# The Role of African Traditional Religion in Conflict Management in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Religion has been observed to be a very strong factor of conflict in contemporary Africa. Many religious crises and those with religious undertone pervade the African continent and happen on high frequency with high proportion of cataclysmic consequences across the states of Africa, for instance, Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, Al-Shabab religious violence in Somalia, Kenya and Eritrea, as well as religious crisis in Sudan. Notwithstanding the potency of religion for conflict creation, religion can still be exploited to be positively functional and beneficial as well as useful for conflict management process in Africa. This work, from the prism of qualitative analytical approach, offers to explore the character and doctrine of African Traditional Religion (ATR) as they are advantageous and essential for conflict prevention, conflict resolution, conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Nigeria. The paper suggests, among other things, a social re-engineering of communitarian ethos as promoted by the African belief system. This is believed to encourage and ensure more peaceful and harmonious coexistence among different societies of the Nigerian state. Data for this work are collected from books, journal articles, newspapers, and other relevant historical documents.

**Keywords:** Africa, African Traditional Religion, conflict management, communitarian ethos

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# Introduction

One of the variables that define human interactions is religion, and among human interactions, conflict is inevitable because communities of people naturally pursue different interests. In this situation, conflict is inevitable; hence the need for its management. The need and desire to manage conflict find expression in the human desire to live in peace for the purpose of progress and community development. Oguntomisin (2004) captured the significance of peace to societal progress, when he stated that "peace is a *sine qua non* to political stability, socio-economic development and societal wellbeing. It is the greatest desire of all human communities all times" (p. 1). To underscore this universal desideratum, he posited that, gospel of peace becomes a cardinal focus of traditional and orthodox religions all over the world, both in the past and present times. In early Africa, according to Rodney (1972), religious beliefs were associated with the mobilization and discipline of large numbers of people to form states. Religions also provided concepts in the struggle for social justice (Rodney, 1972). From this point of view, religion's role in the management of conflict in human society is indisputable.

It is observed that religion as well as conflict is inherent in human existence. According to Idowu (1973), religion is very much and always with us. It is with us at every moment of life in our innermost beings and with regard to the great or minor events of life. It needs no apologetics to establish the fact of its existence and that it has been a concomitant of almost every sphere of human activity from time immemorial. In light of the foregoing, one can conclude that the hand of religion cannot be removed amongst the human interactions and existence which are always fraught with conflicts if the living would have its divine meaning. Bouquet (1933) asserted that religion cannot wisely or safely be ignored or neglected as it is by so many frivolous persons today. Even a defective or obsolete scheme of religion will serve the individual better than none at all. Keith (1930) also noted that we who wish to make reason the guide of life can no longer afford to be mere breakers of images, if our way of thinking is to make any progress in the world, we have no more right to deprive men and women of their religion than of their favorite drinking unless we can provide reasonable and acceptable substitutes.

However, the concept of religion, being a phenomenon that is inexorably linked with and intrinsic in human interrelationships, does not lend itself to a unipolar interpretation. There are a lot of interpretations that are accumulated around it. But simply put, religion is the sum total of a person's beliefs and practices in relation to the Divine Being. Idowu (1973) elaborated this by defining religion as follows:

> Religion results from man's spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to, his immediate awareness of a living power. "Wholly other" and infinitely greater than himself; a power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with Himself. This awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depths of man's being for close communion with, and vital relationship to this power as a source of real life. (p. 75)

Further to this is therefore an attempt to conceptualize African Traditional Religion (ATR), which would help to guide the kernel of this discourse. Awolalu (1976) trying to disabuse minds of the Eurocentric view of ATR, stated that:

> When we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean the indigenous

religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the fore-bears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples' myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old. (p. 275)

Therefore, from the definitions given, one can infer and interpret religion to be the sum total of man's interaction with the Supreme Being or supernatural entities.

Conflict, just like religion, is also a social phenomenon, which forms a crucial and unavoidable part of human life (Ginty, 2008), and manifests in all human social interactions. This is based on the notion that there are groups in society that have different interests. In light of this, it is believed that social arrangements tend to benefit some groups to the detriment of others, thus, the potential for, and likelihood of, conflict always manifest (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). In the observation of Bamigbose (2017), when conflict happens it can escalate and degenerate to become a large scale crisis of magnitude proportion if not properly managed. The nation, Nigeria, has been a victim of incessant and intermittent crises of various dimensions which had made the country suffer many woes. However, the mechanisms adopted to manage conflict have not been so effective to bring about sustainable peace and progress in the country.

It is on this note that this work tends to examine the role of African Traditional Religion in managing conflict in Nigeria. Using the reductionist historical analytical method, the paper discusses the crux of conflict management in Nigeria.

## Conceptualizing Conflict Management

Management is an important parameter that dictates the progress or otherwise of any human establishment. In fact, one can say that management is the soul of business. In the case of conflict, how it is managed has a long way to determine how soon it will be resolved and what peace would be achieved after all. The way conflict is also managed determines whether it will re-occur in the future or escalate into a crisis of magnitude effect. Therefore, in order to prevent the occurrence of conflict, its re-occurrence and escalation, conflict management needs to be taken seriously. Hence, conflict management is not limited to, but encompasses, conflict prevention, dispute resolution, conflict settlement and all peace processes like mediation, negotiation, arbitration, etc. According to Schimid (1998), conflict management can be referred to as intervention in an ongoing conflict process in such a way as to contain and, if possible, a) reduce the level of violence and destruction; b) prevent the vertical escalation toward the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and c) prevent the horizontal expansion into other theatres. In the opinion of Lund (1997), conflict management is: a) transforming the (potential or actual) clash into less damaging form of interaction or b) searching for (temporary) solutions that can prevent escalation and

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move conflicting parties toward either a settlement of the conflict or at least a termination of the killing, e.g., through a cease-fire. Zartman (1997) considered it as interventionist efforts toward preventing the escalation and negative effects of ongoing conflicts.

The aim of conflict management, in the opinion of this paper, is to bring about permanent solution to a conflict and thus ensure positive peace and harmonious coexistence among the people. The work therefore considers conflict management as transformation of all that characterize the conflict such as the causes, the parties in conflict, the environment, the circumstances, while focusing on peacebuilding among human interactions.

## Trajectory of Conflicts and Crises in Nigeria Since 1960

The fact of political history of Nigeria remains that the country got her independence in 1960; however the sociological reality of the independence hinges on the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates and Lagos colony of 1914 by Fredrick Lord Lugard, the then colonial governor of the area called Nigeria (NAI, 1914; Osuntokun, 2018). This brought about a fusion of different ethnic groups with varying aspirations and different worldviews. Consequently, the country secured an independence that brought her into the reality of ethnic pluralism with its attendant challenges. Hence, Nigeria is usually characterized as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously and violently contested along the lines of complex ethnic, religious and regional divisions (Smyth & Robinson, 2001). This has been the trend since independence in Nigeria.

The issues that prop-up violent contestation are essentially those ones that are very fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, zero-sum-game strategy. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) observed these issues to include the control of state power, resource allocation and citizenship. Thus, according to them, disintegration, secession, civil strife, civil war, minority agitation, and violent conflicts, all of which would normally be considered aberrant to 'normal' state formation, are prevalent threats to, and actual occurrences in, Nigeria. As a result, the country oscillates between the deep blue sea of integration and the devil of disintegration.

Violent conflicts occurring in Nigeria, like similar ones internationally, have suffered from the crisis of appropriate label and identity. Orrnet (2008) noted that such a lack of clarity has characterized many scholarly works since the seventies. According to him:

> Since the 1970-1980s, this type of violence has been the subject of increased study… the list of terms used to describe it is long and diverse. Terms like 'identity conflict', 'ethnic conflict', 'religious conflict', 'ethno-religious conflict', 'sectarian conflict', 'communal riots' and protracted social conflict' are among the most commonly found in the literature. Often, however, these terms are adopted without being defined or clarified, resulting in conflict analysis based on assumptions and conceptual confusion-particularly as the way these terms are currently used, they contain many similarities and many overlap, yet they continue to be used indiscriminately and without agreement between analysts. (p. 25)

In the Nigerian context, ethnicity and religion are the principal identities around which violent conflicts occur. Ethnicity in conflict in Nigerian perspective is used to refer to categories that share a common

culture (language being an essential parameter) and who are mobilized for political ends. Religion in conflict, on the other hand, is used for faith-based forms of identity when similarly mobilized for political ends. Of these two, religious identity, principally Christianity and Islam, has played more crucial role in mobilizing people for urban violence since the 1980s (Best & Hoomlong, 2011).

It is pertinent to therefore state that, Nigeria, since 1960 has been bedeviled with one crisis or the other. The country has had many occasions of large scale conflicts which had greatly caused a lot of un-rectifiable damages and destructions in the land. In fact, the various wounds these numerous crises have inflicted and foisted on the psyche of many Nigerians, draining the Atlantic Ocean for the sake of healing them, might not be effective and sufficient. It would, however, require a supernatural mechanism to do justice to the healing. This may be found in the instrumentality of the African Traditional Religion.

*Some Violent Conflicts and Wars in Nigeria: A Dateline (1962-2002)*

| S/N | Conflict | Region | Nature | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Action group crisis | Southwest | Political | 1962 |
| 2. | Census crisis | National | | 1964 |
| 3. | Civil war | National | Structural/political | 1967 to 70 |
| 4. | Maitatsine conflict | North (Kano) | Religious | 1980 |
| 5. | Maitatsine conflict | North Bulumkutu Maiduguri and Ri-gassa/Kasuna) | Religious | 1982 |
| 6. | Kano crisis | North | Religious | 1982 |
| 7. | Maitatsine conflict | North (Jimeta/Yola) | Religious | 1984 |
| 8. | Maitatsine conflict | North (Gombe) | Religious | 1985 |
| 9. | The campus riots | North | Religious | 1986 |
| 10. | The Kafanchan crisis | North | Religious | 1987 |
| 11. | Kano riots | North | Religious | 1991 |
| 12. | The Katsina fracas | North | Religious | 1991 |
| 13. | Maitatsine conflict | North (Funtua) | Religious | 1993 |
| 14. | June 12 crisis | National | Political | 1993 |
| 15. | Renewed Warri communal clash | Delta State | Communal | 1999 |
| 16. | OPC and Hausa traders clashes | Sagamu (Ogun State) | Ethnic | 1999 |
| 17. | OPC and Hausa Traders | Lagos | Communal | 1999 |
| 18. | The Kaduna crisis | North | Religious | 2000 |
| 19. | Communal clash in Brass Local Government | Bayelsa | Communal | 2000 |
| 20. | Communal clash in Etsako Local Government | Edo | Communal | 2000 |

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| 21. | Boundary dispute between communities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River state | | Communal | 2000 |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 22. | Clash between farmers and cattle herdsmen in Saki | Saki (Oyo State) | | 2000 |
| 23. | Communal clash between the people of Ikot Offing and Oku-Iboku | Cross River | Communal | 2000 |
| 24. | Communal clash in Ikare Akoko | Ondo state | Communal | 2000 |
| 25. | Hostility between Ijaw and Urhobo | Delta state | Communal | 2000 |
| 26 | Clash between Igbo and Hausa Traders at Alaba Rago market | Lagos state | | 2000 |
| 27. | Clashes between Ife and Modakeke | Osun state | Communal | 2000 |
| 28. | Boko Haram crisis | National | Religious | 2000 to date |
| 29. | OPC and Hausa people clash at Idi Araba | Lagos state | | 2002 |

*(Best & Hoomlong, 2011)*

## Impact of Conflict in Nigeria

To a common sense, there is no conflict, most especially destructive or negative, that does not have its tolls on people. It is just exactly the same in the case of Nigeria. Every occasion of conflict has always left behind its trail, tales of woes and catastrophes of high proportion and magnitude effects. This section discusses the effects of conflicts in Nigeria.

The fact remains that whenever conflict occurs in Nigeria, the development of the society in most times is seriously and badly affected. The costs of conflict in Nigeria in terms of human life and property, as well as the destruction of social infrastructure, are stupendous. For example, over two million lives were lost to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. In addition, once conflict occurs, scarce resources are inevitably diverted to the purchase of military equipment at the expense of socio-economic development of the country. An example is the security vote to fight Boko Haram in Nigeria during the reign of President Goodluck Jonathan. However, the money was embezzled by some political elites in the country (Nwabughiogu, 2016).

According to the World Bank (2013), weakness in the oil sector arising from years of conflicts have increased macroeconomic risks for Nigeria. Oil accounts for 90% of exports and roughly 75% of consolidated budgetary revenues. The decline in oil output, together with weaker oil prices led to a weakened balance of payments and shortfalls of budgetary revenues. The balance of payments surplus

registered from October 2011 to April 2013 thus disappeared. Official foreign reserves also declined slightly from almost $49 billion in end of April 2013 to $46 billion on September 19, 2013 (Odoh et al., 2014). As of the second half of the year 2013, total federation revenues available for sharing among the tiers of government fell short of projections by 21%, this was as a result of the protracted social conflicts especially the crisis of Boko Haram insurgency.

One other implication of persistent conflicts is the insecurity of lives and properties which tends to hinders foreign economic relations to jumpstart the economy (Adeyemi, 2006). For instance, the crisis of Boko Haram which began in 2000 had caused a lot of destruction of lives and property in the country and life has become unbearable for the majority of people living in the northeastern part of the country, most especially Maiduguri, Borno state. The Nigerian national dailies are awashed on a daily basis with the draconian and dastardly inhuman activities of Boko Haram.

It is also important to state the effects of social conflicts on gross domestic product, exchange rate, inflation and per capita income in Nigeria in $ USD. The IMF (2012) reveals a steady decline in the value of the Nigerian currency, naira, in comparative terms with other major currencies in the world between 1980 and 2012. According to the report, in 1980 one Naira was exchanged for one U.S. Dollar. The exchange rates were three Naira to one US Dollar in 1985, nine Naira to $1 in 1990, 50 Naira to $1 in 2005, 150 Naira to $1 in 2010 and 168 Naira to $1 in 2012. As at the time of writing this paper $1 is exchanged for 350 Naira. This portrays a country's slide in weakness in its global economic positions with other nations. The World Bank report of 2013 also revealed a steady increase in inflation and continuous slide in per capita income and consequently the standard of living index, among other things, grew unbearable. These were as a result of the intractable social conflicts in the country over the years because the required economic stability to take care of these variables has been hampered. The enabling environment was deactivated thus making difficult or practically impossible the thriving of business. Conflicts also made the country unsafe for business and commercial practices. As a result, a lot of factories and businesses became bankrupt and consequently closed. Besides, foreign direct investment (FDI) was not encouraged in the country.

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Religion has been observed to be a very strong factor of conflict in contemporary Nigeria. Notwithstanding its potency for conflict creation, religion can be exploited to be positively functional and beneficial in conflict management process, most especially in Nigeria. However, it should be noted here that the goal of this paper is not to glorify African Traditional Religion or set it above the orthodox or conventional model of conflict management as represented by the western model, but to objectively examine the functional attributes of African Traditional Religion in order to explore its contributions to conflict management in Nigeria.

African Traditional Religion is regarded as one of the cohesive factors in the society. Its major aims are to bring peace and harmony among the people. It binds the community together (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). However, it is lamentable that because imperial Christian European forces invaded, conquered and vandalized African societies between 1860 and 1900, and because Africans were deceived and coerced in the process into believing that they had no God, no religion, no culture, no history and no civilization, all the deities through which they worshiped God, the Creator, and with which they

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effectively and efficiently exercised social control and ensured peaceful, humane, just and egalitarian society were labeled demonic (Nwolise, 2004). Thus the utility of African indigenous religion in conflict management became disparaged and the continent suffered for it. However, it needs to be emphasized that Africa, before the coming of colonial rule, had efficient conflict management mechanisms. For instance, in the Kalahari desert in Botswana and Namibia, the Bushmen had led traditional lives for thousands of years. The lack of technological refinement belies sophistication in dispute resolution practices which evolved without the courts and a formal state system and are suited to the needs of a collective hunter-gatherer society (Boulle, 2005).

Nigeria, today, presents an excellent laboratory for the study of serious confusion, and peculiar problems associated with the values, principles and dynamics of conflict prevention, management and resolution. Hence, the focus of this work is not out of place to help a nation like Nigeria, which is faced with multifarious and multidimensional conflicts. Religion is an inescapable involvement of every member of human race and it is manifested and practiced in various forms in Nigeria, such as funerals, initiations, child naming ceremony, rituals, festivals, etc. Some of these practices are examined as they relate to conflict management.

*Festivals and conflict resolution*

Festivals are recurrent religious ceremonies. There are a lot of festivals in Nigeria as well as Africa in general. No one can claim to have perfect knowledge of festivals in West Africa and most especially in Nigeria. What one knows about festivals is relative to his or her environment and the little he/she read or learned. Oduoye (1998) affirmed this by asserting that nobody studying traditional religion in West Africa is expected to become an expert in describing West African religious festivals. To justify this, a reference was made to Ayeni (1983) who gave descriptions of sixty-nine festivals only in old Bendel state of Nigeria. It should however be stated that the significance of festivals lies in the fact that they illustrate among other things historical events, coming of age, harvesting of crops, and appeasement to various gods for protection against enemies, evil or epidemic disease (Ayeni, 1983), as well as peace-making process.

*Gelede* festival is an example of festivals that play significant role in conflict management in Yoruba land of southwestern Nigeria. The *Gelede* festival is held during the dry season, when people return home from their farms with the fruits of the harvest and there is an abundant food. This period is good for conflict resolution because it used to be a time when people in the area are naturally very happy to reap the fruits of their annual labor. This state of mind is exploited to add fun to the period through the *Gelede* festival which is a festival that also includes entertainment as one of its feature. The festival is held in the town's market place, which is the sphere of female activity and the metaphor of the world as a place of human struggle and conflict. It always comes up in the night till the twilight. The festival is used to settle disputes among husband and wives (matrimonial conflicts) and other social conflicts. The purpose of the *Gelede* festival, according to Lawal (1996), is nothing less than the promotion of social harmony, not only in gender relations but in relations among all people: "to entertain the general public in the process, sensitize it to the virtues of social 'living and good citizenship' (Ray, 1999).

*Rituals and conflict resolution*

The role of rituals in conflict management cannot be overemphasized. Oguntomisin (2004)

asserted that ritual sanctions were deeply rooted in the people's religion described as "the engine of the law" (p. 3). In societies where the king had divine authority and was *ipso facto* the *pontifex maximus,* he could impose ritual sanctions. In some communities in Nigeria certain gods or goddesses were believed to be naturally averse to injustices. Such deities included Ogun, Sango, Ayelala in Yorubaland (Olaoba, 1992) and Swemd in Tivland (Dzurgba, 1977). For instance, in Yoruba land, there are cases of conflict resolution through the instrumentality of Ogun or Sango depending on the gravity of the issues in conflict. Most times in traditional typical Yorubaland, to determine justice in a conflict among the disputants, a gun or iron (Emblem of Ogun) is used to swear an oath by the parties in conflict in order to detect a culprit or determine the innocence or otherwise of the parties.

### Offering in peace-making process

Another supernatural way of peace-making, according to Idowu (1996), involved periodic peace offerings. Such offerings were made in some communities after consulting with the *Ifa Oracle*. In Yorubaland for instance, the Ooni of Ife celebrated the *Olojo* festival annually to offer sacrifices to the gods in order to ensure peace and stability in his domain. Once this is done, it is believed that people will live to prevent the occasion of conflict and resolve it amicably to forestall its escalation when it occurs. This makes peace prevail throughout the year.

### Deities and conflict management

Consultation of deities as final arbiters in disputes that could not be settled in the village assemblies was a common practice among the Igbo. Igbo traditional society practiced village social-political system, and conflicts were always settled in the village assemblies, but the ones that could not be settled at that level were referred to the courts and institutions of their gods and goddesses. These supernatural agencies were the oracles which were believed to be capable of restoring peace (positive peace) among the parties in conflict in a fair and impartial manner. Among the famous oracles to which cases were referred for justice include *Ibiniukpabi* or *Arochukwu* (Long Juju) oracle at Arochukwu, Agbala in Awka and *Igwe-ka-Ala* in Umunneoha (Afigbo, 1973).

### Religious organization and conflict settlement

In Benue state among the Egede, the *alikpe* cult was a formidable traditional institution saddled with a responsibility for conflict management. Once its members were called into a case they could not be stopped. They had a special god of their own whose power was symbolized by a spear stuck in the ground in the compound where they were to intervene in conflicts (Forde, 1970).

### Joke as instrument of conflict resolution

Joking relationships are a form of managing conflict between the Fulbe (Fulani) and others. A joking relationship is either a resolved or a signpost of a former dependency or tribute - paying relationship. Joking relationships exist between lineage and between ethnic groups (Wilson-fall, 2000). Wilson-fall (2000) stated that joking relationships have ritualized the acknowledgment that former enemies have become friends. Joking relationships between the Fulbe and the Tiv of the north central plateau of northern Nigeria, according to him, developed as a result of land overuse. After agreeing to negotiate, the parties in conflict established joking relationships so that future generations would

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avoid conflict. In principle, one is supposed to be more tolerant of those with whom one has a joking relationship. This is how it was being practiced among the traditional Fulani people of the northern Nigeria.

Judging from the above, it is therefore discovered that traditional religion plays impartial and neutral roles in bringing about fairness and justice, such that parties in conflict would accommodate, tolerate one another and reciprocate gestures that aim at genuine reconciliation, which will be good for future relationships.

## Recommendations

If the focus of traditional African religion in conflict management is to ensure genuine reconciliation and harmonious peaceful coexistence among the people, it is necessary and recommended to be part of the judicial legal system of Nigeria.

Also, traditional African religion should be given an ample space in the socio-political system of Nigeria, for instance, by employing traditional religious instruments like gun, sand from the tomb, etc. to administer oath of office on the political office holders. This might create fear that would mitigate political crisis in the country other than litigation, which takes long time in conflict settlement.

Besides, any erring office holder should always be tried by the instrumentality of the indigenous religions, instead of using conventional judicial, legal process (or litigation).

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed conflict and religion as a social phenomenon which cannot be removed from human society. The work also delved into dimensions of conflicts in Nigeria and examined the roles that African traditional religion is capable of playing in the process of managing those conflicts irrespective of their dimensions.

The conclusion therefore is that the best solution for any problem such as conflict is better sourced from within. There is no way an imported or alien instrument can give a required solution to a native problem. The conflicts which happened in Nigeria are as a result of the dynamics of the unique environment and people of the land, and it is only a conflict management mechanism developed from the indigenous traditions, customs and peculiarities of the land that is best suited for offering a solution. Hence the work toes the line of scholars who called for African solutions to African problems (Zartman, 1989).

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