

RELIGION AND HUMAN SECURITY APPARATUS IN OGBA, IKWERRE AND YORUBA TRADITIONS

Obodoegbulam Agi Otto, PhD,
Stephen Egwuatu Amadi
&

Longe, Kingsley Kayode
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Port Harcourt, Rivers State
obodoagi@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13367.34720

Abstract

Throughout the world, Peace is one phenomenon that no price can buy. Whether in religious, social, economic or political sphere, at any time any individual or group peace and security is jeopardised, such an individual or group will go to any length to defend himself or themselves. This paper discusses the concept of religious peace and security apparatus in Ogba, Ikwerre and Yoruba traditions. The study identifies certain institutions like the deities, secret societies, the age grade among others; as responsible for the maintenance of law and order whether in social or religious spheres. It identifies the various instrument of peace and security in these traditions and how these apparatuses are deployed to ensure social and religious security in the societies. The research recognises the policing role of the ancestors in a bid to maintain society in equilibrium. The paper highlights the role religion has played in peace and security in the Ogba, Ikwerre and Yoruba land. The purpose of this research is to identify, highlight and explain how religious peace served as prelude to social peace and security in Ogba, Ikwerre and Yoruba traditions. The paper employs the historical and comparative analytical model in the discussion. The study observes that every human society has its own way of securing itself against threats. It concludes that traditional mechanisms for ensuring religious and human security should be revived as a way of promoting social development.

Introduction

Throughout the world the threat or perceived threat of extinction shakes every human society to its foundation. In the face of such insecurity, it is natural for humans to fall back on religion. Religion whether as a national institution or the practice of a small-scale society, religion is always a rallying point in the face of adversity. According to Shaw (2011) religion at the national sphere, can be viewed from three perspectives: Religion as power, religion as policy and religion as desire. In this sense, religion can be used to moderate power at both regional and national levels, it can be used as a policy framework or as the way of life of a people (Shani, 2016).

The above is necessitated by the fact that religion is an important element of human existence that cannot ordinarily be underplayed (Osaji, 2016). Koberle as quoted in Shaw (2011)

contends that “the desire for sanctification is first aroused in man when he has become conscious in some painful ways of his lack of peace and his erring recklessness of his life.” Under this circumstance, religion inevitably becomes his last option or solace. In corroboration, Tzu remarks “Know your enemy and know yourself, and in a hundred battles, you will never be in danger”. In the light of the above, religion helps to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in order to ensure socio-religious security for both the individual and the wider society. Relating the above to the African context, Osaji (2016) notes “African traditional religion promotes security by not condoning stealing, injustice, immorality and dishonest attitude.” In the traditional setting, security stands paramount in their lifestyle. Therefore, they go to any length to safe-guard themselves and their society. To this end, they employ human and super human apparatus to mount surveillance over the people and the society.

There is global crisis resulting in Terrorism, ethno-religious violence, kidnapping, uprising, and until recently the covid-19 pandemic believed to have political undertone etc. Most of these crisis emanate from religion and ethnic conflicts resulting in insecurity and war apart from the health related crisis. As regard religious crisis, almost all religions preach peace. In Nigeria; the three major religions Islam, Christianity and African traditional religion all preach peace, security and hope to its adherents, yet there are almost daily upheavals within the nation as a result of ethnic or religion crises.

The purpose of this research is to identify, highlight and explain how religious peace served as prelude to social peace and security in Ogba, Ikwerre and Yoruba traditions. The paper employs the historical and comparative analytical model in the discussion. The study observes that every human society has different ways of securing itself against threats. It concludes that traditional mechanisms for ensuring religious and human security should be revived as a way of promoting social development.

The Concept of Religious Security in Ogbaland

Ogba society has a holistic view of security. Among the Ogba, the whole idea of security is embodied in peace. Here, a secured person or group is one that has peace with himself and the wider society. They hold that the security of one person extends to another and vice versa. Similarly, the security of one community is the security of another. In this regard, either as individual or group, whatever that threatens one extend to all. This perhaps explains why Ogba people live in clustered household compound.

Every compound in Ogba usually has one major entrance and an outlet at one extremes of the compound. In most cases, only members of the compound will know the outlet. Among the people, this is a simple security mechanism. Usually, a man of valour will live at the major compound entrance to fore stall any threat or possible invasion. Inside the compound will host other households considered less aggressive. However, this is not to say that in the case of invasion, other members of the compound will not join. In any case, someone has to lead the way and this is usually the man who lives at the major entrance. Ellah (1995) in his analysis of the building pattern of Ogba people, notes that Onitsha and Ekpeye people also arrange their compound in similar manner to reflect their common history of origin.

In Ogba culture, the same security concern for the people is the same for the land. There is this understanding that for the people to be at peace, there has to be a cordial relationship with the supernatural (Obodoegbulam, 2019). In a bid to maintain Ogba society in equilibrium, the deities and other spirit agents who serve as under-pinnings of security must be constantly appeased. Ogba people recognise ritual pollution as one major cause of socio-religious

insecurity. Religious pollution is attracted by many agents, human and non-humans. Natural disasters like drought, epidemics and pestilence sometimes cause religious pollution. Some human actions that cause religious pollution in Ogba include: Stealing, adultery, incest, breaking of taboo, murder, and abuse of trust. Some symbols of insecurity in Ogba include: the placing of the yellow palm frond on one's entrance, the camping of bees at one's compound, the presence of a tabooed animal or insect in the homestead among others. Some notable agents of socio-religious security include: Egbo, Ordu, Uku frima, Uku-abali and the ancestors as well as the age grade.

Some Security Apparatus in Ogba

The aforementioned security agents help to maintain socio-religious security in Ogba. Individually or collectively, these religious security agents supervise, direct, control and punish security outlaws in Ogba. Owing to the constraint of time and space, our focus will be on Egbo and Ali. Though, the security officers are many, these two will serve as good example for our discussion.

Egbo

Egbo is the symbolic eyes of the Ali deity who watches over the people and land. It is usually situated at the entrance of every community or compound. Egbo is made up of a crafted bamboo which is placed across the major entrance of the community or compound. It is placed on a two life sticks planted on either sides of the entrance. These life sticks are over 4 meters high. It is not just the crafted bamboo that makes up the object but includes other traditional materials are added to energize the Egbo. As it were, the items used in the preparation are not disclosed to young minds. Occasionally, rituals take place at the base. Similarly, the items used are held in secrecy. At the end of the ritual session, elaborate feasting concludes the ceremony. Probably, the dancing and eating are to indicate group solidarity. It is believed that the Egbo serves as a stopper, especially of evil from befalling the community and the people. Among the Ogba, Egbo as a security apparatus is surrounded with rules of prohibition. For instance, it is a taboo to carry a corpse, bundle of firewood across the Egbo. Menstruating women are not to cross the Egbo. It is equally a taboo to ride or drive any mechanised object across the Egbo especially the one at the family compound. Anyone who wants to bring in or send out any of the forbidden items, has to use the escape route at the end of the compound. Violators are made to perform a ritual of restoration, which is usually expensive.

Ali Deity

Another security agent in Ogba is Ali deity. It is the symbol of community and existence. In Ogba, this deity is the principal security manager. Every other agent operates as subordinate to this arch deity. The overriding powers of this deity is so encompassing that every individual operates under its watch so long as the individual is within its confines. Even where an indigene of Ogba is outside Ogbaland, it is common to hear such exclamations as "Ali Ogba kweniam" - Ogbaland forbid.

The Ikwerre Experience

Ikwerre people are very religious and with a strong belief in the Supreme Being. Their religiosity according to Wotogbe-Weneka (1996) possesses a pantheistic view of the universe in which divinity is suffused with every aspect of their existence and endeavours, spiritual or

material with Ali (the earth-goddess) as the paramount deity in their pantheon. In his words; “The divinities are believed to be instrumental in directing people on the part of moral rectitude. Certain days of the week and certain seasons of the year and certain periods of the day are regarded as sacred in connection with the worship of the various deities and violation is met with serious sanction”. It is therefore inconceivable to separate the people from their religious worldview and as Johnson (2016) puts it;

The religion of a people is hardly divorced from their culture, the religion and cultures of the Ikwerre people are interdependent that any separation would cause permanent injury on both parties, which invariable may bring disharmony and disparity in the social system.

Socio-Religious Apparatus for Human Security

The cult of Ali (The earth-goddess)

There is the Cult of Ali-earth goddess among the Ikwerre people which in itself is a complex phenomenon. Ali is often associated with the feminine gender as she is believed to have conceived the world in her womb and responsible for the procreation (Mother-earth) while watching over the activities of humans and their interactions with others in society. The phenomenon is sometimes thought of as one and at other times as having a multiplicity of aspects through which it manifests itself. In any case, among the people of Ikwerre, Ali-earth is generally regarded and revered as the arch divinity and forms the basic matrix of all existential realities. It is in this realization that Wotogbe-Weneka (2015) notes that Ali-earth goddess is the origin of the people's morality, social cohesion and fertility. In his analysis of the cult of Ali-earth goddess in Ogba land of Rivers State, as it is among Ikwerre people, Obodoegbulam (2019) succinctly describes Ali thus:

The earth goddess keeps surveillance over everybody. In the event of any wrong doing, such as stealing, witchcraft, sorcery, adultery and other acts of pollution, the culprit does not go unpunished. In such a situation, the victim is inflicted with one form of illness or another to serve as a deterrent.

In any case, Ali among the Ikwerre people because of its potency is held in high regard and reverence. There are obvious serious implication for profanatory actions against the Ali at all levels. This may vary according to the abomination and the family or clan involved. The implications for defiling the Ali is usually grave and so not contemplated. The importance of Ali as the arch deity is best seen in the myth, rituals, taboos, belief, sanctions and emotional commitment that this worship engenders on the people. Ali is therefore seen as an instrument of social, political and economic control. Ali is invoked by Ikwerre people at all times especially while embarking on a journey (Ali durui) or an expedition and in danger it is invoked also (Ali ikwe).

The Cult of Ancestors

Ancestral veneration is the basis for solidarity and of submission to authority. The Ancestors are the departed members of the family or clan. They are the living dead (Mbiti 1969) as they are considered the source of life. An Ancestor in Ogba, as noted by Obodoegbulam (2019) “is someone who led a good life, has offspring, lived to ripe old age, died a good death and has all rites associated with his passage from this visible world to the invisible”. Haven led good lives before their passage, they transmit to the underworld and are venerated by the living as mediators and hence the existence of constant communion between the living members of the

families and clans. Because of these pedigrees, ancestors constitute veritable source of norms, values and customs. That is why they are consulted, why prayers and offerings are made to them. They are believed to provide personal order and stability to the members of their families, communities, clans and ethnic groups since they commune more intimately with the divinities. By their force they are able to influence, reinforce, or sometimes punish the living. They are therefore seen to remain very intimately interested in every person that springs up in their line of family tree and their participation is very intensely felt. As collaborators with the divine, they are principal intermediaries to the divine in their work of protecting lives and empowering their living members. In another respect, Obodoegbulam (2013) refers to the ancestors as the policemen of the universe. The reality of the Ikwerre family as in most African cultures is that it is made up of both the living and the living-dead members. This goes to explain the importance attached to the dead members in order that they may fulfill their obligations of protection and as intermediaries. Be that as it may, death remains an infraction to the physical and the spiritual. The implication is that the death of a relation truncates the chain of existence that binds the family together. Hence, the importance attached to the elaborate rituals to make reconnection possible (Obodoegbulam, 2019).

Sacredness of Life

The emphasis on the sanctity of human life from conception to its enhancement, transmission and society continuity underlies its supremacy over other values. It is therefore unacceptable to take the life of another especially that of kinsman. Murder, suicide, abortion and all that threatens human life and existence were contrary to the vital principles that bind the Ikwerre society and were abomination and taboo. Causing the blood of kin to flow on the earth was tantamount to the desecration of Ali (the earth goddess) that required ritual cleansing and appeasement because of the unpleasant consequences on the individual and the community. This is because shedding of blood is abhorred. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. In such cases, the principle that it is better for one man to die than for all the community to perish is upheld as a form of justification, though as a last resort when all entreaty has failed. If a man intentionally killed another man within the community, he was killed himself. But if he killed a kinsman inadvertently, he was exiled for some long period. In any case any threat to human life is never encouraged and was dealt with decisively as it threatens the peace and corporate existence of the human society. Even the lives of some community totems are held sacred to underscore the value attached to life in general. In this light, an unborn child is believed to have life which begins at conception, held as sacred and to procure abortion on the contrary is anti-life and tabooed. Sources of life like some trees and animals believed to facilitate reincarnation are also sacred.

The Custody and Enforcement Values

The societal values and norms do not drive itself. For this reason, some socio-cultural structures are created to serve as gadfly for the observance of these values in order that the societal peace and order is maintained at all times. This structures while striving to maintain the social equilibrium, it is also concerned with its sustainability for the present and future generations. The common structures include the Council of Elders and Chiefs saddled with the responsibility of guiding the procedures for the appointment of the kings and their coronation. The Council serves as the final arbiter in matters of custom and tradition while the

Chiefs assist in dispute settlements and in the supervision of the sub-groups and associations. The Priests (Nye-kwa-Ali) are usually appointed by the gods as their viceroy and regents. They serve in offering regular sacrifices to placate and appease the gods for their benevolence and against any perceived infractions. The women groups (Omuru-inyonya and Omuru-inyonya-di) and the Age Grade (Uku, Ebiri) are very vital institutions for the maintenance and the enforcement of social security. These groups serve as the check and balance against indiscriminate breaking of the norms and values of the society. The youth, men and women, from where the Age Grade is formed constitute the larger demography and work force of the society. In the words of Ifemesia as clearly evidenced in Ikwerre cited in Iheanacho, (2013);

The age-set exercised considerable discipline over its own members... it performed a most important function in guarding public morality. It was careful of its own good name, and would not hesitate to punish those who would tarnish or disgrace it. Continuous misbehaviour might lead to the ostracism of the offending member.

From the foregoing, with the age grade system in the community the stability and enforcement of law and order, the social equilibrium of the society is guaranteed.

The Yoruba Perspective

In Yoruba cosmology, Olodumare or Olorun - owner of heaven (Awolalu 1979) is the Supreme Being whose supremacy is absolute. He is acknowledged by all divinities as unique, pre-eminent, Omni-potent and omni-scient and the divinities called Orisa are his offspring's, regarded as ministers and functionaries in the universe (Emeagwali (ed.) 1999). The cosmology also consists not only of a supreme being and numerous divinities called Orisa but also a conglomeration of spirits, ancestral forces and psychic agencies.

The pre-colonial old Oyo Empire of the Yoruba Nation was a multi-ethnic religious society but through evolution and harmonious relations guided by the principle of fairness, tolerance and justice, it emerged into a peaceful and strong society where ethnicity and religion were put under control through diplomacy and understanding of one another rather than agitations and communal wars and violent crises to settle disputes, ethnic and religious misunderstanding.

Brief History

Amongst the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba land is located in the Western part of the Nation and traditionally regarded Ile-Ife as the origin and cradle of civilization (Alokan, 2010). They speak Yoruba language generally, though with different local dialects in different communities (Mbiti, 1969) they have an organized political structure which is hierarchical in nature and a monarchical traditional system with the King top most and known as the Oba while next are the chiefs, priests, warriors and so on.

The Oba is next to Olodumare (God) and a fully blown Oba is a quasi-divine personage and meditates with the deities (Orisa) for the people's well-being. The Oba is the custodian of the entire land and delivers justice to the people (Gbadamosi cited in Aderibigbe, 1975).

In Yoruba land, the Oba is highly revered. Next in hierarchy to the Oba are the chiefs known as the Ijoye, who are the intermediaries between the Oba and the people, acting on the instructions of the Oba and concerned about the people's welfare in the community. The chiefs are called Warefa, Otunba, Iyalode, Basorun etc (Alokan, 2010). Next are the cult priests and

warriors known as Awo-Ilu, Onifa, Ogboni, Olode, Apena, Balogun and Onilu etc. who see to the spiritual lives, security and peace of the community and the people.

Challenges

According to Oyeneye and Adenuga (2014); the Alaafin (Oba) of the Oyo Empire waged many battles even against many other Yoruba tribes but the wars had no ethnic or religious reasons, but rather to either prevent external aggressions or to maintain territorial integrity as the empire was surrounded by hostile neighbours of different sub-ethnic groups. Even at that, ethnicity was never the reason for agitations or war because each group had a semi-autonomous status and its own political head which was subordinate to the Alaafin - the King of Oyo Empire.

The 19th and 20th century was a period of crisis, conflict and violence in Yoruba land especially the first quarter of the 19th century due to the decline of the old Oyo kingdom.

Thus the multi-ethnicity was not divisive but unifying factor in time of challenges or external aggressions.

Conclusion

The pervading religious sense invested human security with supra-human source and sanctions. Human security was used to protect sensitive and strategic interests of the society which includes among others; the source and sanctity of human life, economic and socio-political life, the environment and even the sources of water supply. Thus such infractions against the visible and the invisible human communities as procured abortion, murder, suicide, incest, adultery and infertility/childlessness, cultivation and farming on sacred days, falling from a height and dying with face down, cutting the upper teeth, death with swollen stomach or foaming in the mouth, stealing, defecation at the streams were tabooed and required purificatory rites. These constitutes some of the practical codes of conducts of the Ogba, Ikwerre and Yoruba customs and traditions. These norms guide the personal and inter personal relations. The norms guide the people's lives from conception, birth and to the grave. Every aspect of life is taken care of by the customs and traditions of the people which were invested with religious authority and fortified with divine sanctions.

Some remedies associated with human security infractions includes libation and sacrifices, fines and levies, community service, naming and shaming, banishment and death.

References

- Agbakwuo, J. (2013) *The African: His Religion and Cosmology*, Umuahia, Lumen Press.
- Alokan, P. O (2010) "The Impact of Religion on the Promotin of Peace and Economic Integration in Yoruba Land" In *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice, International Perception* 2:1-3.
- Awolalu, J. O and Dopamu P. A (1979). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoge Press Ltd.
- Ellah, F.J. (1995) *Ali Ogba – A history of Ogba people*, Port-Harcourt: FDP
- Emeagwali, Gloria (ed.) (1999) "The Yoruba Religious system" in *Africa update*. Vol vi. Issue 3 (summer).
- Enyindah, (2016) *Handbook on Ikwerre Customary Laws and Traditions (Advocate for Change)*: Sparkles design tech.
- Gbadamosi T. G.O. (1975) "Pattern and Development in Lagos Religious History" In Aderibigbe A.B *Lagos: The Development of an African city*. London, Cambridge Press.
- Idowu, E. B. (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman Press.
- Iheanacho, (2013) *Perspectives in Conflict Interaction and Success Frame*, Port Harcourt, Stepson Printing

House.

- Ikime, O. (ed). (1980) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann publishers
- Johnson, I. (2016) *Religion in the face of Science and Technology (21st Century Assessment)*, Port Harcourt: Alheri books.
- Mou, Dan, (2016) *National Security, Democracy and Good Governance in Africa*, London & Bloomington, Indiana: Author House Uk Ltd).
- Mbiti, J. S (1980) *African Religion and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Obodoegbulam, A. O. (2019) "Inheritance custom in Ogba: A legacy for Posterity" in Obodeogbulam Agi Otto (ed). *Ogbaland in Socio-cultural perspectives*, Port Harcourt, Pearl Publishers International Ltd, 2019, pp.140-150.
- Obodoegbulam, A. O. (2019) *Ogba Religion: The Pre-Christian Heritage*, Port Harcourt, Pearl Publishers International Ltd.
- Okeke, H. (2001) "African Morality vis-à-vis Matrimonial Provisions in the Code of Canon Law" in *Journal of Bigard Theological Studies* 21-1, Jan-July pp 9-37
- Olumati, R. (2015) "The impact of Christianity and modernity on Ali-Earth Goddess of the Traditional Religion of the Ikwerre People, Revers State" *African Research Review* 9(1):36, pp95 – 108
- Osaji, J.O. (2016) "Religion, P001" "The Role of Religion in National security policy since September 11, 2001" Publication of Strategic Studies Institute, US Army war college.
- Wotogbe-Weneka, W. (2015) "Burial rites and reincarnation in the Indigenous tradition of the Ikwerre people of Upper Niger Delta" in Ogunbile Davide (ed), *African indigenous Religious Traditions in Local and Global contexts. Perspective on Nigeria, A festschrift in Honour of Jacob K. Olupona* Lagos, pp. 217-226
- Wotogbe – Weneka, W.(1996) "Fundamentals of Indigenous African Religion of Ikwerre, Nigeria" *A Journal of Oriental and African studies* Vol 8, pp137 – 146
- Shani, G. (2016) Religion a security: an introduction, *Critical studies on security*, 4:3, DOI:10.1080/21624887.2016.1221194