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Relevance of Yoruba Religious Tenets for Peaceful Coexistence in the Nigerian Multifaith Society

Iyanda, Sunday Elijah, PhD

Abstract

Peaceful Coexistence is a fundamental component of community development, corporate growth, and survival of the beautiful universe. At the heart of every faith community and culture lies the need to advance peaceful Coexistence to enhance meaningful lives and sustainable societies. Nigeria today is highly fragmented, less peaceful, and becoming unsafe, coupled with an environment of tension, violence, declining values, injustice, and reduced tolerance and respect for human rights. The foregoing has resulted in catastrophic loss of human lives and properties. As a result, the paper adopted historical method to examine the relevance of Yoruba religious tenets for a peaceful Coexistence in Nigerian heterogeneous society. The paper, therefore, posits that Yoruba religious tenets couched in colleagueship, communal, and among others are catalysts for peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria. The paper concludes that integrating Yoruba religious tenets in Nigerian society would guarantee peaceful Coexistence and sustainable development, especially now that general election is in the offing. The paper recommends that interfaith dialogue should be adopted to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

Keywords: Yoruba religion, tenets, peaceful coexistence, multifaith, Nigerian society

Introduction

RELIGION, IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY, PERMEATES EVERY ASPECT OF LIVES OF the people. Nigeria being a multifaith society has suffered unnecessary setbacks as a result of religious crisis. Religion which is meant to be a platform for peace, stability, progress, development, and unity has now been used by many to disrupt the well-being of the society[1]. Nigeria is riddled with diverse problems ranging from corruption, tribalism, nepotism, political acrimony, insecurity, and religious fanaticism. In all of these vices religious problem becomes the cankerworm and till today, it has eaten deep into Nigerian nation[2].

Religion which is supposed to complement the law of the land has been turned into wrong use by the extremists or fanatics for selfish interest. It is understandable that there are three major religions in Nigeria i.e. Christianity, Islam and African Religion (Yoruba Religion). It is noted that there is not much crisis between African Religion (Afrel) and the two other religions which are Christianity and Islam. It is evident that Christianity and Islam that are expected to bring peaceful Coexistence into the society, are now being used as sources of unrest and insecurity. Therefore, the paper

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looks at the relevance of Yoruba religious tenets (being the indigenous religion) for the needed peace for Coexistence in Nigeria multifaith society. It is the intention of this paper to examine the relevance of Yoruba Religion (being the religion that grew up in the soil of Africa) for the required peace for Coexistence in Nigeria multifaith society.

Yoruba Religion: An overview

It will not be an over statement that Yoruba Religion is as old the people. The study of any religion is the study of the people that practice the religion. And religion comes as a result of the activities of two agents-God that reveals Himself to man, and man that embraces and responds to god's revelation[3]. Yoruba people are dominantly found in the Southwestern part of Nigeria and in some part of Dahomey (Republic of Benin) and Togo[4]. The Yoruba belong to Ogun, Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, Ondo, and Lagos States of Nigeria. A substantial portion of the population of Kogi and Kwara states are also Yoruba[5].

The religion has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Yoruba through oral tradition.[6] It is the religion that Yoruba have made theirs by living and teaching it. It has no written literature but written everywhere for those that care to see and read. It is written in the peoples' myths and folktales, songs, and dances, liturgies and shrines, and in their proverbs and pity-sayings.[7] Yoruba religion has no founder and zeal for membership drive, yet, it offers persistence fascination for Yoruba whether young or old. The religion is a heritage from the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity.[8]

The revelation of the religion came as a result of human experiences of the universe. The Yoruba people pondered over this mystery and desired to know the author and brain behind the mystery. In an attempt to get answers, the Yoruba concluded that the mystery must be a supernatural power, a Living Being who orders, controls, and maintain the universe.[9] This type of process is regarded as human experience. The religion evolved slowly through a long period of time and experience a situation of continuities and discontinueties.[10] This is to say that people allowed the practices and beliefs that continue to be useful and adequate to the spiritual life of the people for development and spiritual growth. It could be understood that the religion encompasses all aspect of life. The adherents do not know how to live without the religion. They celebrate life religiously and they never embark on anything without bringing in religion. Thus, at birth, marriage, death, warfare, healing, the foundation of any project, planting, harvesting, enthronement of kings and chiefs, and other areas of human endeavour, Yoruba religion plays important roles.[11]

Yoruba Religion and Peaceful Coexistence

Peaceful coexistence refers to the concept where different groups or nations live together harmoniously.[12] Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria has constantly been proven

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almost impossible amidst the various effort to live together in harmony as a people. This has been due to the activities of the evil people who have consistently taken undue advantage of the endemic ethics biases and religious bigotries in the society to perpetrate their evil agenda. The peace in Nigeria is termed negative where the peace in existence is mere absence of direct violence, war, or fear. Men of mischiefs were seen taking undue advantage of the ignorant, idle, and indigent youths to accomplish their nefarious selfish interests.[13]

It is important to note that, Yoruba Religion embraces and tolerates the proselytizing religions of Christianity and Islam since their incursions.[14] No wonder, Dopamu in his article "African Religion (Afrel) and the Humanist Perspective in the Global Age" maintains that:

> Afrel (Indigenous Religion) has maintained a long history of cooperative interaction with Christianity and Islam in Africa. In the face of ever troublesome and discouraging history of contact between Afrel and the imported religions, Afrel was able to exercise itself in the style of activity from which it has existed from time immemorial.[15]

Yoruba religion suffered a setback in the 19th and 20th centuries in the hands of Christianity and Islam in the wake of their incursions. Christianity and Islam condemned Yoruba religion as devil worship, pagan worship, animism, fetishism, and among others.[16] In addition, a handful of people also boycotted Yoruba religion particularly those that have access to western style of life and subsequently embraced Christianity.[17] Many indigenous that were educated also attacked Yoruba religion while some that possessed indigenous tradition concealed some vital information from the younger generation and the potency of the traditions from those that are ready to continue with them. That notwithstanding, the eclipse of the religion does not mean a total demise. In the words of Dopamu, he asserts that indigenous/ Yoruba religion has staged a powerful come back in this global age.[18]The resurgence is monumental and all-embracing because the religion is speaking the language of the people as well as their worldview. It is clear and glaring that the Yoruba religion will continue to survive the test of time.

Going by the changing trends in the experience of Yoruba religion in the advent of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, Awolalu's essay "The Encounter between African Religion and other Religions in Nigeria"[19] cannot be shoveled away. In his essay, he discussed the pacifist principle of "Live and Let Live" which characterized the attitude of the adherents of Yoruba Religion in the face of provocations. On the account of all provocations, the adherents of Yoruba religion maintain accommodating posture even though the religious doctrines of Yoruba religion stand in wholesome contrast to both Christianity and Islam. Nigeria is already a pluralist state.

In the light of the foregoing, contending religious forces in Yoruba society have not provided any historical facts to support any conflict among the adherents of Yoruba Religion. As part of social cohesion, the adherents of Yoruba religion allow re-

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ligion to be a basic base for achieving peace. The pacifist tendency which has singularly characterized the adherents of Yoruba religion has explanation in the uniform way they acknowledge and articulate God. This shows that they see the God as the embodiment of peace, and there would be no alternative to please God without having to love peace.

Yoruba Religious Tenets for Peaceful Coexistence

With all the trends that Yoruba religion is facing in Nigeria today, many of the values of Yoruba religion will continue to survive and be instrumental to the emerging ethos of the West. In view of this, tenets could be termed as moral values of the Yoruba people which have helped to better the lots of the community. The Yoruba religious tenets or moral values find expression in honesty, tolerance, communal humanity, accountability, justice, good character, transparence, impartiality, and chastity among others. These Yoruba tenets are rich cultural heritages that distinguish Yoruba people and them unique in the society. Thus, the Western values are embodiments of setback because of their foreignness.

Furthermore, Yoruba religious tenets are full of indigenous expressions that are embedded in the uniqueness and ingenuity of the Yoruba people. Due to the assimilations and internalizations of wealth of experience, wisdom and moral techniques are attained. It is evident that Yoruba religious tenets are acquired informally, through proverb, local wisdom, indigenous philosophy, and local maxims that are moral sciences that convey truths, based on common sense or practical experience of humanity. A times, the Yoruba religious tenets are expressed through traditional and cultural embodiments viz-a-viz metaphor and sentiment. As earlier stated, that Yoruba religion is passed from generation to generation through the words of mouth, so also the Yoruba religious tenets that are indigenous credentials, are transmitted orally from one generation to the other through the conservation of the truths and sentiments of the society. The above is evident through the recognition of the indigenous people with their religion and values by the International Labour Organization (ILO) thus:

> People in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their decent from the population that inhabit the country, or geographical region to which the country belongs at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of their present state boundaries and who irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural, and political instruction (ILO convention.[20]

The fact remains that, indigenous people are diverse in culture, religion, social, and economic organization, yet they are subjected to a stereotype way of life by the world around them. It may not be out of place to ask for the source(s) of Yoruba religious tenets. Gyekye in his submission depict that the messages purported to have been received occasionally by priests from the deities they serve have moral import and relevant for the society.[21] Gyekye acknowledged that people were in possession of some moral values before those messages came, but the interesting aspect of it is

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that the Yoruba religious tenets are there for sustainability and consolidation of moral values.[22]

Honesty

In the traditional African setting particularly Yoruba, honesty shows in truthfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and fairness. This also stands for lack of deceitfulness and falsehood. Honest people could be depended and counted upon to honour their promises and contracts. Yoruba religious tenets therefore, does not give room for cheating, misappropriation, embezzlement, and deception. In contemporary Nigerian society embezzlement, corrupt practices, and misappropriation have become endemic, endless and a way of life for the nation. Dzugba in his view observes that a trustworthy person is found to be taking care of what belongs to other people or nation.[23] It is part of the Yoruba adage which says that honest people are honest in the little and big acts, this is because "he who is dishonest in a very little thing is also dishonesty in much.[24] Therefore, honest people are needed to make peaceful Coexistence happen in Nigerian society.

Tolerance

Yoruba religion and her adherents are known for their high level of tolerance. Despite the incursions of Christianity and Islam into Nigeria and their attacks on Yoruba religion, the adherents remained and still tolerant. Tolerance has been the embodiment of the Nigerian people until the seed of intolerance was sown by the proselytizing religions of Christianity and Islam due to membership drive. The spirit of intolerance has been directly or indirectly watered and cultured by Nigerian governments who are either Christians or Muslims. This could be deduced from many of our past electioneering campaigns where Christians were told not to vote for Muslim-Muslim ticket and Muslims also insisted that Muslims should also not vote Christian candidates. While Christianity and Islam remain intolerant of each other especially when it comes to governance, which is not healthy, Yoruba religion looks to be the most tolerant. There are cases of the followers engaging in religious conflicts for political reason rather than ensuring peace and stability through rituals and sacrifices to gods and goddesses for polity.[25] To this end, the most surviving virtue today in African and perhaps Nigeria is tolerance that has a long history of the people.

Communality and Brotherhood

In Yoruba religion and her adherents, this is the unrelenting pre-occupation with human welfare. This shows that African society and Nigeria in particular appreciates and thrives on harmonious living and social relationships. This is to say that what is morally good is what promotes social welfare, peace and solidarity in human relationships. Gyekye also opined that communal humanity is identical to the welfare of the individual member of the society.[26] In other words, communal brotherhood includes, kindness, compassion, generosity, hospitality, truthfulness, faithfulness, concern for others, and any other thing that would bring respect, dignity, happiness, and

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justice. All of these are considered humanistic because of their consequences for human well-being. Gyekye views that they are conducive to cooperative and harmonious living, having been fashioned out of the experiences of the indigenous people in living together in society.[27]

On the contrary, indigenous people are promoting the opposite. This could be seen in peoples' expression of selfishness, stealing, rape, incest, kidnapping, suicide, murder, assassination, reckless killing to mention but view. Gyekye also asserts that major reason why two deer walk together is no other reason that, one has to take the mote from the other's eye which shows the fact of reciprocity, togetherness, and wefellings.[28] This is to say that Africa and Nigeria are the center of communal brotherhood. The concept of Ubuntu as expressed by Francis cannot be undermined, because this is seen as not only peace but holistic conception of peace.[29] The essence of *Ubuntu* is to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, peaceful Coexistence and mutual development. It is also the principle of symbiosis, inclusivity, and a sense of share destiny between the people and the communities. The Ubuntu concept in relation to Yoruba religion, peace in the society is not only the absence war, fear, conflict, violence, destruction and human suffering, but also the absence of unequal and unjust structure and cultural practices, security, democratic participation, respect for human rights, development.[30]

Good Character (*Iwa Rere*)

Yoruba religion and cultures place a high premium on good character (*iwa rere*) which is the essence of the Yoruba moral system and religious tenets and the linchpin of the moral wheel. This is the struggle to do the right things and to lead a moral life, the quality of a person's personal character is of paramount importance.[31] It is opined that it is from the people's character that all the actions spring. It is in Yoruba adage that: gentle character is that which enables the rope of life to stay unbroken in one's hand (*iwa pele ni ohun ti ko nje ki okun aye ma baje lowo eni*).[32] This shows that the intention to carry out one's moral duty, the decision to obey moral rules, and the way to achieve happiness, all these depend upon the quality of one's character. The promotion of values such as *Omoluabi* that is, a person of good character encourages mutual respect, trust, and understanding among Nigerians of different ethnic background and faith. The Yoruba religious tenets place values on respecting elders and constituted authority. The value fosters the culture of respect and order which reduce conflicts but promote peaceful resolution of disputes and misunderstanding in the Nigerian multifaith society. Similarly, the intention and ability to refrain from pursuing the morally wrong also depends on the quality of one's character. Therefore, good character is required for peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria.

Justice

This refers to being equitable, fair and just. The Yoruba religious tenets should be incorporated into our political and religious cultures so that justice, equity, and fair play will endure in our multifaith society and actions. This is to say that the adherents of

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Yoruba religion should be acquainted with the essentials of the religion which has to do with justice to God, spirit, ancestors, humankinds, and divinities. It is noted that justice demands respect and toleration of other faith adherents and their view. Justice is summed up in the statement "live and let live."[33] "The spirit of live and let live" is fostered by unity when the society is just and subsequently built on fair play.

Oathtaking

Oathtaking is the process of solemn allegiance which is often entered into by individual or group of individuals. The oathtaking is sacred and calls for steadfastness, loyalty, and truthfulness without which the live of the individual or group of individuals are in danger. In this case the paraphernalia of religion must be respected by the adherents of the faith. In Yoruba traditional setting, oathtaking is sacred and religiously upheld with corresponding effect if not religiously upheld. In the religious circle and political arena, indigenous oathtaking should be encouraged in all the religions and political office holders in Nigeria. This procedure will reduce all forms of misconducts in the Nigerian society.

If this is upheld and promoted, it will produce responsible and responsive, less corrupt and god-fearing citizens that their major preoccupation would be to pursue peaceful Coexistence in the Nigerian multifaith society.

Relevance of Yoruba Religious Tenets on Nigerian Multifaith Society

The Yoruba religious tenets hold significant relevance for fostering peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria's diverse multifaith society. The Yoruba traditional religion with its deep-rooted principles of harmony, respect, and communal living provides a framework that can be instrumental in promoting mutual understanding and tolerance among Nigeria's varied religious groups. The fact remains that Yoruba people, an ethnic group from southwestern Nigeria, have rich cultural heritage with numerous tenets that promote peaceful Coexistence. These tenets are highly relevant in fostering harmony in the diverse Nigerian multifaith society.

The relevance of Yoruba tenets emphasis on communal living and collective responsibility. This is as a result of the fact that an injury on one is an injury on others which brings about collective problem solving that leads to a stronger and cohesive society. The Yoruba tenets also bring about tolerance and ability to live harmoniously with people from different backgrounds. It should be noted that Yoruba practice a blend of traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam with mutual respect. This pluralism serves as a model for religious tolerance that is crucial in a country with significant religious diversity. It must be understood that harmonious living is essential in Nigeria with multifaith and multi-ethnic society to promote peaceful Coexistence and reduce religious and ethnic tensions.

Yoruba religious tenets can also provide alternative dispute resolution mechanism which can be effective and culturally appropriate like the use of legal system. This could be achieved with the use of traditional methods such as family meeting, community council, and Oba (Kings) in resolving disputes.

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In Yoruba religion, there are rituals and festivals that promote peace, harmony, and community bounding. This type of cultural bonding and practices can bring people together to foster unity and a sense of shared identity.

Conclusion

The Yoruba religious tenets of honesty, tolerance, communal and brotherhood, justice, good character, and oath-taking are highly relevant for promoting peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's multifaith society. When these values are applied in a broader context, religious tension can be reduced, unity can be fostered, and above all, a society where diverse religious beliefs are respected and celebrated can be built. As Nigeria continues to navigate its religious diversity, the Yoruba religious worldview offers a timeless model for living harmoniously in a multifaith society.

By embracing the above principles, Nigeria can build a more harmonious, inclusive, and resilient society where diversity is celebrated and unity is strengthened. Integrating Yoruba religious tenets and values with modern peace-building initiatives can bring about a future where religious tolerance and mutual respect are the norms contributing to lasting peace and stability in Nigeria multifaith society.

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