

Innovations

Religion and the Humanization of Society: The Experience of an African Community

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Abstract

The humanization of society has become a matter of great concern in contemporary societies. The world has continued to make laudable advancements in many areas of life, but at the same time, there is a steady decline and loss of human values and elements in modern society. This experience of decline and loss appears to be a global phenomenon and it raises serious worries about its resultant effect on the future of life on earth. Different persons and groups are beginning to address the problem by embarking on projects aimed at rehumanizing society. This study investigates the contributions of religion, particularly from the African perspective, to the humanization of society. The study is qualitative in nature and applies the descriptive, functional and phenomenological methods of inquiry. The investigation reveals that African Traditional Religion, particularly as it obtains among the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria, lays high emphasis on human values and wellbeing, communal celebrations, extended family relationships, social fellowship and societal progress. Through these emphases, the religion contributes to making the community more human and humane, and thus, humanizes society. The study recommends that the religion be appreciated and aided to play more of its humanizing role, and that further studies be carried out in other African communities and beyond to strengthen or modify the finding of this investigation

Keywords: Humanization, Society, Africa, Religion, African Traditional Religion, Igboland, Omabe deity, Ovoko Community.

Introduction

The modern world has advanced tremendously in terms of demographic widespread, industrialization, democratization, literacy, digitalization, information and communication technology, and globalization. These advancements make the world, not only more complex and sophisticated, but a sort of a global village. There is hardly any part of the globe that is shielded from what happens in the wider world. As the world advances in these dimensions, directions and intensity, it tends to lose some of the essential elements that make it both human and humane. Human interactions at work are replaced by impersonal, professional and detached relationships while the values of compassion, benevolence, sympathy and consideration for others which define humane living in most traditional communities continue to diminish greatly. Human beings tend to lose value, dignity, and freedom as they are treated more as objects, and sometimes as means to an end. At work, capital and profit are accorded greater importance than the workers, and working conditions are largely dehumanizing. Relationships among workers are at the service of production and their importance is determined by the extent that they promote the maximization of profit. As genuine care for those who produce goods gradually disappear from the priority goals of organizations, labourers experience marginalization, impoverishment, and alienation (Encyclopedia.com). This growing loss of sense of humanity, human fraternity and social friendship, the decline of concern for human beings and the short supply of

respect for others, which characterize the present age is aptly noted by Pope Francis in his Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020, Chapter 1).

People are beginning to see the decline and loss of some key human values and elements in society as a real challenge facing the contemporary world with a lot of possible negative consequences for the future. This awakening gives birth to the growing awareness that the looming danger of dehumanization in modern societies needs to be halted and reversed by consciously creating and promoting the values of humanity and humane living in the world. Hence, the humanization of society is receiving attention as one of the important items in the list of societal needs in modern times. Scholars, researchers, governments, inventors, policy makers, technologists, manufacturers and planners are united in the project of searching for measures, and taking actions towards humanizing or re-humanizing society. This search-action oriented project is taking place in different areas of society such as health-care, development, education, law, work, manufacturing, media, and digitalization. Each of these sectors is committed to seeing that modern society becomes more human and humane. This study is part of the search for ways of humanizing modern society; in this instance, from the sphere of religion.

A number of factors combined to engender this study. The awareness of the decline of some essential elements of humanness in various aspects of modern society triggered a feeling of concern in the author. The concern was intensified by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic which exposed the fragility of life in the world without genuine human interactions and networks. This spurred the author to embark on investigating the problem of this study with a view to finding and proposing possible solution to it. Initially, it appeared as if religion and the humanization of society have nothing in common as there was a serious dearth of material on their relationship. An encounter with Aylward Shorter's idea on how religion humanizes human activities changed the story. According to Shorter (1973, p. 77), among functions of religion in society, "It humanizes man's activities". Coming in contact with this idea ignited a research impulse which set in motion the project of investigating the humanization of society from the perspective of religion.

Africans are known for being deeply religious. Religious beliefs and practices provide basis and backing for the operations of almost all the key social institutions in traditional African societies; family, economy, politics. The sacred is the touchstone from which most people in Africa see and evaluate reality including the norms and customs of the community (Nwanunobi, 1992, p.194). Even with a lot of social changes taking place in the continent in modern times, it is still largely the case that whoever wants to touch the heart of the African person finds it easier by going through the medium of religion. Hence, seeking to understand and actualize the humanization of society through religion has great relevance for members of the African constituency.

The traditional religion and culture of the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria is accredited for its emphasis on humane living (Ifemesia, 1979). This essential feature of life among the Igbo people is indisputably connected with their religion (Iheanacho, 2016). Thus, the African religion as practiced in Igboland is selected to be the focus of inquiry for this study. A rural community in the northern part of Igboland, namely Ovoko, is chosen for the investigation because research finding shows that "Igbo Traditional Religion is still very much practiced there in spite of modernity and Christian influence" (Adibe, 2008, p. 5). In the community, the Ọmabe deity is chosen for specific study because it is a fundamental symbol which brings together into a single ritual focus diverse interconnected web of meaning in the community and is capable of revealing the entire religion of the people (Ejizu, 1986, p. 4). The religious beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies of the Ọmabe are examined with particular focus on highlighting their impact on the humanization of society.

The argument of the study is that religion humanizes society. African Traditional Religion, as typified in the religious tradition of the Ọmabe deity in a northern Igbo community, is used as a case to demonstrate this claim. The study is qualitative, and the methodology is descriptive, functional, and phenomenological. Information is gathered from secondary sources of print and electronic material, and from personal communications (unstructured oral interviews) carried out on the tradition of Ọmabe in Ovoko community. The presentation of the study is done in five segments: an introduction, a conceptual clarification, a

descriptive presentation of the Qmabe tradition in Ovoko community, a highlight of the humanizing impact of the tradition on the community, and a conclusion.

Conceptual Clarification: Society, Humanization, and Religion

Society

A society is the setting in which human beings are born, live and spend their lives on earth. Living in society is essential to human existence as it accords with the natural constitution of the human being. Society refers to “a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests” (Merriam-Webster, “Society, Definition”). To qualify as a human society, it is necessary that there is a group of persons who occupy a determined territory, has social connection that has endured over time, shares a common culture, and is able to carry on and provide their own conditions of existence (Onyeneke, 1993, p.19). Sometimes, the term society is applied to social groupings or aggregates of people such as clubs, professional bodies, associations, guilds, fraternities, boards, cooperatives or organization, and also to groups of animals that live and work together such as bees or ants. For the purpose of this work, society applies to human beings in their conglomerate sense such as communities, towns, states, nations or the world.

There are different types of societies which can be broadly classified in three categories: the Pre-Industrial Society, Industrial Society and Post-Industrial Society. Social relationships are shaped by and reflect the type of society that obtains and which people find themselves at any given time in history. For instance, societies at the pre-Industrial period were predominantly rural, small, and well knitted together. In such small societies, everybody knows everybody else, and relationships among the members are more frequent and intense. The Industrial Revolution gave rise to a new form of society which relied heavily on machines for production. This decreased significantly the demand for human labour and gave birth to urban cities where people that were not formerly of the same ancestral or ethnic origin came to live together. In this new context, the appeals and authorities of the long-established traditions, customs and values of the old began to wane, giving room to the emergence of new ones. By the end of the 19th century, new technologies were introduced that again ushered in new forms of society, namely the post-industrial society. Unlike the industrial societies that relied on the production of material goods, the post-Industrial societies are rooted in the production of information and services (OpenStax, “Types of Societies...”).

With the emergence of the post-industrial society, many of the social structures, systems and ideas that had their basis in the pre-industrial and industrial society faced serious challenges of relevance. Among other things, the post-industrial age exposed humanity to a number of conditions that played down on the humane dimensions of society. For instance, it introduced forms of communication which “lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication” (Francis Pope, 2020, no. 43). The culture of working, studying, attending religious functions and ceremonies, and holding meetings and conferences virtually which were exceptions in the past suddenly became ordinary. The combined effect of all these is a continuous decline of companionship, fellowship, friendly intercourse and persistent social interactions which are the essential elements that make a society both human and humane. This is the condition of the modern world that makes humanization of society necessary for the sustenance of meaningful human existence.

Humanization

Humanization denotes the act and process of adapting things and places to human nature or use, making them humane, emphasizing humanity, and fostering qualities that are essentially human or favourable for the welfare of people (Merriam-Webster, “Humanize ...”). Humanizing society means making human beings the

central focus in social matters which entails laying emphasis on the values of human welfare, relationship, coexistence, cooperation, mutual respect, care and compassion. The notion of humanization is not new in history, but it did not receive much attention until in recent times when the condition of things in the world called for it. The goal of humanization is to see that there is an increase of the human attributes in all the dimensions of society and in the entire world. In fact, “The humanization of organizations is an increasingly important trend and increasingly present in forward-thinking organizations,” and “organizations are increasingly turning to humanization to ensure a sustainable and successful harmony between people, productivity and output” (Miranda, “Humanization...”). A humanized society offers people the opportunities of having their identities affirmed, feeling authentically human, and experiencing genuine freedom to be and to do things (Springer Link, “Culture as Humanization”). Humanization also plays a very positive role in conflict management and prevention; “humanization can help to de-escalate a conflict or limit escalation, as well as reduce the likelihood of mass violence or genocide” (Maiese, 2003).

Human beings are part of the wider community of the natural, the cosmic and the transcendent, and their existence are only fully meaningful, comprehensible and complete in their relationships within this context. Thus, “To be humanized is to be in harmony with nature, with fellowmen and with the idea of the Transcendent” (Velassery, 2020). The recognition of the transcendental dimension of humanization serves the purpose of differentiating it from the type of humanism premised on secular naturalism, which affirms and promotes the dignity, freedom, rights, and opportunities of human beings in society without any reference to the supernatural. (American Humanist Association, “Definition...”). This recognition also creates room for the inclusion of religion in the list of prospective role players in the process of humanization of society. In sum, humanization aims at having a society that is humane and relational with sufficient emphasis placed on human wellbeing, dignity, care, security, and freedom. Religion promotes this goal.

Religion

Religion is one of the key institutions in every human society. There is hardly any society in the world that does not have religion in one form or the other. Even the most primitive human societies had a sense of the distinction of realities in terms of the sacred and the profane, the natural and supernatural, and the visible and invisible, which implies the existence of a form of religion. Religion is the social institution and aspect of culture that is concerned with human relations with the sacred, invisible, ultimate, spiritual, divine, holy, inviolable, transcendent or that which is worthy of special reverence (Britannica.com; Onuigbo, 2020). Religion is of great social relevance because of its functions, which include: “(a) giving meaning and purpose to life, (b) reinforcing social unity and stability, (c) serving as an agent of behavior, (d) promoting physical and psychological well-being, and (e) motivating people to work for positive social change” (Howard Community College, “Sociological Perspectives ...”). African Traditional Religion is applauded for the way it touches and responds to the fundamental needs of human beings in society; their material well-being as well as social welfare and progress (Shorter, 1973).

The religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous people of Ovoko, a northern Igbo community, align with the basic tenets of the Igbo religion. This religion conceives of reality as constituted of the visible and the invisible worlds. The visible world consists of human beings and everything that is perceptible to the senses, while the invisible sphere embraces the totality of all spiritual realities together with the Supreme Being (that is, God or *Chukwu*). God is the origin of all things, who sustains everything in existence, and has many intermediaries that collaborate with him to carry out this function. These intermediaries include the deities, ancestors, and multitudes of unnamed spirits, and through them, the affairs of the community and its members are directed and sustained (Onuigbo, 2009, p. 36).

The worship of God in Igboland which is usually done through his intermediaries is largely directed towards the wellbeing of human beings. In fact, “In the hierarchy of beings, man stands at the center. Both the beings above man and those below him are appreciated to the degree they help man to achieve his self-fulfillment, which is the strengthening of his life-force and the integration and harmony of the society to which he

belongs” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 72). This anthropocentric orientation of the Igbo traditional religion informs the content and reasons of the prayers and sacrifices of its adherents. This orientation intends humanization. The religious symbol and tradition of the Ọmabe deity in Ovoko demonstrate the import of religion for the humanization of society.

The Ọmabe Deity in Ovoko Community

Ọmabe is one of the principal deities in Ovoko community and it ranks above other intermediaries of the Supreme Being known and operative in the land. It is highly respected, feared, worshipped, and celebrated, and its impacts on society are both strong and pervasive. Considering the beliefs, rituals, veneration and devotions associated with the deity in the community, it qualifies as a dominant symbolic tradition in the religious life of the people. It is a deity that manifests itself visibly in the world as masquerades (Attamah-Ugwu Amaja, personal communication, January 6, 2021). Masquerades are produced when human beings, usually males, cover themselves with some materials to give expression to another reality of a different identity that is spiritual. Many masquerades of different shapes, modes of expression and functions that appear under the name of Ọmabe.

The Ọmabe is generally believed to be a spiritual reality in spite of its visible appearances in the form of masquerades. Depending on dialectical variations, the Igbo name for masquerades is *mma*, *muo*, or *muonwu*, which literally means “spirit”. Spirits do not have material bodies but they can assume corporeal forms in the visible world specially to carry out certain missions. The Ọmabe spirit assumes the material form of a masquerade in order to serve the needs of human beings in the community. The phenomenon of masquerades is common to the Igbo, but there are variations of beliefs and practices associated with it throughout the region. These variations owe to the fact that the Igbo socio-political model is such that every community is largely autonomous (Onyeneke, 1987, pp. 12-13).

The Ọmabe deity-masquerade is typical of the communities in the northern part of Igboland, namely, the Nsukka area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The Ọmabe tradition is so closely associated with the people of this area that sometimes, they are collectively called “Igbo-Ọmabe”, that is, the Igbos who have Ọmabe as their symbol of identity (Onuigbo, 2009, p. 116). Within this area, various communities have outstanding variances of beliefs and ritual practices pertaining to the Ọmabe deity. These variations range from the visible shapes of the masquerades, to their ways of expression, functions, powers, the cycles of their festivals, and the styles of the celebration of the festival. Therefore, except when a comparative analysis is intended, the study of the Ọmabe tradition within particular communities offers better opportunities of precision of facts. Hence, the focus of this investigation on a specific community.

There seems to be a general agreement among scholars that the Ọmabe masquerade is an embodiment of an invisible spiritual reality, but opinions differ concerning the type of spirits it embodies. Some scholars are of the view that the Ọmabe masquerade embodies the ancestral spirits (Onyeneke, 1987; Ifemesia, 1979; Asogwa and Odoh, 2021), but others hold that Ọmabe is a spiritual entity in itself which manifests through masquerades. In support of this latter view, Keith and Shaw observe that in the masquerade “is manifested the cyclical return to the land of the living of a being (or group of beings) called Ọmabe, with whom is associated community justice, peace, and welfare” (1987). The religious beliefs and practices of the people of Ovoko align more with the latter view, which is, that the spirit embodied by the Ọmabe masquerade is not ancestral but a distinctive deity.

In the hierarchy of spiritual beings, the Ọmabe deity follows after God before all other entities including the ancestors (Onuigbo, 2009). Rightly so, according to the religious beliefs and practices of the Ovoko people, the Ọmabe has its dwelling place on high while the abode of the ancestors is beneath the earth. During its annual appearance in the visible world, the Ọmabe comes from above, and thus its coming is linguistically described in terms of the descent of the spirit (*udamma*). Furthermore, the festival of the Ọmabe takes precedence over the ancestors’: the yearly festival of the ancestors in the community holds in the seventh month, that is, a month after the departure of the Ọmabe. Moreover, the Ọmabe is addressed by the title “the son of the

Creator-God" (*Omabe Nwa Ezechitoke*); a title which indicates a special relationship of affinity between the Ọmabe and the Supreme Being (S. Onyeke, personal communication, January 10, 2021).

The Ọmabe festival takes place every year and the three major clans in the community take turns in hosting it. The rotation among the clans pertains only to the hosting of the festival but the actual celebration involves the whole community. The festival entails a lot of eating, drinking and merriment by everybody. A period of time is set aside before the festival for the material and spiritual preparations for the coming of the deity. People purify themselves to ensure that the Ọmabe does not meet them in any abominable state (Attamah-Ugwu, Amaja, personal communication, January 6, 2021). Weeks before the celebration, the heads of the families in the host clan send out invitations to friends and relations in the other clans and villages to come and celebrate with them. Such invitations are hardly turned down. The chief priest of the Ọmabe deity in conjunction with some elders and titled men determine the particular date when the festival of the Ọmabe takes place in any given year and the calculation is done following certain natural and astrological rhythms (Nnadi, 2021).

From morning till late afternoon on the day of the descent of Ọmabe-masquerades, families and their guests are found in their homes feasting. Towards the afternoon, people move out to the public arena in expectation of the appearing of the deity. The masquerades come from the uninhabited and desolate areas in the community, which are commonly believed to be the abode of the spirits. They appear in different shapes, colours, and numbers, which are all particular manifestations of the one and same deity. People make their prayers to them as they pass. The celebration is continued throughout the day. The following day, all the masquerades appear in one place, the community central market (*Afor*), for public display. It is the "Epiphany", of the masquerades. While the display goes on, people eat, drink, rejoice and exchange pleasantries (E. Ugwu-Okanya, personal communication, January 7, 2021). The invited guests return to their homes after this second day of the festival.

From the day of its appearance, the Ọmabe stays on earth with human beings for a period of three months. During this time, the celebration of the deity continues, usually at village levels. Every village in the community has a shrine of the Ọmabe deity and a priest instituted to its ministry. There is also a shrine dedicated to the deity that belongs to the community as a whole which has one arch priest dedicated to its service. People offer sacrifices to the Ọmabe in these shrines either as supplications for anticipated favours or thanksgiving for prayers already answered. A group of initiated men called "the children of the spirit" (*Umu Mma*), found in every village, coordinates the activities of the deity throughout the time. In this period of its sojourn, the Ọmabe performs so many functions that are predominantly meant to serve the needs of the people. At the end of the period of its sojourn, the deity goes back to the spirit world from where it comes.

The festival ends with the departure of the visible form of the deity, but its contact with the community continues particularly through the mediation of its priests. Whether the Ọmabe is visibly present in the community as masquerades or as invisible deity, its impacts in terms of sustaining, directing, and regulating the activities of the people in the community are profound and undiminished. Some of these impacts humanize society.

The Humanizing Impacts of the Ọmabe on the Community

Through the visible appearances of the Ọmabe in the form of masquerades, it introduces the invisible deity into the physical sphere of human beings in a way that the divine becomes concrete, perceptible and close to the people. This incarnation makes the deity easily approachable to the community such that people can present their prayers to him with ease. Petitions presented to God through the Ọmabe during its corporeal sojourn on earth are believed to get answers without delay (E. Ugwu-Okanya, personal communication, January 7, 2021).

The Ọmabe masquerade arbitrates cases and helps to bring about peace in the community. Conflicts are part of human experience in every community, but sometimes people find it extremely difficult to have them resolved. Issues that families, kinsmen, and other constituted organs of arbitration in the community find

problematic to solve are referred to the Ọmabe to handle. The Ọmabe masquerade enjoys the advantage of anonymity and spiritual authority that places it in a privileged position to adjudicate cases impartially and fearlessly. Difficult martial issues, land disputes, and accusation of poisoning are the type of cases referred to the Ọmabe to settle (E. Eze-Ajibo, personal communication, March 4, 2021). These cases are usually treated right inside the earthly dwelling places of the deity in the village squares and the decisions made by the deity are binding on the parties concerned.

The Ọmabe helps the community to communicate messages that human beings ordinarily find them difficult to do. Relationships in the community are marked by relatively too much familiarity which do not always allow human beings to execute certain judgments in relation to others. Sometimes too, individuals in the community may either be overly respected or feared and when they are suspected of some heinous acts, people find it extremely difficult to tell them their offences or to summon them for judgment at the community meeting. The community entrusts such responsibilities to the Ọmabe; one or more masquerades undertake the mission of communicating the decisions of the elders or the entire community to the persons concerned.

The appearance and epiphany of the Ọmabe masquerades provide room for the all-important human need for entertainment and recreation in the community. Some of the most beautiful and artistically designed masquerades in the community are found within the category of Ọmabe. The masquerades entertain their audience through various forms of display. There is hardly any event in the life of the community that is as entertaining as the outing and display of the Ọmabe on the days of its appearance and epiphany. The entertainment by the masquerades refreshes the mind, reduces stress and contributes to the emotional and physical well-being of people and the overall preservation and promotion of their health.

The festival of the Ọmabe creates and promotes communal celebration, fosters fellowship, and strengthens social integration among the people in and beyond the community. There is hardly any celebration in the traditional life of Ovoko community that is as all-involving and encourages sharing, reaching-out and friendship as the Ọmabe festival (J. Okwechi, personal communication, April 10, 2021). It provides occasions for the members of the community to gather and celebrate, and by so doing, their identity as a people is cultivated and strengthened in a way that makes for a greater sense of oneness among them. The invitations to participate in the celebration of the festival by families to their friends and relatives from other clans and neighbouring communities help to create, nourish and sustain bonds of relationships. Bonds established through this festival diffuse tensions among members of different clans and communities and even militate against possible feuds, enduring conflicts, and inter-communal wars.

Ọmabe tradition also contributes immeasurably to moral stability and discipline in the community. The deity is generally considered benevolent, but at the same time, it is known to be very strict on issues pertaining to the violation of the ethos of the land. Serious moral transgressions attract grave punishment from the Ọmabe to the point of visiting the offenders with strange illnesses and, sometimes, death. The fear of such punishments serves as deterrent to possible offenders and makes them to live and act rightly in accordance with the customs and traditions of the land. When the Ọmabe is on the earth, quarrelling, fighting, stealing, poisoning people and similar wicked acts are strictly forbidden.

The traditions of the Ọmabe deity plays a positive role towards the preservation of the natural environment in the community. A lot of damages have been done on the vegetation of many communities in Nigeria through indiscriminate felling of trees and bush burning by people. This has led to the disappearance of tropical forests in many places in the country and thus transforming them into arid and unproductive lands. The shrines of Ọmabe are sacred and people are strictly forbidden from cutting down trees in and around them. In this way, the groves that grow around the shrines escape the exploitative hands of the modern builders, developers and firewood merchants.

These highlights, which are not exhaustive, delineate the humanizing impacts of the religious tradition of the Ọmabe deity on the community.

Conclusion

The symbolic rituals and traditions of the Ọmabe deity in Ovoko (Igbo) community portray how religion, particularly in Africa, humanizes society. The worship of the deity provides room for the gathering of the community to celebrate, which fosters a sense of oneness in the people and strengthens the affective bonds among them, and with their neighbours. This religious tradition promotes human wellbeing, social solidarity, peace, and entertainment, and preserves the natural environment from reckless exploitation. In this way, religion functions as a catalytic agent of humanization of society.

The humanizing impact of this African religion is wholistic, for it integrates the concerns of humanity, the natural environment and the transcendent in its orientation and service. The experience of religion in Ovoko community in relation to the humanization of society serves as an example of what many religions are capable of doing for the good of the social order. These affirmations counter the proclivity for neglecting religion in matters concerning the humanization of society. Moreover, with “the global revival of religion”, which D’Souza (2011, p. 2) describes as “the most important development of our time”, this study has a relevance that goes beyond the investigated African community to the whole world.

Further investigations of the African traditional religion need to be done to identify more of its credentials, abilities and ways that contribute to the humanization of society. The religious traditions of other communities in and outside Igboland and Africa ought to be studied to elicit facts to support, modify, strengthen, approve or disapprove of the findings and conclusions of this study. Studies should also be undertaken to find out possible ways of humanizing the religions of various communities to enable them contribute more effectively to the humanization of society. Finally, religion in general, African Traditional Religion in particular, and the tradition of the Ọmabe deity, to be precise, call for more appreciation, promotion and revitalization for the hope they offer towards the humanization of society.

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