

Restoring Security for National Development: Igbo Traditional Religious Approach

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Abstract

Security is paramount to sustainable development of any society. It is connected with all aspects of development and its negligence creates enabling environment for the breakdown of law and order. Insecurity with its negative impact on development has become the greatest challenge in the Nigerian society. So much has been expended by the Nigerian government including the use of security apparatus and amnesty. In spite of these efforts, recent events are proofs that there can be no military solution to what is largely a moral and systemic problem. The more government makes money available and deploys security personnel, the more intractable the problem. Therefore, the paper examines the holistic approach to security of the traditional Igbo as a panacea to current insecurity in Nigeria. Traditional Igbo socio-religious structures provided for security of life and property, social welfare and social justice. The methodology employed in this paper is analytical phenomenology which brackets off researcher's bias and interprets facts as they are. Clearly, attitudinal change and institutional reforms are imminent in the hope of building a secured and developed Nigeria.

Key words: Security, Development, Religious, Traditional, Igbo

Introduction

Opinions are rife that there can be no meaningful development in any society without security. Gurama (2010: para 5) rightly observes that "it is the backbone of any society." Similarly, El-Rufai (2012: para3) opines that "without internal security, national development will be a mirage." Naturally, the primacy of security to development is connected to the fact that it is tied to the social, political, economic and cultural institutions all of which contribute to growth of society. When it is neglected, the consequence can be disastrous; lives are lost, property are destroyed, fear and tension will rule the atmosphere, lawlessness becomes the order of the day and crime walks the street in broad daylight. Therefore, adequate arrangements must be put in place to bring about structural transformations that will

guarantee not only security of lives and property but also the institutions as no society develops when under a state of insecurity.

Coincidentally, security challenges in Nigeria are results of systemic failure; the socio-political and economic institutions have been neglected over the years. This is substantiated by careful examination of the immediate and remote causes of violent waves across the country. Violence in the Niger delta that raged between militants on one side and the government and the oil companies on the other hand results from the exploitation, imbalance in the distribution of economic resources, marginalization and injustice which the region has been subjected to. Kidnapping in the South-East reminds the nation that the region has suffered political marginalization and social injustice since the Nigerian-Biafran civil war which has led to disaffection among the youths in the area. The Boko Haram insurgence in the North where a vast majority of misdirected youths unleash terror on the populace is a failure of religious and political leadership. The mass of the youths in this area were denied access to basic education which leads to illiteracy and poverty thereby making them willing instruments in the hands of religious fundamentalists and greedy politicians.

In the face of all these, several approaches have been used to combat security challenges by the Nigerian government ranging from open confrontation by security personnel to the amnesty programme. Opinions and suggestions have also been given in the literature on how to tackle this problem largely blaming poor political leadership and not paying much attention to other factors that create enabling environment for insecurity to thrive. This paper goes beyond this to argue that restoring security goes beyond the use of arms to quell insurgency and violence. It argues that society must preserve itself against corruption and moral bankruptcy. Therefore, the study makes an analytical inquiry into the concrete and visible factors that strengthened and preserved the institutions of development in the traditional Igbo society. It concludes by making recommendations on repositioning the Nigerian nation for self preservation and restoring security for National development in Nigeria. It is the opinion of the paper that the best way to ensure secured and prosperous nation is to protect the institutions from corruption.

Conceptual clarification

Three concepts are basic in this study and they require clarification to enhance better understanding of the main thrust of this paper. They are security, development and traditional religion.

Security

Security is holistic that it touches virtually every aspect of human life. It is not enough to speak of security in terms of absence of violence as this is to understand security in military and defence terms. Security approached in this way does not give the whole picture as it neglects other aspects of security which deals with access to basic necessities of life; access to food, shelter, health and the feeling of belongingness, the right to live anywhere in the state, freedom of movement and ownership of property including land, job opportunities and wealth creation.

In a broader sense, security encompasses the totality of the human building capacity and the functionality of all agents of development in the state. Accordingly, Gurama (2010) observes that security “has to do with the quality of the state in terms of poverty levels and equality,” and that “security situation in Nigeria is best understood by studying the statistics that show that while the nation is getting richer, Nigerians are getting poorer”. He further notes that “a situation where up to 70 percent of the population lives on less than ₦150 a day is a clear picture of a state of insecurity.” What is being said here is that security is tied with the poverty level, the margin between the rich and the poor, and the mode of distribution of resources. Low poverty level and equitable distribution of resources guarantee high level of security in a state.

Development

Development has being variously defined. The definitions range from the one that refers to an event or happening and even biological changes evidenced in growth. Most of these definitions have viewed development from quantitative change. This paper will be concerned with the meaning that identifies development with relationship to the act of improving, enlarging or expanding the scope of a people to enjoy an acceptable quality of life. From this perspective, development is the process of forging new values and enabling a community to have a part in determining its own destiny. According to Salawu (2010:3), it is “the process by which people become better off... the process of improving the quality of human lives”.

Igbo Traditional Religion

Traditional religion is that which evolved from the African soil and transmitted orally from one generation to another (Quarcoopome; 1994). Arguments are rife as to whether to speak of the traditional religion in plural or singular term because of the peculiarity associated with different African tribes practising the religion in their peculiar environments. Be that as it may, in whichever way we speak of the traditional religion, its remarkable character lies in the fact that it is intricately woven in the people’s worldview which shapes their way of life and perception of reality.

In this vein, Ugwu & Ugwueye (2004) observe that in the traditional worldview; there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. Speaking about the Igbo, Ekwunife (2003) opines that the Igbo worlds of the material and the spiritual “are fused into one coherent unit.” This echoes earlier opinion of Leonard (1968) who observed that among the Igbo, the religion so permeates all facets of life that it formed the basis of their existence. According to Basden (1966), it is the religion that dictates and sanctions business interactions, political activities, social conducts, morality etc.

Igbo custom and tradition

These are referred to as *Omenani*. *Omenani* as (Nwala; 1985:36) observes is the Igbo word used in describing Igbo custom and tradition which encompasses all that obtained and approved in the land. According to Ilogu (1974:22), there are

two main kinds of custom. There are customs that pertain to morality and those that are purely social and cultural. The moral codes are usually in the form of prohibitions sanctioned by the earth goddess and communicated to the community by the ancestors. Social and cultural practices are detailed for each activity that makes up the institutions of society. They range from “very serious subjects like methods of social control, to more minute demands of etiquette and polite behaviour (Ilogu; p. 22). Moral codes according to Iwuagwu (1998) were given for the ordering and preservation of the community. They are means by which the traditional Igbo enforced conformity.

Culturally, *omenani*, measures social ethos and prescribes processes of socialization and also embodies myths of society expressed in public rituals and seasonal ceremonies. In this way, the social philosophy and religious doctrine of the people are communicated and kept alive. *Omenani*, also embodies numerous taboos (*aru or nso-ani*), the breach of which brings serious cosmic disharmony in the society. Such taboos that are treated with severe sanctions include suicide, murder, arson, killing of totemic animals, stealing, and adultery.

Hence, *omenala*, provides rules of behaviour, customs, traditions, laws and regulations. It regulates marriage, business transactions, relationship with one’s neighbours, attitude regarding the sanctity and sacredness of life, governance, rules regarding diet especially for titled men; where they should go and where they should not go are all clearly spelt out.

Traditional Igbo attitude to life and property

One of the most fundamental social and cultural realities in the traditional Igbo societies is the basic understanding of life and property as natural gifts. Though nothing compares with life (*ndu kariri ihe nile*), it stands in a somewhat special relationship where if it is starved of wealth or property it is not worth living. Life is greater than wealth (*ndu ka aku*), yet it has to be *ezi ndu* (good life) to be worthwhile. Good life measured from this dimension implies that life ought to be oiled or greased (*itu ndu mmanu*). Hence, property is considered necessary for the satisfaction and protection of the needs of the individual, the family and the clan as a whole.

Another aspect of the good life (*ezi ndu*) is that it must be in accord with the dictates of the customary tradition (*omenala*). In recognition that no one has authority over his life or that of another, the Igbo would say *chi nwe ndu* or *ndu di n’aka chukwu* (God has supreme authority over life). Other expressions such as *ndu bu isi* (life is supreme), *ndu ka aku* (life is more precious than wealth), *aghara ndu kpa aku onye iro erie* (wealth acquired at the expense of life will be left in the hand of the enemy), place premium on life over material possession. Hence life is jealously guarded at all cost. Such things as assassination and ritual killing were unknown except when the gods demanded human sacrifice to avert calamities in the land (Arinze; 1990). Destruction of property was carried out in some cases when someone breached any of the numerous taboos as a means of cleansing the land.

In the traditional Igbo, “property is seen as basis of wealth and communal ownership makes everybody a stakeholder and not just strangers in their own community” (Ike and Edozien 2001:106). However, this does not exclude individual’s right to private ownership of property but consists in the understanding that whatever an individual acquires belong to the entire community since the community owns such individual and that certain property (land and economic trees) are the property of the community. It includes but is not limited to ownership of property in the sense expressed by Fagothey (1959) who opines that:

a thing is said to be one’s own when it is restricted to a certain person and all others are excluded from it.... An owner is a proprietor.... Ownership may therefore be defined as the right of exclusive control and disposal over a thing at will (p. 145).

Some of the ideas expressed above are strange in Igbo land. Ownership of certain property is not to the exclusion of others and there is a limit at which one is at liberty to dispose at will one’s possession. Land was communally owned and individuals who owned land never sold them. Certain cash crops such as oil bean, apple (*udala*), pear (*ube*), though may be privately owned, they were for public use. Those who owned them were not at will to fell them or destroyed them at will without serious sanctions from the community. No individual has the right to take his life. Suicide was a taboo and whenever it occurred, serious ritual cleansing was carried out to placate the offended earth-goddess.

Another aspect of the traditional Igbo attitude to life is their belief that life extends beyond this present world (Mbiti; 1969:161). The prospect of re-incarnation as predicated upon good life in this life is high (Ekwunife; 2003). It is the people’s belief that all those who lived bad life would wander aimlessly after death not having a place of rest. This consciousness enabled the traditional Igbo to live morally good life in order to enjoy eternal bliss in the world of the ancestors and to escape life of misery in the outer darkness called *ama itire*. The successive sojourn of an individual in this world makes this world a permanent place in the Igbo worldview. Traditionally, the Igbo regarded this world not as a temporary place but a place that requires adequate attention. Onuoha (1997) observes that, the Igbo penchant for hard work is predicated upon this belief. Every effort has to be made to make life worth living in this world. Hence the Igbo attitude to life is world affirming; a worldview which combines effectively the notion of enhancing this world and at the same time holding the belief that life continues in the hereafter.

Igbo Socio-Economic Welfare Structure

In the whole of Africa, the sense of community is strong and religion is the substratum upon which this is built. In connection with this, Mbiti (1969) observes thus:

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part.... To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A

person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships, and in the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to cut out of the whole picture. (p1).

The above observation not only describes the importance of religion in the African community but rather stresses the corporate life experienced in the traditional African societies.

This form of existence in Igbo permeates all aspects of Igbo life and is expressed in diverse ways in their social and economic relationships. For the Igbo, in their social life the expressions; *onye aghala nwanne ya* (be your brother's keeper), *igwe bu ike* (there is strength in multitude), *som adina* (I need companions), to mention a few, alludes to the fact that no man is an island and that life is not lived in isolation. It shows that communalism was preferred to individualism. Life was lived in a community and it emphasized corporate personality against individuality.

This sense of community pervaded all life's activities; people assisted their neighbours without charge in building their huts, in the farmland, in marriage, in child upbringing, during occasions for joy or sorrow. The guiding principle of living in the community was "I am because we are." Everybody worked for the good of the community. An individual considers the implications of his/her actions on the community not as they are pleasing to him. In this vein, the different individual socio-political units are closely knit together. Consequently, the nuclear family in the traditional set-up was not pronounced. A family could be as large as the entire community (Onuh; 1996).

Igbo sense of Justice and judgment

Justice in Igboland is intricately woven in the people's customary tradition called *omenani*. It was *omenani* which embodies their religion that provides the legal framework for administration and control of justice. In this regard Onyemaechi (2011) observes that:

Religion has also a political significance, since traditional governing authority has a religious foundation. The rulers in societies are Chiefs, Secret Societies and priestly Elders, all embodying and using authority from the unseen world of gods and ancestor spirits. The native law and custom enforced by them with regard to marriage and land rights for instance are thought of originating from sanctified ancestors and gods whom it would be sacrilege to disobey; risking a dangerous curse as well penalties by the direct physical force still sometimes commanded by these traditional rulers (para. 7).

Similarly, Ike and Edozien (2001: 37) wrote that; "truly in Igboland, the traditional man abhorred injustice since it was an offence against the earth (*ani*) and was

punishable by the gods.” Further, they observe that “the core of the Igbo concept of justice is evident in proverbs, wise sayings and prayer...” Hence, among the Igbo justice is based on rules which are enacted by the elders and sanctioned by the ancestors *Ndichie*. Those who broke the law are punished or fined on the basis of a compensatory system of justice in which appeasement of spiritual forces was considered first for justice to be seen to have taken its course.

Although, administration of justice in the Igbo traditional society was handled by different groups (Okwor; 2012), elders and men of title played significant roles. They were men of high moral integrity (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo_culture). *Ofo*, “the visible emblem of the ancestors and stamp of authority” (Madu; 1996:67) which they held was significant in the administration of justice. It gives the holder the authority to preside over adjudication as well as reminding him of the danger in abusing the same authority. No holder of ‘*ofo*’ according to Onwubiko (1994) meddles with justice without serious consequences to his life. He must speak the truth at all times and upholds what is just. It was only when these men failed that cases were referred to the masquerade cult or to a deity for final appeal.

Another aspect of the traditional Igbo justice is that it is compensatory in nature. Its nature provides that the offender is punished more than the offence he committed and the law is no respecter of personality. Achebe (1958:103) demonstrates a clear picture of this strict sense of justice thus:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeulu’s quarter stormed Okonkwo’s compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman (p.99-100).

Okonkwo was punished even when the crime he committed inadvertently, “was a female *ochu*” (manslaughter). Added to this is that his greatest friend Obierika took part in destroying all that Okonkwo had laboured to achieve in life. Justice must take its course no matter whose ox is gored. The land must be cleansed from pollution and this Okonkwo paid for including going to exile with his family. Okonkwo would have walked away with minor penalty in the retributive British justice system.

This method of punishment according to Okwueze (2003), of using severe sanctions against offenders in Igboland produces double effects; firstly, the land is restored and secondly, those who have criminal intention are checkmated. The Igbo justice system is a respecter of no one, it ensured that justice was neither delayed nor denied especially when a deity is involved. There was no adjournment to buy

time and it was affordable (Chijioke; 2005). These fostered peace and security in traditional Igbo Land.

Towards the Security and Development of Nigerian Nation

Thus far, from the standpoint of Igbo attitude to security and development, the Igbo had a holistic approach to security engrafted in social structures. Firstly, the Igbo placed premium on the sanctity of life above other considerations. Property was regarded as gift from nature and for the benefit of the entire community. Individual ownership of property did not deter others in terms of usage. Certain property was not owned privately. Likewise, certain products such as mineral deposits should serve the interests of Nigerians. The economic system suitable for Nigeria is mixed economy wherein government should take charge of some sensitive aspects of the economy to benefit the citizenry.

Secondly, the traditional Igbo society structured on communalism achieved maximum security. Communalism ensured that life was shared and no individual or group lived on his own or segregated against. Everybody was given a sense of belonging with each individual working for the good of the society. The guiding social and economic principles are; “I am because the community is” and “from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs.” In Nigeria so many tribes and social groups have been marginalized. Some are being treated as if they are strangers in their own country. There is no equitable distribution of resources. The gap between the rich and the poor is so wide. The youths are unemployed and as a result feel that since they are neglected or ignored, the only way out is to take to violent activities. A secured Nigeria is Nigeria where all the tribes will live together as one, and work together towards its common good. No section of the country should be treated as sacred cows and others as second class citizens. Hitherto tribalism has characterized our national life. The walls of partition dividing us as North and South, Christians and Muslims, the rich and the poor, are pulled down by the Igbo sense of communalism.

Thirdly, justice played an important role in ordering and maintaining a secured society. Failure of justice has been identified as one of the major factors that fan the embers of insecurity in Nigeria. The president, Goodluck Jonathan in his 51st independence address to the nation decried the rot in the judiciary and called for total overhaul of the system (<http://www.news2-onlinenigeria.com/latest-add>). Nigeria inherited retributive justice system from British Government in which an offender pays so little for the offence committed. The Igbo compensatory justice system is a reversal of the British system; offender is punished more than the offence he committed. It is structured in such a way that judges do not meddle with justice without serious consequences to themselves.

Conclusion

The study reveals that traditional values are those which define our true nature and our peculiarities as a people. And that over time we have allowed imperialism to submerge our values and in the process lose the moral fabrics that wielded the society together and ensured a peaceful and prosperous nation. We must

return to the roots; the traditional virtues that can put in place the needed structures that will transform institutions of development. What is needed in Nigeria at the moment is a national re-birth using the Igbo traditional values as expounded in this work as tools for national orientation. Having said this, it is our opinion that Nigeria will continue to face security challenges until the option of Igbo traditional approach to security is explored.

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