

Traditional Humano-Communal Ethics In Inter-Faith Relations: The Etsako (Edo) Experience

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Abstract

Managing religious plurality has become one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. This is because issues concerning religion often evoke strong sentiment and passion. In Nigeria, the heat of religious tension is most often felt in the rancorous relations between her Muslims and Christians. And efforts at establishing genuine co-operation between them are most often marred by the fear of syncretism, conversion and the sabotaging efforts of those who abuse religion for personal interest. The paper examines the contributory factors to the peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians in Etsako. The work adopts the historical and descriptive methodology. It reflects on the human-centered ethics and the communalistic lifestyle which have clogged Etsako Muslim and Christians together in a seamless brotherhood; making it impossible for them to take up arm against each other on the basis of religious belief. From this concept the paper re-echoed that African Muslims are not Arabian neither are their Christian Europeans; hence, should always prioritize their common African ancestry over and above religious sentiments. A research of this nature has become relevant as our modern world is being torn apart by tension and friction in Muslim-Christian relations. The paper thus proposes this Etsako (African) humano-centric and communalistic ethics as a strong foundation for Muslim-Christian dialogue in Nigeria

Keywords: Etsako, Humano-communal, Ethics, Interfaith, Relations

INTRODUCTION

Religion is part of human life. By intuition, man is sentimentally attached to his creator whom he calls so many names depending on the level of maturity and sophistication of man's psyche. Religion could serve as an instrument of social harmony, and paradoxically, it could also serve as a motivation for violence; hence, it has been viewed by scholars as a "double-edged sword." (Maregere, 2011: 23) Nigeria a Federal constitutional republic born out of colonialism in 1914 has witnessed many conflicts revolving around political, economic, religious and ethnic motives before and after independence in 1960. These conflicts have had enormous consequences in the development of Nigeria. And Issues that raise the most dust are those that pertain to the religious belief of the various people that makes up the Nigerian geopolitical entity. Nigeria is religiously pluralistic with Islam and Christianity being the dominant religions. Adherents of these two religions are often hostile to one another; this hostility often dovetails into open confrontation and outright violence. Experience has taught Nigerians that tension and friction in Muslim-Christian relations is an *ill wind that blows nobody any good*. This is why there have been clamours for strategies that will promote peaceful coexistence of different religions in a multi-faith society like Nigeria.

It is observed that despite the friction and tension in Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria, it is still possible to identify communities where appreciable level of peace and concord exist between Muslims and Christians. This is the case of the Etsako people of Edo State where there is more or less a 50/50 Muslim-Christian population. In Etsako, there is a form of dialogue of life that operates on a practical day-to-day terms. Christians and Muslims live next to each other; mingle freely in all aspects of human endeavor, meeting in the market place and on the streets, in schools and other institutions. Both Christians and Muslims are awakened every morning by the strident voice of the muezzin from the minaret of the mosque, urging faithful believers that "it is better to pray than to sleep." Christians receive Christmas and Easter greeting cards from their Muslim friends, neighbors, and relatives. Muslims are present in churches for the baptism, wedding, or burial of relatives and friends. In this dialogue of life, Christians and Muslims are enriched by each other's experience and spirituality, and strengthened by certain features of the faith of the other.

A reflection on the secret behind this appreciable level of tolerance between Etsako Muslims and Christian reveals the human-centered ethical consciousness and the communalistic lifestyle which have clogged them together in a seamless brotherhood; making it impossible for them to take

up arm against each other on the basis of religious belief . This paper explores how the Etsako people have harness this dialogue of life inherent in their traditional moral consciousness to effectively promote peace and concord between their Muslims and Christians. And then propose same as a model for effective Muslim-Christian dialogue in Nigeria.

Humano-Communal Ethics: A Contextual Analysis

First, Ethics is simply the science of what is morally good and bad, right or wrong (Lille, 1961: 1). It is a major branch of philosophy, encompassing right conduct and good life; and the systematic study of the fundamental principles underlying morality. (Onimhawo, 2010; 162). Gyekeye, (1996: 55) defines morality as a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conducts of people in the society. These rules and norms emerge from, and are anchored on people’s belief about right and wrong conducts or good and bad character. Onimhawo (2010: 162) emphasizes this in his assertion that, the central concern of ethics is “the good life”, “the life worth living”. Every human society has their set of idea about “the good life” or what is good or bad. These principles help to protect and foster such values as life, justice, honesty, fidelity, human freedom et cetera; all in rational pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment (Omoregbe, 2003: np).

“Humano-Communal” is a term contextually extracted from the two words; “humanism” and “communalism”. Where humanism denotes the assessment of reality through an exclusively human perspective; communalism is the principle and practice of togetherness and support (Microsoft Encarta 2009: np). In this respect, Humano-communalism entails a devotion to the collective human interest. It is what Lamont Corliss(1949: 15) has simply referred to, as “human-beingism” - that is, devotion to the interests of human beings. It repudiates discrimination and re-affirms the spirit of cosmopolitanism, the spirit of international friendship, brotherhood and compassionate concern for fellow human beings throughout the globe. Generally speaking, the essence of humanism/communalism is that,

- a) It place value in life and in man
- b) It emphasizes justice
- c) It is committed to intellectual freedom – i.e free inquiry without limitations or boundaries. It believes in human reason
- d) It insists on individual differences and the right to think differently
- e) It insists on pluralism, multiplicity and many ways of knowing (Azenabor, 2004: 3)

However, Azenabor (2004: 4) rightly pinpoint that humanism is a term be-devilled by its several

clashing meanings. One may not be too sure in which sense the term is being used. According to him;

First, there is an ethical sense of the word. Here, humanism means the belief that human beings should be accorded compassion and respect. Second, there is the sociological sense, meaning that social structures are best viewed as the product of human agents. Third, there is a historical sense, denoting periods such as the Renaissance, in which man became the centre of scholarly attention. This third meaning may not involve yet another sense of the term; the belief that there is an important distinction between human and other animals, perhaps though not necessarily with the corollary that the former should rule sovereign over the later. Fourth, the word can also suggest the sovereignty of the human as opposed to the divine or supernatural, in which case, it becomes a rather more positive synonym for atheism or egotism and merges into the idea of a naturalistic world view. Here, humanism becomes the opposite of supernaturalism. The position here is that man should rely upon his own capacities, rather than on some transcendent power. This, in turn is coupled with an affirmation of human self-development or self-perfection. It is in this later sense that someone like the late Tai Sholarin of Nigeria was referred to as a humanist. Hence, humanism has its ultimate faith in man, believing that man has the power or potential of solving his own problems, especially if he relies on power of his reason, courage and vision. Man, here, is said to be the master of his own destiny. The fifth sense, is that of placing primacy or value on human essence or nature, in the sense of certain properties which human beings importantly share by virtue by their humanity (Eagleton, 1996:128-30) and which have metaphysical, ethical and political implications. It is in this sense that we talk of "Africanness" or "Africanness".

It is instructive to note that Humanism is a universal phenomenon. It is present in all civilizations. It is a stage of development, where man and his ideas becomes the centre of active intellectual, religious, philosophical, historical, ideological and artistic concern. Humanism exposes the ideas of the dignity of human nature. But then, every man is part of a social and cultural context. We all have a country, a colour, a history and a tradition. Hence, we posit that Humanism, in spite of its global nature, is also

cultural. It is specifically along this line and spirit that we conceive and talk of "African Traditional Humanism".

African Traditional Humanism

African Traditional Humanism is an adaptation of Humanism to the concrete situation of the African people. "African Humanism" refers to a philosophy which extols not only the good of the human person in general but also the good of the African person as the purpose of all actions (Egbunu, 2014: 278). It is an ideology which encourages "the best in the evolution of society and the treatment of mankind, and in the exploitation or use of his natural environment." African humanism attempts to identify values and life practices indigenous to African peoples, which distinguish them from others. African Humanism sets the pattern of African thought and defines its style, methodology and terms of expression. It bears on the problem and welfare of Africa and Africans. It is the belief in and theory of the worth and possibilities of the African. Its emphasis is on the African man, his dignity and culture, rather than on science and technology per se. African humanism is basically discernible from the African Religion which is focused on the enhancement of human existence rather than on the natural world or the divine.

In the same vein, African humano-centric ethics sees man as a family being. He is born and bred in the family; he lives, moves, marries and dies within the family of the living and the dead. This family within which man's being oscillates already embodies the spiritual root on the basis of the conviction that all members of the family belong to one ancestry, which traces back to God. Human beings are connected as family beings, and all families trace back to God. African Humanism, as an African thought system stresses on defining relationship among people in society, that is, inter-dependence, rather than bold description of individual events in human experience or individualism (Azenabor, 2004: 6). It is inferred from foregoing that the traditional humanism of the African people is inextricably intertwined with their Communal life. According to Ikhidero, the humanistic inclination of an African creates in him the inherent responsibility of being his brother's keeper (Ikhidero 2014: 25).

Individualism is regarded as anti-social in the African humano-centric moral context. Gyekeye, (1996; 55) affirms this in his comment thus, "African social morality repudiates ethical egoism." Ethical egoism is the doctrine that everyone has to pursue his own welfare and interest. This is because the African concept of man is that of a being in relation. Julius Nyerere emphasizes this communal nature of African societies in his "Theory of African Socialism" known as Ujama. Ujama in its literal sense means

"togetherness" or "family hood". It is a concept used to describe the brotherhood or family-hood of African. Africans do not make a sharp distinction between a brother, step brothers or sisters etc. Ayantayo buttresses this fact thus;

The traditional Africans often refer to all blood relations, close or distant, as "our brother or our sister". Brothers and sisters from the African social ethics do not create room for egoism or reclusivism. In the African traditional way of life, emphasis is placed on the philosophy of human relations. Thus interpersonal and intercommunity relationship is realized without difficulties (Ayantayo, 2009: 22).

The Etsako People

The people of Etsako are part of the larger segment of a race called the Afemai's. The Afemai nationality comprised of the Akoko Edo's, the Owan's and the Etsako people. These people occupies the northern fringes of Edo State, hence they are commonly called "Edo North". The name Etsako is part of the history of the people. Although commonly adapted today as the nation's name, it is best descriptive of a part of the tradition and culture of the people. The Etsako people take the business of marriage very seriously and it was from that the name evolved. Etsako literally speaking means "those who chopped off their teeth". "Ako" means teeth and "Tse" means to split. In pristine Etsako tradition, men who married young women particularly those who were never married before, usually leave them with a mark to identify them. They chopped off part of the incisor (front teeth) with either a knife or a chisel. And it was usually painful to the women. Although the pain was excruciating, the women loved it, because it showed that they were virgins and never before married. This practice which was carried on for a very long time became associated with this people and with time, became also known as their name, Etsako - *Carved Teeth people* (Ayasi, 2018).

There is a general consensus amongst historians which also corresponds with numerous oral traditions as transmitted through the ages that the Etsako people came from the Bini (Benin) nation, having migrated in stages during the reigns of Oba Ewuare and Oba Ozolua between the 14th and 18th Centuries respectively (Ede, 2011). The Benin Empire, during these periods, witnessed a series of draconian laws, inter-tribal wars, suppression and oppression of subjects, misappropriation of public funds by the ruling aristocracy, ethnic feuds and many social ills that became so unbearable. What followed is what Aha Dokpesi Okhaishie (1999: 8) described as a "migration plague". Consequently, many people began to escape from Benin to seek settlements in more comfortable places where they could be masters of their own destinies. The Etsako as a whole are a

large family group who left Benin kingdom to establish their new home but had to further spread out for reasons of space, hence the various villages and towns that today make up Etsakoland. These include; the Agbede, the Anwain, the Auchi, the Avhianwu, the Avhiele, the Ekperi, the Ineme, the Jagbe, the North-Ibie, the Okpella, the South-Ibie, the Uzairue, and the Weppa-Wanno, being the different clans of the Etsako division. Today, this division has however metamorphosed into three district local government administrative areas viz; Etsako East with Headquarter at Agenebode, Etsako West with Headquarter at Auchi and Etsako Central with Headquarter at Fugar. In spite of the artificial boundaries created by successive government administration for convenience, the people have largely remained one and have related across boundaries.

The Traditional Religion of the Etsako People

The Etsako moral consciousness is deeply rooted in their traditional belief. The Etsako people from the earliest time evolved a traditional religion which was essentially based on the worship of traditional deities. The people had a general belief in a supreme being that they call "Osinegba" – The High God. The root word *Osi* means transcendent being. The people reach him through a numbers of spirits or lesser divinities in a diffused monotheistic system of worship. Some of the principal divinities like Uchi, worshipped by the Auchi is believed to represent the spirit of the founder of community. Other deities equally reverend are Orle-the river goddess, Amanue, Ogholodio etc. There were shrines where these deities were worshipped by Devotees. In fact, this was the official religion as at that time (Oseni, 1998: 63). are believed to stand and mediate between the individual and the High God. The Etsako operates a system of gerontocracy where the most senior of the Elders - *Ita* acts as the custodian of the culture, taboos and tradition of the people (Oshomoh, 2018). They worship the ancestral spirits on behalf of the people. They consult Oracle and offer communal sacrifices to solicit and appease the ancestral gods for the welfare of the people. Meanwhile the *Ita* performs the priestly and judicial function.

Advent of Islam to Etsako land

Islam in Etsako is the by-product of Nupe's encroachment into Edo land in the 19th century. As history has it, the Nupe lived around the confluence of the Niger and Kaduna Rivers and were considered as one of the seven Hausa Banza Bakwai – "the bastard seven." They were vassals of the Igala Kingdom before the 15th Century, but by the mid-16th Century, they had established a kingdom with its sovereign ruler titled Etsu Nupe. The Kingdom which was overthrown by the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio later became part of Sokoto Caliphate. They were expected to pay regular tributes to the Caliph. Driven

by this expectation and the desire to collect tributes and booties, they unleashed terror on the weaker nations on a regular basis. With the Nupe's numerical strength, superior weapon and more sophisticated military tactics, the Etsako fell prey to their predatory assaults. They were notorious for slave-raiding activities in the land. The Etsako people were victims of the Nupe constant raids and terrorism and had to flee their homelands from time to time. They devised a warning sound to inform themselves of the invading Nupe army that was better organized and had superior weapons. The shout was "uku-ku-ku" in addition to "they are coming again". This shout was corrupted by the Nupe as "kukuruku" and thus they described the Etsako as "Kukuruku Banza". That became the origin of the appellation "Kukuruku", a name by which the area is still popularly referred to by many geographers, historians and chroniclers all over the world.

The conquest of Etsako land by the Nupes in 1819 according to Aruna (2006; 170) marked the beginning of the incursion of Islam into the area. The conquest was primarily to source for slaves, which were lucrative articles of trade that period. This made people of Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba traders together with Islamic propagators immigrate into the area. As these traders entered the area, they stayed at different locations. The Nupes settled at Igbhei and built a local mosque where they were observing their prayers. The Hausas settled at Aibotse and Akpekpe quarters in Utsogu and Iyeki. The Yoruba settlers also settled at Akpekpe along with the Hausa and built their first Juma'at Mosque at Okpophuli in Akpekpe. The settlement of these traders attracted attention from the Etsako people who were peace loving and hospitable to strangers (Aruna, 2006; 170).

With magnanimity and high mindedness, the Etsako people welcome these settlers and developed interest in their way of behaving. They were fascinated at their mode of dressing as Muslims and their pattern of worship during the Friday Juma'at Service and on feast days. This made some of people to join the company of these settlers and started participating in their worship pattern especially during the prayer time. Seeing this interest among some of Etsako indigenes in Islam, the new religion, Mallam Momoh Moisajo, a Hausa settler who was among the first Islamic teachers, began to teach them how to read the Qur'an in Arabic language secretly in his house. The secrecy was due to the fear of the priests who were in control of the traditional religion which was the official and prevailing religion in the land (Aruna, 2006). Consequently, Nupe influence started to permeate the land as Nupe titles like Chaba, Serkin Pawa, Kasuwa and Daudu were now being used. Youths started to acquire in addition to their names, a social name known as "Isamai". Women started

bearing in addition to their native names such names as Awawo, Alimatu, Asana, Ayina, etc. The Islamic religion became largely embraced by many of the towns and villages and till date we have the strong presence and impact of Mohammedan followers in such towns as Auchi, Jattu, Ibie, Okpella, Agbede, etc. (Ede, 2011; np)

Christianity in Etsako

Although, evidences abound of earlier contacts of the Christian missionaries with the indigenes of Agenebode (present day Etsako East Local Government Area) and environs, the officially recorded date for this is 1884 when catholic priests started visiting Agenebode and environs from their then headquarters in Lokoja (Diocese of Auchi). Later on the missionary headquarters was moved from Lokoja to Asaba. Rt. Rev. Monsignor Carlos Zappa became the prefect of the upper Niger at that time in Asaba. As Prefect, Monsignor Zappa again successfully resumed evangelization works into the interior of Agenebode and its surrounding towns through the River Niger.

In 1897, a parish was officially erected at Agenebode (the first parish in the Diocese) with Rev. Fr. Peter Piotin, SMA, as the first parish priest. From Agenebode, other parish stations were opened in Etsako; at Iviakpodi, Iviukwe, Okpekpe and Apana. In 1908, he established the first Major Seminary in Nigeria, St. Martin's Seminary at Iviakpodi. The seminary was later transferred to Asaba in 1927 by Bishop Broderick. Among the Seminarians who moved from the seminary at Iviakpodi to Asaba was the late Rev. Fr. Paul Emechete, the first Nigeria Priest, and the late Rt. Rev. Monsignor Joseph Agbodio Erameh, a native of Anegbette in South Uneme Clan in present Etsako Central Local Government Area of Edo State (Diocese of Auchi).

It is also on record that in 1935, Bishop Oyebode of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) approached the King Momoh Ideao (the Otaru) and requested for a land to build church, school and clinic. The Otaru who was pleased with the intentions of the mission obliged and gave them a portion of land to erect the building. The CMS built two houses one for church and school and the other serving as their residence and a clinic. Bishop Ayebode who was a health officer with his wife administered free treatment to patients who came to the clinic. During that time, there was an outbreak of yaws disease, a tropical skin disease that caused large red swellings and sores all over the body in Auchi community. Despite the kind gesture of Oyebode, only few converts were made to Christian faith. In spite of this, there was no tension or apprehension from other Muslims with regards to conversion of their children. The spirit of tolerance pervaded the entire life of the Auchi people

(Seghosime, 2011; 18). The rise of Pentecostalism and its widely acclaimed miracle working power also gave a boost to the spread of Christianity in Etsako land. Today The Omega Fire Ministry founded by Apostle Suleman Joseph a Muslim convert is one of the leading Pentecostal churches not only in Etsako but also in Edo State as a whole.

Interfaith Relations among the Etsako People

Interfaith relations imply possible and practicable cordial relationship that exists between religions in a society. Its instrument is interfaith dialogue aimed at cordiality, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance that will be the true sign of a new era in the religious history of humanity (Ottuh & Aitufe, 2014).

The underlying basis for harmonious interfaith relations in Etsako is that, the people have angled them together in brotherhood irrespective of the faith they profess. Such ties include; family, marital, friendship, ideological and more importantly, ancestral ties. This belief is anchored on their traditional human-centered and communalistic worldview. The Etsako Muslims and Christians on the basis of this see themselves first, as brothers and sisters of same ancestral decent, friends in the same social group before religious affiliation. The Etsako moral consciousness like those of other African societies is life directed and human preservative (Ikhidero, 2014). Every rites, rituals and taboos are all directed at promoting and preserving life as well as making man relates meaningfully with fellow men in every area of life irrespective of their religious affiliation. To this end, willful murder, suicide and even abortion are regarded as serious abominations in any African society. This creates no room for anyone to willfully take his or her life or the life of another in the name of religious belief.

Also, the Etsako Muslims have an understanding of the pristine Islam practice by Prophet Mohammed. The import of Qur'an 10:99 implies that the whole world cannot be Muslims. This provision of the Qur'an formed the basis of Etsako Muslims non-violent attitude towards people of other faith because the "lord has not willed that everyone should be Muslims". This is what the Etsako Muslim leaders teach and their followers understand it as such there is no room for fundamentalism (Onimhwo & Ukpebor, nd: 10). Among the Etsako people, traditional priests, Christian and Islamic clerics recognize and respect the independent validity of their different religions. There is hardly any case of pastors or imams openly criticizing or casting aspersion on each other's religions. Individuals get converted to any religion by choice and not by force or compulsion. One unique aspect of interfaith relations in Etsako is that the various religious adherents freely and joyfully give out their daughters in marriage to suitors who profess faith in religions

that is different from theirs. Citing the example of his own family where he has an Imam and traditional worshippers as siblings Rev. Fr. (Prof) J.A. Onimhawo (2018) reiterated that parents in Etsako do not raise eye-brow when their children decide to embrace a religion different from that which they subscribe to.

The level of religious freedom in Etsako is highly commendable. Mutual interactions pervade the entire Etsako community as a whole and equal rights and opportunity are given to everyone irrespective of religious faith. During religious festivals like the Christmas and Sallah (Eld-El-Fitr) celebrations, it is difficult to know those celebrating the feast. Everybody participates in the celebration whether Muslims or Christians. This shows the level of togetherness among the Muslims and Christians in Etsako. They even make contributions towards the success of every festival. For example Apostle Johnson Suleman, the General overseer of Omega Fire Ministry, donated two live cows towards the celebration of Eld-El-fitr in 2010 (Onimhawo & Ukpebor, nd). And in the spirit of brotherhood, they share together their *Sallah ram* and *Christmas rice*. This principle of humano-communalism can never be alien to Africans. In an authentic, undiluted and unadulterated African, there is always an accommodating spirit and not of bloodshed.

The high level of enlightenment of the Etsako people is also a contributive factor to interfaith harmony in the land. Religious leaders in Etsako are not only enlightened both with the western education and Islamic education they also encourage their people to embrace education. Thus the people are exposed to moral education along with religious education. This has also creates willingness in them to exchange ideas and values inherent in their different religions with the hope of ultimately reaching agreement. The height of this willingness to dialogue is reflected in the large turn-out of religious leaders from the different religions during the inauguration of the Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission (IRDC) in Auchi on Saturday 24th July, 2004 (Ikhidero, 2007: 26).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interfaith conflict is always an ill wind that blows no man any good. The humano-communal ethic of the African traditional religion as aptly reflected in interfaith relation should be a good basis for dialogue between Nigerian Christians and Muslim. Nigerians on this note must first see themselves as brothers and sisters from one country. Indeed Nigerian Christians are not Europeans neither are the Muslims Arabian. They are all African who trace their route to a common ancestry. They are Africans who value the sanctity of life promote the ideals of togetherness. This should be the ideal basis for inter/intra-religious dialogue in Nigeria. This form of dialogue is aptly

captured in the assertion of Lateef Adegbite (1995: 218) a Yoruba Muslim and one of the most vociferous advocates of the implementation of the Shari'ah in Nigeria, that "no responsible Nigerian, certainly not the Muslims would precipitate a religious war today realizing that one's kith and kin, spouse, or close friend could be on the other side of the battlefield." It is just by the accident of birth and choice that Nigerians has found themselves in different religions. Africans whether they profess faith in any other religion had never thrown away their Africanness, that is, their true African nature. African principle of communalism can never be alien to us. In an authentic, undiluted and unadulterated African, there is always an accommodating spirit and not of bloodshed. Hence the philosophy of individualism that breeds contempt ought not to have a place in Nigeria, an African country. Muslims and Christians are Africans and if they understand who they are as African, then they will have few problems dialoguing with each other. Moreso, these African values of humanism, communalism, hospitality etc should be inculcated in our young ones.

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