

Religion as the Matrix of Nigerian Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses religion as the matrix of Nigerian culture. Religion as the mother of science permeates life, people and culture, there is no culture without a definite religion, and culture on the other hand is summed up as the totality of people's way of life. Religion is the matrix of culture in the sense that it serves as an avenue for understanding culture because of its features such as beliefs, practices, norms and values which cut across people, institutions and relationships. Religion complements other cultural agencies of mobilization and change in promoting peace, tolerance and love among individuals in the society thereby enhancing and promoting culture. Religion as an element of culture requires man to act right, do good to oneself and others thereby strengthening relationships, norms and values which are particulars of culture. However, there are scholars who hold the view that this relationship should not be stressed and that religion and culture should be allowed to operate separately without one interfering in the other. They argue essentially from the position that religion mixed with culture is most likely to imbibe various vices associated with culture. Thus, the objective of this paper therefore is to give meaning to the concept of religion and culture, the relationship between religion and culture. Also, it will appraise the role of religion in promoting culture and the influence of religion on Nigerian culture. Data for this work were aided through the application of primary and secondary methods of data collection. The findings revealed that religion is a very good phenomenon in the life and culture of the Nigerian people, owing to the fact that with religion, people aspire to do good and relate well with others in the society thereby enhancing their culture.

Keywords: Culture, Matrix, Religion, Ritual killings, Society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a deeply religious society and this significantly influences the cultural values. A society that is culturally pluralized with over 250 ethnic groups each with its own language, culture and religion (Okpa, Ajah, Eze&Enweonwu, 2022a). Thus, religion permeates life, people and culture, there is no culture without a definite religion, and culture on the other hand is summed up as the totality of people's way of life.

Conceptualization of Concepts

Religion – This phenomenon has been an age long concept and very difficult to define. Throughout history and the dark ages of the human race earliest cultures, religion has been a vital and pervasive feature of human culture. The task of giving a universally accepted definition of religion has been very prodigious and very complex in spite of its long history and study. The word religion is originally a Latin word religio. Its etymology is obscure, unclear and equivocal. In view of this fact, Maduro (1982) has this to say:

Some think it is related to re-ligare: 'to re-fasten', or to 'tie tightly again' – in which case its etymological meaning will be something like 'the strict and faithful observance of a commitment by which one has bound oneself.' Others however, think it comes from re-legere: to re-read or to interpret literally (a manuscript, for instance). Finally still others believe religio derives from re-ligere meaning to re-elect, to re-choose, to accept definitely (a way of life, for example) (p.3).

Religion is conceived and defined differently by various scholars. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, theologians and Marxists examine, scrutinize researches and analyse religion, thereby seeing religion from different perspectives. Thus, according to Uche (2006), "the reason for the inability in having an acceptable definition of religion includes the fact

that scholars of other disciplines other than religion dabble into religion they are poorly equipped to grapple with” (p.156). Such scholars involved in the definition only reflect their beliefs, practices and actions. Some writers made passing comments on religion as an aspect of social system in the society. It should be noted also that such passing comments are based either on ignorance, prejudice, and bias, or preconceived notions which do not reflect a true picture of religion.

However, Madu (2003) defined religion as man’s recognition of the existence of forces beyond him who he believes created the universe, sustained, preserves and provides for this universe. In corroboration to Madu’s assertion, Omoregbe (1993) postulates that:

Whether such a deity really exists or is simply the figment of the imagination of the religious man is not important to the concept of religion, as long as the deity is really believed to actually exist. For man, the deity is a reality. The concept of deity is essential to the concept of religion. Thus, where a belief in a deity is lacking, there can be no religion, because religion is essentially a relationship established between man and a deity, i.e., a transcendent personal being believed to exist (p.3).

In addition Ginner (1992) also defined, “religion as a system of beliefs about sacred elements and forces of the cosmos including man’s place in it, which provides meanings about ultimate notions such as life, death, etc and entails a number of practices or rituals” (p. 205). In his own view, Durkheim (1947) defined religion, “as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, to things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community all those who adhere to them” (p. 37). With these definitions of religion amongst numerous others, a layman will simply understand in the simplest notion that religion has its roots in the awareness that there is an ultimate reality which is greater than man.

Culture – It is true of the saying that there is no cultureless society; it is not conceivable to have a society without culture or worse still a culture without a society. It is very common to hear people saying the word “culture” in their daily interactions. When we refer to people as being uncultured, we mean that they are timid, unrefined, primitive and uneducated whereas a cultured person is one who is refined, outspoken, civilized and learned in all ramifications (Eze, Ajah,

Okpa&Ngwu, 2022a). This does not truly connote the true meaning of culture.

Hence, culture as a concept is only meaningful in the context of human society. In other words, it presumes existence of human society and is imbued with tools and skills with which the human society is enabled to work. As an entity that incorporates the totality of a people’s way of life, culture is both incorporative of and synonymous with a given society’s way of life. In addition, Uche and Udezo (2011) states that, “culture is a reference point in many social engagements such as marriage, chieftaincy, education among others. The culture of a people determines or offers a balanced, broad based and improved understanding of the people, institution and relationships in society” (p. 41). A narrow view of culture could be understood from the perspective of how culture impinges on their various spheres of calling, learning, teaching and disciplines. Culture flows like a river from age to age, generation to generation and has its traits transmitted to newer generations. Culture identifies and makes for uniqueness of a people by the indelible imprints it carries on the people’s life. Culture though transmissible is also acquired by learning and sharing through education.

Nevertheless, according to Uwandu and Nwankwo (2006), “the word culture etymologically derives from the Latin root word “colere” meaning to inhabit, to cultivate or to honour” (p. 62). To Carmody and Brink (2002), “culture consists of the values the members of a given group hold, the languages they speak, the symbols they revere, the norms they follow and the materials of goods they create from tools to clothing” (p. 53).

Culture can be understood as a relatively integrated set of ideas, values, attitudes and norms of life which possess a certain amount of stability in a given society. It is said to be the complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities required by man as a member of a society. On the other hand, Nnonyelu (2009) asserts that, “culture refers to the totality of a given people’s way of life. It refers to the learned and socially transmitted behaviour” (p. 9). In a related development, Schaefer (2005) is of the view that, “culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects and behaviours. It includes the ideas, values, customs and artifacts” (p. 58). With the above definitions, it is clear that culture is just a way of life of a given society in a

given time. It is the totality of the activities of man in his society.

The Confluence of Religion and Culture

Religion and culture are concepts that are only meaningful in the context of human society. In other words, both culture and religion deal with man (Alawari&Ajah, 2017). Culture is the bedrock of religion while religion is an element of culture, both can exist independently but are interwoven, they are inextricably intertwined. Culture affects religious beliefs while religion has profound effects on culture by dictating the norms, values, mores, etc of culture. According to Uche (2006), religion stands central as a matrix in understanding what culture is all about. In other words, it is on the platform of religion that culture can be well understood.

Hence, religion does not exist in a vacuum. It exists only within a situated reality. Like any word in any language, religion is a word that is situated historically, geographically, culturally and demographically within a given linguistic community and it is this particular situation that gives it its meaning. Maduro (1982) further stated that, "every religion is always a religion of real human beings, a religion that would not be the religion of concrete human beings would be nonexistent, purely a phantasm of the imagination" (p. 41). Thus, religion is not a watertight compartment isolated from the other dimensions of the common life of the people. It is closely linked and interrelated with the rest of their social life, with all the other dimensions of common life. On this note, we therefore affirm that religion is inseparable part of culture. Also, Omoregbe (1993) posits that, "every religion is a product of a particular culture within which it grew and its doctrines reflect the worldview of that culture, its understanding of reality and its way of looking at things" (p. 300).

It is therefore impossible to understand any religion without understanding the culture within which it grew. For instance, to understand Christianity, one has to understand the Jewish-Greco-Roman culture; for Islam, one has to understand the Arabic culture. This also explains why many European writers as Omoregbe argued, misunderstood African Traditional Religion because they did not understand the African culture. Therefore, every religion according to Metuh (1987), "comprises of the beliefs, values, practices and cultures of a particular society and it is this society that defines it and gives it whatever shape it is to assume" (p. 2). Every religion therefore represents the way in which a particular

people, culture looks at reality. It is an expression of the cultural worldview of a people and the vehicle for the transmission of such a cultural worldview. The Pontifical Council for Culture (1999) states that a faith "which does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not fully lived" (p. 6).

The Role of Religion in Promoting Culture

The influence of religion on the Nigerian culture cannot be over emphasized. Religion is the core of the African man. An African cannot do without religion, he takes it everywhere. Mbiti (1969) further adds, to where the African is, there is his religion, he takes it with him to the peer party, a funeral ceremony and if educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school and if a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. Religion moulds the individual consciences of the people living in a particular cultural setting by determining what is good and what is evil for them. It inculcates moral values, ideas through religious associations and through families and this helps in shaping the cultural system.

Consequently, Dzurgba (2002) said that in all cultures, religion dictates marriage rites. The search for a compatible spouse, process of courtship and wedding are all done according to the dictates of religion. The marriage vows and oaths are taken based on traditional religious rites. Marriage is seen as more of a religious covenant because the religious oaths and vows increase and foster commitment on both partners. Marriage being an institution of culture has its shape in religion, religion dictates the good aspect of marriage, bringing out moral values which enhance and fortify it, in this way culture is promoted.

Religion creates, reinforces and maintains social solidarity. The belief in the supernatural and ultimate reality imbues in people a sense of oneness, unity and moral values. Durkheim (cited by Nnonyelu, 2009) explains that the supernatural, that is the totem ancestor, god or some other spiritual force is a symbol of the society, and by means of religious rituals and practices, the people of the society in effect worship them.

By offering meaning and purpose to human life, religion provides certain ultimate values which people hold in common thereby enhancing relationships in a given society. When people of a given culture accepts and adheres to a form of religion which prescribes values and norms, they tend to relate well with each other, moderating the way they think, act or speak, and so on. When people create the habit of good and

healthy relationship, it becomes culture, this showing that religion has a role in fostering and promoting culture.

Religion embodies several codes of conduct that serve as bench marks or parameters for gauging people's conformity or violation of societal rules and regulations, most of the human actions are guided by religion. The mores on incest and taboos used for the control of human sexuality conduct seem to cut across all religions; dictating when and to whom sexual acts are permissible. There are a lot of religious values and codes of conduct which form the basic cultural norms of a given society thereby enhancing and promoting culture (Okpa, Ugwuoke, Ajah, Eshioke, Igbe, Ajor, Ofem, Eteng & Nnamani, 2022b).

Religion serves as a means of social support when man is faced with the realities of life and the problems facing his existence on earth. According to Schafer (2005), most people find it difficult to accept and cope with stressful events like the death of a loved one, serious injury, bankruptcy, divorce, emotional pains and so on. Schaefer declares that "through its emphasis on the divine and the supernatural, religion allows us to "do something" about the calamities we face" (p. 355). In most religions, religious adherents offer sacrifices and prayer to a deity in the belief that such acts will change their undesired earthly conditions. On this level, religion encourages and soothes man in the midst of all his problems and misfortunes. Thus, according to Uche (2006):

Religion has institutional means of inculcating and improving moral behaviours in a cultural system... these institutions includes schools, seminaries, hospitals, clinics, social welfare, orphanages, rehabilitation centres, etc. Admitting new doctors to medical profession, witnesses testifying in courts, public officers taking oath of office, are all to ensure the highest degree of commitment to the ethics of a profession, telling the whole truth, justice in trials and good governance (p. 166).

With the above precepts, religion is true of influencing adherents to imbibe good cultural values by setting out codes of conduct in every institution of the society. When people of these institutions abide by the tenets of religion pertaining to the institution, they are morally sound thereby promoting good culture.

The Impact of Religion on Nigerian Culture

Before the advent of Christianity and Islamic religion in Nigeria, the people of Nigeria were mainly Traditional Religion adherents. The traditional religion was also seen as their culture,

there was no clear difference between the religion and the culture of Nigerians. The traditional religion supported all sorts of atrocities like human sacrifices, the use of charms and amulets, killing of twins, slave trading, etc. There are also other cultural practices that were not moral like the marginalization of women and acquiring them as properties, incest, social stratification, nudity, etc., people had no right of their own, human rights were dictated by the traditional religion (Okpa, Ajah, Nzeakor, Eshioke & Abang, 2022c).

With the advent of Christianity and Islamic religion in Nigeria, things took a different shape, there was culture shock, dynamism and conflicts, naturally there exists tension and struggle for supremacy between different cultures of different background. Christianity and Islam began to preach about the purity and sacredness of life and the human body, they emphasized on the need to cover the body with clothing materials. Slave trading, human sacrifice and killing of twin babies were condemned, Christianity preach the equal right and nature of all humanity thereby condemning the marginalization of women. All these were very strange to the people because their traditional religion supported them. This culture shock resulted to a lot of conflicts, the people abruptly refused and rejected these alien culture, Nwandu and Nwankwor (2006) attested to this by affirming that, "lives were lost in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of our culture from what could have been regarded as infiltration and consequent corruption of our cultural values" (p. 67).

The Christian missionaries and Islamic jihadist were well armed to the core because the colonial government supported them and they were able to suppress and subdue the people's rejection of these cultural values. People began yielding to the religious demands and tenets of Christianity and Islam, and culture dynamism was experienced. With culture dynamism and assimilation, a lot of things were abolished, for instance the killing of twins, slave trading, human sacrifice, the use of charms and armlets etc. The Christian and Islamic religion also introduced other rich, moral and cultural values like;

Western Education – The Christian missionaries built schools and taught western education and thoughts for free in these schools, the Christian codes of conduct and moral values were being taught, people started to see the evil in their existing culture. Education was a very powerful agent for this culture dynamism, the Islamic scholars were not left out in this noble role, Islamic

schools were built in the Northern parts of Nigeria to teach new Islamic converts how to read and write (Iloma, Nnam, Effiong, Eteng, Okechukwu&Ajah). Today, Christian and Islamic religion are embedded in Nigeria curriculum of education and most civil servants, public leaders, statesmen and women, etc. are all products of the mission schools.

Economic Development – The trade by barter was replaced with the more objective and rational system and means of exchange in trade with money. The missionaries brought goods such as linen and silk materials, beddings, rugs and other economic crops to Nigeria, all these enhanced the standard of living of the people (Ajah, Ajah, Ajah, Onwe, Ozumba, Iyoke&Nwankwo, 2022).

Wearing of Cloth – In Nigeria today, total nudity is an eye sore and a thing of the past, before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, nudity was among the cultural values of Nigerians. People move about and engage in their daily activities half-naked. Body coverage with clothing materials made no meaning to them, it was a very big eye sore for the missionaries to see people moving about naked, may be that was why they described the people and their culture as “Barbaric.” The missionaries introduced clothes and clothing materials and emphasized on the need to put them on. According to Agha (1996), it was a great spectacle that attracted the entire community when the first lady convert in Unwara in Igboland put on a gown.

White Collar Jobs – Prior to the advent of Christian and Islamic religions in Nigeria, Nigerians were mainly engaged in farming, hunting, trading, fishing, etc. as means of achieving livelihood which the traditional religion supported. But with the advent of the missionaries, new means of livelihood was introduced, they started training and educating people to take up teaching jobs and work in public offices where people go to work neatly and smartly dressed and look presentable unlike the traditional jobs maybe that was why the local people called these jobs “white collar jobs.” Notwithstanding the numerous contributions of religion to our culture, it is worthy to note that there are some adverse influences of religion on our culture today (Eze, Okpa, Onyejebu&Ajah, 2022b).

Religious Intolerance and Fanaticism – has become an ill-wind in Nigeria that blows no one good. One can identify numerous bloody encounters and demonstrations in the northern Nigeria resulting from religious doctrines (Jihad), religious intolerance, fanaticism and sentiments. In

the name of religion, families are destroyed, people are murdered and nations destroyed.

Ritual Killing – Today is perceived as an act of spiritual fortification in the name of religion. Nigeria is a deeply religious society, hence most Nigerians believe in the existence of the transcendental entities and that these can be influenced through ritual acts and sacrifices (Rituals constitute part of the traditional religion practice and observance of the people). Some Nigerians engage in ritual acts to appease the gods, seek supernatural favours, or ward off misfortune. They do this out of fear of unpleasant spiritual consequences if they default.

Belief in Ghost, Juju, Charms and Witchcrafts – is prevalent and widespread. They believe that magical potion prepared with human head, breasts, tongues, eyes, sexual organs can enhance one’s business, political, financial and spiritual fortunes. And that these can protect them against business failures, sickness, diseases, accident, spiritual attacks, etc. In the name of religion, this bloody, brutal and barbaric acts and atrocities still continue today in our Nigerian society.

II. CONCLUSION

Human beings are said to be very passionate about anything that has to do with religion, the issues of religious syncretism, religious riot and conflicts, fanaticism, proliferation of churches and the numerous religious faiths in the world today give credit to this fact. Religion dictates the culture of the people by dishing religious tenets, of the world today like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates are said to adopt Islamic values, codes and norms as their culture, this is also true of Rome and other countries like England and Germany which adopted the Christian ethics and codes of conduct as their culture. Nigeria is not left out in this, most states of the Northern Nigeria adopt Islamic values as their culture and there is no clear difference between their culture and the Islamic religion unlike the eastern part of Nigeria where some of the traditional cultural values, festivals and feasts are still practiced.

Having seen all this, one has no doubt in saying that religion is a very good phenomenon in the life and culture of people. Thus, religion remains the matrix of the Nigerian culture.

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