

SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: THE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt of the fact that Nigeria is a Multi-Religious cum Multi-Cultural society which portend that conflict or misunderstanding is inevitable due to the pluralistic nature of the nation. Thus, there is need to create a platform that will bring people together to strategize on possible ways to sensitize citizens on the need to tolerate each other irrespective of their divergent religious views and affiliations, thereby impressing the consciousness of tolerance and good interpersonal relationship. In a single phrase the main trust of this work is to sell the idea of living together in peace not minding our religious/cultural ties which can as well be called social cohesion. Dick (2003), assert that social cohesion is the "willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper". This connotes the ability of people to freely work to achieve set goals that will lead to the development and well-being of the society. This further connotes that if members of the society are given proper orientation on the mechanism to impress on the hearts of individuals the willingness to share their risks and challenges together in order to build a peaceful society, there will be a high level of tolerance amongst the people. As this strategy if achieved, will go a long way to bring prosperity and development to the people. Social cohesion takes different dimensions ranging from Identity, Culture, Politics, Religion, etc. This paper shall be looking at the religious dimension with emphasis on the African Traditional Religious Perspective.

Key Words: Social cohesion, Religion, Dialogue, Inter-religious Dialogue, African Traditional Religion

Definition of Concepts

Social Cohesion:

The concept of social cohesion refers to developing strategies for good interpersonal relationship and peaceful co-existence which creates confidence and sense of security amongst members of the same society. It involves shared values, solidarity and better understanding of members; thereby reducing disparities which could have created gaps between members.

In analyzing this concept, it is important to have an over-view of the different notions of International Organizations, since the concept under review is a global phenomenon. It is imperative to align our thoughts to a global stand. From the United Nations report, a cohesive society is one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, recognition and legitimacy. Such societies are not necessarily demographically homogenous. Rather, by respecting diversity, they harness the potentials residing in their societal diversity (in terms of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and skills). The United Nations Development Programme meanwhile defines social cohesion as the state of a society's convergence, or the 'common bonds' that unify

different people and groups that share space or territory. This starts when people buy into and interact with each other based on a common set of political, economic and social institutions. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that while social cohesion is often perceived to be the overarching goal of social policy, little agreement exists on what it means (OECD 2012). The organization further maintains that, a cohesive society works towards the well-being of all members, minimizing disparities and trying to avoid marginalization within and between groups. Thus, social cohesion can be reinforced by fighting discrimination, social exclusion and inequalities, by building social capital (i.e., networks of relationships, trust and identity between and within different groups of society) and by enabling upward social mobility. UNICEF considers social cohesion to refer to 'the quality of coexistence between the multiple groups that operate within a society. Groups can be distinguished in terms of ethnic and socio-cultural origin, religious and political beliefs, social class or economic sector or on the basis of interpersonal characteristics such as gender and age. Quality of coexistence between the groups can be evaluated along the dimensions of mutual respect and trust, shared values and social participation, life satisfaction and happiness as well as structural equity and social justice.'(UNICEF, 2015). The World Bank describes social cohesion 'as the glue that bonds society together, promoting harmony, a sense of community, and a degree of commitment to promoting the common good. Beyond the social relations that bridge ethnic and religious groups, vertical linkages in which state and market institutions interact with communities and people can further cement the cohesiveness of a society if they are inclusive, transparent, and accountable'(World Bank Report 2001). It also implies a set of accepted norms and rules around inclusion and equity, social and national membership.

Dialogue:

The society we find ourselves consist of diverse religious traditions with each competing for relevance and prominence in public space. Nigeria for instance, has had a fair share of religious conflict which resulted to grave consequences of loss of lives and properties. Hence, it is imperative to create platforms for discussions that will birth a peaceful atmosphere for good interpersonal co-existence. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, defines dialogue as a formal discussion between two groups or more countries, essentially to solve a problem or bring a dispute to an end. In explaining this concept of dialogue, Jaja (2005) posits that dialogue is a discussion between people or a conversation that deserves patient questioning and listening to each other's views and a willingness to co-operate in a common venture with a view to eradicating suspicion, skepticism, hatred, prejudice, fear, mistrust and religious faith. Another scholar, Mala (1985) views dialogue as a "process in which individuals and groups learn to wipe out fear and distrust of each other and develop new relations based on mutual trust". In the same vein, Iiori (1993) maintains that dialogue is a continuous process that involves peace-making and strategies towards peace building. He further stated that it is a means of forging greater relations, harmony, understanding, tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

For Mulder (1985) dialogue is "an encounter between people with direct commitment, the most important encounter of which takes place at the level of normal daily life". In another vein, Silvia in Mala (1985) is of the view that dialogue is far from being a temptation to syncretism but guards against it, because in dialogue we get to know one another's faith in depth hence one's faith is tested, refined and sharpened.

Inter-Religious Dialogue:

Inter-religious dialogue in a lay man's word can be viewed as interaction between different religious traditions. This is very essential for a harmonious pluralistic society since man as described by Wotogbe-Weneka (2014) is "the only religiously conscious being, through his ability to reflect and ponder over and around his ability to extrapolate into a 'Being or Force' higher than himself which demands his loyalty and worship". The importance of inter-religious dialogue cannot be overemphasized as everyone naturally, consciously or unconsciously tend to jealously guard his religious beliefs since it makes meaning to him and gives a sense of spiritual satisfaction. Thus, would not for any reason want his beliefs system to be trivialized or trampled upon by adherents of other faiths who due to ignorance may undermine the religious beliefs of others. Hence, the popular saying "Religion is Highly Inflammable" connotes the sensitive nature of the issues of religion in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. No wonder Jaja (2005) defined inter-religious dialogue as "talk between two or more religious group" he further expatiated that it is a dialogue that involves the sharing of religious experiences, opinions and ideas among different religious denominations based on the principles of "give and take or tolerance" this is the main reason why platforms for inter-religious dialogue need to be taken seriously since it creates opportunities for purposeful discussions which is aimed at stimulating unity and understanding among people of different religious traditions. Again, inter-religious dialogue is as well called inter-faith dialogue which means the cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different faith or different spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. This definitions gives us a clear view of why interreligious dialogue is unavoidable if the society must peacefully co-exist.

African Traditional Religion:

African Traditional Religion is an autochthonous religion, this implies that it is indigenous to the continent of Africa, just like other tribal religions from other parts of the world; African religious traditions are largely defined along community lines. The religion involves teachings, practices and rituals that lend structures to African native societies. The religion also play a great role in the cultural understanding and awareness of the people of their communities. Suffice to say that African traditional religion is a prescribed way in which Africans exhibits their beliefs and worship of the supernatural in response to their environment and experience (Ikenga-Metuh, E. 1987). For Idowu (1973) African traditional religion is the religion of Africans which reveals the spirituality of the African belief of the Ultimate reality of the Supreme Being in relationship to man. While Ekwunife (1990) defines African religion as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of traditional African response to their believed revealing Superhuman Ultimate and which are rooted from time immemorial in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears²⁹

Looking at the place of African religion in the society Walter et.al (1994) posit that Africans are the carriers of their religions, they expatiated by saying that the religion is not limited to a

particular location but practiced both in the social and geographical levels of the society. The indigenous religion is meant to checkmate all aspects of the society for orderliness in the society. This checks ranges from environment, human activities like economy, politics and the likes. Abanuka (1999) asserts that African religions are an embodiment of a mythical narrative, he recognizes Idowu's expression of spirituality of the African environment. This implies that the mythical beliefs of Africans on the consequences of ill conducts in the society restrains man from certain behaviours which are inimical to the society thereby resulting to a peaceful society because nobody wants to be punished by the gods of the land.

In the same vein, Awolalu and Dopamu (1994) opined that African religion is the practice of the people in Africa. This definition was corroborated by Owete and Iheanacho (2009) as they maintain that African religion is the indigenous religious belief and practices of the African people. Africans have the belief that there is no religion without man; this is embedded in their world-view because for the Africans religion exist because man is involved. This brings to clarity Wotogbe-Weneka's (2014) view that man is the only "religiously conscious being". From another flank, Nabofa (1994) relates African religion to symbols as he posits that the African religion like other religions are embedded with signs and symbolism thus suggesting that symbols connote man's experience of the divine revelations and expressions.

From the conceptual clarifications above, it has been established that African traditional religion is a lived religion and not a confessed one as the religion is not just domiciled within the African geographical continents but is seen wherever an African is found; the African-ness of an African reveals the religion wherever they are found since it is an all-encompassing religion.

The African Perspective of Social Cohesion:

Social Cohesion in the African perspective is hinged on the premise of the principle of communalism which according to Mbiti's Philosophy is "I am because we are, and because we are, I am", (Mbiti, 1969). This ideology constitute the core of African value which has bounded Africans from time immemorial before the infiltration of foreign culture and religion. So, for the Africans living together, social cohesion is the basis of existence. For this reason, Africans address themselves as brothers and sisters. Kinship ties such as aunty, uncle, niece, nephew and cousin were not prominent in addressing relatives until the influx of modernity. The kinship title stated above creates boundaries and cracks the walls of social cohesion as prior to the eve of foreign religions and its agents, Africans trace their blood line and relationship to generations unknown and accord them the respect that is due them.

Interestingly, some brothers took oaths never to hurt themselves, thus, as they multiplied with the passage of time and became communities of their own; these communities despite the distances, during crisis do not shed the blood of each other, if done in error, sacrifices are made to placate the fore-fathers, and the earth deities in order to re-enforce peace. Failure to do this attracts calamities on the offenders. This is because they still see themselves as brothers despite the length of time (Wuchendu Amadi, 2021, oral source). For instance, when the researcher was a teacher at a community secondary school, in one of the Ikwerre Communities in Rivers State, Nijerja. In the cause of preparations for our annual inter-house sports in 2009, a student mistakenly inflicted injury on his colleague during the rehearsals which resulted to a sudden outcry on the field because this boys were believed to come from communities that is bounded by the oath of their father not to do anything that will inflict injury on each other. This oath in the African traditional believe system is so strong that breaking it always lead to severe

consequences that might result to death if proper actions are not taken, so everyone tries to ensure that the sanctity of the covenant that was made by their parents and existed from time immemorial is upheld. Again, the story of blood oath and its mythical potency as believed by their forebears from time immemorial is transmitted from one generation to another, thus, impressing it on the minds of their children to always desist from actions that could lead to bloodshed. With the consciousness of the consequence of blood spill, the students screamed and ran to me as their teacher to report that somebody has committed a terrible offense. I was shocked at their gestures! Upon inquiry, the students said that it is a taboo for people from both communities to inflict any blood flowing injury on each other because it is an offense on the land (*Eli diety*). The teachers from the community also confirmed the story and concluded that with the severity of the incident, the case needs to be taken home to their parents since blood is involved, the necessary rituals must be carried out to create stability else the calamity will be severe. Thus, to create equilibrium and stability in the society, a matter that happened in school that would have been handled officially within the purview of the school environment was taken home to be settled traditionally because of an old time oath which was taken by their forebears to maintain a peaceful social cohesion among the people. Upon further inquiry, the researcher was informed that these two communities are regarded as brothers, they address themselves as *Nkpekini-eni* which means people from the same umbilical cord. Blood is believed to be so sacred that a brother is not to kill a mosquito or bee on the body of his fellow because it will be assumed that he has shed his brother's blood. For this people, the immemorial oath taken by their forebear forbids them to shed blood of each other as they are believed to be from the same parents, they are also forbidden from marrying themselves. For instance, the entire Odegwu and Emohua axis of Ikwerre in Rivers State which comprises of fifteen towns and villages are forbidden from shedding blood, if done in secret, the deities *Etina* and *Ruvisi* must reveal it through different ailments and diseases if not placated. This is because the sacredness of the land is paramount (Anwuri Douglas, Oral source 2022).

It is amazing to know that an immemorial oath was still active on the minds of the teenagers in the secondary school even in modern day. It was discovered that teenagers were cautious of the kind of play they engaged in because of the communal oath of not shedding the blood of each other. Still on the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, among the Ndele people, it is a taboo to also shed the blood of a fellow Ndele person, so during crisis among cult rivals, the cultists fully armed with the knowledge of an immemorial oaths go out to call their counterparts outside Ndele land to come and fight for them because they know the consequences of shedding the blood of a fellow indigene. The researcher also lost a cousin who was invited to fight for his cult group, he died in the cause of the fight for his group; that was always the result as most of the cultists who go there to fight are strangers. They die since they do not have mastery of the terrain and environment of the place, they are easily trapped and killed by their rivals. The Ndele land forbids indigenes from exposing any of her members to any form of danger that will lead to threat to life. It is believed that the deities will fight for themselves in exposing any form of illicit ill a person is involved in, if not in life, it will be at death. This has been the basis of peaceful coexistence in most African communities before the birth of the new religions (Rowland Alete, 2021 oral source). Furthermore, the Ikwerre people instills a mindset of peaceful social cohesion among her indigenes through different oral sources especially songs of the traditional values which are always sung in social gatherings, such songs eulogizes good character and great achievement through dint of hard work. Prominent among these songs is

Igbule wenei-jinu-nye zo..wu....Igbule wenei-jinu-nye zo..wu...
Obu-ayiwa –ayiwa chei obu-ayiwa ayiwa,
Obu-ayiwa-ayiwa chei obu-ayiwa.....
Eluwa chei-wey awa-wey.. obu-ayiwa-wa we...y.

In the course of every activities just like the example of the students given above, songs are repository of the norms and values of the land. The song above literarily means that all Ikwerre people are brothers, because if you kill your brother, you will not have a kinsman. The song impresses on the minds of the listeners never to think of bloodshed. This shows that from the traditional African believe system sharing social life and maintaining cordial relationship is an ethical guide that shapes the character and mode of interpersonal relationship that exist amongst the people.

Another very important point to note is the fact that a core cohesive aspect of the African religions lies in its characteristics. First it is Pervasive, that is, it is all embracing as it permeates all facets of life and there is no difference between the profane and the sacred. The religion is not selective nor discriminatory. This implies that the religion carries every one along irrespective of their status in the society.

The religion has no founder, hence nobody fights for abusing any deity, priest or ancestors because the deities fight for themselves if the need arise. This is different from the two dominant religions who fight to the extent of destroying lives and properties just to protect the image of their religion. For instance, in 1986, some students went for demonstration which resulted to loss of lives because some persons pulled the statue of Jesus Christ (Owete et al, 2008). Another instance is the riots that ensued in 2015 (BBC 2020), claiming lives and properties as well, because someone drew the cartoon of Prophet Mohammad not even in Nigeria yet lives were lost within the country because adherents of these religions were trying to protect the ones they hold in high esteem. Still on protection of religious belief, in May, 2022. Deborah Samuel a year-two students of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto was stoned to death because of her complain of incessant post of Islamic religious text on an academic WATSAP platform which was purely dedicated for academic information, her complain was tagged blasphemy and it resulted to her untimely death (Punch Newspaper, 2022). This is not so with the African religions as deities fights their battles by themselves. The questions then is, why do Christians and Muslims fight to protect their religion? Is the God they serve not able to fight for Himself? Nevertheless, they ascribe wonderful appellations such as "the Almighty God", "Great in battle", "the all-knowing God" God of Peace, Religion of peace and the likes. Yet adherents of these religions still go for physical combat in the name of their God. This is an aberration in African traditional religious setting because offenders will receive message from the deities to carry out placating rituals or face the wrath of the gods. Hence, the gods does not need any person to fight for them. African religion has no written text unlike other religions, its tenets are enshrined in myths, folk tales, music, taboos, sanctions etc. Although, it is not documented, it is daily impressed on the hearts and minds of members of the society. For instance, the teenagers that were very conscious of the blood that was mistakenly spilled on the field of play during the school inter-house sports rehearsals. More so, since the deities fight for themselves as the security agents of the land, once a person commits atrocities or any form of havoc in the most secret place, it is always blown open, if not in life then at death or through open confession by the culprit. For instance, let any man whose land forbids sleeping with a woman in the farm go and try it, within days or weeks depending on the community the manifestations of the offence will propel the

person to confess and placate the land. Another example is, when a symbol of prohibition such as red piece of cloth and white chalk is placed at location or object, it connotes caution and naturally people will adhere to that caution sign. Again, when a person dies after committing a heinous crime without disclosing it in order to be given a befitting burial at home, the gods will exhume such corpse after one or two weeks of burial as a way of punishment even at death especially in Ndele community of Ikwerre land.

Furthermore, the African religious tradition does not proselytize, it is not mission minded, that is, it does not go canvassing for adherents which often cause problems and perceived breach of rights. African are born into their ethnic religions, they are immersed into it through the years as transmitted from one generation to another. In the traditional religion, people assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices that is passed on to them by their forebears. Although, these traditions handed down from time immemorial, each generation tries to modify some traditional practices to suit themselves in respect to historical experience and needs. More so, there is no systematic dogmas which a person is expected to accept. This makes African religion and its practices very apt in dealing with issues of social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

African religion is liberal and embracing to other religions yet its tenets and values have not always been taken into cognizance when looking at issues of social cohesion. Interestingly, it is the background of every converted Christians and Muslims; its adherents have not raised any dust on the mass exodus of Africans to the new religions as they still go back to African religion to seek help when the need arise. The tolerant nature of the religion makes it very imperative for other religion to learn from, in order to achieve a peaceful and cohesive society. This is because despite the fact that African religion is always sidelined in religious discuss, it has been the basis of last resort to most adherents of both religion (Christianity and Islam), issues such as severe/mysterious sicknesses, loss of valuable item, security etc. makes them run back to the traditional African priest or diviner for solutions. Today in Rivers State, to curb the menace of insecurity, OSPAC; a traditional security outfit is used to maintain peace and order in parts of the state, this again indicates that African religion is inevitable in the issues of social cohesion.

The communal philosophy of 'I am because we are' is still upheld in the traditional African setting as blood shed or suicide remains a taboo in the traditional society. Hence, even on health grounds Euthanasia is not a common measure in our hospital because for Africans, life is precious and even up to a bedridden stage a sick person is cared for, until the last breath is taken. People were seen as brothers and sisters. Superficially, one sees this kind of relationship among the Christians and Muslims; yet crisis still prevails amongst them due to their religious divides which negates the African philosophy of communalism.

Suffice to say that the pitfall of African religion may be that it is and was too tolerant to allow other religions to dislodge its structure of value for life, communalism and tolerance for others; thereby disintegrating instead of integrating the people. This fact brings to bear the fact that African traditional values and structure is the key to a peaceful social cohesion. Its tolerant nature is a pointer to the truth that the solution the society is looking for is in our traditional religion. However, the problem is that we have been so indoctrinated to the extent that we see African traditional believe system as barbaric even though we are all practitioners.

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