

DEMOCRACY, GOOD
GOVERNANCE and
DEVELOPMENT
in AFRICA



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AGA|SUN|JAN|UIK|11042016

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Langa Research & Publishing CIG
Mankon, Bamenda

Publisher

Langaa RPCIG

Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group

P.O. Box 902 Mankon

Bamenda

North West Region

Cameroon

Langaagrp@gmail.com

www.langaa-rpcig.net

Distributed in and outside N. America by African Books Collective
orders@africanbookscollective.com
www.africanbookscollective.com

ISBN: 9956-763-00-4

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Exploring Indigenous Religious Tenets for Democratic Sustainability in Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Introduction

The thrust of this chapter is the exploration of indigenous religious tenets or traditional moral values as catalysts for democratic sustainability in contemporary Nigerian society. The chapter appraisingly evaluates indigenous governance in the pre-colonial era and the contemporary dimension it has taken in the colonial and post-colonial periods. As a result, this chapter adopted historical, analytical, political and religio-ethical approach leading to the fact that the democratic tendencies occasioned by the West have woefully failed the masses, because of their wrong application as well as their foreignness. The chapter, therefore, postulates that re-integrating, internalizing and implementing traditional religious tenets would guarantee democratization process and democratic sustainability in Nigeria. To this end, the chapter concludes that democratic sustainability in Nigeria can only be possible as the only game in town when these indigenous religious tenets are faithfully applied with an African eye bird's view.

The 21st century Nigeria has failed in her democratization process. As a matter of fact, Nigeria who joined the League of Nations to practise democracy has vehemently refused to internalize or domesticate the supposed democratic ethos. To an extent, some political feelers believe that Nigeria is benefitting from democratic dividends one way or the other since 29th May, 1999 till to date because there is no military intervention. While some social feelers strongly believe that the democratic values are far from

being implemented since the unholy bedfellow of democracy which is corruption is a landlord in Nigeria. In another development, some indigenous believers hold on to the fact that integrating traditional religious tenets or traditional moral values as means of governance would bring about a vibrant and sustainable democracy that has become an issue in Nigeria.

This democracy notwithstanding, Nigeria is far from consolidating a vibrant and sustainable nation because the much needed domestication of democratic values is abysmally and wrongly applied if at all they are even applied. Thus, these Western democratic values become strange to Nigeria as a result of improper implementation, which have greatly retarded development, democratization and sustainability. Therefore, the thrust of this chapter is to explore indigenous religious tenets or moral values as catalysts for democratic sustainability in contemporary Nigerian society.

Indigenous Religious Tenets: An Overview

It would be worthwhile to start this section by giving account of indigenous religion before showcasing its tenets. First and foremost, it is proper to state that indigenous religion is as old as the people. Indigenous religion is a religion that had been handed down by our forefathers to this present generation. It is orally transmitted from one generation to another. It does not possess sacred scripture yet it is written in memory of the very world we live and transmit orally as the occasion demands (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005). Indigenous religion is not proselytizing religion, nor does it guzzle for membership. Yet, it is tolerant, it accommodates, it socializes, it embraces and remains autochthonous. Awolalu and Dopamu again assert that we are born into this indigenous religion, live it and die in it. Rolling out the tonality of indigenous religion, Dopamu (2005: 3) has this to say:

This is clearly seen in African (indigenous) religion which encompasses all aspect of life. Africans (Nigerians) do not know how to live without religion. They celebrate life religiously and they

never embark on anything without bringing in religion. Thus, at birth, marriage, death, warfare, healing, the foundation of any project, planting, harvesting, enthronement of chiefs and kings and other areas of human endeavour *Afrel* plays important roles.

As a matter of fact, *Afrel* is an acronym of African religion, and the concept is coined by Dopamu (2006).

It is germane to state based on the aforementioned tolerance that indigenous religion embraced and tolerated; still embraces and tolerates the proselytizing religious of Islam and Christianity since their incursions. Again, Dopamu (2006: 30) consistently maintains that:

Afrel (indigenous religion) has maintained a long history of co-operative interaction with Christianity and Islam in Africa. In the face of ever-troublesome and discouraging history of contact between *Afrel* and the imported religions, *Afrel* was able to exercise itself in the style of activity for which it has existed from time immemorial.

Nevertheless, this indigenous religion has suffered a setback in the 19th and 20th centuries in the hand of Christianity and Islam in the wake of their incursions. Christianity and Islam condemned indigenous religion as devil worship, pagan worship, animism, fetishism and among others. In addition, a handful of people also boycotted the Indigenous religion especially those who have access to western style of life and subsequently embraced either Islam or Christianity (Alamu, 2014). Also, some indigenously educated people also attacked this indigenous religion, while some of the custodians who possessed or possess the indigenous traditions did or do not help issues as they conceal vital information from younger generation, and also the potency of the traditions from those who are ready to continue with them. However, the eclipse of the religion does not mean a total demise. Dopamu (2006) asserts that indigenous religion has staged a powerful comeback in this global age. The resurgence is becoming monumental and all-embracing now because the religion is speaking the language of the

people as well as their worldview. The religion will continue to survive the test of time.

Tenets of Indigenous Religion

Despite the current trends, many values of indigenous religion will continue to survive and be instrumental to the emerging democratic ethos of the west. To this end, tenets have to do with moral values of the indigenous people which have so far helped to better the lot of the community at large especially in the pre-colonial period. These indigenous tenets or moral values find expression in Oath-taking, selflessness, honesty, integrity, utilitarianism, tolerance, impartiality, accountability, transparency, chastity, communal humanity and brotherhood, proverbial philosophy and among others indigenous tenets would be fully explained later when we are reconciling both the tenets and democratic sustainability together. As a point of fact, these indigenous tenets are rich African cultural heritages that have distinguished the indigenous people and made the people unique in their environment. It is as a result of the abandonment or subjugation of these indigenous tenets that make indigenous people to face a plethora of problems that they could not solve till to date. Thus, the western democratic values are embodiments of setback because of their foreignness and improper implementation.

Nevertheless, these indigenous tenets are full of indigenous expressions, which are embedded in the uniqueness and ingenuity of the people. Through their assimilations and internalizations of a wealth of experience, local wisdom and moral techniques, good governance and democratic sustainability can be attained. The truth is that indigenous tenets are acquired informally, of which proverb, local wisdom; indigenous philosophy and local maxim are moral sciences that convey truths, based on common sense or practical experience of humanity. Often times, these indigenous religious tenets are expressed through traditional and cultural embodiments vis-à-vis metaphor and sentiment. As earlier stated, that indigenous religion is passed from generation to generation, usually by word of

mouth, so also these indigenous religious tenets which are indigenous credentials, are transmitted orally from generation to generation by conserving the truths and sentiments of the community. Even, the international labour organisation recognizes indigenous people with their religion and values thus:

People in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or geographical region to which the country belongs at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of their present state boundaries and who irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institution (ILO convention 169).

Although, indigenous people are strikingly diverse in their culture, religion, social and economic organization, yet they are subjected to a stereotypical way of life by the world around them. Unwaveringly, this stereotypical way of the native is depicted by some people as the embodiment of spiritual values and political progress.

It suffices to state that the majority of people may probably ask the source(s) of indigenous religious tenets? Gyekye (2002) has helped a great deal to depict that the 'messages' purported to be received occasionally by priests from the deities they serve have moral import and relevance for the people of a community. He further adds that the people are in possession of some moral values before those 'messages' descended on them. The interesting thing here is to first and foremost attempt a conceptual clarification of democracy before exploring these indigenous religious tenets for sustainability and consolidation.

Democracy: A Conceptual Clarification

Democracy as a concept originated from Greek-city state or the polis around 5th century B.C as "demo-cratia" meaning "rule of the people" (Eyinla, 2007: 66). Democracy emerged as the government

