

# The Place of African Traditional Religion in Nation – Building

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**Abstract:** African Traditional Religion is the religion that was handed down from generation to generation by our forbears and is being practiced today in a variety of shades and intensities. It influences all areas of life, has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African peoples throughout the centuries. Through its positive roles have contributed immensely to nation building. These can be seen through values, morals, ethical codes and sanction, traditional health care delivery etc. Findings obtained from this paper suggest ways African Traditional Religion has contributed to nation building, socio-historical, analytical and descriptive methodologies were employed. This paper conclude that African Traditional Religion which is embedded in the culture and traditions of the people is a bedrock for nation building and sustainable development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Nation Building.

## Word Counts – Traditional Medicine

**Kofi** – Tseko notes that the phrase “traditional medicine” has become a catchword among the people in all countries in Africa. This is partly because the use of herbal remedies has gained popularity world-wide and the exploitation of these remedies has become a multimillion industry though he further argues in his own way that the term ‘African Traditional Medicine is not synonymous with ‘alternative and complementary medicine’. African Traditional Medicine is the African indigenous system of healthcare and therefore, cannot be an alternative (89).

## INTRODUCTION

**Religion is regarded as one of the cohesive factors in any society. Introduction**

Religion is regarded as one of the cohesive factors in any society. It plays the role of bringing peace, harmony and development in the community, virtually no nation can do without religion because it permeates all the activities of man in his lifetime and here after. The neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of

misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world (Max 16).

Africa is currently undergoing crises that are undermining the goals of effective nation-building, if African Traditional Religion is given the opportunity plausible values and principles can serve as a tool for nation-building. ATR has been a bedrock for nation-building and sustainable development through its positive roles. It provides adherents with the moral conduct, ethical codes and sanction, enhance stability, satisfaction and harmony etc which can move the nation forward. It can correct a lot of ills and reform the society by harnessing the fragility of the nation. This paper is a wakeup call for the nation to imbibe the values to ATR of religion that was handed over to us by our forefathers where its traditional socio-religious value and morals are catalyst to bringing changes in character and attitudes, thereby resulting in nation building. These can also be seen in tradition healthcare delivery medicine, eschatological concept as a tool for nation building ATR provides an anchor giving meaning to various forms of human experience, life and actions. This is done through the nurturing of human conscience for honestly, transparency and the common good of the nation.

## **African Religion influences and the impact in nation – building can be seen in different ways as discussed below:**

### **African Traditional Medicine and Nation Building**

Medicine is an art of restoring and preserving health especially by means of remedial substance and regulations of diet opposed to surgery and obstetrics. (Concise Oxford Dictionary) from the perspective of the less developed societies it defines medicines in terms of spells, charms, fetish. Though this is an attempt to relegate the medical system of the less developed societies into the background. This attitude was occasioned by the superiority complex of the Euro American scholars which was a bane to their understanding of the culture and religion of the people (Ubrurhe 8) Kofi – Tseko (Olojubu).

African Traditional Medicine has to do with practices and knowledge that was in existence before the coming of the orthodox medicine which aims at promoting, restoring and the maintenance of health and wellness.

According to Mume in Ubrurhe (10), Traditional Medicine is defined as the transmission by word of mouth and by example, the knowledge and practice based on customary methods of natural healing and treatment of disease. Shishima (71) in his own view defines traditional medicine as that kind of medicine handed down to us by our fathers from generation to generation. He asserts further that, by traditional medicine, we are referring to the African medical science, which has developed over a period of time from the origin of man on the African continent through its contact with other civilizations to the resentment (72).

Traditional medicine can be traced back to the creation of man in the confirms the emergence of the use of Herbs for medicine in Gal. 1:29 “behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed, to you shall be for meat. He also added that, traditional medicine is also as when man became subject to illness in creation and the Garden of Eden (10). God in his magnamaty planted leaves in the garden for man’s survival. The trees were to function as medical herbs in bringing nourishment and keeping fit for man.

### **Apenda Agrees With the Above and Opines that;**

Traditional medicine plays a very important role in nation building. Its impact is felt and seen as it continues to provide effective health care to the people in the face of high costs of orthodox medicine and all of its technologies in a bid to provide good healthcare. In view of the above fact, interests has recently been expressed in integrating herbal medicine into modern medicine. It is in this light that Oosthuizen writes that,

the traditional healer/diviner has, still according to a lot of African professionals, greater success in the mitigation of psychological turbulence than western-trained psychotherapists (46). He adds that “the traditional healer/diviner has wider function than just healing, but as well acts as consultant on family and other relationships, as priest, and as one captivating a great interest in ecological issues. In other words he/she also has the daily needs of the people at heart (46). Traditional medicine is receiving a lot of recognition in our country. There are cases where patients revert to traditional medicine in the face of failure on the part of the orthodox medicine and its inadequacy. Olajubu observes that:

Traditional medicine enjoyed some patronage and patients flocked to these practitioners due to expressed dissatisfaction with orthodox medicine and sometimes due to the resistance of certain illnesses to western drugs. Diseases that are low in responding to treatment and terminal illnesses are usually brought to the traditional.

### ***According to Apenda;***

Traditional medicine is as old as when man became subject to illness in creation. During the fall of man and dismissal from the Garden of Eden, the consequence brought about man’s consciousness to develop traditional ideas of his survival. Medicine arouse out of man’s urgent need. It came into being as a result of man’s attempt to conquer his physical environment such as animals’ enemies, natural phenomenon and diseases (10).

### ***Medical practitioners (323)***

Straying the nations healthcare sector, the truth of the matter is that, the contribution of natural-based products to orthodox medicines cannot be overlooked. This shows that African Traditional Medicine has overtime been the bedrock or foundation of primary healthcare for majority of Nigerian’s living in rural areas. It has actually done well in the treatment of infertility, orthopaedics as well as other diseases.

### ***As part of the contributions of traditional medicine in Health Care Delivery System in Nigeria, Ekeopara notes that;***

... to make a barren woman productive, a special concoction specially prepared to cleanse the reproductive organ is administered to the woman three times daily for a period of three days. Rituals right accompany such administrations if it is believed that there is spiritual agency involved in the barrenness (54).

The traditional practice of orthopaedic health care is gaining prominence in our country today. It’s experiencing rapid revolution and it has been improved from what it was from the beginning. They have a good knowledge of herbs to

use and some of their therapeutic techniques are shrouded in secrecy and mystique. Orthopaedic (bone setting refers to the science of treatment of fractures and bone related ailments (Njoku 205). The traditional bone setters are capable of treating fractures that would have resulted to amputation in the orthodox hospitals. Sometimes, cases of bone setting that could not be treated in the orthopaedic hospitals are referred to the bone setters for healing (Terna 109).

Bone setters know exactly where the problem is by touching and proper examination of the affected place. They are well trained and can feel where broken pieces of bones are and are able to set them in proper place. They may force the affected part where the bone crosses each other and tie it with a special wood and rope for the affected part to be sustained. A part from using herbs, the patient brings a chicken whose bones are not yet strong. Part of leg similar to the patient is fractured and the same treatment will be given to the chicken for healing process. The same herbal medicine will be applied to the affected part of the patient chicken and supported by stints and wrapped with ropes. The chicken is therefore released to move about and fend for itself. As the healing of the chicken gradually progresses symbolically the patient's healing takes place. Concurrently, the day the chicken recovers fully the patient also becomes fully healed. The chicken is monitored carefully and craftily to protect it from all forms of danger (Terna 111). It is a known fact that activities of the traditional healers are holistic and psychotherapeutic which are provided with affection, empathy and genuineness in order to restore confidence.

### **Traditional Birth Attendants**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a traditional birth attendant (TBA) as a person who assists the mother at childbirth and who initially acquired her skills of delivering babies by herself or by working with other birth attendants. In the northern parts of the country, traditional birth attendants are female only, whereas in some other parts of the country both males and females are involved. They occupy a prominent position in Nigeria today as between 60 – 85 percent of births delivered in the country and especially in the rural communities by them (Ekeopora and Uanha 32).

Osunwole (88) opines that, traditional birth attendants have good understanding of their clients because they understand them, their cultural beliefs relating to pregnancy and birth. They believe that pregnancy is a natural phenomenon that, under normal conditions, should pose no problem except as a result of witches and sorcerers. In a case of difficult or prolonged labour, fresh shoots of pawpaw will be given to the woman in labour to chew or the traditional birth attendant will put fresh Ogichi in the patient's mouth to support her to push the baby out. She can also administer (Adamsonia spp) agwu

obobolo mixed with ogbulu in a clean water in a bowl for the patient to sit on it, during the expectation date (EDD) and apply some on her body. When the labour is established, she will sit and stand up with words like (the owner or giver of the load bring it down) *Unadu kiradu gwu* three times also put the water on her head three times also. A little hen and the bowl will give in appreciation for purification (Achana, oral interview).

Ojoago explained that, during difficult labour, she massages the abdomen of the woman with herbs and uses part of it to wash the vulva known to have muscle relaxant properties. In a case of breech delivery, she uses Ogichi and incantation such as, (child follow the normal route of delivery ordained by God and not the other route) *oma lona koju dute kuwa kile eki lona abojin, lona okpakpa*. This has helped many women (oral interview). The effect of the rite above by traditional birth attendants is to instill discipline in the children right from birth. It reduces indiscipline, corruption and different vices in the community and that also affects the nation positively as a whole.

In the reduction of child mortality, a study carried out by World Health Organization (WHO) showed that in Ghana, Mali and Nigeria inclusive, the first line of treatment for 60% of children with high fever resulting from malaria is the use of herbal medicines (Busia 17).

It is an incontrovertible fact that traditional medicine has recorded meaningful and notable contributions which cannot be dismissed with a wave of hand in Health Care Delivery Services not only in Nigeria alone but in many countries of Africa at large. Busia noted that;

Globally there is now a general recognition that traditional medicines, the medicines once described as primitive could be mankind's saving grace and therefore, within the past three decades, the changing view of herbs in particular as traditional medicine has moved from that of "witches brew" to major medicine (17).

It is a known fact that sickness, diseases and misfortune are the worst enemies of effective nation-building and national development in the sense that only a healthy person can work and contribute to nation-building and African Religion through its agents ensures a healthy being for a healthy nation through its provision of medicines to cure disease and restore a person to good health (Adega 50).

### **Moral Rules and Values**

Morality is the principle concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour or a particular system of values and principles of conduct (Dictionary).

In African Religion moral rules and values is stressed right from childhood. The children are taught moral behaviour, values, good character which includes table manners, unity, love, respect for elders and constituted authority, moral chastity before and during marriage. African Religion spells out moral rules and values emphasizing that man in the creature of God and that no man exists all by his/herself (Adega 48). Ugwu and Ugwuweye opined that, all virtues action of man in the traditional African society is derived from African Religion. Thus, man subdues his/her lower nature and sets for his noblest ideals of righteousness, justice, peace and service for humanity under traditional religious guide (111).

These values and morals determine the political, economic and social behaviour of a people and stability and development of any nation of the world. According to Mbon, the development or otherwise of a nation to a very great amount depends on the moral and intellectual development or otherwise of its people (101). Supporting the assertion above, Anyanwu observes succinctly that, we are not quite aware that any society can afford to exist in the absence of morality, trust, goodness and faithfulness, only religion provides these (1).

African religion, is a rich heritage that presents to younger generation a rich religious and cultural ethos of our forefathers. Though there are no sacred scriptures nor reformers which are regarded as repertoires of authentic beliefs and practices of African religion. However, Africans are very religious and it permeates every aspect of their life. The religion was preserved and transmitted from our progenitors through art forms and symbols, sacred institutions, oral traditions etc. The level of religiosity by the Igbonation was highlighted by Hilary thus:

Religion was the centre of life-wire of their existence. Their culture was inspired and directed by their religious beliefs. Each village has priests and priestesses who help in all spiritual matters, conducting ceremonies and rituals. And since they believe that everything in life is controlled by higher powers, there are also dinners in a village that attempt to predict the future. Hence, it is clear that the culture of Igbo people has its root in Igbo traditional religion (16-17).

It has been discovered that similar characteristics spread through the various culture, politics, social organization and moral life. Other societies also have custodian of moral values that act as community "police" or guardians or of morality. African Religion has workable socio and political structures that promoted unity of purpose, community spirit, and ethical values among all peaceful co-existence. Those core religious values (after Mekoa 5).

### *According to Paulinus*

Moral order helps men to work out and know among themselves what is good and what is evil, right and wrong, truthful and false, and beautiful and ugly, and what people's rights and duties are. Each society is able to formulate its values because there is moral order in the universe. These values deal with relationship among people, and between people and God and other spiritual beings; and man's relationship with the world of nature (5).

### *Mbiti further adds,*

The morals and the institutions of the society are thought to have been given by God, or to be sanctioned ultimately by him. Therefore any breach of such morals is an offense against the departed members of the family, and against God or the spirits, even if it is the people themselves who may suffer from such a breach and who may take action to punish the offender.

In African traditional society are varieties of taboos which can never be taken for granted. It covers all aspects of human life and contravening it will result in severe punishment. Paulinus agrees with the above and asserts that;

Breaking a taboo entails a punishment in the form of social ostracism, misfortune and even death. If people do not punish the offender, then the invisible world still punish him. This view arises from the belief in the religious order of the universe, in which God and other invisible beings are thought to actively engage in the world of men.

According to Wiredu (10), African Traditional Religion provides a moral and ethical compass that guides societal behaviour. This shared ethical foundation can be instrumental in establishing a just and harmonious nation. It also provides an ethical and moral foundation that can influence governance structures. Traditional leaders, often integral to African Traditional Religious, can play a significant role in promoting just and ethical governance at both local and national levels (Olupona 190).

It should be noted that the major religions in Nigeria (African Traditional Religion inclusive) have many common values to make them serve the purpose of the nation. The major religions in Nigeria all believe in God as the source of being-creator, the preserver, the source of society and human community, and so of the nation (Okpe 13) in the words of Balogun (61) each of these religions have norms which are similar and which it sincerely observed, can nurture and strengthen the nation. Some of these norms include concept of reward and punishment, accountability before the source of being including the idea of the hereafter and judgement which

are meant to discourage deviants in the society and encourage good performance among fellows.

Religious values can be considered to be the high moral and ethical values that all faith aspire to achieve. In this way, religion can serve as a spring board for the inculcation and improvement of ethical values which are fundamental to achieving correct human behaviours particularly as it relates to productivity and nation building (Okpe 6).

And principles embedded in African religion with various deities involved, enabled citizens and different groups to appreciate each other based on universally accepted virtues of justice, truth, common good, love and peace (Uzundu 10).

In African religion, moral values can be seen in obedience to authority. Authority is retained in heads of families, clan chiefs and tribal leaders. They are agents through whom ancestors enforce moral ancestors. One is encouraged to be more obedient to ensure continued good will from both ancestors and living elder's, both of who are beneficiaries of one's obedience (Mekoa 5).

African religion contributes immensely to the development of the nation especially the current democratic system of government as they follow and practice moral values which includes respect for human life and property, discipline, hospitality, hard work, fear of God and the ancestors. Human welfare and interest of others is paramount in their decision making. Adherence to laws and social norms is also seen in the life of the practitioners of African religion and anything short of the above brings about crisis, stagnation and underdevelopment.

### **ATR in Promotion of Peace**

Peace can be seen as freedom from disturbance, tranquillity. Peace has always been a concern and a vital need in our nation. African religion has been a promoter of peace which leads to nation building. There is a great need for peace in every nation so as to carry out their national activities, economic, cultural, social, political and religious activities. Peace must have ramifications for the whole country. It is not a private commodity to be acquired and monopolized by an exclusive elite. Peace knows no discrimination and no favouritism, based on creed, gender, health, race, or wealth (Mbiti).

Furthermore, African Religion encourages peace, which is a necessary ingredient for nation-building. This is a chemical through covenants and oath-taking. Thus, when conflicts distrust and suspicious ravage families/communities, a piece of machinery is put in place to rectify the problem and restore peace and stability to such an affected family or society (Adega 50). Peace is a gift and value necessary for creation to be at unity within itself. Without peace, no meaningful development can take place (Okpe 15).

African Traditional Religion also use some channels of enhancing peace through traditional values. Life is highly valued, abortion is an abomination, beliefs – the fear of the Supreme Being and spirits is the highest element of traditional African spirituality.

### **CONCLUSION**

Religion, is one of the recognized factors that can enhance or destabilize the nation at any given period of history. Religion seems to have a tremendous influence on the nation and African Tradition Religion has been a bedrock for nation building and sustainable development through its positive roles. It provides adherents with the moral conducts, ethical codes and sanction, enhance stability, fulfilment, satisfaction, harmony etc which move the nation forward. Religion affects every aspect of life and if given proper attention can correct lots of ills and reform the society by harnessing the fragility of the nation. The undermining goals of effective and good nation building is being affected by crises.

African Traditional Religion has plausible values and principles that can move the nation forward and turn it into an enviable one. It stands as a reliable institution providing stepping stones to sustainable growth in the nation. It provides a sense of security, promotes peace and provides an anchor giving meaning to various forms of human experiences thereby promoting nation building. African Traditional Religion stands as a significant force in the nation's development.

ATR is also committed to the promotion of human good so as to provide basic human needs, guarantee protection of human rights and promote integral development of the nation. The neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world. (Max 16).

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