



DANCE ACROSS GENERATIONS FROM ELDERS TO CHILDREN: THE UNIQUENESS OF AKWAOBIO THEATRE TROUPE IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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ABSTRACT

Beyond its entertainment value and its role as a cultural marker, dance is a force that transcends boundaries and embodies a unifying power. It is a bridge that spans time, space and cultural differences, connecting human to its past and to each other in ways that defy easy categorization. Akwa Ibom State, a region steeped in cultural richness, boasts a wealth of traditional dances and troupes, each with its own distinctive character. Amidst the rapid transformations of modern society, it has become imperative to preserve, promote and document these dances, lest they fade away with time. This paper examines the vital role played by Akwaobio Theatre Troupe in preserving and transmitting Akwa Ibom State's unique dance traditions across generations. In the course of preserving these dances and making the accessible to the youths, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe ensures that the knowledge and skill associated with these art forms remain alive and dynamic. The study also explored importance of intergenerational understanding and the benefits of cultural tourism, highlighting the potential of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's initiatives in promoting greater appreciation and awareness of Akwa Ibom State's cultural heritage. Beyond mere preservation and promotion, the troupe's initiative foster intergenerational understanding and respect for both young and old. This harmonious collaboration between the different generations nurtures the growth and evolution of Akwa Ibom's dance traditions, ensuring they remain vital and relevant for years to come.

Keywords: Dance, Generations, Uniqueness, Theatre, Troupe



Introduction:

Dance is in essence the coordinated and rhythmic movement of the body to music within a defined space. According to Ekaette Edem, “Dance is truly a mirror that reflects the myriad aspects of a culture. Each geographical location, religious belief, political and historical experience, biological, social, and economic factor adds a distinct layer to the depth and richness of a particular dance form” (161). Yet, it is more than just a physical form of expression. At its core, dance is a conduit for conveying ideas, emotions, and stories, leveraging the powerful language of movement and music to speak directly to the hearts and minds of its audience. Through this language, dancers can express a spectrum of human experiences, from love and joy to grief and conflict. They become storytellers, conveying complex narratives and evoking a visceral response in their viewers, forging a connection that transcends verbal communication. Walter Sorell asserts that, dance is “as old as man and his desire to express himself to communicate his joys and sorrows, born with the most immediate instrument: his body” (10).

To borrow the words of Sorell, dance, like culture, is as old as humankind itself. Ekaette Edem affirms that “culture in its diversity is distinguished by virtues of its specific historical evolution and its unique characteristics, making each culture structurally unique and original (5). Precisely, the



multifaceted nature of culture is a product of its diverse historical trajectory and distinctive features. No two cultures are exactly alike, as each had developed in its unique time, and context. This inherent singularity imbues each culture with its own identity, rooted in customs, traditions, beliefs, languages, artistic expressions, and shared narratives. These elements woven together over time to create a rich pastry of unique characteristics that make each culture one of a kind, worthy of preservation and celebration. As such, dance is an essential part of a society's way of life, embodying the beliefs, values and traditions of a people in a manner unique to them. This uniqueness is manifested in the movements, music, and costumes associated with the dance form, reflecting the distinctive character and history of the community from which it originates. Further, this cultural significance lends an inherent value to dance beyond its aesthetic appeal. It becomes a repository of collective memory and identity, a medium for storytelling, and a conduit for cultural expression and preservation. The essence of a people is captured within the rhythmic beats and the fluid movements of their dances, serving as a source of pride, continuity, and social cohesion.

Beyond its entertainment value and its role as a cultural market, dance is a force that transcends these boundaries and embodies a unifying power. It is a bridge that spans time, space, and cultural differences, connecting us to our past and to each other in ways that defy easy categorisation. Dance is the life blood of human expression, the pulse that drives our cultural revolution. It unites us through our shared experiences, our joys and sorrows, and our innate need for connection. As such, dance is not just a form of art or entertainment, but a vital part of our collective heritage. Dance, with its expressive movements and primal rhythms, speaks to something fundamental within us, something that reaches beyond our individual selves and connects us to something universal. It is through dance that we tap into the collective unconsciousness, accessing the wisdom and experiences of generations



past and infusing them within. As such, dance is not just a form of art or entertainment, but a vital part of our collective heritage. Dance, with its expressive movements and primal rhythms, speaks to something fundamental within us, something that reaches beyond our individual selves and connects us to something universal. It is through dance that we tap into the collective unconscious, accessing the wisdom and experiences of generations past and infusing them with new life through our own interpretations; indeed dance is a language that we all understand, regardless of our cultural background.

Whether it's the intricate footwork or the sensual sway of belly dance, or the frenetic energy of break dancing, each style has its own unique beauty and expression. Ahmed Yerima confirms that; “Dance is the bond, the link, the power beyond entertainment or identity” (8). And Chris Ugolo is of the opinion that “dance art in Nigeria is woven around the fabrics of the traditional societies with focus on the socio-political and economic relevance of the people that owns it” (39). This expresses dance in the Nigeria society as significant medium. It is a significant mode that borders directly on the totality of aspects of life of the people. That is, their cultural identity’. This is corroborated by Keita as he opines that “Unlike other forms of dance, African dance is not detached from the lives of the people, but a spontaneous emanation of the people that Translates everyday experience into movement” (76). Dance in this context is no longer merely an art form or a pastime, but a vital component of the social fabric. It is a language of the soul, weaving together the stories of the past and present, binding communities in shared experiences and a deep sense of belonging. The rhythmic movements, the expressive gestures, and the syncopated beats of traditional dance become a medium for expressing the hopes, fears, dreams, and joys of a people. These dances connect us to our ancestors, their struggles and triumphs, their wisdom and their faith. In Africa, traditional dances become a powerful symbol of a people's identity, a living history that evolves and adapts with each new generation. They are a cultural



legacy, handed down from parent to child, teacher to student, community to community. As such, these dances become a means of preservation, ensuring that the stories and experiences of past generations are not lost to time. They act as a living archive, a repository of knowledge that is passed on not through books or lectures but through the physical embodiment of movements and rhythms.

Indeed, dance transcends its artistic nature and permeates into the fabric of social and economic life. As a potent force in cultural expression, it can function as a catalyst for positive change and growth within a society. According to Ekaette Edem, “Africans have been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which... associates with dances, musical performances, incantations, prayers and sacrifices to the gods and the spirits of the ancestors” (104). The rhythm and harmony inherent in dance can serve to unite people, fostering a sense of belonging, togetherness, and social cohesion. Beyond its immediate effects, these bonds can contribute to increased collaboration, innovation, and productivity in both social and economic spheres. As a society, we must ask ourselves: What are the values of traditional dances in a rapidly changing world? How can we ensure that these cultural treasures continue to thrive in the face of modernization and globalization? By exploring the economic impact of these dances, we can begin to answer these questions, and pave the way for innovative approaches towards preserving and celebrating our shared cultural heritage. From traditional tourism to cultural festivals, traditional dances offer a window into the soul of Akwa Ibom State, revealing a deep connection to the land, history, and the people.

Akwa Ibom State, a region steeped in cultural richness, boasts a wealth of traditional dances and troupes, each with its own distinctive character and charm. Passed down through generations, these dances act as a vibrant and enduring manifestation of Akwa Ibom's cultural identity. Amidst the rapid



transformations of modern society, it has become imperative to preserve and promote these dances, lest they fade away with time. Through the advocacy for the importance of traditional dance, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is preserving Akwa Ibom's rich dance legacy, ensuring that future generations may continue to appreciate and embrace this essential part of their cultural identity. Beyond mere preservation, the troupe's initiatives foster intergenerational understanding and respect. Elder dancers, rich in knowledge and experience, have the opportunity to impart their wisdom to the youth, while the younger generations gain a deeper appreciation for their cultural roots. This exchange fosters a sense of community and shared purpose, allowing traditional dance to serve as a means of social cohesion and connection. The harmonious collaboration between the different generations nurtures the growth and evolution of Akwa Ibom's dance traditions, ensuring they remain vital and relevant for years to come.

Bio-Data of Obiousop Samuel

Chief Obiousop Samuel Obiousop is a native of Ikot Usop, a village in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Obiousop Samuel is a versatile artist and performer, who obtained his Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Uyo with a specialisation in Dance and Choreography. He is proficient in various art forms, including drumming, dancing, acting, choreography, singing and playwriting, showcasing remarkable talent and passion for the performing arts. His impressive body of choreographed works spans over through decades and includes a range of productions such as; "Time" (1998), Ibarki (Fire Dance 2015), the captivating "Beach Fashion Show" (2016), and Calisdin (2018). With over 40 years of professional experience in the area of cultural practice, Obiousop's expertise in traditional dance and culture has been sought after by various organisations within and outside Akwa Ibom State. His wealth of knowledge and experience has made him an invaluable resource for schools, churches, and others. Committed to preserving and promoting the cultural legacy



of Akwa Ibom State, Obiousop Samuel serves as a valued staff member of the Akwa Ibom State Council for Arts and Culture. His dedication to his profession and his community is reflected in his role within the Council, where he actively participates in all the performances and outings by the Council as a lead dancer.

About Akwaobio Theatre Troupe

From an interview with Samuel, he mentioned that according to history and legend, the founder of Ikot Uso village was indeed a man named Obiousop, whose name is etched into the cultural memory of the community. Obiousop, meaning “the descendant of Usop” is said to have settled in the area now known as Ikot Uso after a long journey, establishing a community that would bear his name and become a vibrant center of culture and tradition. Over time, the village of Ikot Uso flourished under Obiousop's leadership, becoming a hub of trade, agriculture, and cultural exchange. Ikot Uso expanded with its brothers migrating to villages like Anua Offot in Uyo Local Government Area, Ikot Obio Akwa, Ikot Obio Uko, Ikot Nsudo, a neighbouring village with Ikot Uso to Mbiabang Ibieno, Ikono, Ini, Ohafia in Abia State to Aruchukwu, Afikpo and even Switzerland, located in central Europe.

Indeed, like many African communities, the people of Ikot Uso believed in a pantheon of deities and spirits that governed their world, and they performed various dances and rituals to appease these powerful forces. One of the most significant dance forms in Ikot Uso was the *Ekoon*, a dance that was used to honor the gods and spirits, and to seek their blessings and protection. The dance was characterized by its energetic, rhythmic movements, which were said to invoke the power of the gods and to create a spiritual connection between the dancers and the divine. They also believed in the spirit of *Ntrukpom* (The Eagle) as a guide, and many other gods like *Ibritam*, *Iso Asobo* etc. The people of Ikot Uso believed in a diverse array of deities and spirits, each with their own unique powers and areas of influence. The



Ntrukpom (Eagle) spirit was revered as a guide and protector, with its keen eyesight and swift flight symbolizing vigilance and wisdom.

Samuel retold that the *Iso Asobo*, also known as the “Face of the Python” is a mysterious entity that roamed the forests and waterways of the region, protecting the community from harm and evil spirits. To honor the spirit, the community would often perform a special dance, which featured intricate movements and gestures that were said to reflect the sinuous grace of the python. The Obiousop as the founder of Ikot Uso after settlement began celebrating the corn festival and other forming season. He further mentioned that as the founder of Ikot Uso, Obiousop played a pivotal role in establishing the community's cultural traditions, including the celebration of festivals, marriage rites, coronation, the coming of age, birth and others. They also had the CORN FESTIVAL, known as “*Usoro Abakpa*”. It was another important celebration in the cultural calendar of the Ikot Uso Community, a time of great joy and celebration that was marked by feasting, music, and dance. This festival marked the end of the harvest season, and was a time of thanksgiving and feasting, as the community came together to share the fruits of their labour and offer gratitude to the gods for their blessings. During the “*Usoro Abakpa*”, the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe would put on series of elaborate dances and performances, often accompanied by drumming and singing, to honor the gods and invoke their continued favour. The festival honoured the bountiful harvest and the life-giving power of the earth.

According to Obiousop Samuel during festivities, the people of Ikot Uso would recount the stories and legends of their ancestors, passing down the wisdom and traditions of their forebears to younger generations. During the farming season, part of the celebration was the introduction of *Ekpo Ntem* (Farming Masquerade) who performs in the bush for clearing. The *Ekpo Ntem* would perform to the part of the village, where a ram had been prepared for sacrifice called *Nkong Erong* to appease the gods as a



symbol of devotion and thanksgiving to the gods. In the eyes of the people of Ikot Uso, the sacrifice of the ram was more than just a ritualistic offering; it was a sign of divine acceptance and favor. The sacrifice of the ram served as a powerful symbol of spiritual reconciliation between the earthly realm and the divine, bringing the community closer to the gods and ensuring their continued protection and blessings.

Once the sacrificial ritual had been completed, the celebrations would continue in earnest, with the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe taking the lead. The troupe's members, decked out in colorful costumes, would converge on the palace of Obiousop, the founder of Ikot Uso, to perform a series of traditional dances. The palace as a cultural center for the community would be filled with music, laughter, and the lively energy of the troupe's performances.

For Samuel, the growth of Ikot Uso into a thriving community was marked by the establishment of various clans and families, each with their own unique culture and traditions. These clans were named after the ancestors of their members, and each had its own customs and rituals that reflected their unique histories and beliefs. He also mentioned that before Obiousop theatre troupe was formed, they were other groups and societies that performed diverse cultural roles and functions like *Mbre Ikpaisong*, *Mbre Ikot Uso*, *Mbre Mbong*, *Mbre Uyong Ekong*, *Ekpo Initiate*, *Ekoong Mfang Ukom* and many more. Each with their own unique practices and traditions, for example, the *Mbre Ikpaisong* was a group of warriors and protectors who served as the village's first line of defense against external threats. In addition to their defensive responsibilities, the *Mbre Ikpaisong* also played a significant role in the community's cultural life, often performing intricate dances and rituals that were said to bring good fortune and ward off evil spirits.

Cultural exchange was an integral part of the community's traditions, with neighboring villages often invited to participate in the celebrations and festivities, as Ikot Uso would welcome performers and



artisans from nearby communities to share in the festivities and showcase their own unique cultural expressions. This not only fostered a sense of camaraderie and friendship between the different groups, but also allowed for the exchange of ideas and practices, enriching the cultural landscape of the region as a whole. These regular interactions with neighboring villages allowed for a rich exchange of ideas and traditions, fostering a sense of shared history and connection between the different groups. These cultural exchanges also served as a form of diplomacy between the communities, helping to strengthen bonds and resolve disputes in a peaceful and harmonious manner.

Moreover, these cultural exchanges often led to the adoption and adaptation of new dance forms, musical styles, and storytelling techniques, enriching the traditions of the different groups and contributing to the development of a rich and diverse cultural landscape. The cross-pollination of ideas and traditions between the neighboring villages was not just a source of enjoyment and entertainment, but also a key factor in fostering harmony, creativity, and innovation in the region. Indeed, the children of the different villages were often at the forefront of these cultural exchanges, contributing their youthful energy and enthusiasm to the celebrations. This intergenerational aspect of the cultural exchange was particularly valuable, as it allowed the young people to develop a deep appreciation for their cultural heritage while also forging bonds of friendship and understanding with their counterparts from other villages.

According to Obiousop Samuel, Ikot Uso's evolution from Five to Nine Families is intricately connected to the legacy of the ancestor Obiousop. As the community grew and more families arrived, Obiousop, in his role as the founding leader of Ikot Uso, oversaw the expansion of the settlement and the division of the community into distinct families of Nine as officially documented. The name Akwaobio was derived from “Akwa Mbre Ikpaiong”, which is translated to “Large Community”. This name was chosen to reflect the increasing size and vibrancy of the settlement, as well as the diverse cultural



influences that were shaping the community's identity. As the largest family within Ikot Uso, the Obiousop family established the Akwaobio Troupe as cultural guardians.

The names also given to the children in Ikot Uso had deep spiritual significance, reflecting the community's reverence for the gods and spirits that governed their lives. Each name was carefully chosen to honor a specific deity or spirit, and also to identify the age and number of the child in the family. They had names like; Ette Nso, Baba Nso, Akpan Uso, Akpan Mbat, Okporo (Okporo Isip (Kernel) – Last son), Usop, Inyang Udo etc. The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was a living, breathing embodiment of the cultural continuity and intergenerational wisdom of the Ikot Uso Community. From its humble beginnings as a family-run troupe to its current status as a respected cultural institution, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has persisted through centuries of change and adversity, preserving and celebrating the unique traditions of the region.

Founded over half a millennium ago, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has stood a taste of time as an institution with a rich legacy rooted in Akwa Ibom State's cultural history, serving as a guardian and promoter of the region's traditional dances, storytelling, and performances, continually refining and preserving the unique cultural heritage of the region. Obiousop Samuel's profound connection to Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is inseparable from his ancestral legacy, as he was born into a lineage deeply entrenched in the cultural traditions of Akwa Ibom State. Growing up within this rich heritage, Obiousop has been groomed to carry forward the artistry and cultural knowledge passed down by his ancestors, exemplifying his devotion to preserving and perpetuating the legacy of his forebears. It was also fascinating to hear about the evolution of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe in the context of its relationship to the Obiousop family. From Obiousop Samuel, he was born to see that his father was not really involved in the troupe, as this was due to the influence of Western education, and perhaps the pull of modernity. In



his father's quest to go to school, led him to distancing himself from the traditions of the troupe, while still retaining an attachment to certain practices such as the Ekpo masquerade. He had performed at his early age as an Ekpo masquerade initiate.

Growing up within this rich heritage, Obiousop Samuel has been groomed to carry forward the artistry and cultural knowledge passed down by his ancestors, exemplifying his devotion to preserving and perpetuating the legacy of his forebears. The commitment and passion of Obiousop Samuel to the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is a testament to his connection to the community's cultural heritage. Despite his father's shift away from the troupe, Samuel recognized the importance of carrying on the traditions that had been passed down through generations of his family. His deep personal involvement with the troupe reflects his desire to honor the legacy of his ancestors, while also shaping and adapting the performances to reflect the changing needs and interests of the community.

The appearance of the moon was a magical moment for the Obiousop family and the wider Ikot Uso community. The moonlight nights offered a respite from the daily grind of work and life, providing an opportunity for the families and the people to come together, relax, and share in the joys of traditional games, music, and dance. It was an important social event, reinforcing the bonds of community and providing a space for people to connect with one another in a way that transcended the usual boundaries of age, status, and gender. The moon, with its cycle of waxing and waning, was seen as a powerful symbol of the passage of time and the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. As the people gathered under the night sky, they would have invoked the spirit of the moon, asking for guidance, protection, and blessings in their daily lives. Ekaette Edem asserts that “community and cultural celebrations as a form of gathering may be entertaining in nature, conducted or organized by a person or group of persons, organization, firm, association, or even the government within and outside a particular locality and



may not be limited to things as carnivals, sports, concerts, music performance, dance and drama presentation, arts and craft, fairs, etc.” (92). Indeed, community and cultural celebrations play vital role in nurturing social cohesion and a sense of belonging within a community as identified among the people of Ikot Uso community

While the early dances were more spontaneous and improvisational, the desire for greater precision and clarity in performance led to the development of more formalized movements and arrangements. The introduction of choreography and dance placements within the traditional dances of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe speaks to the evolving nature of cultural expression in the community. This shift towards modern dance practices is indicative of the increasing influence of Western ideas and aesthetics on traditional African culture, as performers sought to appeal to a wider audience and incorporate new elements into their art. As visitors from other parts of Nigeria and beyond began to visit Ikot Uso, there was a greater need for performances that could be easily understood and appreciated by people from different cultural backgrounds. By incorporating more structured choreography and clear staging, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was able to create a more accessible and dynamic experience for audiences, while still retaining the essence of their traditional practices.

It's fascinating to know that Obiousop Samuel's Senior Uncle; Chief Ette Jack Samuel Obiousop is the leader of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe today. This position not only demonstrates his dedication and passion for the troupe's traditions, but also speaks to the importance of family and lineage in preserving and passing on cultural knowledge. As a respected elder within the community, his uncle's leadership serves as a vital link between the past and the present, ensuring that the unique history and traditions of Ikot Uso continue to thrive for future generations. Obiousop Samuel further mentioned that the lineage of leaders within the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe reads like a page from the community's history, each



generation building on the legacy of the previous one. As his Grand-Father was a leader of the troupe who was fondly called Ada Jackson, who succeeded from his Great- Grand- Father, Akpan Mbat, who succeeded from Uko Udo, his father and Akpan Akwa who was Uko's Father. Akpan Akwa succeeded after Akwa Obio, a man who was named after the founder of Ikot Uso, Obiousop and then Akpan Akwa handed over to Akwa Obio. From Ada Jackson to Akpan Mbat and beyond, the role of the troupe's leader has been passed down from father to son, creating a continuous thread of knowledge, experience, and cultural wisdom. With each successive leader, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has evolved and adapted, yet the spirit of its founders has remained strong and unbroken. The troupe has been shaped by the unique personalities and visions of its leaders, each bringing their own distinct style and perspective to bear on the troupe's performances and cultural impact. The leadership structure of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was indeed based on a number of factors, including age, wisdom, and leadership qualities. This system of selection and appointment within the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe embodied a delicate balance between tradition and meritocracy. This blend of hereditary and merit-based selection ensured that the troupe's leaders possessed the necessary qualities to guide the group through changing circumstances, while also preserving the historical continuity and cultural legacy of the community.

The hereditary leadership of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe underscores the strong ties between family, lineage, and cultural tradition in Ikot Uso. This system of leadership, while reflective of traditional African governance structures, also highlights the respect and trust that the community places in the Obiousop family, who have been entrusted with the stewardship of the troupe for generations. In this way, the continuity of the troupe's leadership not only ensures the preservation of its traditions and practices, but also reinforces the social fabric of the community, solidifying bonds of kinship and shared history. For Obiousop Samuel, he will return to the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe after his career as a civil servant. This



reflects the deep-seated importance of cultural identity in the lives of people like him. By choosing to rejoin the troupe after his retirement, Obiousop Samuel is affirming his belief in the value of the community's traditions and his own role in perpetuating them. In this case, the allure of returning to the troupe and engaging in cultural practices is a powerful force that transcends the boundaries of time and space. Samuel's decision suggests that, despite his exposure to the modern world, the pull of tradition remains strong and compelling. In doing so, he reaffirms his identity as a member of the Obiousop family, a custodian of Ikot Uso's cultural heritage, and a vital contributor to the ongoing story of his community.

Cultural Participation:

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe encompasses a broad repertoire of traditional African dances, such as Abang, Ebre, Mboppo, the dynamic Asian *Uboikpa*, *Eka-ekoong*, *Ikprang*, the graceful *Abobom Ekoong*, and the lively *Utta*. Additionally, Samuel said that the troupe has cultivated expertise in a range of contemporary African dance styles, demonstrating their versatility and commitment to exploring the diverse forms of dance rooted in their cultural heritage. Embodying the spirit of intergenerational continuity, the leadership of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is entrusted to a family member upon the passing of the current manager, ensuring the sustainability of the troupe's legacy across generations. This long-standing tradition, rooted in the troupe's history as a family-run institution, guarantees the continuity of the troupe's artistic vision and cultural knowledge, and contributes to its enduring presence and impact on the cultural landscape of Akwa Ibom State.

The journey undertaken by the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe performers in the past is a testament to the immense dedication and fortitude of its members. The members used to carry instruments on their heads, walking for an entire day through various villages before reaching their destination, all to share their art with other communities. This was a remarkable display of physical endurance and artistic



devotion. One of it was the performance they attended at Minya Village as they walked all night from Ikot Uso village to Minya. Such journeys must have been both physically demanding and spiritually enlightening, offering the performers a chance to commune with the natural world and the spirits that inhabit it. In a sense, these journeys became a vital part of the performance itself to them as emphasised by Samuel. As they walked, the rhythmic steps of the performers created a beat that echoed through the forests and villages, invoking the spirits of the ancestors and harnessing the energy of the natural world. However, there was a shift from walking to wheelbarrows, bicycles, and now cars and buses, which reflects the troupe's continued innovation and adaptation to new technologies, and has allowed them to reach a wider audience and expand their impact beyond the local community.

For the performers, the Troupe is open to individuals from the age seven and above. The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe also encourages lifelong engagement in traditional dance and cultural expression, ensuring that the vibrant legacy of Akwa Ibom's rich cultural heritage is passed down to successive generations. From childhood to adulthood, members of the troupe are continuously immersed in their cultural traditions, cultivating an intimate understanding and appreciation of their indigenous art forms. By welcoming individuals of all ages, the troupe creates a sense of community and shared experience that transcends generational boundaries. Moreover, the involvement of young members in the troupe ensures the continuity of its legacy. By instilling in them a deep connection to their cultural heritage at an early age, and are advocates of traditional dance and culture.

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe located in Akwa Ibom State, in the vibrant town of Ikot Abasi. Established over five centuries ago, the troupe has been an enduring fixture of this community, perpetuating and preserving the rich artistry of Akwa Ibom's cultural heritage with pride and passion. As a cultural hub within Ikot Abasi, the troupe serves as a vital resource for the town, drawing visitors from



near and far who seek to experience the diverse and captivating dance forms and storytelling traditions of the region. The members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe embody the spirit of resourcefulness, seamlessly balancing their artistic pursuits with a many other commitments and responsibilities. From educators to business owners, farmers, civil servants, each member brings a unique set of skills and experiences to the troupe, contributing to its diverse and resilient nature. Despite the demands of their professional and personal lives, the members of the troupe remain dedicated to their shared passion for cultural performance, balancing rehearsals, performances, and community engagement with their other commitments.

The Theatre Troupe, despite their busy schedules, prioritizes regular gatherings to maintain the continuity and momentum of their performances. Wednesdays at 4:00 PM serve as a standard time for the troupe. During these weekly meetings and rehearsals, members hone their skills, discuss upcoming performances, and plan new choreographies, all while cultivating their bonds of friendship. The importance of these weekly meetings extends beyond their practical functions. For many members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, these gatherings offer a sense of community, a respite from the demands of their daily lives, and an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural roots. As they engage in the rhythms and movements of traditional dance, they also engage with one another, sharing stories, laughter, and memories. The troupe's bond is forged not only through their shared passion for the arts, but also through the intangible threads of friendship and family that bind them together.

Artist Training: With the spirit of community empowerment, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe takes a holistic approach to supporting its members, by offering opportunities for personal and professional development beyond their artistic pursuits. The Troupe sponsors members for professional courses, educational endeavors, and skills training, and also invests in their individual growth, by equipping them



with the knowledge and abilities to succeed in their personal and professional lives. This approach reflects the troupe's commitment to promoting self-reliance and economic sustainability among its members, recognizing that the preservation of cultural heritage is best served by a community that is healthy, educated, and self-sufficient. This dedication to the holistic development of its members is a brand of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, demonstrating its enduring commitment to the well-being and success of its people.

Beyond their artistic and educational endeavors, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe exemplifies a spirit of philanthropy and generosity, extending its support to both members and non-members through its scholarship programs and charitable activities. Committed to the well-being and success of its members, the troupe recognizes the critical importance of education in fostering personal growth and prosperity. By offering scholarships to its members and other deserving students, the troupe facilitates access to education, creating opportunities for young people to pursue their dreams and build a brighter future for themselves and their communities. Through its charitable initiatives, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe embodies the values of kindness, empathy, and service that lie at the heart of African cultural traditions.

Jobs Opportunity:

The diverse talents and skills of the members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe are a source of tremendous benefit to the community and beyond. The members are trained to perform a wide array of dances and play various musical instruments; the members' versatility and expertise have made them highly sought after as great entertainers in Akw Ibom State. Their contributions extend beyond boundaries, as they take their performances to schools, churches, government events, private functions, enriching the lives of those they encounter with their arts and cultural knowledge. From teaching traditional dance forms to leading drumming workshops, from choreographing performances to providing technical support, the



Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's members play vital role in the transmission and celebration of African cultural heritage.

As ambassadors of their culture, the troupe's performers have shared the unique traditions and history of Ikot Uso with audiences around the world, showcasing the rich diversity of African culture and highlighting the many ways in which different communities can connect and share their common humanity. Akwaobio have participated in International Cultural Festivals such as: National Multi-Cultural Festival in Australia, Yearly African Root Festival in Venezuela, and also travelled to Belize, Aruba, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Bahia, Nigeria Cultural Relationship in Brazil. This impressive list of international events in which the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has participated reflects the troupe's growing reputation on the global stage. Beyond the cultural significance of these international engagements, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's participation in these events has also had a profound impact on the lives of its members. For many, the opportunity to travel and perform overseas has opened up new worlds and perspectives, exposing them to different ways of life and broadening their understanding of the world beyond their own community. This exposure has not only enriched their own lives, but has also informed their artistic expression, inspiring new creative ideas and approaches that they can bring back to their community, enhancing the troupe's performances and cultural impact.

Challenges of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe

Religious Barrier:

The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's struggle with religious opposition to their cultural practices reflects a larger societal tension between tradition and modernity in many African communities. From Samuel, on one hand, the troupe's performances represent a cherished and integral part of the community's cultural heritage, preserving ancient traditions and practices that have been passed down through



generations. On the other hand, the rise of Christianity and other religious movements in recent decades has led to a rejection of many traditional practices as “fetish”, “demonic”, or “barbaric”, often leading to a clash of worldviews and values. This tension between traditional culture and religious doctrine is a complex and multifaceted issue that has shaped the course of history in many African societies. For the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, the challenge is to find ways to balance their commitment to preserving their cultural heritage with the need to respect and coexist with the religious beliefs of their community. One possible resolution by Akwaobio is to focus on the universal, humanistic aspects of their performances, highlighting the themes of community, tradition, and interconnectedness that resonate across cultures.

Income:

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, like many other cultural organizations around the world, is tackling with the challenge of financial sustainability. While the troupe's performances may be enriching and fulfilling on a personal and cultural level, the reality is that funding for the arts can be difficult to secure, especially in communities where traditional practices are not widely valued or supported. For Obiousop, this issue presents a significant hurdle in his efforts to support and compensate the troupe's performers, who are dedicating their time and talent to the preservation of their community's cultural legacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's efforts to document and share Akwa Ibom's dance traditions across generations represent a triumph of cultural preservation and intergenerational harmony. By embracing the wisdom of the past and inspiring the curiosity of the future, the troupe ensures that the vibrant legacy of Akwa Ibom's dances continues to dance across time, weaving an intricate tapestry of heritage, identity, and beauty for generations to come. By preserving these dances and making them accessible to the youth, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe ensures that the knowledge and skill associated with



these art forms remain alive and dynamic. In essence, they are paving the way for future generations to step into the spotlight and continue the intricate choreography of Akwa Ibom's cultural identity, making sure it never misses a beat.

To further preserve and promote Akwa Ibom's dance heritage, the following recommendations could be considered:

1. Encouraging the involvement of schools, dance groups, and cultural organizations in teaching and performing traditional dances, thereby creating a sustainable dance culture among younger generations.
2. Highlighting Akwa Ibom States dance traditions at local, regional, and national events, creating greater visibility and awareness of these art forms.
3. Providing financial and structural support to traditional troupes and other cultural organizations to continue their efforts in preserving and promoting Akwa Ibom's dance heritage.
4. Creating incentives, such as scholarships or awards, for young people who excel in these traditional dances, motivating them to pursue their interest further.
5. Developing cultural tourism initiatives that highlight Akwa Ibom's dance traditions as part of its cultural richness, attracting visitors and spotlighting the state's unique identity.

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RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN NATION: X-RAYING THE CONFLICTS AND REMEDIES

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Abstract

Religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria: X-raying the conflicts and remedies is the focus of this research. Religion is man's belief in a supernatural force for protection and reverence. Ethnic identity is an individual's self-categorizing concept in which a person identifies with an ethnic cleavage and its cultural identity, beliefs, values and origins. Religion and ethnicity have caused great harm to the Nigerian state as there is now absence of peace and crisis all over the country. There is lack of peaceful coexistence among religious groups in Nigeria as religious fanatics create tensions on daily basis. This research addressed the historical context of religion in Nigerian society, and look at ethnicity as concept, the connectivity of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria, a critique of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, exploitation of religious and ethnic identities by elites, religious conflicts and socio-political implications, religious identity and manipulation in Nigerian politics and remedies to ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. This research utilized the analytical method with books, journals and internet sources. It recommends that every citizen of Nigeria should be allowed to practice their religion freely without infringement and discourage ethnicity because they breed discrimination and crisis.

Keywords: Conflicts, Ethnicity, Exploitation, Identity, Religion

Introduction

Nigeria, as a result of ethnic identity and religious affiliation is more polarized and disintegrated today than it was at independence; and the situation is getting unbearable on daily basis. Adamolekun (2000) asserts that religion covers a wide variety of behavior, practices and beliefs. Hence, religion is not in any way a means of promoting conflicts, rather it is a means of encounter with the Supreme Being and interaction with the supernatural order to cope with life crises. Most religions of the world proclaim peace, love, harmony and have served the cause of peace. Contrary to the above assertion, religion has



been the causes of many wars in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Findings show that religion is sometimes one of the major causes of wars and this is borne out of the fact that some of the current international conflicts have religious undertones.

The interplay between religion and ethnicity in Nigeria is a significant factor in the country's socio-political landscape, as both are powerful identities with the ability to unify communities or create deep divides. Nigeria's ethnic diversity and religious pluralism intersect to form complex group identities that political elites have historically exploited for power and control. By leveraging these identities, elites often incite tension and conflict, deflecting from critical issues such as economic inequality, resource allocation, and corruption, (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). This manipulation contributes to cycles of intercommunal violence, particularly in regions where ethnic and religious identities align with access to political and economic resources.

The reality and effects of violence and insecurity in Nigeria and the world are alarming. Nigeria, since independence, has been bedeviled with one form of violence and insecurity or the other: militancy, religious crisis, political crisis, kidnapping, insurgency. This socio-Religious conflicts are part of the recurring issues in Nigeria today (Oko, 2015:287). The effects on the nation and the church cannot be overemphasized, (Olusakin & Sibani, 2023). Nigeria, as a result of ethnic identity and religious affiliation is more polarized and disintegrated today than it was at independence; and the situation is getting unbearable on daily basis. This was re-echoed by Atanang, Ekanem and Oko (2022:201) when they said "due to differences in tribes and religious beliefs, there are numerous incidences of hostilities, resulting in destruction of lives and properties" .Ambrose (2022) says, if the inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is in nature, it will pave way for a peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic



society like Nigeria. For example, one can quickly observe that, in our schools, neighbourhood, and even extended families, Muslims and Christians are living together. The questions begging for answers are: is ethnicity the main cause of religious violence? Are religious conflicts in Nigeria political? If Nigeria completely becomes a secular state, will crisis cease? This research will see to the solutions of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Historical Context of Religion in Nigerian Society

Nigeria's religious landscape is one of the most diverse and complex in Africa, deeply shaped by its history, colonial legacy, and varied ethnic composition. The country is home to three major religious traditions: Islam, Christianity, and indigenous African religions. Each of these belief systems has left a profound imprint on Nigeria's social, economic, and political structures, contributing to both its unity and its divisions.

Islam is the oldest of the three major religious traditions in Nigeria. It was introduced to the northern part of the country in the 11th century through trade and contact with the broader Islamic world, especially with North Africa and the Arab world. The Kanem-Bornu Empire and later the Sokoto Caliphate helped establish Islam as the dominant religion across the northern regions, where it remains the majority faith today. The Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio in the early 19th century, also contributed to the spread of Islam and shaped the political structure in the north. Islamic leaders in the north exercised both religious and political authority, creating a legacy of theocratic governance that continues to influence the region's culture and political systems (Falola, 2001).

Christianity was introduced later, primarily during the 19th century with the arrival of European missionaries, who initially established schools and medical facilities as a means to evangelize local



communities, Ter-Haar, 2009). Christianity spread most rapidly in southern Nigeria, where British colonial administrators also had a greater presence. Unlike Islam, which became embedded in local governance structures, Christianity spread through a decentralized network of missionary institutions. The faith gained considerable influence among the Yoruba in the southwest and the Igbo in the southeast, contributing to a new social hierarchy and changing traditional practices, (Larrain, 1983). Christian missions often prioritized Western education, which in turn opened up opportunities for employment in the colonial administration, thereby reshaping social structures in the south (Peel, 2000).

Indigenous African religions, though often less visible in contemporary Nigeria, represent the oldest spiritual traditions in the region. These belief systems are typically polytheistic and emphasize a close connection between the spiritual and natural worlds. Indigenous religions vary widely across Nigeria's different ethnic groups, but common features include ancestor worship, belief in multiple deities or spirits, and a strong link between religious practices and local customs. Although Christianity and Islam now dominate religious life in Nigeria, indigenous beliefs continue to influence cultural practices and worldviews, especially in rural areas. Many Nigerians even today incorporate elements of traditional religions into their Christian or Islamic practices, creating unique syncretic forms of worship (Falola, 2001).

A Look at Ethnicity as Concept

Ethnicity is generally considered the most basic and political salient identity in Nigeria. Nigerians define themselves in clear terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity both in competitive and non-competitive spaces. Ethnicity is one of the key markers in Nigeria's pluralistic society. The



primordialists see ethnicity as historically rooted and embedded in people's way of life and culture, and enforced by social institutions, collective myths and memories developed from early socialization, and hence have continued over time to heighten the polity of the nation, (Nwaoha, Ogboji & Ugwolebo, 2022).

Ethnic nationalism holds that nations are defined by common ancestry, language, and beliefs (Muller, 2008). According to Erikson's (1968), description of identity as interrelating the group and individual identity; identity can be generally defined as any group attribute that gives recognition, definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually and collectively. Ethnic identity connects people with common ancestral bond, languages, cultural affinity. Two major approaches or school of thoughts can classify the nature of Nigeria's identity formation. The first is primordial ties which are basically ascriptive and dependent on the 'givens' of life or natural (tribe, kinship, and ethnicity among others), and civil ties, which is based on industrial-society, such as political party affiliation, interest group membership, class and 'elite' construct.

Uchegbu, Belo & Ojo (2025) holds that identities are intricately linked and mutually reinforcing, because identities co-exist. The most salient identities are main basis for violent conflicts in Nigeria which cut across ethnic, regional, religious and sub-ethnic. The phrases: ethno-religious, ethno-regional and religio-political are ways of expressing the connectivity of identities in a plural state, like Nigeria. In recent times, other 'primordial' identities which have gained wide and strong conceptual relevance in Nigeria are those of 'indigenes', 'non-indigenes', 'migrants' and 'settlers. All these have ethnic, communal, religious and regional affinity, and have emerged from an entrenched system of exclusion and marginalization in which non-indigenes, migrants and settlers are deprived of equal



access to resources, rights and privileges in the same nation as citizens. The newest emerged, constructed identity in Nigeria is the ‘political-class’ identity which has deepened the socio-economic marginalization and promoted the classification of other citizens of the country as the ‘poor masses’. This exclusionary system has continually promoted social inequality, injustice, and deprivation which has remain the bane of violent conflicts all over Nigeria, and is deep-rooted in the “national question”. Of course, these marginalization and ethnic socio-political inequalities were both entrenched by the colonial lords and post-independence administrations.

Nwaoha, et.al (2022) defines ethnic nationalism as the allegiance of individual members of ethnic group to such group, having shared origins, tradition and having developed high level of consciousness on the factors that binds them together in a given area. There is always a fundamental consciousness of the ethnic group to think and belief that they are distinctive from others, and this ethnic consciousness and allegiance determine the level of co-operation and existence of these ethnic cleavages in a given period.

Ethic nationalism identifies a people of ethnic group of common descent bonded with common culture and distinctive ideology. Ethnic nationalism believes that nations are defined by common ancestry, language and beliefs. It is based on the idea that ethnic groups have the right to self-determination, and this right can lead to a variety of different outcomes from a sovereign state to the establishment of self-governing bodies within the existing state. Ethno-nationalism is a type of nationalism which basic understanding is tied up to ethnic ties and ethnicity as core component of nations. Ethnic nationalism as a concept refers to distinct ethnic groups and identities that are living in a common territorial space



or polity, who failed to develop attributes or social capital or integration to accommodate each other, whose deep-rooted boundaries define their distinct cleavages.

Colonial legacies, modernization, forced assimilation; social fragmentation, uneven development and histories of authoritarianism are factors that construct ethnic nationalism. Ethnicity plays a major role in the political development in Nigeria, and has emerged ethnic politics-a detriment to Nigeria's nascent democracy and national development.

The Connectivity of Religion and Ethnicity in Nigeria

The Hausa-Fulani are predominantly Muslim, the Yoruba are religiously diverse with a mix of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions, and the Igbo are primarily Christian. These religious and ethnic identities are not merely cultural markers but have become politicized in ways that shape access to power and resources. As a result, religion and ethnicity often overlap, influencing regional politics, economic policies, and social organization. Considering religious affiliation trend in Nigeria, all is not well as religious crises have almost put the entire country apart as religion is used as a political weapon by selfish politicians. According to (Oluwatoyin & Emmanuel, 2020) Nigeria has three hundred and fifty ethnic groups with diverse religion, history, culture, dialects and languages. The major ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani) compose only fifty-seven percent of Nigeria's population. The remaining forty-three percent are the minority groups. Minority groups according to (Dada, 2016) do not have political voice, nor do they have access to resources or the technology required to develop economically. As a result of this, they often consider themselves being marginalized, neglected, relegated and oppressed in all ramifications. These among other factors usually fuel religious crises in



Nigeria as each ethnic groups and religious fundamentalists will usually want to have their ways at all cost.

The political relevance of religion and ethnicity has been especially pronounced since colonial times when the British colonial administration applied “indirect rule.” This policy relied on local leaders and aligned with ethnic and religious divisions, especially by empowering northern Muslim leaders and reinforcing a political divide between the north and the south. This divide laid a foundation for later ethnic and religious competition as Nigeria transitioned to independence, with groups vying for influence in the emerging nation-state (Kukah, 1993). Over the years, these divisions have become deeply entrenched in the political framework, influencing voting patterns, party alliances, and government appointments. Consequently, religion and ethnicity serve as a means of rallying communities, but they also perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups and fuel tensions across regional and religious lines.

A Critique of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

The persistent exploitation of religious and ethnic identities for political gain has profound implications for Nigeria’s social and political stability. This manipulation not only fuels division but also hinders development by diverting attention and resources away from crucial issues like poverty reduction, healthcare, and education, (Smith, 2007). The cycles of violence that emerge from such divisions have a devastating effect on communities, leading to economic disruption, displacement, and long-term trauma, (Ibrahim, 2011). Intercommunal violence often results in the destruction of infrastructure and disruption of essential services, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, where access to social services is already limited, (Omeje, 2012).



On a national scale, ethno-religious conflict weakens Nigeria's cohesion and challenges the viability of its federal structure. As local leaders and politicians continue to draw on these identities to build support, the sense of a united Nigerian identity becomes harder to sustain. This fragmentation impedes the formation of effective, inclusive policies, as politicians prioritize the interests of their immediate ethnic or religious constituencies over national unity. Moreover, when communities become polarized along religious and ethnic lines, they are less likely to collaborate in addressing shared challenges, such as poor governance and economic inequality, making it easier for elites to escape accountability (Kukah, 1993).

The intersection of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria has become a critical factor in the country's political and social dynamics, (Lewis, 2007). Political elites exploit these identities to maintain control, reinforcing divisions that lead to recurring violence and societal fragmentation. By examining case studies such as the Jos crisis and the Boko Haram insurgency, it is evident that many of Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts are not merely cultural clashes but products of deliberate manipulation. Scholars such as Albert (2002) and Kukah (1993) highlight the importance of addressing these root causes by fostering inclusivity, accountability, and unity across Nigeria's diverse communities. Addressing the manipulation of religion and ethnicity in politics is crucial for fostering peace, development, and national cohesion in Nigeria.

Exploitation of Religious and Ethnic Identities by Elites

Several instances of intercommunal violence in Nigeria demonstrate the impact of elite-driven manipulation of religious and ethnic identities. These clashes have led to the loss of thousands of lives and the displacement of many more, illustrating the tragic consequences of politicizing religious and



ethnic identities (Albert, 2002). Boko Haram capitalized on religious grievances and perceptions of government neglect, attracting followers who felt marginalized by the state. The group's attacks on Christian communities and government installations have further intensified Nigeria's religious divide. Politicians in the northeastern Nigeria have been accused of leveraging the insurgency to gain control over rival communities or to undermine federal power. The Boko Haram conflict is thus both a symptom of religious and ethnic manipulation and a tool used by some elites to maintain local power, even at the cost of regional stability, (Anderson & Beckerleg, 2007).

Political elites in Nigeria often manipulate religious and ethnic identities to secure loyalty, consolidate power, and marginalize opposition. This exploitation operates on several levels, ranging from subtle messaging to outright incitement of violence. During elections, for example, candidates frequently appeal to ethnic and religious loyalties, presenting themselves as defenders of their community's interests, (Nnoli, 2008). This approach is especially effective in Nigeria's "first-past-the-post" electoral system, where the winner takes all, making ethnic and religious bloc voting a critical strategy for political survival.

In many cases, elites stoke fear and distrust between religious and ethnic groups to maintain political stability that benefits their own interests. For instance, politicians might emphasize historic grievances or frame social and economic problems as threats posed by another religious or ethnic group, even when the issues stem from broader structural inequalities or governance failures. This tactic allows elites to deflect attention from systemic issues, such as poverty and corruption, by fostering divisions that keep different groups in opposition to one another rather than united in demanding accountability



(Albert, 2002). The outcome is often a heightened sense of “us versus them” among communities, which can quickly escalate into conflict.

The selfishness of leaders in government, fraud, and the wide gap between the political class and the masses force the suffering society and the youth to carry arms, Rev. Christian Eze (Personal communication, 12th Feb., 2023). Socio-economic factors in this contest include unemployment, corruption, uneven distribution of wealth and resources, poverty, and environmental crisis. Unemployment breeds poverty. Extreme poverty logically leads to criminality that begets insecurity. A society where more than 90% of the workforce who are youths are unemployed, necessarily will yield more than 90% of insecurity. Nigeria has been called the extreme poverty capital of the world and yet there is no reasonable programme either immediate or remote on ground to lift her out of this messy situation. This situation creates an avenue for the youth to employ themselves in criminal activities that lead to insecurity, (Nwagboso, 2012).

Religious Conflicts and Socio-Political Implications

Religious diversity in Nigeria has been a double-edged sword, providing a source of cultural richness but also contributing to tensions and conflict. Inter-religious conflicts, such as those between Christians and Muslims in the Middle Belt region, have often been fueled by political and economic grievances rather than solely by religious differences. Competition over resources, political representation, and access to land are often reframed along religious lines, intensifying these conflicts (Albert, 2002). Political elites have sometimes exploited these religious divisions to secure their own power, aligning with religious leaders to gain the support of their communities while marginalizing opposition groups.



In recent years, religious identities have become further politicized, with religious organizations becoming more influential in advocating for social and political change, (Meyer, 2004). For instance, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) frequently engage in public debates over national policies, particularly in areas related to religious freedom and governance. These organizations have become major players in Nigeria's political discourse, sometimes challenging government policies and sometimes aligning with them, depending on the interests of their constituencies, (Salamone, 2014).

Nigeria's religious history is deeply intertwined with its socio-political and economic landscape. The introduction of Islam and Christianity, the persistence of indigenous religions, and the colonial legacy have collectively shaped Nigeria's diverse religious environment. Religious identities in Nigeria intersect with regional and ethnic distinctions, creating a complex and sometimes divisive socio-political landscape. This historical context helps explain the ways in which religion continues to influence Nigerian society, not only as a matter of personal belief but also as a significant factor in social, economic, and political power dynamics, (Nolte, Danjibo & Oladeji, 2009). Understanding this context is essential for analyzing the role of religion in contemporary Nigeria and for exploring how religious identities may be used by political elites to maintain their dominance, a phenomenon that aligns closely with the Marxist perspective on religion as a tool of social control.

Religious Identity and Manipulation in Nigerian Politics

1. Elections and Religious Allegiances: Nigerian elections have often been marked by candidates openly aligning with religious identities to secure votes. For instance, in presidential elections, candidates strategically emphasize their religious affiliations to appeal to either the Christian or Muslim



majority. This tactic serves to polarize voters along religious lines, reinforcing divisions that distract from critical issues such as corruption or policy failures. Religious leaders are frequently enlisted to endorse candidates, turning places of worship into platforms for political propaganda. (Van-Stiphout, 2014).

2. Sharia Law and Northern Identity: In the early 2000s, several northern Nigerian states implemented Sharia law, a move supported by Muslim elites who portrayed it as a return to religious and cultural authenticity. This development created significant tensions with Christian populations in the north and with the broader Nigerian Christian community, (Alao, 2010). While Sharia's introduction was presented as a reflection of regional autonomy, it also functioned as a political tool for northern elites to consolidate power, foster regional solidarity, and marginalize Christian minorities, often leading to violent confrontations.

3. State Support for Religious Institutions along Ethnic Lines: Nigerian governments at both State and Federal levels frequently fund religious activities and events, such as sponsoring pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem for citizens. While ostensibly promoting religious freedom, these state-sponsored initiatives also serve to curry favor with religious groups and strengthen the political influence of religious leaders. For example, governors in northern states often use public funds to subsidize the Hajj pilgrimage, building goodwill among Muslim constituents and reinforcing the elites' legitimacy through religious patronage.

These case studies illustrate how religion is used to foster political loyalties, create a sense of shared identity, and legitimize power, ultimately supporting the elite's control over Nigeria's political landscape. By manipulating religious affiliations and exacerbating sectarian divides, political leaders



gain short-term political capital at the expense of long-term social cohesion, perpetuating a system that serves elite interests while marginalizing the broader population, (Mohammed, 2004).

Remedies to Ethno-religious Crisis in Nigeria

In Nigeria, intolerance of the other's ethnic origin and religious belief has been considered as one of the main causes of insecurity. According to Ozoigbo (2019), ethnic bigotry and religious fanaticism have facilitated insecurity in Nigeria to the extent that it is gradually becoming the identity of the Nigerian State. Manguwat (2016) holds that major religious crises in Nigeria have erupted between Christians and Muslims; but also, between Muslims and Muslims. There has not been any intra-religious conflict among Christians that would require the intervention of government and security agents. Therefore, it requires religious tolerance to suppress ethno-religious violence in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a secular state but the identification of Christianity and Islam to the exclusion of other religion further deepens conflicts in Nigeria. The State of origin should be removed and replaced with State of resident in all our national document as this will reduce ethnic identity which is in opposition to nationalism.

As Nigerians witness the harrowing effects of violence and insecurity, various countries, civil society organizations, traditional rulers and religious bodies, lend their voices to call on the federal government to find lasting solution to the issues stemming violence and insecurity in the nation. (Olusakin & Sibani, 2023). There should be a serious security check on religious groups fueling violence in their organization via sermons, teaching, hostility. Religious and traditional leaders should preach unity and peaceful coexistence, discouraging violence. Nigerian citizens and religious groups are supposed to



unify people of diverse culture together and not as one who divides members of multi-national state. According to Chidi (2022), religious extremism, poor leadership and marginalization have been identified as the major causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Nigeria religious adherents and leaders, especially the Muslims and Christians have demonstrated intolerance attitude towards each other resulting in religious fanaticism, confrontations and conflict of interest between members of this various religious group.

The economic implications of ethno-religious crises, like the social implications, are multi-dimensional. The disruption of economic life due to ethnic and religious conflicts negatively impacts on the national economy. Individuals, corporate organizations and governments have business interests in various parts of the country and the outbreak of such conflicts usually necessitates the closure of business activities, (Chidi, 2022). It is imperative for Nigerians to raise local securities that will protect economic activities in any part of Nigeria.

Conclusion

There are two primary religions in Nigeria- Islam and Christianity, competing with each other for centuries, causing intolerance and socio-political crises. Conflict is a great predicament in any human society. History indicates that conflict is an on-going process in human relations and may occur within and among groups and communities at any time. The management of ethno-religious crises is essential for the protection of Nigeria's national security and unity. The prevalence of crises in Nigeria is eroding the unity upon which any meaningful development could take place. It has also left adverse effects on the socio-economic polity of the people. Since the effects of ethno-religious crises borders on national



security, it is imperative that governments evolve such measures that would protect lives and property of the Nigerian people.

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PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

- Rev. Christian Eze (Personal communication, 12th Feb., 2023), the Cathedral Administrator, Wesley Cathedral of Methodist Church Nigeria, Edo-Delta Diocese and a member of Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Edo State.

The Role of Religious Ethical Values in Stemming the Tides of Cybercrime among Youths in Nigeria

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Abstract

Cybercrime has become a household phenomenon in Nigeria, particularly among young people who are mostly actively involved in the crime. Cyber shenanigans are perpetuated in different forms, such as credit card or bank account hacking and unsolicited emails and text messages to unsuspecting persons by fraudsters through the aid of the internet accessible with computers or mobile phones. Cybercrime is ethically and morally wrong because they cause pain to victims or destroy the lives of those involved, which is completely against moral codes in a humane society. The study aimed to investigate the reality of cyber fraud among youths in Nigeria and highlight the role of religious ethical values in stemming this evil tide, with the understanding that humans, including cybercriminals, are religiously conscious beings living among people. The study adopts a historical research methodology to systematically recapture the complex nature of cybercrime and youth participation in Nigeria through a critical review of relevant literature. The study revealed that the quest for wealth and fame among youth in Nigeria and the rush to measure up with their peers in the society could be attributed to the reason why many youths engage in the illicit venture of cybercrime, even though it is against their faith and falls short of religious, moral, or ethical values. The study therefore, argued that if properly engaged, religious moral values could serve as transformative tools towards right values among young people. The study concludes and recommends that the fight against criminality, especially cybercrime, is the sole responsibility of every member of society, but that the religious community must play a vital role in teaching adherents that going against or breaking existing laws is both punishable by God and society.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Youth, Unemployment, Religion, Ethical Values, Nigeria.



Introduction

The tendency to use religion for positive or negative gains, whether relating to character or virtue, has been an age-long argument among scholars of religions globally. This debate is even more complicated, particularly in Africa, where religion has assumed a dangerous ‘weapon’ in society, because it now serves as a means of political recognition to the detriment of the electorates or to improve economic and charismatic relevance among clergies, instead of using it in the services of God and humanity. Although, we cannot equivocally conclude that religion remains the major reason while the African continent as a whole cannot measure up in areas of technological advancement as compared to Europe and America. Although African country like South Africa have tried to break the shackle of religious bigotry to some extents and in their effort to embraced secularism. Whereas Nigeria has been labelled consistently with derogatory nomenclatures like ‘notorious’ and ‘overtly religious’ people by Western scholars. According to African countries are rich in culture and values that continue to shape the African cosmology and philosophy due to its accommodating nature (Marloes 647). There are over 250 ethnic nationalities in Africa that has served as a guiding light for countless generations, molding the moral and ethical foundation of societies across the continent (Falola par. 2). These are some of the reasons why it was literally easy for Europeans missionaries and the Arabian merchants to penetrate in the southern and northern protectorates of Nigeria where they spread Christianity and Islamic message to the people without any form of hindrances.

It is interesting to note that the immoral act of cybercrime did not originate from the African continent, rather it first surfaced in the European state of France in 1834, where the first cyber-attack took place and cybercriminals stole financial market information by gaining access into the French telegraph system (Wolf par.1). Since then, cybercrime has become the compound name for rule-breaking behaviours, such as cyber-fraud, cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and cyber espionage in the cyber spaces (Hutchings and Chua 169; Lazarus, 65). As Africans began to be aware of the illicit trade of cybercrime, it is unfortunate that Nigerian youths have taken the centre stage with the bulk of cybercriminals emanating from our space, where they represent ninety percent of the active population (Adeniran 20; Ojedokun & Eraye 1002). Cybercrime involves defrauding victims of monetary values, and many young people in Nigeria most especially job seekers and university undergraduates, have taken the trade as a means of employment with the hope that through it they will become rich one day



(Lazarus 67). Osuntuyi, Ireymi and Aluko express their worries about the increasing number of youths joining cybercrime in Nigeria when they opine that:

Many people, especially the youth, are getting involved day by day. They are participating actively in one form of Internet fraud or the other, majorly known in cyberspace as cybercrime, but known in the Nigerian parlance as *Yahoo Yahoo*..., cybercrime is a fast-growing expanse of crime, and this crime has continued unabated with the day-to-day involvement of many youths who are infused with the get-rich-quick syndrome (51).

The quest for quick wealth and the corrupt lifestyle often displayed by politicians has unequivocally forced many young people into illegal means of making money at all costs, including cybercrime and other forms of shenanigans that readily come to mind. This challenge of rich quick tendency is dramatised in our music industries today and on social media, including music stars who occasionally flaunt expensive jewellery, displacing and talking about the necessity of making wealth at any cost, in their songs, has paved the way for more crimes in society. This kind of lifestyle has become part of us because we have gradually built societies that no longer give credence to hard work, rather one that celebrates criminality instead of virtue, even among Christians and Muslims. For instance, social media was flooded in 2023 with the untimely demise of a Nigerian popular musician and Afrobeats star Ilerioluwa Oladimeji Aloba, popularly known as ‘Mohbad’, who we alleged to have “died why trying to get rich” in the music industry because today new generational record labels are co-founded by Yahoo-boys (Lazarus, 69).

The cybercrime phenomenon remains one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century and has escalated to what Osuntuyi, Ireymi and Aluko et al described as *Yahoo Plus*, that is, the blending of spiritual elements with internet surfing (51). Many have identified the influence and roles of religious leaders as promoters of cybercrime activity in Nigeria as negative. According to Osuntuyi, Ireymi and Aluko, Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion glamorised cybercrimes because “*Yahoo boys and girls* make use of spiritual ingredients that can help them successfully scam their victims by hypnotising them, even though their victims might be aware of the prevalence of cybercrime in the scheme (62-63).

This paper explores the role of religious ethical values in moderating negative criminal behaviours and other forms of youthful delinquency, and promoting positive values and conduct in the society can transform society. Therefore, the first section conceptualises and theorises cybercrime and



youth, providing relevant examples. The next section deals with Nigerian youth and the cybercrime phenomenon, next is the role of religious ethical values in mitigating the menace of cybercrime and then conclusions and recommendations.

Conceptualisation and Theoretical Clarification of Concepts:

Religious Ethical Values

Religious ethical values are the product of sacred religious texts, which usually resonate with major world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and African Traditional Religion, etc. In the context of this study, however, the sacred religious text of Christianity is the focus, although with a comparative analysis of other sacred scriptures that are believed to have a significant place in the life of adherents due to the valid cultural and moral teachings of its founders. Although the purpose of this study is not to compare the moral values of both religious experiences, rather to stress the rich morals inherent in both religions and how they can engender sound ethical principles, particularly among the youth, so as to build trust and a meaningful, humane society.

Furthermore, religious ethical values can be understood within the framework of religious beliefs and practices, texts, sacred spaces, symbols, piety, and the life and influence of a particular founder, that became a stander for followers as they get acquainted with certain values, due to the positive roles they play in shaping such religious cultures and traditions in the society (Bobyreva et al 2). The development of religious ethical values is usually a complex process, because religion itself signifies the ‘most good’ which can be expected or hoped for from this world. Hence, religious values are the “stable belief that a certain model of human behaviour or the ultimate goal of a person’s existence is the only preferable one from a social and personal point of view, rather than a different manner of behaviour or some other ultimate goal of existence” (Bobyreva et al, 2-3). For the purpose of clarity religious ethical values are decorated with terms such as norms, morals, traits, and attitudes, which are different from one religious consciousness to another. In the Christian worldview, for instance, its own system of values lays the basic foundation of faith, expecting adherents to follow accordingly for the promotion of it religious norms and for societal acceptance. Although, virtually every religion in the world uphold high standard of morality, either as a written code, or as a moral disposition, that admonished followers to leave an acceptable lives as they engaged in human society, keeping to the ideas that immoral and unethical ways of life are absurd and causes pain to humanity