

Chapter Ten

RELIGION AS A VEHICLE FOR PROMOTING AFRICAN NORMS AND VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA SOCIETY

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Abstract

Africans from time immemorial have unique culture which is evidenced in their ways of life. Their norms and values as elements of their culture are embedded in religion. Sadly, in contemporary Nigerian society, there is high rate of neglect of African societal norms and values while several vices such as dishonesty, disrespect for elders and authority, indecent dressing, divorce, murder, lack of patriotism abound. It is against this background that the paper examines some traditional African norms and values such as the marriage institution, sense of respect for authority and elders, sense of community life, sense of good human relation and truthfulness as well as sense of value for human life. It further considers religion as a means of revitalizing these norms and values. Religion inculcates moral discipline in people and confers legitimacy on the norms and values of the society. More so, it guides behaviour, established rules, defines relationships and ensures social control for the society. A number of recommendations were made and emphasis was laid on the need for religious bodies and government to liaise together in the inculcation of good moral values on the Nigerian populace.

Keywords: Religion, Africa, Norms, Values, Nigeria.

Introduction:

African societies, as organized and functioning human communities have undoubtedly developed norms and values which are intended to guide social and moral behaviour. These norms and values are deeply rooted in the traditional African religion which defines the moral conduct of the people. Kunhiyop (2008) observes that despite the indisputable cultural diversity that arises from Africa, in particular, Nigeria's ethnic pluralism, there are underlining affinities in many areas of their lives and this is surely true in the African religious and moral outlook. Religion can be described as the beliefs and practices of a people or society relative to the sacred. It is an aspect of human behaviour and culture which permeates every society (Olumati, 2012). Thus, it addresses human behaviour and gives meaning to human-culture and institution as well as groups and organizations.

Religion presents itself as the cornerstone of the foundation of the African people, since it dictates their social lives through norms and values. It also provides incentives for people to live moral lives. According to Nnadi (2004) the ethics of the African society is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong; what is good or bad character; it is also embedded in the conception of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society; it is embedded furthermore in the forms or patterns of behaviours that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and corporative living, justice and fairness. In the same manner, the Christian Religion which has permeated the African soil teaches the right moral values as stated in the commandments. For example, the Bible enjoins adherents not to commit adultery, kill, steal, or engage in any form of evil but to love God and honour the elders and people in authorities (Exo. 20:12-17).

Originally, Nigeria in African Continent upheld and practiced the African norms and values. Conversely, in cotemporary Nigerian society, there is high rate neglect of indigenous societal norms and values, while several vices abound. Some of these vices are dishonesty, disrespect for elders and authority, marital infidelity, divorce, robbery, indecent dressing, indiscriminate murder of innocent souls, abortion, cultism, greed, selfishness, poor attitude to work, lack of patriotism and so on.

To correct these anomalies, this paper therefore examines some African norms and values such as: the marriage institution, sense of respect for authority and elders, sense of community life, sense of good human relations and truthfulness, sense of value for human life and others. It further examines the role of religion in promoting these values.

Definition of Concepts

The Concept of Religion

The term Religion has been defined by several authors in various ways. Attansay (2006) defines religion as "a belief and worship of Supernatural Being that observes all human affairs and is interested in them". According to Agang (2009) "Religion is part of the social system which gives a society its social and cultural identity, self affirmation and self definition". The above definition is in line with this write up because it projects religion as that which dictates the societal norms and values, hence it is a significant element in human life.

The Concept of Norm

Norm is the accepted standard or pattern of behaviour or way of conduct within a given society (George, 2012). Marini (2014) defines norm as a belief about the acceptability of behaviour. A norm indicates the degree to which a behaviour is regarded as right versus wrong, allowable versus unallowable. It is an evaluative criterion that specifies a rule of behaviour, indicating what a behaviour ought to be or ought not to be. Therefore, norm as a behavioural rule, produces a feeling of obligation.

The Concept of Values

Macmillan English Dictionary (2007) defines value as the principles and beliefs that influence the behaviour and way of life of a particular group or community. According to Nduka (2005) a value is a belief about the desirability of a mode, means, or end of action. Values are desires, interest, goals, ideals, approvals/disapprovals, preferences and standards. Also, Schaefer (2003) states that values are those collective conceptions of what is considered good, derivable, proper or bad, undesirable, and improper in a culture. They indicate what people in a given culture prefer as well as what they find important and morally right or wrong. Values may be specific such as honoring one's parents and owning a home or they may be more general, such as health, love and democracy. In a nutshell, values refer to those codes of behaviour which are highly esteemed and cherished by members of a society.

African Norms and Values

Africans, in particular, Nigerians from time immemorial have unique culture which is noticeable in their ways of life. Their norms and values as elements of their culture are highlighted through the following: marriage institution, sense of respect for authority and elders; sense of community life, sense of good human relations and honesty as well as sense of value for human life.

Marriage Institution

Marriage is a relationship between two persons of the opposite sex who are legally jointed together in matrimony. Madukwe (2010) opines that marriage is a social institution that is founded on and governed by social and religious norms of the society. It is a union of a man and woman which is contracted between persons of opposite sex. The sex of the parties is significant in determining whether the marriage is legal or illegal.

The traditional African society believes in polygamous marriage which involves a man and two or more women. Chapman (2003) maintains that marriage is the

oldest institution established on earth as an avenue for a man and woman to express the innate love deposited in them by God. The African society upholds the view that from inception God commanded that people of opposite sex should be married and procreate. Africans regard marriage as criteria for the measurement of a responsible man in the society. This implies that a man of integrity should be married to as many wives as he desires depending on his capability. The African society expects that in every marriage institution there should be childbearing to strengthen the union and for continuity and perpetuation of the man's family name.

Obviously, Africans have great value for the marriage institution which they regard as sacred; hence the partners must be faithful to each another. In a situation where any of parties violate the rule, such will be severely punished by the gods. Buttressing this fact, Scheafer (2003) asserts that a culture that values the institution of marriage may have norms and strict sanction which prohibit the act of adultery. Moreover, the marriage institution forms the family; which inculcates the appropriate moral values in their children which enable them to tell the truth, become industrious and considerate in their dealings with others.

Respect for Authority and Elders

In the traditional African society, it is generally believed that elders are close to the ancestors who are the intermediaries between the people and the gods; hence they are the custodians of the laws of the land. Therefore, it is the duty of the younger ones to give them due respect. Thus, Okwueze (2004) posits that the young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often taught of the importance of respecting elders in order for them to be respected when they become elders.

In addition, the elders in Africa are respected because they are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young. For example, in Igbo parlance, it is said that the "words of one's elders are greater than amulets", it means that they give more protection than the amulet does. In African concept, the elders wield power and authority, the legitimate power lay in the office sanctioned by ancestral norms, not in the person, and the person lost his right to exact obedience once he abused that office. In Nnadi's (2004) words, African's generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when none can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness.

Sense of Community Life

In the traditional African setting, the sense of community life entails security. Africans believe in communalism which connotes concern for human beings and their well being. As an offshoot of extended family system, there is interconnectedness among the members of the community, there is care for one by all, there is the bearing of one another's burden and everyone is his brother's keeper. There is a mutual assistance for one another. The haves help those who do not have so that no one perishes because of wants while his next door neighbour lives in affluence. There is sharing of virtually everything (Madukwe, 2010).

Undoubtedly, the community is the custodian of the individual; hence he must go where the community goes (Okwueze, 2004). The idea of "we" and "us" is entrenched in the African's right from childhood, so that as they grow, they know that they belong to and must function within the community in which they are rooted. Mbiti (1982) avers thus, in traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group.

Sense of Good Human Relations and Truthfulness

In Africa, especially Nigeria, good human relationship is highly priced because it facilitates interpersonal relationship and unity in the community. The art of dialogue is cherished since it affords people the opportunity to freely discuss their problems and proffer suggestions and solutions together. The unwillingness to disclose one's private or personal affairs can be interpreted as bad manner or signs of enmity. Africans are of the opinion that he who discusses his affairs with others hardly runs into difficulties or makes mistakes in the execution of his plans. Life in African community is based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. Kunhiyop (2004) asserts that humane living among an African people is a concept which is defined as "a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values, a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human being".

Furthermore African's regard truth as a salient moral value which must be possessed by every individual. It is expected that everybody in the society should demonstrate the highest standard of integrity to avoid having a questionable

character (Attansay, 2006). This truthfulness extends to all the details of the information they give out, hence it must be told irrespective of the situation.

Sense of Value for Human Life

Generally, Africans in particular, Nigerians believe that human life is sacred hence shedding of blood is abhorred. The most fundamental of all human rights is the right to live. Even to perform one's duty, one has to live. According to Razaq (2010), the European convention of human Right 1953 stated in section one of the Article Two that "every one's right to life shall be protected by law. No one shall deprive another of life intentionally, save in the executions of a sentence of court following conviction of a crime for which the penalty provided by law". This explains the fact that naturally man has the right to life.

In African concept, life is not only sacred but also sacrosanct and people are bound to respect it. Murder is not encouraged especially within the clan, but officially committed during war or self defence after all negotiations for peace have failed. Emeka (2015) observes that people who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the people of the community.

The Role of Religion in Promoting African Norms and Values in Contemporary Nigerian Society

In the contemporary Nigerian society, there is high rate of negligence of the indigenous societal norms and values which has resulted in moral decadence. Against this background, religion has a unique role to transform the Nigerian populace through the revival of these norms and values. The efficacy of religion in inculcating right moral values on individuals cannot be over emphasized. Religion is at the root of human existence hence every religion including the African traditional religion teaches and re-shapes individuals character through ideal moral values.

The discussions so far on some African norms and values reveal the fact that they are deeply ingrained in religion. Thus, religion is indispensable to man due to the significant service it renders to humanity. Okwueze (2004) defines religion as that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices, which not only identify or define the supernatural and the sacred and man's relationships thereto, but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what is good or what is bad with the supernatural.

Certainly, religion draws man's attention to a relationship with the supernatural which enables him to exercise the fear of God in his dealings with his counterparts and the environment at large. Invariably, in the present day Nigeria where disrespect for elders and the authority as well as murder and kidnapping have become rampant, religion will build in people the spirituality that respects persons, life and nature. Such spirituality would enable both the youths and adults to respect one another and ultimately imbibe the respect for life, nature and environment (Attansay, 2006). Thus, Razaq (2010) affirms that life is a precious gift from God. As the benevolent source of that gift, it is compulsory to appreciate it. God's interest in human life is further seen in his advise to maintain a calm heart and to avoid immoral practices that can lead to the destruction of life.

Religion teaches and instills personal discipline in people. The power of personal ascetic living helps people to exercise restraint in whatever they are doing both in the educational, religions, business, social and political sectors. According to Attansay (2006) religion builds rectitude of life. The more the people live organized lives, the more they can expect organized lives from others and so are able to show others an organized life. It is high time that Nigerians imbibe the virtue of accountability, since it is a strong religious value. Most Nigerians have lost the meaning of this word.

In recent times, marital infidelity and divorce have become the other of the day. This is contrary to the past where marriage was considered a social obligation and great pressure was placed on the parties to stay together. Divorce was seen as immoral act, an affront to decent people. However, since religion inculcates moral discipline into people, it will ultimately unite, promote, harmony, peaceful co-existence and tolerance among married couples. Akamu (2012) reiterates that religion confers legitimacy on the norms and values of the society. By so doing, it guides behaviour, establishes rules, defines relationships and ensures social control for the society-among and outside its members.

Conclusion

The traditional African norms and values are gradually dwindling in contemporary Nigerian society. To salvage this situation, religion should be fully embraced. The reason is because religion gives objectivity to moral values. It creates an in-depth fear in man that enables him to have good human relationship which promotes positive and effective transformation of the society. Obviously, transformation of Nigerian society depends on sincerity of purpose, genuine

intention devoid of corruption and all manner of vices, which can be attained through the African norms and values.

Recommendations

- i. There should be moral upbringing of children by their parents to checkmate their unruly behaviour and exhibit characters that conform to the societal norms and values.
- ii. Religious and moral education should be made compulsory at all levels of educational institutions in Nigeria to inculcate good morals into the youths and promote the norms and values of the society.
- iii. Religious bodies and Government should liaise together in the inculcation of good morals into the people in order to enhance good living that will shun indiscipline of various kinds in the society for the promotion of African norms and values.
- iv. The community, home, church and government should educate the masses on good human relations to avoid moral decadence in the society.
- v. The norms and values of the society should be re-vitalized to re-orientate and enable the Nigerian populace live a better life.
- vi. Honesty and excellence should be encouraged and rewarded in the society as a lesson for others.
- vii. The elderly ones should show high level of integrity and exemplary lives in their relationship with others in their discharge of duties.

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