mary Kingsley “when I say Juju or fetish, I mean the religion of the native of West Africa”, (cited in Opoku,1978:4) It is important to note that none of these descriptions of African traditional religion is

correct. For even the etymologies of many of the terms have nothing to do with religion. For instance “Paganism may be the oldest of the names adopted to describe the religion of the so-called “primitive” or uncivilized people of the world. This word has a Latin origin (*Paganus*) meaning a village dweller or a country man, a person who lives away from the civilized community. The word was, sociological term, a term of differentiation between the enlightened, the civilized and the sophisticated, on the other hand, the rustic, the unpolished and the unsophisticated on the other as Idowu (1973:116) puts it. It can be said that the root of the above notion may stem from the fact that anything that does not conform to a certain cultural pattern accepted as the norm by the Western investigators is regarded as primitive as Idowu puts it, (1973) if the above terminologies are not appropriate descriptions of African traditional Religion, what then is African Traditional Religion? African Traditional Religion properly understood involves the belief and worship of the supreme Being known and Reversed all over Africa as *Onyame* in Akan (of Ghana) *Mawu* in Ewe (of Ghana) and *Oladumare* in Yoruba (Nigeria) *Mkoo-bot* in Bulu (of Cameroon) *Ngewo* in Mande (of Sierra-Leon) *Qamata* in Xhosa (south Africa) *Ngai* in East Africa and *Chi okike* in Ikwerre etc. The worship of the *Onyame* can be direct but is mostly done indirectly through divine agents like the *abosom* (gods or divinities) and the ancestors. African traditional theologians explain that one cannot worship the Supreme Being formally without the agency of the divinities or ancestors just as within the traditional political and diplomatic contexts one can not formally contact the king without the agency of his linguistic or sub chiefs. According to Awolalu, when we say African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a foolish religion, (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is written everywhere for those who care to see

and read. It is largely written in the peoples' myths and folklores, tales, in their proverbs and pity sayings. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive. Yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old Awolalu. (1976:275).

The Concept of Wealth Creation

The concept of wealth varies among societies. Therefore the world wealth means different things to different people. In its most narrow sense, wealth refers to abundance of objects of value e.g. gold, clay, water, property, certain skills and the state of having accumulated these objects. The Webster Dictionary of English sees wealth among others as natural resources of a country, whether or not exploited. The product of the economic activities of a nation, anything which can be exchanged for money or barter. Just as the word, wealth is relative, the state of being wealthy is also relative. A person that is wealthy is someone who has accumulated substantial wealth relative to others in a given society of reference group.

It is pertinent to note that despite efforts over the last two to three decades by successful governments in the African Region to take head long the issue of poverty through various wealth creation and poverty alleviation programmes, not much seems to have been achieved. This is evident by the growing poverty incidence of the African region. Different surveys indicate that many Africans and indeed the world live poor. About 250 million people are found in sub-Saharan Africa. This certainly is a paradox given the abundant human and natural resources of the continent. One can posit therefore that the issue of poverty and its eliminating strategies is one of the toughest development challenges facing the continent.

Wealth Creation Defined

The international monetary fund (IMF) (2003) assert that wealth creation can be narrowly defined in terms of income generation or more broadly as the creation of asserts both in terms of physical and human capital. Chukwunonyelum (2004), states that wealth creation in simple terms, refers to economic

growth and better standard of living for the individual, family or states. Using the Parrew model, he explained that the Parrew creation refers to two concepts namely;

(a) Coping strategies: These are ways and means used by individuals and families, dwelling in a harsh economic reform environment, to respond to socio-economic challenges such as illness, unemployment etc. it includes the two ideas of relief and alleviation of pains, disasters and stress brought about by poverty.

(b) Empowerment: This is a process and dynamic definition which gives people power over the different social, economic, cultural and political forces which govern their lives. When people gain power and control over these factors they achieve social and economic progress. The aim of empowerment is to create true wealth and involve people in different aspects of governance both in public, private and traditional settings. Any wealth creation initiative must increase the productivity of the individual and family. It must boost the human capital elements such as knowledge skills, and health which increase the total productivity of the individual and the human development index of the society.

Poverty as a Concept

Poverty describes a wide range of circumstances associated with need, hardship and lack of resources. For some, poverty is a subjective and comparative term, for others it is moral and evaluative, and for others scientifically established. The principal uses of the term include;

- (A) Descriptions of material need, including deprivation of essential goods and services, multiple deprivation and patterns of deprivation overtime.
- (B) Economic circumstances, describing a lack of wealth usually understood as capital, money, material goods or resources especially natural resources.
- (C) Social relationships, including social exclusion, dependency and the ability to live what is understood in a society as a

normal life. E.g to be capable of raising a healthy family and especially educating children and participating in the society one sees him or herself.

Causes of Poverty in the Society

In every traditional setting, poverty has been attributed to the following causes.

- i. Individual, or “pathological” causes which see poverty as a result of the behaviour, choices or abilities of the poor.
- ii. Familial causes which attribute poverty to upbringing;
- iii. Sub- cultural causes which attribute poverty, to common patterns of life, learned or shared within the community
- iv. Agency causes, which see poverty as the result of the actions of others including government and the economy and
- v. Structural causes which argue that poverty is the result of the social structure of every traditional setting

Wealth Creation versus Poverty Eradication: An Integrated Approach

Repnik (1994) in defining poverty in terms that will provide a means of defining poverty eradication stated that poverty could be expressed as firstly, the inability to satisfy basic needs of human life due to lack of income or property. Secondly, a lack of opportunity to generate income or property and thirdly, a lack of means to change the situation. In this context, poverty eradication means the creation of general conditions which allow living in dignity where people are free to take their own decisions in life and where the poor participate in social, political economic and traditional decisions making. Simply put poverty alleviation or eradication refers to the lifting of the poor out of poverty for survival either through reliance or direct or indirect measure.

It is very important to note here that the concept of poverty eradication and wealth creation using African traditional setting cannot be separated. Indeed they are intertwined such that one is an extension of the other. Poverty eradication is simply lifting the poor out of

poverty. This connotes survival, having to meet the basic survival needs of the individuals. This can be summarized to mean giving a man fish in order for him to survive. This is because policy initiators viewed poverty simply as material deprivation. Thus attacking it, the attention of government had focused on helping the materially deprived (the poor) to alleviate his/her condition.

Wealth creation on the other hand is all encompassing, it entails the following;

- (a) Teaching the man how to fish (inculcating requisite income generation skills
- (b) Showing the man the way to the river
- (c) Making available the necessary tools required for the fishing
- (d) Ensuring that there is demand for his excess catch
- (e) Provide other ancillary services that will be required by the man to ensure that he can maximize his catching potentials etc.

The Relevance of African Traditional Religion in Wealth Creation and Poverty Eradication using Traditional Institutions

The Ikwerre people of North Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria like other tribes in Africa have a religious world view and therefore place much emphasis on the role African traditional religion plays in their developmental agenda. That is, the traditional African peoples understanding of development is derived from their religious world view because they do not divorce their religious life from the other aspects of their lives, be they social, economic, political etc. they exemplify what Opoku observes about Africans, He puts, “A close observation of Africans and their societies will reveal that religion is at the root of African culture and is the determining principle of African life. It is no exaggeration, therefore to say that in every traditional African, Religion is life and life is religion. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do, whether it be farming, fishing or hunting, or simply eating, drinking or traveling. Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next. It is hence not an abstraction but a part of reality and

everyday live (1978:1) what this implies is that for the traditional Africa people e.g. the Akan of Ghana and every other tribe in Africa, such as the Ikwerre people, economic development and poverty eradication is related to their community harmonious relationships with the Supreme Being, the Ancestors, the gods and other spirit beings. This is because in their world view, these beings can make or unmake. Africans have a holistic attitude towards life and thus they see development as any other human activity which aims at affirming their life in a holistic way that will enable every generation to ensure its survival and be able to hand over the survival status to the future generations as directed by their traditional religious teachings. On this premise, Awuah Nyamekye (2009:25) posits that development in the view of Africans is the Judicious utilization of resources both natural and human with the view to achieving growth and meaning in life for the present generation and the subsequent ones. Some certain mechanisms or traditional core values have contributed to both wealth creation and poverty eradication in the African setting. Using Ikwerre as a referential case study, the following institutions are usually put into consideration in terms of economic development.

- (A) The Institution of chieftaincy
- (B) Gerontocracy
- (C) Taboos
- (D) Kingship ties
- (E) Attitude towards nature (water bodies, totem and sacred groves)

(A). Chieftaincy Institution

The adherents of African traditional religion are very much aware of the fact that economic development will be difficult to achieve without authority. Hence the establishment of chieftaincy institution is to serve as an authority or a pivot around which development revolves. Chieftaincy is a system of government or political organization whose leader is known as Obene (chief) in Akan as posited by Busia (1951) Odotei and Awedoba (2006) Awuah Nyamekye (2001, 2009). Among the Ikwerre people the "EZE" (chief) is mostly selected from the family by the "*Ohna*" (oldest). To ensure that

the authority of the chief is recognized by the members of the family, clearly defined procedures are followed in the selection and installations of a chief. For instance, the selection must be done democratically. It is usually by consensus. It is only direct sons that can aspire to be chiefs, and not indirect sons (*nwo nwo*), and even so, it is a taboo for one to proclaim himself or herself a chief without authorization from the king makers, i.e., those accredited to confer chiefship on people in Ikwerre societies. It is also a taboo for someone to fight, argue or insult a chief in the public. It is a taboo for a chief to strike or be stricken for he is seen as the earthly representative of the ancestors of the entire community. All these are meant to protect the sacredness of the person of the chief and the sanctity of the institution of chieftaincy. The major occupations in traditional African societies are farming, fishing, hunting and animal husbandry. This makes the land an important economic resource, for this reason, land and other communal resources in these societies and beyond are held in trust by the chief. The chief also has the power to mobilize the people for its economic development. As Sarfo Menscol says, this also applies to the Akan of Ghana (2001) and Ikwerre in particular

Ohna Weke Wonkwukon in oral interview posits that any chief who defiles the chieftaincy institution by perverting justice in usually recalled and as such may not be consulted in matters that concern the family. The story is usually left vacant until after much consultations on who becomes the next to be appointed and approved by *Nye Ohna* (oldest) at the general assembly of community members or meetings.

(B) Gerontocracy

Among the Ikwerre people for instance, the chiefs have other office holders who assist them in traditional issues. These are the "*Ohnas*" which is translated as the council of Elders. These are made up of different family heads who rule according to the order of seniority. One of the responsibilities of the council of elders is to ensure that the chief does not abuse his/her office. In other words, the council of

elders limits the powers of the chief just as the power of the president is limited by the constitution and other institutions such as the legislature and the judiciary as stipulated by the theory of separation of powers. Awuah Nyamekye (2001).

The authority of the "*Ohna*" lies in the belief that he represents the ancestors of the family and since the family is the major source around which the dynamics of subsistence and other natural resources management resolves, the "*Ohna*" often has the final say in resource allocation and utilization as well as in management generally. It is the "*Ohna*" who takes custody of all the family landed property (lands). For this reasons, it is his responsibility to ensure that each member of the family is given his or her fair share of these important resources for both individuals and the communities survival. It is for this reason that any disgruntled family members may lodge complains relating to lands and other resource management issues in the family. Such matter is only referred to the chief only when the individual is not satisfied with the decision of the "*Ohna*". In Akan, it is against this background that the institution of chieftaincy and respect for gerontocracy are mostly recognized in the akan and other traditional societies. This goes to explain why the Ikwerre and beyond take landed matters seriously as this may mar the future of their children and also cause economic setbacks in the society.

C. Kingship Institutions

The hierarchy and power structure among the Ikwerre people is similar to the one of Akan of Ghana with the "*Nyenwe Ali*" (His Royal Highness) as the overall head of the hierarchy or the royal family if the family is off royal origin. A royal family in Ikwerre refers to the family whose ancestors founded the community in which they live. Poverty has been noticed to be one of the major hindrances to development. Aware of this, Ikwerre culture and religions inculcate the sense of sharing and hospitality among the kith and kin even among members of the larger community. See Ejizu (n.d) This is the basis of the extended family system even among

the Akan of Ghana. Awuah Nyamekye posits (2009:33). The training of the younger ones does not only lie within the royal family but other members. This systematic measure in which the ancestors have a role to play keeps poverty away at a lower rate and thus ensure that no one becomes a social and economic liability so as to pose a threat to sustainable development. This is one of the traditional ways of redistributing wealth.

D. Institution of Taboos

One major means by which social harmony and morality can be achieved, thus ensuring development in traditional Ikwerre society even among other tribes is through the application and enforcement of taboos which are inextricable attributes of African religion. The word taboo is a derivation from Polynesian term *Tabu*, which simply means "forbidden", It may apply to any form of prohibition. Sarpong (1974,51). The Ikwerre word for taboo is "*Nso Ali*", meaning that which the land forbids. According to G. Tasie (ed) (2007:39), he asserts that certain material objects feature prominently in Isiokpo ritual, prominent among them is the "*owhor*" and its adjunct "*Ogu: Owhor*" is a sacred piece of stick believed to be imbued with spiritual and or ancestral power. Any attempt to desecrate the *owhor* is a serious taboo in Ikwerre land. In traditional Ikwerre society and beyond, it is a taboo to seduce another man's wife, to commit murder, to get involved in Incest, Rape, homosexuality, lesbianism is a taboo among the ladies. It is a taboo to fight in the farm, in the stream, to cry before the Ali deity, to commit suicide, same thing applies to sexual intercourse with animals (bestiality). This also applies to other tribes as breaking these laws is seen as a serious offence with serious punishments. These are some of the innumerable taboos through which peace, harmony, sanity and economic developments are realized. To maintain economic stability, it is a serious offence to steal from public fund or communal property which are of considerable value. It is a taboo to shift farm boundaries without authorization, uprooting of planted food items is also a taboo. See Osei (2006)

Generally taboos abound around land administration and public office holders.

E. Attitude Towards Nature

In the making of the traditional people and others, human beings did not just happen to be in the world. Rather they were made to be in the world and live by means of the resources in their environment. This applies that environmental consciousness has been part and parcel of their traditional life. Awuah Nyamekye (2009). In view of this, some straight measures are put in place to ensure the conservation of the environment. They know that water is one of the essential elements in sustainable development. Therefore it is a bad behaviour to defecate near a river or farm near water shades in order not to expose the water to the sun to avoid drying up. Some traditional societies do not allow fishing using chemical weapons in order not to kill and destroy aquatic plants which are sources of economic development. In line with taboos, totems are strictly not destroyed. The study of the totems shows that apart from their religious undertone, the concept of totemism helps in the preservation of the flora and fauna. This is because totemic plants and animals are not harmed but are rather protected in traditional African Societies and thereby protecting the lives of the endangered species.

Another important measure used throughout by traditional Africans to present the economy is the institution and observances of sacred groves. Sacred groves are maintained, preserved and conserved through a combination of taboos, prohibitions, beliefs and restrictions because the forests are believed to be the abodes of their totemic plants and animals. For instance, Anene's (1997:101) research indicates that, the Boabeng-fiema monkey sanctuary in the Nkoranza district of Ghana, is one of the richest Ghanaian forests in terms of diverse types and rare species of monkeys like the Black and white Columbus and moria monkeys. These species are considered sacred by the people of Boabeng and Fiema villages. These sacred groves apart from serving as shrines can as well serve as wind breaks and

also aid in photosynthesis and its resultant oxygen production, which are very essential for human survival Awuah-Nyamekye (2009).

Summary

It must be understood that African Traditional Religion is the most important of all the many ways in which Nigeria citizens and indeed Africans get involved in the life of their community and society. Therefore our traditional religious life must equally reflect and impact our social, cultural, political and economic life.

We must let religion play its powerful influence not only on individual character and action but also on our communal life as a people. One of those powerful influences is that money is not everything. In be skett, Warren W. Wiesbe tells of how paul summarized the Christian philosophy of wealth when he writes "let him who stole steal no more, but rather let him labour, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need". (EPH. 4. 28) one of the underlying facts about this verse is to ensure sanity in whatever one does which has to be done well, having the interest of others at heart.

Conclusion

This work has not only demonstrated that development is one of the major concerns for Africans but also pointed out some of the concrete ways in which African Traditional religion guides them to ensure development. It has also not only examined the concept of wealth creation from both the traditional and contemporary perspectives, but also touched on the fact that the philosophies underpinning development in both traditional and contemporary times are fundamentally not different. This shows that African traditional religion does not only promote development but has concrete measures to ensure, development, even the Ikwerre people and the society at large.

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