

**AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AS AN UNEXPLORED
TOOL FOR ACHIEVING RESOURCE CONTROL IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The quest for resource control and restructuring is one of the most frequently discussed issues among Nigerians today. The interest in this issue cuts across religion, ethnicity, discipline, and age. This agitation is gathering momentum not because of any other factor but because of poor leadership, corruption, the manifestation of capitalism, and the distribution of resources in our nation Nigeria. It is the research position that this clamour for resource control and restructuring is a strong pointer to the mismanagement of the resources entrusted to public officeholders. The paper also argues that no matter the level of restructuring and resource control at the state level, or Local Government Level, if the challenges and problems of poor leadership, corruption, and the manifestation of Capitalism are not routed out, these agitations will continue to plague the nation-state at all levels. It is therefore the position of this paper that the answer to the quest for resource control and restructuring is to explore the unexplored tool of the African Indigenous Religion, anchored on communal life, authority, and sanctity of traditional rulers, the African ethics and taboos as well as African concept of Wealth based on family and community welfare as against the individual concept as the

basis of solving this mirage of challenges. This paper will employ the use of the phenomenological approach as a method and in its theoretical framework will focus on functionalism as a tool.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Ethics, Religion, Resource Control, Nigeria

Introduction

The quest for resource control has been on the front burner of public discourse for some time now in Nigeria through various groups, organizations, communities, ethnic nationalities, etc. This quest cut across religion, ethnicity, discipline, and age. This critical issue has been debated in and out of government without clear-cut solutions. It is worthy of mention that Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and also one of the largest producers of oil. 90% of the nation's revenue is believed to be oil generated. It is quite interesting to note that the crude oil is generally and geographically located in the Niger Delta area. The Niger Delta is culturally diverse in ethnicity. The Niger Delta or oil-producing states in Nigeria cover 9 (nine) states of the present-day Nigerian nation, namely; Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers states respectively. Various multinational oil companies operate within the area mentioned above. The quest for resource control is often and generally reduced to economic factors as against the multi-factorial issues involved. These factors include among others, ethnic conflict, power play in government, the contest of proprietorship rights, environmental pollution, and calamities are all embedded in these factors.

These struggles over the years have led to uprisings, destruction of lives and properties including the hanging of a notable environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa, and, the fragmentation of communities; it has created directly or indirectly, the problem and perennial challenge of militancy, kidnapping, terrorism, deadly and violent confrontations, etc. This agitation has further degenerated into the problem of the welfare of host communities, states, and regions. Invariably, this has greatly contributed to the instability of the nation, Nigeria as the oil-producing states

complain of negligence and under-development while the non-oil-producing states attack the oil-producing states as being selfish, and unrealistic and often term them lazy people.

Functionalism is a theory that will be employed, to ascertain the fact that the use of basic ethical teaching of African Traditional Religion can be used to bring about a relatively peaceful Nigerian society. In its methodology, the work employs a phenomenological approach, which is multi-dimensional and will employ the use of both primary and secondary sources to arrive at an acceptable conclusion and recommendation.

Conceptual Clarifications

African Traditional Religion (ATR): the concept of Traditional Religion has been with Africans from time immemorial. African Traditional Religion is one in which the trace of its founder is impossible. The issue of the oneness of African Religion has been in contentions over the years. The Nigerian pre-colonial period was an independent ethnic group. This is true of most African ethnic groups; a typical example is the Kwa-zuluNatal, which became a united nation under Shaka-Zulu. In this independent ethnic groups were equally independent in ways, manners, and styles of worship¹. Each of these had its belief system known as African Traditional Religion.² Over the years, scholars have argued over the use of an appropriate term for the Religion of the African people. Most scholars have advocated for the use of African Indigenous Religion or African Religion for short as the appropriate term for the religion of the African people. This has become necessary due to the derogatory nature of the term 'traditional' has assumed. However, we must reaffirm the definition of Awolalu and Dopamu,³ that it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebearers of the present generations of Africans. This religion is embedded in the world views of the Africans and indeed, transpires every aspect of their lives. Though ATR denigrators often make it look irrelevant to the 21st-century development as against other world religions.⁴

Ethics of African Religion: when we speak of African ethics or ethics of the African Religion, we refer to the essentials and acceptable norms of the African people culminating in the dos and don'ts of the given African society. These ethics are anthropocentric; this implies that it is meant for the welfare, benefits, and preservation of the life of man, which is the basis of the existence of the community. According to Ejizu, human existence was believed to be a prime value, and any other thing is expected to serve its realization.⁵ Another notable scholar Nwala agrees with Ejizu's opinion above when he affirms that, "to the traditional Igbo, the *summum bonum* or highest value of life is of supreme importance"⁶. This importance placed on life, which necessitated the strong ethical views of the Africans is expressed in most of the Igbo names as asserted by Ekeopara⁷, such names as

- *Ndubuisi*- life is supreme
- *Nduamaka*- life is very good
- *Nduduito*- life is sweet
- *Ndubuaku*- life is wealth
- *Nduka-aku*- life is greater than wealth
- *Ndukauba*- life is greater than material possessions
- *Ndubueze*-life is the king of values
- *Nduka-ego*- life is greater than money
- *Ndukwe*-if life permits

Resource Control: resource control can be broadly defined as the way and manner in which government revenue is shared among the various tiers of government. In another critical analysis, this concept could refer to how the resources available are harnessed and determined. According to Ifedayo⁸, resource control involves the access of communities and state governments to natural resources without inference from the Federal Government. Douglas⁹ however in his analysis pinned it down to the actual control of the resources by the people who live in communities with these resources for the support of life. The feeling by host

communities, states, or regions of marginalization or exploitation necessitates this protest (Ikporukpo)¹⁰. In its basic concept, resource control is the principle whereby federating units seek empowerment to be self-governing in terms of the resources within the locality (Ofeimum)¹¹.

Agitation for Resource Control in Nigeria

The origin of the struggle for resource control in Nigeria is often said to be an issue that preceded the emergence of Nigeria as a nation. In 1807 after the abolition of the slave trade, local traders were said to be involved and struggled for the trade in palm oil (Ikporukpo)¹². As early as the Willink Commission of 1965, the Ijaw nation was said to have presented a case for resource control. After the creation of the 12 states by General Gowon on May 27, 1967, the states immediately demanded resource control. The agitation became very prominent during the days of Gen. Obasanjo, with the challenges of offshore/ onshore dichotomy. On the whole, it is generally believed that the colonial masters first introduced the oppressive policy by declaring all resources, and properties belonging to the British Crown. When eventually the Nigerians took over leadership after independence, this mentality persisted. At a point, 50% accruable to the host community of such natural resources was evoked, but after the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta, most of these arrangements were altered, especially during the military era, to what we have presently today, though slightly adjusted by previous administrations in the country.

The agitation today has taken more of a national shape, than the usual regional coloration being given to it. The argument today is hinged on the need to practice true federalism against the current practice whereby all powers and privileges are domiciled in the central government giving room for perceived injustices, exploitation, discrimination, and dehumanization of the minority against the majority tribes, which is against the concept of communalism.

The introduction of true federalism or approval of resource control, will not permanently put to rest the agitation for resource control as the agitation will

develop a dimension, from a given region to states, local government areas, host communities, and of course families believed to have been the custodians and first occupants of the land will seek for control or demands special royalty. In other words, no matter the resource control agitation, without proper administration and consideration, the agitations will never cease. This proper administration and consideration can only be found in the ethics of African Religion which has over time been censored to be archaic, outdated, fetish, and ancient.

These unexplored tools of ATR, which have brought peace, progress, good neighborliness, love, and acceptance among our forebears, are still relevant today. Neglect of these very special ethical values under the guise of any such called modernity, civilization, globalization, or any other foreign influence, will only end up in a more complicated scenario, hence, complicating the already complex issues.

Ethics of African Traditional Religion

Over time, there have been scholarly debates over the efficacy of the Religion of the Indigenous people as against other religions of contemporary society. If the assertion that African religion is potent and efficacious, with immediate results, then, it is right to affirm that the efficacy of its ethics should also never be in doubt. It is on this premise therefore that this paper is anchored, namely, that the unexplored tools of African religion have a potent place in solving the age-long problems of resource control that have bedeviled the country even from the colonial regime.

The African ethics according to Samuel Waje Kunhiyop,¹³ is intensely personal, communal, and religious. It is personal because it is rooted in the being of the person affecting not only the mind, but also the heart, body, and spirit. It is communal because whatever affects the individual affects the family and the entire community. It is also very religious because God, the ancestors, and the good and bad spirits are all involved in the ways and how the people live. The ethics are therefore well guided and protected as any of the three acts as judges and advocates of peace in the community. This, therefore, explains the stability that the traditional African society enjoyed as compared to the crime, drug, and rituals ridden society

of the 21st African society that is embedded in individualism, capitalism, selfishness, and corrupt tendencies; a society invigorated with personal aggrandizement as against the community focused African society. No wonder Samuel Waje Kunhiyop pointed out that modern African ethical thinking did not develop in isolation but has been richly influenced by the forces of Westernization, Christianization, and Islam. Before concluding on African ethics, the sources must be pointed out, namely; customs and taboos, oral tradition myths and legends, stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, and wise-saying and liturgy. This is beyond the research focus. It must be conclusively opined that throughout Africa, God, the ancestors, and the spirits are all powerful forces that impinge on human life in one way or another. The religion of the people, therefore, is the basis of their ethics and therefore communicates every aspect of the lives of the Africans. No wonder Akama¹⁴ has affirmed that religion interacts with cultural institutions, and finds expression in material culture, human behavior, value system, morals, and ethics.

Ethics of African Traditional as a Panacea for the Agitation for Resource Control

As earlier pointed out, no matter the level of agitation and attempt to settle the challenges of resource control, If the ethical lives of the people are not shaped to conform to an acceptable norm based on the African world view as against the capitalist and Western concept, this agitation will know no bound, rather it will trickle down to every level of society, hence creating more division, tendencies, and acrimony among the already fragmented society. It is therefore the position of this research that the following African ethical underpinning will help resolve the challenges of resource control;

1. **Communal life:** basically and as earlier pointed out, one basic concept of African religious ethics is that it is intensely communal; that simply means the good of one in a given community is seen to be the good of all, a given

child in a given community is believed to be the wealth and joy of the entire community, this fact is succinctly expressed by Odama Onah (oral interview- 6-8-2018)¹⁵, when he opined that this was the foundation of the traditional community idea of jointly sponsoring an individual for studies, either by contribution or using the commonwealth of the community e.g. harvest of palm fruits. He observed that such a concept was based on the fact that once that individual is developed and well positioned, he/she supports the community in one way or the other like picking up one or two other persons for training as well. Here, there is no room for the maltreatment of the poor, the common good is evenly distributed, and hence individualism and selfish desires are practically non-existent. This is affirmed by Chioma Patricia et al when she opined that, the community system of living is guided by the principle of ‘be your brothers’ keeper’¹⁶. The absence of communal life, the rise of capitalism and individualism entrenched by the colonial masters and adopted and enforced by subsequent Nigerian leaders are the basic foundation for these problems which have led to insecurity, immorality, hatred, bitterness, and all manners of agitations. No wonder then that Onwubuiko as cited in Kanu, has affirmed that ‘the African idea of security and its value depends on personal identification with the community as well as within the community.’¹⁷

2. **The role of traditional elders and chiefs:** the traditional institution is generally believed by the primordial Africans to be a sacred institution. This institution it is believed is the representative of the ancestors. The elders and

chiefs are the custodians of the basic beliefs and ethics of the land, they are held in awe as no one dares disobey their pronouncement, the elders on the other hand are well guided in such a manner that they jealously guard against injustice. According to Iyaji Eje (oral interview-6-9-2019)¹⁸, they are the ones who hold the authority, source, as well as culture of the people, they are the ones who can trace and re-trace the basic traditions required by the modern generation. Unfortunately, these respected and sacred institutions are already politicized in Nigeria beginning from the selection of traditional rulers and to the other chiefs in council. Corruption, materialism, and individualism have so eroded this great institution that the sacredness is no longer striking. The corrupt officials with ill-gotten wealth influence the traditional institutions that truth and justice are no longer the hallmarks of the people. The youths on their own, who are caught up are equally disillusioned such that they have no respect for their traditional rulers. The agitations would have been well coordinated if the respect of the traditional rulers by its citizens and the truth and justice as insignia by the traditional rulers still held strong.

3. **Integrity and honesty:** one of the hallmarks of a true African is integrity and honesty. A lie by a primordial African is considered a grievous offense whose consequences are better heard than felt. Prince Pius Odey (oral interview-7-9-2019)¹⁹ pointed out that his father told him that in primordial times, people did not lock their doors during the day, whether they were around or not, and that products meant for sales were displayed openly

without an attendant, that customers will generally call-out to the marketers to please come out and sell their products; such was the honesty, that the primordial Africans had, such that there is no slight thought of being dishonest to ones' neighbor. This ethical behavior of the Africans, therefore, did not ever give room to suspicion, manipulation, or betrayal of one's neighbor. It is in line with this that Chioma Patricia et al, have opined that

Honesty is very important in solidifying the foundation of any relationship, be it family or friends. It is seen as that aspect of value that glues or binds people together. Trust manifests as a result of honesty. The Nigerian leadership of today has shifted from honesty to dishonesty and deceit. Dishonesty threatens one's relationship with others, creates no room for confidence, and also encourages corruption²⁰.

This integrity and honesty embedded in African religious ethics have been so eroded that there is no longer room for confidence and trust; hence every ethnic group suspects one another.

4. **African ethical beliefs in inter-marriages:** the basic African understanding of marriage between ethnic groups is to build a bond of unity and lasting relationships. Such relationship goes beyond the individual involved, it transcends to family, clan, and the entire community. Such marriages are often regarded as a covenant, whereby such in-laws are never allowed to shed each other's blood (Ubong Ekong oral interview)²¹. In fact, in the Ibibio nation, an in-law is so highly regarded and protected. An in-law is seen as part and parcel of the family (Daniel Inyang oral interview-6-

7-2012)²². In present-day Nigeria nation, virtually every part of the ethnic groups has inter-married with each other, yet this has not reduced the agitation for resource control. This would have been settled if the ethical African understanding had been upheld, namely; that it would have brought the Nigerians closer to themselves in love, protection, care, trust, and confidence.

5. **Respect for human life and human dignity:** human beings in traditional African society are seen as valuable members of a given community, therefore they have the right to live. Life was so important to the Africans that everything was/is done to preserve or sustain it. No wonder, that Chike Augustine Ekeopara opined that among the Igbo of Owerri;

The man was at the center of the community because the community existed. After all, man exists and without life, man was doomed and by extension, the community itself. Hence, the traditional society places a high premium on the life of its members and establishes such values that enhance the preservation of life²³.

Primordial Africans never dehumanized life based on material gains, this has today entrenched all manners of ills in the 21st-century African society because of resource control lives have been lost, and properties destroyed. The case of Ken Saro Wiwa and the unresolved shell return to Ogoni land is very much in the public domain. If caution were taken to protect and respect human life and dignity, it is the position of this paper that most of

these challenges would have been overcome. Undeniably, the killings and counter-killings have left a bitterness that will take decades to cure.

Recommendations/Conclusions

The present worldview of Africans today needs a total re-orientation, the orientation that is focused on African religious ethics, which will bring to bear a reasonable, well-coordinated resolution of the agitation for resource control. Such must be based on trust, confidence, respect for one another, and a sense of brotherhood. The present Western individualism, capitalism, and materialism which only leads to self-aggrandizement will never help resolve this agitation that has left us more divided than when the colonial masters left the country. This is truly a timed bomb that must be deactivated and timely so to avoid an explosion. This lies only in a sincere application of African religious ethics. The sting of breaking any of these taboos is enough to bring to conformity all abnormal behavior. This is the basis of the scholarly debate today on the efficacy of the indigenous religion of the African people as against other religions.

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