

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION'S CONCEPT OF JUSTICE AND HUMAN DIGNITY: A SOLUTION TO MORAL PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY EZZA CLAN

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Abstract

This research work aimed at examining African Traditional Religion's Concept of Justice and Human Dignity as a solution to moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan. The problem of the research was that African countries, especially Nigeria was in a state of moral decay. In the light of mounting problems bedeviling African nations, the researcher embarked on research work that would help to get rid of most of the problems by taking Ezza clan as a case study. The methodology adopted was a descriptive survey design which helped in collecting, finding, discussing and interpreting what was available. In-depth interviews and questionnaire were used to explore ATR's concept of justice and human dignity. The key findings of the research revealed that human rights and justice were very vital in Ezza clan; that ATR was anchored on the concept of justice and human dignity which served as tools for inculcating and enforcing moral values in Ezza clan; and that ATR on its emphasis on justice and human dignity could revitalize moral values and practices as well as promote social cohesion and community development. The findings finally showed that ATR to a large extent could contribute immensely to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan in particular and Nigeria in general. In line with the findings, the following recommendations were made: Westerners and adherents of imported religions should try to respect traditional values. High moral standard should be encouraged in all spheres of human endeavours. Lastly, ATR in conjunction with justice, human rights and dignity should be upheld so as to stem the rising tide of immorality in all walks of life.

Key words: ATR, Concept of Justice, Human Dignity, Moral Problems, Social Cohesion, Moral Rejuvenation.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Understanding ATR's Concept of Justice and Human Dignity can help to revitalize moral values and practices, promote social cohesion and community development. The traditional Africans firmly believe the universe was created and sustained by God. It is also believed

that God not only created the material universe but also established laws of nature and human customs. Africans consider God to be both active and interested in the historical and ethical affairs of men.

The Africans no doubt believe in the justice of God. In this regard, Parrinder (1969) observed that “God is judge, ruler of morals, and the final tribunal before whom man must appear after death”. God is a God of Justice and it is left for us to restore or uphold human dignity by doing what is right before God and our fellow men. In doing so, peace, harmony and tranquility will reign supreme in this age “money talks as our core values erode” (Kalu, 1980).

African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous religious systems of African peoples South of the sub-Sahara. It is indeed the religious beliefs and practices of the Negroid peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, prevalent before the arrival of Christianity and Islam and still adhered to by many Africans.

African Traditional Religion is anchored on the Concept of Justice and Human Dignity because the religion serves a useful role in enforcing moral codes in the society. Okafor (1992:40) for instance, with respect to Igbo people observed that:

Generally, the Igbo seek and cherish justice in all spheres of human activities. An unjust man is looked upon with contempt and disregard and is never allowed to hold any serious social position. The Igbo idea of justice is clear and distinct. For them, justice simply means – giving to everyone what is his due. Favouritism in any gender or case stands condemned as a mutilation of justice. There must be equal reward or punishment for equal merit or offence. But the Igbo notice that absolute justice is not possible in any human society. Hence, in vital issues, they seek the redress of a divine justice.

Human dignity is considered as paramount in African society. This is the reason why human rights are vital in African society. The right to life is perhaps the first followed by others such as the right to own property. The rights are considered to be natural, inalienable and fundamental in African society. Africans have sense of sin and by implication have sense of morality. For instance, in African society God is said to be the ultimate guardian of human morality. God is said to be God of justice and as such is regarded as the founder

and guardian of morality. Certain actions of man are considered offences against God and our fellow man. In this regard, Basden (1983:216) observed that:

Certain actions such as murder, theft and adultery, are esteemed offences against God, as well as against man. The natives hold that in committing such offences, a man is acting contrary to the will of God and appropriate punishment will assuredly follow. Should the actual sinner escape, his descendants must bear the burden.

Offences or sins against God involve doing anything contrary to the will and direction of the Deity. They include in particular, murder, suicide, stealing and any immoral behaviour. In fact, all sins or offences that are against the divinities, the ancestors and other spiritual beings are sins or offences against God for the divinities and ancestors are there to carry out the wills of the Supreme Deity.

Most traditional African societies believe that the best way to relate to God and other fellow human beings is to seek justice which will restore human dignity. This is the reason why the traditional Africans place much premium on character. According to Idowu (1962) "To the Yoruba, man's character is of supreme importance and it is this which Olodumare Judges". The Igbo people believe strongly that when they disregard the norms of the society they commit sin against earth spirit, the ancestors and the Supreme Deity. In this respect, Ilogu (1974: 137) argued that:

Sin is not therefore seen directly and primarily as rebellion against the deity or deities, but more often as departure from the norm, the prescribed "laws" or falling foul of Omenani, over which the earth goddess presides who is thereby indirectly rebelled against.

The earth goddess and the ancestors are the custodians of public morality and any contravention of the norms of the society is viewed seriously by them as Arinze (1970) observed that "The Iboman believes that when he sins, he makes the higher powers frown". Opoku (1978) also writes of the Akan people of Ghana, that "the Earth abhors suicide, and the spilling of blood and cohabitation in the bush". In fact, the Africans abhor what diminishes human dignity, such as sins which include among others murder, theft, adultery, incest, rape, breaking taboos, desecration of holy places and objects of worship. Mbiti

(1969: 205) believes that those laws, customs, rules, taboos, etc. were instituted by God or national leaders when he observed that:

There exist, therefore, many laws, customs, set forms of behaviour, regulations, rules, observances and taboos, constituting the moral code and ethics of a given community or society. Some of these are held sacred, and are believed to have been instituted by God or national leaders.

God is acknowledged by most Africans as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical code. However, He is not expected to be involved in day to day observance of the moral order. It is the duty of the divinities, ancestors, spirits, elders, priests and traditional rules and others to act as daily guardians or police of human morality.

Religion has played major role in ethical code as Amadi (1982:3) vividly portrayed:

Religion has played a particularly important role in ethical philosophy all down the ages because it has been a useful instrument for enforcing moral codes. One should do this and not do that because God has said so. Much of the ancient and medieval philosophy of the Western world hinged on religious precepts. The medieval philosopher found God a very useful resort, the point at which all arguments ended.

The ethical codes of traditional Africans are largely unwritten, though they are written in the hearts of the people and are found in the religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the particular society.

In the light of the challenging problems highlighted above, it is incumbent on the researcher to find out the possible means ATR's concept of justice and human dignity can help in solving moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan.

Statement of the Problem

African countries, especially Nigeria is in a state of moral decay. There is a deepening crisis which pervades every aspect of the national life – there is indiscipline in schools, fraud of high magnitudes is rife in the society, stealing, and armed robbery, bribery and corruption, examination malpractices, kidnapping, banditry, bad governance, electoral malpractices, embezzlement of public money, rape, murder and the like. In the light of these mounting problems bedevilling African nations, the researcher wishes to embark on

a research work that will help to get rid of these problems by taking Ezza clan as a case study.

Objectives or Purpose of the Study

The general objectives of the study is to examine the African Traditional Religious concept that reflects justice and human dignity that will serve as a solution to moral problems bedevilling contemporary African societies. Specifically, the study will

1. Explore the concept of justice and human dignity in African Traditional Religion (ATR) with particular reference to Ezza clan.
2. Examine the role ATR plays in addressing moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan.
3. Investigate the relationship between ATR's concept of justice and human dignity and social cohesion in Ezza.
4. Develop a theoretical framework for understanding ATR's contribution to moral rejuvenation in Ezza and Nigeria as a whole.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the concepts of justice and human dignity in African Traditional Religion?
2. To what extent does African Traditional Religion address moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan?
3. What are the relationship between African Traditional Religion's concept of justice and human dignity and social cohesion in Ezza?
4. To what extent does African Traditional Religion contribute to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan?

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study cannot be overemphasized. It will help the individual to seek and cherish justice in all spheres of human activities. It will help one to know what is right and do what is right. It will enable the individual to be of good character which will enable him/her to live life of integrity. The research work also enables the community to abhor

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what diminishes human dignity such as sins which include among others murder, theft, adultery, incest, rape, breaking taboos, desecration of holy places and objects of worship. The government and the society at large will also benefit immensely as the study will serve a useful role in enforcing moral codes in the society.

Scope of the Study

The study covers African Traditional Religion's Concept of Justice and Human Dignity: A solution to moral problem in contemporary Ezza clan. The researcher limits this study to Ezza clan which consists of Ezza North and Ezza South L.G.A. However, the findings of this study can be generalized to other clans in Ebonyi State.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design used was a descriptive survey design which is a form of descriptive research that aimed at collecting, finding, discussing and interpreting what is available. Descriptive research design is appropriate because in the words of Osuala (1993) that gives a picture of a situation with a full understanding of the phenomena for making a wide range of policy decision. This design was used to elicit the opinion of the respondents on ATR's Concept of Justice and Human Dignity as a solution to moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan. The design was also considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to identify the characteristics of the population objectively and their opinion by collecting and analyzing data.

Area of the Study

The area of study is Ezza clan. Ezza clan consists of two local governments namely, Ezza North and Ezza South. Ezza North and South were formerly one local government area but were later created two. The clan comprise the following communities: Amana, Amezekwe, Idembia, Amagu, Achara, Nsokara, Okoffia, Amudo. The above communities, eight in number make up Nsokara Ezza. The Kpakpaji group include the following communities: Nkomoro, Ameka, Ezzama, Amuzu, Ekka, Inyere, Oriuzor, Umuezeokoha, Umuoghara, Umuezeoka, Ogboji, Amaewula, Okpomoro and Amuda.

Ezza people before the colonial era were traditional worshippers. At that time, the people adhered strictly to the concept of justice and human dignity and moral problems in the clan were very minimal. But nowadays, the concept of justice and human dignity seem to have been thrown to the wind. Moral problems such as rape, adultery, corruption, kidnapping, murder, armed robbery, etc. are rife.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of all adults of 25 years old and above who are of sound mind whether male or female in Ezza clan. The population of the study is one million adults.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A stratified random sampling techniques was adopted for the study. 500 adults were randomly selected for the study. Data necessary for carrying out the study was sort primarily from a population of 500 respondents. The main purpose of using random sampling technique is to select a sample that can be used as a representative sample generated from a larger population.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used was oral interview and structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. It was built in line with the general purpose of the study which is to examine African Traditional Religion's Concept of Justice and Human Dignity as a solution to moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan. The questionnaire was structured in two sections: Section A and B. Section A was about the personal characteristics of the respondents such as age, sex, status and qualification and section B was designed to sort opinion and perception of respondents in line with the research purpose and objectives. The researcher used a modified likert four (4) point scale type with the numerical values assigned to them as follows:

Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points

Agree (A) 3 points

Disagree (D) 2 points

Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Face validation was used to establish that the instrument was designed to measure what the researcher desired.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher distributed the questionnaire to the respondents by himself. The respondents filled in the questionnaire and was collected on the spot. A total of five hundred questionnaire was administered to the respondents and all were collected.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected from the respondents were analyzed through the use of mean score (\bar{x}) using the formula below:

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{x}) = \frac{FX}{N}$$

Where \bar{x} = mean

F = frequency

X = score

N = total numbers of scores

Decision Rule

In the analysis, the decision rule is 2.50. That is, mean score of 2.50 is taken as a criterion point, which implies that a mean score of 2.50 and above is an indication that the respondents are in agreement with the option of the items and therefore signified that the option is accepted while any mean score of 2.49 and below is an indication that the respondents are in disagreement with the option of the items and therefore is rejected. Data

were analyzed by using weighed mean of; SA = 4 points, A = 3 points, D = 2 points and SD = 1 point.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The data collected from the respondents through oral interview and questionnaire are presented in tables.

Research Question One:

What are the concepts of justice and human dignity in African Traditional Religion?

Table 1: Mean rating on the concepts of justice and human dignity in ATR

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
1	The concepts of justice and human dignity in ATR							
a.	Justice means giving everyone what is his or her due	362	114	22	02	1836	3.67	Accepted
b.	Equal reward or punishment for equal merit or offence	245	186	65	04	1672	3.34	Accepted
c.	Human dignity is paramount in African society	281	167	29	13	1696	3.39	Accepted
d.	Human rights are vital in African society	244	169	56	31	1626	3.25	Accepted
e.	The right to life is considered sacred and inalienable all over Africa	415	67	16	02	1895	3.79	Accepted
f.	Africans abhor what diminishes human dignity such as sins.	188	192	94	26	1542	3.08	Accepted
	Grand mean						3.42	

From table one above, the respondents agreed unanimously with respect to items a–f that justice means giving everyone what is his or her due, equal rewards or punishment for equal merit or offence, that human dignity is paramount in African society and that human rights are vital in African society. Similarly, the respondents agreed that the right to life is considered sacred and inalienable all over Africa and that Africans abhor what diminishes human dignity such as sins.

Research Question Two:

To what extent does African Traditional Religion address moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan?

Table 2: Mean rating on the extent ATR addresses moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
2	The extent ATR addresses moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan							
a.	ATR is anchored on the concept of justice and dignity	313	117	66	04	1739	3.48	Accepted
b.	ATR serves as a tool for enforcing moral codes in Ezza clan	411	68	20	01	1889	3.78	Accepted
c.	ATR inculcates moral values and attitudes to our youths.	296	183	22	04	1781	3.56	Accepted
d.	In Ezza ATR helps the people to have sense of sin and by implication have sense of morality	128	214	106	52	1418	2.84	Accepted
e.	ATR plays major role in ethical code	315	129	48	08	1751	3.50	Accepted
	Grand mean						3.43	

From table 2 above, the respondents also unanimously agreed with respect to items a – e that ATR is anchored on the concept of justice and dignity, serves as a tool for enforcing

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moral codes in Ezza clan, inculcates moral values and attitude to our youths as well as helps the people to have sense of sin and by implication have sense of morality. Similarly, the respondents equally agreed that ATR plays major role in ethical code.

Research Question Three:

What are the relationship between African Traditional Religion's concept of justice and human dignity and social cohesion in Ezza?

Table 3: Mean rating on the relationship between ATR's concept of justice, human dignity and social cohesion.

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
3.	The relationship between ATR's concept of justice, human dignity and social cohesion in Ezza							
a.	Justice, human dignity and moral problems are closely related	183	227	27	63	1530	3.06	Accepted
b.	ATR on its emphasis on justice and human dignity can revitalize moral values and practices	251	192	51	06	1688	3.38	Accepted
c.	Their relationship can also promote social cohesion and community development	62	311	117	110	1525	3.05	Accepted
d.	ATR will not promote social cohesion in the clan.	49	179	234	39	1240	2.48	Rejected
	Grand Mean						2.99	

From table 3 above, the respondents all agreed with respect to items a – c that justice, human dignity and moral problems are closely related, that ATR's emphasis on justice and human dignity can revitalize moral values and practices. The respondents equally agreed that their relationship can also promote social cohesion and community development. However, they rejected item d which said that ATR would not promote social cohesion in the clan.

Research Question Four:

To what extent does African Traditional Religion contribute to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan?

Table 4: Mean rating on the extent ATR contributes to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	DECISION
4.	The Extent ATR contributes to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan							
a.	Africans believe in the justice of God and other spiritual beings	358	106	28	08	1814	3.63	Accepted
b.	Traditional Africans strongly believe that good character helps us live lives of integrity	221	204	72	03	1643	3.29	Accepted
c.	The ancestors serve as factor of cohesion in African societies	218	226	43	09	1645	3.29	Accepted
d.	African countries, especially Nigeria is in a state of moral decay. ATR will to a large extent help in indiscipline in schools, fraud, stealing and armed robbery.	68	238	156	38	1336	2.67	Accepted
e.	ATR will also curb bribery and corruption, examination malpractices, and kidnapping	53	215	206	26	1295	2.59	Accepted
f.	Finally, ATR will also help in no small measure to get rid of banditry, bad governance, electoral malpractices, embezzlement of public money, rape, murder and the like.	186	213	84	17	1568	3.14	Accepted
	Grand Mean						3.10	

From table 4 above, the respondents were unanimous in their agreement that Africans believe in the justice of God and other spiritual beings, that good character helps them to live lives of integrity and that ancestors serve as factor of cohesion in African countries. Furthermore, all the respondents agreed that African countries, especially Nigeria is in a state of moral decay; that ATR would to a large extent help to get rid of indiscipline in schools, fraud, stealing and armed robbery in Ezza clan in particular and Nigeria in general. ATR would also help to curb bribery and corruption, examination malpractices, and kidnapping. Finally, all the respondents also agreed that ATR would help to get rid of

banditry, bad governance, electoral malpractices, embezzlement of public money, rape, murder and other evils in the society.

Discussion of Findings

This research was carried out in order to determine how ATR's concept of justice and human dignity could solve moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan. It was discovered that the concepts of justice and human dignity in ATR entail giving everyone what was due to the person, equal reward or punishment for equal merit or offence. It also involved right to life and abhorrence to what diminishes human dignity such as sins. It equally showed that human rights and dignity were vital in African societies. Their assertions as indicated in the grand mean of 3.42 unmistakably showed that the respondents were unanimous in their affirmation. The researcher also discovered that the respondents were also in agreement that ATR played major role in ethical code as it served as a tool for enforcing moral codes, inculcated moral values and attitudes to Ezza youths, helped the people to have sense of sin and by implication had sense of morality. ATR was also anchored on the concept of justice and human dignity. Their assertion as indicated in the grand mean of 3.43 showed that there was no dissenting voices.

Furthermore, all the respondents agreed that justice, human dignity and moral problems were related; that ATR's emphasis on justice and human dignity could revitalize moral values and practices in the area. They also agreed that their relationship could also promote social cohesion and community development. However, some respondents did not believe ATR could promote social cohesion in the clan.

Finally, the respondents unanimously agreed that Africans believe in the justice of God and other spiritual beings and that good character helped the people to live lives of integrity. The respondents were also unanimous in their agreement that the ancestors served as factors of cohesion in the society. They also believe that African countries – Nigeria and Ezza clan in particular were in a state of moral decay. The respondents therefore affirmed that ATR would help to get rid of the ills in the society such as banditry, bribery and corruption, indiscipline in all its ramifications, rape, murder, etc. The grand mean of 3.10

showed unmistakably that the respondents were totally in agreement ATR would contribute to moral rejuvenation in Ezza clan.

Summary of Findings

The study was conducted in order to find out how ATR's concept of justice and human dignity could be a solution to moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan. The findings indicated that ATR in conjunction with justice and human rights would address moral problems in contemporary Ezza clan.

Conclusion

From the findings of this research, the following conclusions could be drawn. African Traditional Religion plays major role in enforcing moral codes, promote sense of sin, contribute to moral rejuvenation and more importantly cherishes human rights and uplifts human dignity. ATR and culture should be taken seriously for better society at this time the world is in a state of topsyturvydom.

Recommendations

In view of the above conclusion, the researcher hereby recommends the following:

Westerners should try to respect traditional African values. It could be recalled that the advent of Christianity and western education into African societies disrupted traditional means of maintaining morality. High moral standards should be encouraged in all spheres of human endeavours. ATR in conjunction with justice, human rights and dignity should be upheld so as to stem the rising tide of immoral living in traditional African societies.

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