

Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-Existence: The Case of Female Religious Cults Relationship in Ijebuland, Ogun State Nigeria

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Abstract

There is in Nigeria today, a depressed mood of daily occurrences of war, tension, impending collapse of the political system, social decay, corruption and religious violence. The core cause of this crisis in Nigeria among other reasons is religion. Despite various government's efforts to put an end to all the violence there seems to be no end to the violence and intolerance dividing the nation. The various violent or religious crisis has had a bitter impact on inter-religious relationship in a pluralistic religious state like Nigeria. Most of the violence was caused by religious crisis, lack of tolerance among the different religious groups or faith, ignorance, the struggle for power and monopoly-having absolute knowledge about God. Since all the religions practised in Nigeria advocate peace, harmony, tolerance, patience understanding, good neighbourliness and even the idea of 'live and let others live', one then wonders why all the religious crisis or violence against each other. The theme of this paper is religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence from the perspective of the traditional African religion taking examples from the inter-cultic groups in Ijebuland. It is necessary to note that inter-cultic groups in Ijebuland would continue to be an integrating power that would unite people in Ijebuland and not disintegrate them. The traditional religion through the various activities of its adherents should be a reckon force for integration since there is a mutual inter-cult relationship among the various cultic group. Among these group of people, their religion is not a mere faith which they profess but a way of life, a system of social control through which they get an organizing mechanism in which they live their everyday life peacefully.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, peaceful co-existence, female cults, Ijebuland

Introduction

Religion which is as old as humanity has played a great role in the lives of the people. Religion, a universal feature of human existence, is one of the fascinating varied and complex phenomenon in human history. However, many people have accepted the pervasiveness and persistence of the traditional religious rituals and the deep rooted influence they have on the people's understanding of life. The new religions necessitated a re-orientation of the people's minds, thoughts and beliefs in which the indigenous cults, their ritual activities and divinities gradually became less important, since the new religions do not recognise them. The influence of Islam and Christianity has not however diminished the honour respect and loyalty given to the traditional religion. The three religions practised in Nigeria enjoy patronage by the people in the various communities. According to Nwanaju, (2005: 55).

the great Yoruba pantheons of deities still portray a wide range of cults and occultist practices. Rituals have great bearing on the cycle, ecology and civic calendar. They are meant to appeal organism favours from the gods.

These various traditional rituals serve psychological, spiritual, political, social roles among the people and they provide an inter-cultural perspective which will continue to illuminate the religion. Therefore, an examination of these crucial, basic and essential rituals would give insights into the persistence of the traditional rituals among Ijebu people and the activities of women being the most highly revered ritualists who would continue to promote religious tolerance among their various cultic groups.

An understanding of the position of women and their activities in their various traditional religious cults could be used as a yard stick to ensure religious tolerance in the society. Religious tolerance which is a situation whereby people of different faiths live together peacefully and accommodate each other's view without violent crisis and respect one another's view without clash is desirable for anybody. The activities and ritual rites performed by women if extended to others can be used as an example for religious tolerance in the large society.

Their inter-cultic activities had been used to foster unity, understanding and progress in Ijebu-community and to show peaceful co-existence among the various cult groups in the traditional society. They relate and communicate among each other amicably despite their short comings. They know that no one is perfect and human being as a whole needs the company of others. From the activities of the religious cult they make all efforts to inculcate among themselves the spirit of love, peace, understanding, unity and tolerance. In their various religious cult groups, they have rules and regulations which regulate and control the group's behaviour.

The traditional cult groups lay emphasis on virtue and reverence each other a lot while they make various rituals as their tool. Every stage of their life is characterised with these rituals which are religious observances. These are norms taboos and prohibitions which they use in protecting their members and the entire cult groups in Ijebuland. They promote peace and harmony with all integrity which has resulted in security of life and property.

Engendered Priesthood in African Religion

Among the Ìjèbù people, just like in other Yorùbá communities, the priestesses are among the various religious leaders who perform specific rituals. These religious specialists in their own ways and contexts serve a religious purpose as intermediaries between humanity and the spirit world. In order to be able to communicate between humanity and the spirit world, they are concerned with the renewal and the sustenance of the life of the individual and the community they serve through their rituals and symbolic authorities. As Ray, (2000: 72-89) said:

Like that of most traditional priests, their effectiveness as ritual healers lies in their ability to control self-induced trance states and to perform dramatic ceremonies involving powerful herbal medicines. In this way they exercise troubling spirits and expel the evil forces of witchcraft.

They are the official servants of a divinity and they work in the shrine or temple of the divinities. They are to be found in places where gods are worshipped and where sacrifices are made to the sacred beings. They are the mediators between the object of worship and the adherents. They are the people in charge of the shrine “*Ojú Òrisà*”. They take care of the shrine and sacred places in general. They keep the shrines tidy by sweeping them regularly. The walls are neatly kept and the artistic decorations of the emblems of the divinities are beautifully done. They are responsible for the preparation of sacrificial materials, the examination of the sacrificial items and they prepare specific rites.

The Supreme Being and other spirits invisible to mere mortals/human beings are approached directly and indirectly through these chosen priestesses. Libations, invocation, sacrifices and prayers are the supplications acceptable by the divinities. These are made by the priestesses with traditional rituals and ceremonies at appropriate times and places. The priestesses are the keepers of the welfare of the people and are entrusted with the sacred rituals.

According to Parrinder, (1962) the priestesses are the specialists who help the paramount ruler of a community in the area of propitiation. They advise him (King) about the rituals and medicines to be used. They are responsible for the treatment of certain diseases through the use of herbs, plants, bark and roots. Among their popular medicines are the purgatives and other treatments which may include poultices, ointments, rubbing powders and sweating bath. They have their own way of treating particular types of sicknesses.

Their objective is to profess remedies in the curing of specific diseases. They are able to carry out magical and sacrificial rites in treating the afflictions. Apart from the *Ifá* priest, they are prominent when it comes to oracular inquiry. They are able to serve as soothsayers and foretell the future. They diagnose diseases and recommend their remedies. They speak or listen to the divinities when the need arises through the use of *Erédógún* (the kolanuts-divination). Parrinder, (1962: 102) further says that:

They seek to interpret the mysteries of life, to convey the messages of the gods, to give guidance in daily affairs and settle disputes, to uncover the past and to look into the future.

In order to carry out their administrative and political functions in each town, the *Olòrisà* organises themselves into an association of priests and priestesses. In this association as in other associations in Yorùbáland, their purpose according to Fádípè (1970: 254) is to;

introduce uniformity in such matters as calling upon the Òrisà on behalf of the community in such critical occasions as, war, drought and pestilence, annual propitiatory sacrifice for ensuring the welfare of the community during the selection of a new King or Chief.

Apart from these functions, they are also responsible for fixing the dates of the annual festivals of the *Òrisà*. Finally, having learnt and received instruction in the laws and taboos of the divinities from an older priestess, they too pass the knowledge unto others. They teach the people the law and the taboos governing religious matters. Their administration and political functions include settling quarrels among members, their family, the nuclear and the extended families, the communities and help members by discussing their domestic problems. People generally confide in them as guardians and counsellors. Fádípè (1970: 254) retorts in this regard that:

A priestess... is a person “in touch” both ways between the object of worship and man. She knows them both, hears

them and speaks on behalf of one to the other. It is her duty to offer up man's worship and to bless man in the name of his object of worship.

It is her primary assignment to speak on behalf of her clients to the divine beings and bless them in return. Ìdòwú, (1979: 133) confirms this point when he says:

On the whole, they are women of respectable character: trustworthy, devout, obedient to the traditions of the office and to God or the divinities that they serve, friendly, kind, 'educated' in matters of their profession, and religious.

They are indeed the cream of the society.

Women through their cult groups and its various movements, have gender roles to play in the search for peace between the various denomination of faiths in Nigeria today. According to Ogundipe, (2007: 49) because of women's closeness to the spiritual, and their own sacrality and being givers of life tend to be more spiritual and long-sighted about life and culture. These women can intervene positively and productively in the internal religious crises facing Nigeria. Female Priestesses being women, wives and mothers are the real producers of life and are tend to be more opposed to its destruction and would not be happy and be party in advocating the taking of life in killings as seen during religious conflicts involving the "foreign religions". Ogundipe, (2007: 50) opined further when she said that:

Being more involved with religious movement for sociological reasons some of which we know, women could work on recreating the religious tolerance and interconnectedness that existed in Africa before these genocidal times. We shall not develop by massacring each other, by killing off our populations and loving in blindness about each other's faith and other aspects of culture.

There exist various cultic groups each with its institution of priesthood and in this there exist hierarchy and each members respect this order of hierarchy within the group and outside the group, no problem of one priestess of one cult group being jealous of the other in another cult group, they reverence each other a lot. These hierarchy is the grade of priesthood and it has to do with the various cultic functionaries that exist in the female cult. Their functionaries include, the *Alagbo*, who is the owner or person in charge of the shrine. There is also the *Alabe*, the person next in rank to *Alagbo*, she is responsible for the shaving of heads of new initiates during initiations. She is a sort of bodyguard to the '*Alagbo*'. The next in rank to *Alabe* is *Alase*, she is the catering officer who is responsible for buying the materials for sacrifice. She is also the treasurer in charge of the shrine. Next is the "*Koburu*" who is a sort of chief whip and police officer and she keeps order among members. These groups of priestesses occupy an important position in the community. They are revered in the worship of the divinities in various cults and their functions can be summarised into five: these are cultic, oracular, therapeutic, instructional and administrative or political functions.

To ensure the continuity of the priestesses, new members are initiated from time to time in order to perpetuate the activities of the cult. In addition to this, people are being initiated from their childhood so as to continue the tradition laid down by the cult group. Moreover, the cult groups are adapting to modern situations. The shrines are being rebuilt and the old structures are being pulled down and new ones are replacing them thereby helping in perpetuating the activities of the priestesses.

In the area of ritual practice, it is observed there is continuity in the area of rituals. This is because rituals are found at every location - at road junctions, streams, rivers, etcetera and this forms an essential feature in traditional Ìjèbú society.

Some Causes and Cases of Religious Crises in Nigeria

Nigeria in recent times has had a number of religious crises and this crisis is either in form of intolerance within a religion or between one religion and another. There are many factors which causes this intolerance among the different religious sects. According to Faluyi (1988: 126)

Many factors may bring about intolerance among the different religions. Doctrinal interpretations may cause conflict. The mode of worship by one sect may be at variance with the practice of the others. Fanaticism may generate violence and intolerance.

Causes of religious crisis in Nigeria include religious particularity, the claim that one religion is the best, noteworthy, special and the only universal religion that vouchsafes salvation to man. Particularity is a common phenomenon among human beings as well as a feature of religions. It is a notion that is deep-down in human nature and a claim of self-superiority by man. Particularity is common to all religious but no religion can claim

to have the monopoly to religious truth as salvation is property of every religion.

Nobody should claim that his/her religion is the only one and that his/her own is the best. The various religions are but the different languages through which God Almighty has spoken to the human heart, that is, channel through which God reveals Himself to human beings at different times. Each religion should care for its own doctrines and leave the salvation phenomenon to the judgment of God. God alone has the final say on whom would be saved. Particularity has caused more religious conflicts in Nigeria than any other factor. It has been a major cause of inter-religious conflicts.

There are two types of religious crises in Nigeria. We have the intra-religious crises and the inter-religious crises. The intra religious crisis is aimed at purifying a particular religion and is usually targeted at members of the same religious faith. As Alli, (1993: 117) opine, this type of religious crises is usually the result of violent efforts by some believes to impose their own views or interpretations of theological positions on others. Example of such a crisis was in Nigeria in 1980, when the Maitatsine sect launched a violent attack on the people of Kano, the Bulunkutu riots in Bulunkutu area of Maiduguri. Around October, 1982, the various Kaduna riots of 1982 and 1984, the Katsina riots, the Gombe riots of 1985 and the January 1993 Katsina and Funtua riots were examples. All these riots were seen as intra-religious crises.

The inter-religious riot occurs when members of different religious faith fight usually over superiority of their faith. Example of this crisis include the Christian – Muslim riots in Kano in 1982, the Kafanchan riots of 1987 the Bauchi riots of 1991 and the Zangon – Kataf riots of May 14, 1992 to mention a few. The Kaduna Sharia crisis of February 2000 which continued in January, 2001 between the Yoruba Christian and Hausa Muslim is another inter-religious riot. The bad incident between the Tivs and the Azeris in May, 2001 in Nasarawa state in which many were homeless and dead was not only ethnic but also religious crisis.

One must not forget the Muslim solidarity with Afghanistan in October, 2001 when the Muslim radicals saw the US bombardment of Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a violation of Islam. This was used as a way to attack Christians in Nigeria. In the same month religious violence was recorded again in Zaki-Biam in the central part of Nigeria, there was also the Miss World competition riot of November, 2002 in which the Northern Muslims burnt down the Christian churches. Today, Boko Haram; an Islamic Terrorist group in Nigeria has killed, maimed and destroy wantonly with reckless abandon. This evil act o recent has not been limited to the opposing religion but as well to Muslims.

The November, 2008 and 17th January, 2010 Jos riots which were crises between the Muslim and Christian ethnic groups in Central Nigeria near the city of Jos is another example of inter-religious violence. In these crises, houses, churches, mosques, vehicles were set ablaze and no fewer than 200 people were killed. This crisis continued to the dawn of 7th March, 2010 in which more than one hundred Christian villagers were killed by Muslim Hausa-Fulani herders in Dogo-Nahawa village near Jos.

Inter-cult Relationship

A critical look at the different cults in Ijebuland reveals that cordial relationships exist between the female-oriented cults and all other cults in Ijebuland. It is not easy or common to see a devotee of one divinity or cult to convert to another one as in the imported religions where one can move from one denomination to another. This is because in the traditional religion generally, there is no policy of evangelisation, as they see themselves as one. Members of one cult, like *Iyemoji* can be invited for the annual festival of *Iyemule* another cult group in Ijebuland. They would join each other in the worship, give roles to one another to perform except classified roles that may not be allocated to an initiate of another deity. In breaking kolanuts, offering prayers and using the *Eredogun*, they can join and even lead as a mark of honour. There is a link between all the divinities and their various cults in Ijebuland and even beyond. They see themselves as one and the spirit of togetherness is always expressed and showed in all their activities. It is true that there is proliferation of cults in Nigeria, to the effect that each divinity has its priests and priestesses. Shrine, temple or grove and devotees. Yet, there is a strong inter-cultic solidarity so much so that devotees of different cults come together and perform social and religious functions together especially on festival occasion. The relationship between the members of different traditional cults is one of peace, harmony and concord. There is no rivalry between the members of one traditional cult and those of another. No matter where one priestess may go, she is identified and sees as a member of the larger. They accept one another and use the same passwords either for greetings or performing rituals with little variations. They easily identify the slight differences and adjust. There is no antagonism and no undermining of authority. Idowu, (1979: 153) added that.

Members of the different cults have moral obligation to be at peace with one another. There are taboos and prohibitions which hold them together internally and these are binding on all and sundry.

They respect one another's views and know the order of things among themselves. They know the time and period of one another's annual festival, what is expected of them and they do not fight or have alteration. For

instance, before the female-oriented cults have their annual yam festivals, they must have celebrated the annual *Agemo* festival. Each cult in Ijebuland sees one another as partners in progress; they never look down on one another, there is no room for envy; there is no strife, no tension. Where there is any, they settle amicably. The Ijebu people use their religion as the base for achieving peace. The Supreme Being is their ultimate reference point in dealing or relating to one another Akanmidu, (1993: 282) remarked that:

...the adherents of African religion have explanation primarily in the uniform way they acknowledge and articulate God..., they all see the Supreme God as the embodiment of peace and that there are no other alternative to please Him without having to love peace.

S. N. Booth (1977: 15) does not mince words when he also affirmed that;

African religion is to a very large extent a “family” religion. The relationship within the family, within the clan, between clan and clan and so on, are all important and God is interested in the continuing coherence of the group so that it doesn’t break up.

They see themselves as one and they are able to demonstrate personal responsibility in their behavior “they have not given themselves to the illusion that building impenetrable religious boundaries between the different adherents of the deities helps their relationship”. Ijebu religion in particular and African religion in general, provides internal cohesion among its followers. Dopamu (1993: 243) surmised that;

Although we have devotees of different divinities, the worshippers do not see themselves as belonging to different religions. That is why it is possible for a person to worship several divinities at a time. Again, there are no sect, no secessions no internal conflicts and the worshippers do not go to court in order to make the appointments of a chief priest invalid or to remove an aged priest. The oracle is their court, their judge and their arbiter and its declaration and judgment is binding. Again, death is the only agent that can enforce compulsory retirement on the priests/priestess.

The indigenous religion of the Ijebu people infuses a great deal of discipline on the people in the traditional society. They obey the law of the land and all the do’s and don’ts of the cult groups. It is necessary to extol the moral bounds with which the various cult groups used to bind the individuals together for the large society. The social, moral and spiritual stability that exist among members of each group which is also extended to other groups can be used by other religions to continue to promote religious harmony and tolerance in the larger society. Just as in the words of Komolafe, (1997) “our indigenous faiths through our various cultic association or group foster our heritage of peace and harmony and it is indeed our gospel of religious tolerance”.

Looking at the African life before the coming of the foreign faiths, there is a lot of strength, spiritual affinity, fondness, inclination, cohesion and persistence performance and observance of religious rituals and ceremonies in all the different cult groups and this is still so nowadays. The various gods and goddesses placed on the adherents of the cult groups discipline and each group serve as an avenue where peace, justice, honesty and prosperity reign supreme. In order to accomplish this, there are various sanctions spelled out to punish offenders and to reward the compliance by the divinities and the ancestors as the case may be. It is therefore not surprising to see any thief being punished with violent death by Sango and Ayelala while Ogun, the god of iron deals with people that cheat or swear falsely. The cult groups have ethics, rules and regulations which instill discipline and order in the individual person and within the group.

There is virtuous life among the women, honesty, justice, and fair-play is also noticeable and they avoid things that are taboos or forbidden as much as possible. There is high sense of loyalty and peaceful co-existence among these cult groups. These they show in the various traditions associated with the worship of the divinities and the veneration of ancestors in their cults. In some of these traditions there are symbolic behaviours of the devotees and the various priestesses. A notable tradition is seeing the way they greet each other. The mode of greeting in these female oriented cults is different from the normal way of greeting which is usually kneeling down. In greeting a senior member of the cult, the junior kneels down, put her hands at her back and touches her forehead to the ground to pay homage especially to their senior priestesses.

Another important thing they do is displayed in the way they share kolanut. They normally use their mouth to pick the kolanuts from the ground. This is a re-enactment of their covenant with one another and with the divinities. The covenant is both suzerainty and parity. With this covenant agreement, an atmosphere of oneness and togetherness is created. The covenant brings together members of the cults and gives cohesion in the community at large. As J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu (2005: 233-234) have stated:

...by the terms of the covenant the worshippers are bound together and they see themselves as members of the same family. Spiritually therefore, the people have concern for one another in consequence of the covenant. This covenant gives meaning and cohesion to society and enhances a bond between man and God and finally between man and man.

Speaking further on this observation, P. A. Dopamu (1988: 59) affirmed that: Covenant, therefore, is not a commercial bargain or a legal contract, but rather the people's pledge of loyalty to God and their fellow men, especially those who stand with them within the covenant. It is a quality not only of loyalty to one another but also of loving kindness. It is for this reason that they should seek the welfare of one another and keep away from doing evil to one another.

In all these, they must not fight or envy each other, but if they do, they must not injure each other. They must neither curse nor abuse one another in the shrine. At times, in sharing kolanut, the Alagbo (the head of the priestesses) may feed it into each priestess's mouth. These covenant frameworks can be used to regulate human and to solve the problem of religious crisis in the society. It must also be used to foster morality and combat corruption and moral decadence in the community. As used by women in their various cult groups, covenant concept can also be used in the large society among the various religious groups to regulate human behaviour in social contexts.

Other significant behaviours were also observed during offering of sacrifices to the divinities or the ancestors. First, the priestess that had gone to place the sacrifice at the altar or at the entrance of the shrine must first be fed. She must not use her hands for any other thing until she has been fed by the chief priestess. When the priestess returns, she must be fed with the same type of food she had sacrificed to the deities. To do this, the priestess must put her hands at her back. It is only after she has been fed that she could use her hands.

Also, during ancestral veneration, the priestesses must deep their hands into the blood of the sacrificial animal and clean them by rubbing them against the tomb. Whatever blood stain that remains on their hands is rubbed on their bodies. They would kneel down and pray against shedding of blood among their children and other cult members.

Finally, during the procession by the priestesses to and from the river side to fetch water, they must not talk to anybody. They would only tie white wrapper which symbolises holiness and purity or any neat wrapper and must go bare-footed. They would carry their clay pot (Otun) on their heads/hands and cane (*Atori*) on their hands which is symbolically use to ward off evils generally or impending ones. It is a taboo to be touched by these canes. If anybody is inadvertently touched by the cane, the person would be asked to bite it. However, if a person is deliberately beaten with this cane, he or she would be tasked to perform an elaborate sacrifice to avoid calamities. During the procession, the line must not be intruded upon by a non initiate and even an initiate. A non-initiate either rushes by before they get to him/her or waits patiently until they have all passed. Anyone who breaks into this procession would be cursed. With this long procession not cut or intruded upon, they believe in unity and in this unity lies their strength. They see themselves as a long-handled sweeping broom which can not be broken unlike one broom stick which can be broken. In the shrine, no one wear slippers or shoes and this is a mark of respect for the deities all together.

To sum up, the Ijebu people through their traditional religion enhance internal cohesion, inter-cultic and inter-faith solidarity which accounts for the general well-being and cohesion of their community. Tolerance is an important feature of the Ijebu traditional cultic group if it is upheld by all; it can put an end to all the destructive crises of religious intolerance pervading the society. The traditional religion can adequately hold the people of various communities together and help in building a progressive society. It can play a significant role in uniting a fragmented society and allow co-existence of other religions and cultures.

It should be noted that in their cultic group, living closely with one another, fixing the days of their various festivals without clashing, allow each other to attend those of their friends in and outside of their respective communities, and most importantly, all showing respect for the right of the other man. Hence, these religious groups in Ijebu can be used as a model for Nigeria in pursuit of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect for other faith and unity among all can be achieved. There are many factors that project the people as one these factors could be used for the building of a progressive and economically viable nation which will always stand in unity and as the saying goes "in unity lies our strength."

Conclusion

The relationship of the female-oriented religious cults in Ijebuland, Ogun State could be a model for religious

tolerance and peaceful co-existence for other religions in Ijebuland and Nigeria as a whole.

Since tolerance, harmony, and peaceful co-existence are the prerequisite factors of communal development and stability in any society, a peaceful co-existence among the various religious groups could be achieved if they adopts some of the policy of the female-oriented cults groups in Ijebuland as examined above in the paper. Adherents of religions should be at peace with one another and not turn against each other. Religious groups should also understand each other's religion and mutually co-habit for the evolving an egalitarian society

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