Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.1 March, 2024; p.g. 305 – 312; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SACRED SPECIALISTS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The thrust of this paper is on the contributions of the sacred specialists in African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the Contemporary Nigerian society. African Traditional Religion has a host of sacred specialists who are professional in their various disciplines. They are seen as indispensable persons who engender progress in the human society like Nigeria. The researchers made use of primary and secondary sources of data collection as their methodologies. The work discovered among other things that sacred specialists play essential roles in African society. The work recommended among other things that professionalism among sacred specialists in African Traditional Religion should be encouraged.

Keywords: Contributions, Sacred Specialists, ATR, Contemporary Society, Nigeria.

Introduction

It is a popular position among scholars of African Traditional Religion that Africans are notoriously and obstinately religious. This is a truism accentuated by the numerous elements, nature and votaries of this unique religion. Fundamentally, man conceived the idea of supernatural reality through religion which is capable of unveiling every mystery and challenges to his existence on earth. But this is obviously tapped, harnessed and enjoyed from a handful of experienced, trained, strong and virile experts who perform in some cases definite roles in some other inter-related functions to the enhancement of the adherents of the faith and community. African Traditional Religion has a host of sacred specialists who are professional in their various disciplines.

They are seen as indispensable tools that engender progress in the human community especially Nigeria. To this end, this work will critically examine the sacred specialists, their contributions to Nigerian society and the impact of Western culture on their roles. The genesis of these sacred offices is prehistoric. They are as old as the existence of man and his knowledge or idea of God. They are usually inherited right from birth or through succession. Sacred specialists are such personalities devoted to the gods who by virtue of their specialized office, knowledge and skill in religious affairs play .a key role of mediation and problem — solving in the life of their people. They seem to be the greatest gift and most useful succor to the society. "These are men and women who know how to lead others in religious activities, and

who serve as the link between their fellow human beings on one hand and god, spirits and invisible things on the other" **(Mbiti, 1975:19).** Everyone who discharges this kind of duty is called a sacred specialist. We have the professional – full time priests and non-professionals or quasi — sacred ones. The Native doctors or Medicine men, Diviners, Rain Makers fall under the professionals. Although most of them claim their art comes from divinities, and ancestors, they still pass through one form of training to the other.

Some do pass through some periods of apprenticeship with renowned traditional medical practitioners. This exercise helps to broaden their, knowledge of herbs and improve their dexterity and medical practice. Since specialists belong to a special category of their own, they have a language, symbolism, knowledge, skill, practice and office personality of their own which are not known or easily accessible to the ordinary person whether he is a villager or a scholar in search of knowledge to better the human welfare. They are people who perform religious duties whether in the temples or shrines or sacred grooves. They are taken as the servants of the gods; hence they are the mouth pieces and mediators between respective gods and men.

There are a lot of functions that are embodied in the offices of sacred specialists which will be seen in their categories, thus: Priests, Medicine men, the Herbalists, the Diviners and Rainmakers. There is over lapping in their functions. One may combine the function of a priest and that of a medicine man, At times one person may perform most of the roles within his jurisdiction.

The Priest

The most outstanding sacred specialist among the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria is the traditional priest. He is seen at every part of the society. The priest serves divinities / gods and humanity. He ministers in temples, shrines, sacred grooves or elsewhere. According to Mbiti: "They are versatile in religious knowledge in matters of myths, beliefs, traditions, legends, proverbs and in the religious practices" (Mbiti 1975:159). They are custodians of religious objects, myths and traditions as well as intermediaries between divinities, and the worshippers. Priesthood office is usually occupied by both men and women. The priest at a time may combine the priesthood function with medical practice. There are -two types of priests, the professional and non-professional.

The professional priests: These are the main officers attached to divinities.

They are called the Eze-alusi or Eze-mmuo among the Igbo. Among the Yoruba, they are called the Olorisha. Some people are normally set apart from birth to dedicate their lives to this office whereas others are called or appointed through the medium of spirit possession and later trained in the art of priesthood. Any priest set for orientation is taken to the training centre where he or she undergoes long periods of initiation and training by older and more experienced ones. The training involves knowledge in' occult matters and the proper performance of public rituals. According to Quarcoopome: "There are rules relating to the moral and spiritual state of trainees, before, during and immediately after training and after officiating at formal ceremonies" **(Quarcoopome 1987:76).**

The non-professional priest or lay priest: The non-professional priest is usually the head of the family. He officiates at the domestic and ancestral shrines, where he leads the household

in making offerings, libation and prayers. Normally in the mornings he appears before the shrine and on behalf of the family offers prayers for the protection and success in their daily activities.

The Medicine man: For a clear understanding and appreciation of the position of a medicine man, it is quite necessary to first and foremost point out what we understand by traditional medicine. According to World Health Organization, traditional medicine is defined as:
The sum total of al/ knowledge and practice whether explicable or not, used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental or social imbalance and relying exclusively on practical experience and observations handed down from generation whether verbally or in writing (W.H.O. 1979:2-4).

Metuh defined medicine as: "a recipe of herbal formulae designed to generate some powers which are built into nature by God which one be trapped and applied with the help of God and other spiritual beings to meet various human needs" (Metuh 1987:222). Finally, it was generally observed that most Scholars of African Traditional Religion were of the opinion that medicine for Africans primarily conveys the idea of forces contained from the properties of some plants and herbs and applied to the solution of a variety of human problems.

The medicine man that is also known as the traditional doctor or traditional healer is called in Igbo "Nwadibia" and Yoruba "Babalawo'. There is a belief by Nigerians that he has supernatural powers. He claims to be a great agent of the divine healing. But his main duty is to fink human beings with the living dead and 'the spirits. 'Messages from the sacred world or the ancestors are received from him since they normally have the gift of second sight. It is believed that a good medicine man has the ability to unfold the secret of the heart, to interpret the past and predict the future. He also prescribes sacrifices that may be offered to public divinities and the ancestral spirits. The medicine man has both men and female categories.

The Herbalists: The herbalist is called "man of trees" and is akin to the medicine man. He has wide knowledge of the curative properties of herbs, plants, bark and roots. The herbalist is mainly concerned with the healing of the sick. He produces medicine from plants and animals to fetch healing. He is called to fight the power of both physical and metaphysical evil.

Diviners: Divination is simply a practice whereby communication is established with the spirit world to find out and know the future, destiny, well-being of the mortals. It has the following forms:
Rhabdomancy: throwing sticks in the air and examining their position when they fall.
Hepatoscopy: examine the entrails of an animal.
Teraphim: images of dead ancestors, possibly used in spiritualism.
Necromancy: consulting the dead.
Astrology: drawing conclusions from the relative position of plants.
Hydromancy: observing pictures in water.
Hence, a diviner is a specialist who learns the cause of a disease and provides remedy for healing, or discovers the solution to, problems by means of inspiration or manipulation of objects through many techniques. This power to divine can be gotten through communication with the ancestral spirits. According to Gehman, “a diviner may be a medium through whom the spirits speak to the divine' (Gehmah, 2001: 53).

Dreams and visions are different ways through which the diviners receive words from the spirit world. Common tools of his business include divining Stones, seeds, mutts, gourds and a divining bow. A diviner can be trained privately by other; diviners as an apprentice, for periods ranging from three to seven years. Some inherit the profession from their fathers. The training of a diviner involves learning the names and signs of practice, rites and cult of divination. There is a final ceremony by other diviners when the new one is authorized to practice, the initiation being brought to a climax by the new diviner taking flames from a lamp into his hands, without his skin being burnt. After that he prays alone to the god of divination. However, some learn the trade through practice than formal apprenticeship.

Rainmakers: Africans have great regard for rain. It is seen as a blessing since it waters their; farm and provides drink for their animals, Nigerians usually experience both rainy and dry seasons annually. If the rain is delayed considerable, it means that for that season there will either be insufficient harvest or none at all, and this creates a lot of anxiety this agrarian people. The seasons control the rhythm of community life, and in many societies the change of the seasons is marked or observed with ritual activities.

There are rites to mark many occasions like the beginning of the rains, the planting ceremony, the first fruits and the harvest of the crops, the beginning of the hunting or fishing season. These communal rites and activities are extremely important in strengthening community consciousness and solidarity, and are educational occasions for the young people e concerning both social and ' spiritual matters. Rainmaking is one such communal rite and rainmakers are some of the most important individuals in our society. Some people do inherit the office from their parents and begin to train at early age. Others may be called to the office through dreams, messages from the spirits or a natural interest in the work. Training in this field is usually long and involves learning to perform the rain-making rituals, to observe and interpret weather conditions, and to observe changes in the sky both at night and in the daytime, and the movements and habits of insects, birds, and certain animals, as well as the changes in plants and trees. It is very important to note that rain-makers do not make rain, rather they only pray to God (who is the Rain-Giver) for it. They performs rituals for it and as far as possible tell people when it will rain. They are known to be capable of producing rain, as through magical or ritual actions.

The contributions of sacred specialists to Nigerian society

The Sacred Specialists appear to be indispensable and veritable tools in the total well-being of every -society especially Nigeria with their varying and over lapping functions as can be seen below.

Religious role: The Sacred Specialists such as the priests are the official servants of divinities: They' are mediators between God, the divinities, ancestors and men. According to **Ugwu** "they act as a bridge or link 'between devotees and his object of worship" (Ugwu 2003:18). They know the gods,' hear them and speak to them for the worshippers. As the mouth-piece of the divinity they take messages from him and deliver them to the people. They ate regarded 'as the spiritual pastors of the society. In essence they are the embodiments of the presence of God among worshippers.

Furthermore, the mediatory position of the priest accords them the ample opportunity to offer sacrifices and advocate for the people to God. In the words of Quarcoopome, "as the representative of the people in relation to God, the priest helps the people to offer sacrifices and make intercession with God, the divinity and the ancestors" **(Quarcopoome 1987:77).**

Libations are poured daily at the shrine by the priests. They offer sacrifices sometimes to ward off an attack either in public or private life or when there is definite knowledge of an impending disaster. For instance, when there is prediction that some unnamed trouble or danger is looming in the community or when the society is already infested by a plague (adversity), priests offer sacrifice which may prevent the calamity from spreading. They also offer sacrifice when a foundation is being laid.

This is to appease the spirit of the land in order that all may be well' with that which is being founded or it may mean to ward off evil spirit. The diviners are consulted when there is a missing item, when a barren woman desires children, when there is an inexplicable disease, when one has a strange dream during crises of fife, when a child is born, at betrothal to find the appropriate husband, at death to find the cause of death and during an undertaking.

Medical role: Though as mentioned earlier, the priests could offer sacrifices for an effective preventive medicine, yet the actual healing functions lie within the ambient of the medicine men and herbalists, who bring to the door post of the society the traditional medicine. According to the World Health Organization, traditional medicine is defined as:
The sum total of all knowledge and practice whether explicable or not used in diagnosis prevention and elimination of physical mental or social imbalance relying exclusively on practical experience and relying exclusively on practical experience and observations handed down from generation whether verbally or in writing" (W.H.O. 1979: 3).

For **Metuh (1987)**, medicine is "a recipe of herbal formulae designed to generate some powers which are built into nature by God which can be tapped and applied with the help of God and other spiritual beings to meet various human needs" **(Metuh 1987:222)**. Scholars of African Traditional Religion are of the view that traditional medicine primarily conveys the idea of forces contained from the properties of some plants and herbs and applied to the solution of a variety of human problems like in treating of infertility cases. The medicine men render medical services to the people. They are approached for every malady believed to be caused by magic, witchcraft and sorcery. It is their responsibility to find out the foot cause of sickness, discover who is responsible, diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right remedy and supply means of preventing ailment. Quarcopoome pointed out that "people approach them for help in order, to succeed in their various undertaking" **(Quarcoopome 1987:81).** This is to say that they have the panacea to every human problem.

Social role: The social relationship of the community often seems to lie solely on the discretion of the sacred specialists like the diviners. For instance the issue of suitor in marriage is usually determined by them. When a family finds a girl that is to be married to one of her members or a man tries to give a marriage proposal to any of their daughters, the parents normally carry out secret investigations as to the lineage, morals and good disposition of the would-be-partner. But the parents do not rely alone upon the result of their investigation as they would finally consult the oracle for confirmation. Here, the diviner will reveal to them the prospects

of the marriage. If there are any obstacles on the way, they are removed by sacrifices offered to the appropriate gods before the marriage "talks" precede. They are also approached for choice of sites for markets or public places.

In times of crisis such as the outbreak of an epidemic or drought the sacred specialists are consulted to offer appeasement sacrifices to the divinities and the ancestors so that they may watch over and protect the community from harm. The perform substitution sacrifices to affect deliverance to the born-to-die (Abiku) children.

Political role: This is on public policy especially as regards the administration or government of the society. The sacred Specialist like the head priest is usually a member of the council of the community. The priest features prominently at the installation of kings or chiefs, and it is believed that 'he has the power of life and death over such kings or chiefs. Among the Yoruba the priest has everything to do with the making f kings and chiefs. Everything is done at his ministration. Also he takes an important role in the decisions affecting the community.

Similarly, in Nupe, the priest is the custodian of the sacred bangles of the king which in the days gone by could only be worn with the permission of the chief priest.

Generally the traditional priests play a pivotal role in the smooth running of the society. Some of our leaders are depending solely on their functions for their guidance and protection. They serve as judges, guardians and directors with, regard to the entire well-being of the community in which they live. They may also preside over meetings and committees, and their decisions are always regarded as correct because they represent the divinities.

Influences of Western culture on the activities of the sacred specialists

Western culture bothers on foreign religions and education with their concomitants civilization, science and technological advancements. Most Nigerians are becoming accustomed to the application of scientific methods in solving human problems. Many inexplicable diseases can now be treated or handled in the hospital instead of through traditional medicine.

There have been improved medical facilities in our country. Many people have rejected the traditional ways bf treatment administered by the sacred specialists. This was noted by Ezeanya when he said that "strict adherence to rules of hygiene, us of hospital, health centre and. maternity homes have resulted in*a sharp drop in the number of people who formerly consulted diviners and medicine men to find answers to their health problem" (Ezeanya 1972:33)

People are enlightened through the scientific knowledge on some genetically problems like sickle cell anemia thereby reducing the level of patronage received by the medicine men and herbalists in our society today. Science and technology have created great awareness in the lives of our people. They believe that science has all answers to their problems instead of the sacred specialists and this had vitiated the roles of the sacred specialists in our communities.

The missionaries from the Western world showcased the western education as the only gateway to the benefits of their country. The advent of western education affected our sacred

institutions seriously. Hence Ilogu observed that "all the more grotesque of Ibo traditional religious practices have died out, as a result of the influence of modernization brought about by school education" (Ilogu, 1974: 103).

Before the advent of the Western culture, our society was a place where people lived well, initially a country that created a tradition of wholeness, with the activities of the scared specialists which embraced all aspects of life, the spiritual, the political, the social,, where music and arts communicated with the sacred. But when we imitated the European model, together with its accompanying paraphernalia of courts, laws, prison, officers, etc., we have continuous strife instead of being at peace with the judgments of our gods and ancestors.

Foreign religions like Christianity and Islam started to paint ugly pictures about the activities, of our sacred specialists. It became unfashionable for one to declare oneself a traditional worshipper. People started to look down and abandon our revered and glorious sacred institutions and shrines. This threatens the continuity and existence of our unadulterated traditional medication. Many shrines were left unattended to because those who would have assumed priestly functions have rejected and renounced them for the white man's religion. This prohibits some of the various practices of the scared specialists. They felt that the practices violate the nature and character of God as revealed in the holy books like Bible and Korean. But this has not augured well with the well-being of our people. Hence a lot of casualties (untimely deaths, high rate of crime amongst others) are being recorded as a result of the outburst of the gods.

Conclusion

The indispensability of religion in the life of man is appreciated and harnessed through the activities of the sacred specialists. They are the traditional professors with religious knowledge and who know how to lead others in religious activities and who serve as the link between their fellow human beings on the one hand, and God spirits and invisible things on the other. Their activities are too valuable for the fact that they attend to both physical and spiritual %needs of man. Hence the Anthropological Quarterly of 1st July, 1999 or "Nigeria Traditional Healthcare" magazine has the following to say about their functions.

It is concluded that in a society where Healing involves not just the curing of disease but also the protection and promotion of human physical, spiritual, and material well-being, traditional healers remain the very embodiment of conscience and hope in their respective communities Though they are all agents of gods or divinities, their functions vary in order to meet the various and multiple problems of human beings. Therefore, in Nigeria society they still remain the hope of the mortals.

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