

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AS AGENT OF PEACE RESTORATION IN NSUKKA CULTURAL ZONE

Blessing Ndidi Ezema, Ph.D

*Department of Religion and Cultural Studies,
University of Nigeria Nsukka*

Abstract

Religion plays a dual role in human societies, influencing both conflict and peace. In the Nsukka cultural zone of Nigeria, daily life is shaped by African Traditional Religion (ATR) alongside foreign faiths, especially Christianity. Despite the influence of Western religions and modernism, ATR continues to offer meaning and spiritual grounding for the people. Traditionally, it upheld moral values and social order, promoting peaceful coexistence. However, the rise of Christianity and modern ideologies has eroded these traditional structures, contributing to increased insecurity in the region. Ironically, this insecurity has sparked renewed interest in ATR as a means of restoring peace. This study addresses a research gap by exploring ATR's role as an agent of peace restoration in Nsukka. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research relies primarily on oral interviews and participant observation, supported by secondary sources such as books, journals, and articles. Findings reveal that ATR helps restore peace through indigenous institutions such as deities, the council of elders, and masquerade cults, which function as custodians of justice, reconciliation, and moral discipline. The study recommends increased reliance on these traditional mechanisms to sustain peace and social harmony. Ultimately, it highlights the relevance and efficacy of African Traditional Religion as a viable model for peace-building in Nsukka and potentially in other African societies facing similar challenges.

Background to the Study

Human experiences show that peace is invaluable for human existence and interaction. Yet conflicts, especially violent ones, are frequent in the human society, disrupting the peace needed for progress. It was in recognition of the value of peace in human society that Onah (2013) notes that peace is good relationship well lived; healthy absence of pressure and conflict, being strong and prosperous. In recognition of the value of peace, Mbiti (2010) notes that people want peace in our time, peace tomorrow and peace in this new millennium.

Prior to the coming of new religions and foreign cultures to Nsukka, human life was relatively stable with African Traditional Religion greatly influencing the lives of the people where it gave meaning and purpose to all aspects of their thoughts and actions. Nsukka people were notoriously religious and this religiosity helped create an atmosphere where peace and reconciliation prevailed. Drawing examples from various communities in Nsukka cultural zone, African traditional religion is still alive in Nsukka where life, whether social, economic or political, is responsible for nurturing and shaping the character and culture of the people. Traditional Religion provided traditional values which the people earnestly adhered to in order to live peacefully. These traditional values play a central role in the socialisation and harmonious existence of the community. Traditional Religion also provided institutions that engender peace in the community through the employment of the services of deities, elders, ancestors, age grade organisation, married women (*inyomdi*) and daughters of the land (*umuada*). These institutions help the communities maintain strict observance and adherence to the established cultural norms of the society. Any breach of this code of behaviour is considered evil, wrong or bad. It is considered an injury or distraction to the accepted social order and peace. In addition, these institutions help to maintain communal life in Nsukka. This philosophy of togetherness is sacred.

This community-oriented life existed in Nsukka and helped create stable communities where justice, peace and reconciliation prevailed. This togetherness is what brought unity among Nsukka families and communities. Surprisingly, there seem to be new phenomena that bring hatred, bitterness, pride, divorce, segregation and corruption in Nsukka that erode the time-cherished African Traditional value system of the people. This social tension has led to disruption of peace because of desecration of social value system and traditional institutions which accelerated peace in Nsukka. Approaches of Christianity and modern cultures are both distraction and condemnation. Gradual departure from traditional values and cultural practices as a result of modernism has jeopardised the peace of the community, creating avenue for conflict. Consequently, Christianity and modernism have strived to drive African Traditional Religion and its spirituality into oblivion. However, African Traditional Religion has continued to flourish despite all criticisms. With the increasing wave of crime and insecurity in Nsukka, there has been a steady increase in the number of people who resort to traditional institutions for justice and this new trend is yet to be documented by any scholar, this informs the gap this work seeks to fill. It is this value system and institutions that ensured justice that this paper is out to investigate and thus recommend for peace restoration in Nsukka. It is therefore, against this background that this study was conducted. It hopes to critically study how African Traditional Religion fits in to the process of restoring peace in Nsukka.

Methodology

This work adopted qualitative design. As such, the method of data collection was ethnographic method which included oral interview and participant observation. In this sense, relevant informants were interviewed. These include the traditional rulers, religious leaders and lay people. The participants were purposely selected to represent several communities that make up Nsukka cultural zone. These include elders, actors as traditional arbiters and others who have knowledge in the people's cultural practices. The population of the informants was fifty which included fifteen (15) traditional rulers, fifteen (15) religious leaders and twenty (20) lay people. The population cuts across gender comprising thirty-five (35) males and fifteen (15) females. They agreed to be interviewed with all necessary ethical guidelines in oral interview being observed. The language for the interview was both English and Igbo to accommodate the non literate participants. Data collected in vernacular were transcribed, translated, and interpreted. Added to this is participant observation. By this, the student participated and observed the processes of peace reconciliation, in the traditional way, in the course of the study. This took place between 2020 to early 2024. Secondary source of information includes text books, journals, Newspapers, and articles dealing with issues of peace in Nsukka and beyond. Data from these sources were presented descriptively in the work.

Definition of Terms

The following key terms are defined for the purpose of clarity. African Traditional Religion (ATR), Peace and Restoration

Peace

The term peace originates, most recently, from the Anglo-French meaning reconciliation, silence, agreement. Nwolise (2005) said that peace is believed to have its root in the Anglo-Norman word pas which means *freedom* from civil disorder. Ani commenting in Ikejiani (2009) defines peace as a state of mind in concurrence with serenity; a state of harmony, tranquillity, concord and a balance of equilibrium of power. Ani goes further to explain that peace is also a state of justice, goodness and civil government. Peace can be empirical or abstract, normative or descriptive, active or passive. Hence, peace exists where people are interacting non-violently and are managing their conflict positively.

African Traditional Religion

Africans have their own religion just like every other people of the world. African Traditional Religion is the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. Olupona (2014), African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous religions of the African people which deal with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts and so on.

According to Omotoye (2011) African Traditional Religion is the traditional religion of the African people before the coming of Islam and Christianity. Nweke (2020) sees African Traditional Religion as the way Africans understand and worship their god. According to Akinmayowa (2015), African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous religious beliefs that Africans practiced before the advent of Christianity and Islam to Africa. Therefore, African Traditional Religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans, with features and characteristics distinct from other religions that can be found in other places.

Peace Restoration

Restoration according to Cambridge Dictionary (2005) is the act or process of returning something to its earlier good condition or position, or to its owner. Collins Dictionary (2018) defines restoration as a return of something to a former, original, normal, or unimpaired condition. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it as an act of bringing back to a former position or condition. According to Richard (2021), peace restoration means to cause peace to exist again. In this context, peace restoration is referred to any action or process that is used to repair or renew cordial relationship from different social groups in such a way that there is absence of disagreement, terror and suspicion. Peace restoration would follow after some form of impairment or damage has occurred and would be aimed at returning something to its former condition. Therefore, peace restoration is recovery or return of what was lost.

Conceptualisation of Peace in Nsukka

Nsukka is a town and local government Area in south East Nigeria in Enugu State. Nsukka as used in the context of this paper include the whole Nsukka cultural zone which as Omegheoha (2012) posits, refers to a group of homogenous people which includes Nsukka, Igbo-Eze South, Igbo-Eze North, Udenu, Isi-Uzo, Uzo-Uwani and Igbo-Etiti Local Government Areas. There is a resemblance in the culture and traditions of the above-mentioned local government areas. The resemblance and cultural affinities expressed mainly in their dialects, food, masquerade tradition, marriage customs and rites of passage. Peace is no doubt choreographed in Nsukka culture and tradition. Tradition according to Merriam (2003) means those beliefs, customs, practices, ethical principles or moral codes and information which were handed down orally by the votaries of African culture from one generation to another, without any text which is handed down from generation to generation continues and discontinues. In Nsukka community, peace occupies a place of pride as it is accompanied by justice, equity, fairness, honesty, accountability, absence of quarrel and war. In support of this, Nweke (2018) opines that from childhood people are infused with the mindset that life of peace and harmony is the

greatest virtue to acquire by every person, irrespective of where one finds one's self. This implies that Nsukka traditional society is communally bound. This togetherness is what brings peace in Nsukka peoples families and communities.

Institutions in African Traditional Religion that Engender Peace in Nsukka Deities; Imprecation of the gods (*Ikpo Ma*)

In Nsukka, deities play a central role in maintaining peace and justice, deeply rooted in African Traditional Religion. They are considered intermediaries between God (Ezechitoke) and society, believed to possess the power to save, punish, or provide for the people. Contrary to earlier Eurocentric views that misrepresented African deities as primitive or idolatrous, scholars such as Ele (2017), Obidigbo (2010), Omeje (2013), and Isiani (2022) and Eze (2016) emphasize that these deities embody the immanence and accessibility of the African God and serve as instruments of justice and moral order. Deities in Nsukka society—such as Ube Ihunowerre, Ohe Imufu, Ochehi Orba, and Adoro—function as spiritual courts of law, where people take cases involving serious crimes like murder, adultery, theft, and poisoning; when formal systems are perceived as inadequate, victims or their families invoke these deities through a process known as *ikpo mma* or *arusi*—a petition for divine justice. The deities then intervene, often resulting in visible consequences such as madness, mysterious deaths, or forced restitution, which serve as deterrents against wrongdoing. These spiritual interventions are taken seriously in Nsukka culture. For instance, if someone wrongfully possesses the property of a victim cursed by a deity, the deity may exact punishment on them, starting even with family members. A striking example is from 1964, when the deity Ochehi killed a notorious thief and confiscated his belongings, transferring them to the deity's shrine through the priest. Similarly, deities like Ube are known to demand that corpses of their victims be brought to their shrines, failing which the victim's family may suffer continued misfortunes.

Modern examples further illustrate the deities' continued relevance. In 2011, a woman was forced to return a car believed to belong to a deity's victim. In 2016 and 2022, suicides attributed to divine justice from the Ube deity were reported in cases involving theft. These actions underscore the strong cultural belief in supernatural justice and its role in deterring crime. Each deity has a maiden figure (*nwada*) who ensures stolen items are returned, reinforcing the community's value for justice and restitution. The persistent fear of divine retribution fosters communal harmony, discourages crimes, and upholds moral standards, particularly protecting the weak, poor, and vulnerable. Deities in Nsukka are more than religious figures; they are enforcers of societal norms and custodians of justice. Through *ikpo mma*, they offer a spiritual avenue for redress, sustaining peace, social cohesion, and communal trust across generations.

The Council of Elders in Nsukka

In the Nsukka community, the Council of Elders—known as Ama-Ali or Ndi Okenye—comprises respected family heads who act as traditional leaders and mediators. They hold domestic authority, serve as links to the ancestors, and play a key role in dispute resolution and governance. According to Ezeogidi (2019) and Enyioko (2017), the council functions as a collective body that resolves conflicts through dialogue and consensus. When disputes arise, the aggrieved party reports to the eldest family member with kola nuts, prompting a meeting (Ibe-izu). Both parties are heard, and decisions are made in the community's best interest. In more complex or inter-community cases, the Oha Nsukka, a higher traditional council, intervenes. These elders hold the sacred ofo symbol and derive authority from their spiritual connection to the ancestors. As noted by Nwolisa (2005), while Western systems rely on formal courts, African traditions emphasize communal justice through elders and open assemblies. The Council of Elders thus plays a vital role in maintaining peace, justice, and community welfare in Nsukka.

Age Grade

In most traditional societies, the age grade system is an indispensable structure in the complex function of maintaining and enforcing peace in the community. According to Okwueze (2004:24) “age grade refers to an organized peer group whose homogeneity is derived from age of members. Age here refers not necessarily that members are those born on the same day, month or even year. Here, age grade refers to people who are born within the same age brackets of two to three years who form themselves into peer group (*otu ogbo*)”. To Ekeopara (2011), age grade refers to people who are born within age brackets of two to three years; they form themselves into age grade. There is no sex discrimination; both male and female whose age differences fall within two to three years are members. According to Nwankwo (2018), Atuonwu (2021), Ada (2014), age grade in Igbo society is a group that performs economic, social political and judicial functions, they resolve disputes between age mates and they achieve social control of members by making good behaviour a pre-requisite for benefiting from her social welfare service.

Each age grade sees it as a sacred duty to make its members responsible moral beings who respect the values of the society. It ensured that its members adhered strictly to the moral codes of the community. Age grade also acts as the military arm of the society in times of war and crisis. Age grade come together for the purpose of peace keeping and community development. If a member is unbearably rude to his parents or other older people, his age grade would usually start its reaction by seriously cautioning the members to desist from such unacceptable behaviour. If a member or non-member commits offences against the community such as stealing, especially from the farm or yam barn, exchanging words

with parents or coming back late at night, the age grade organisation will discipline him by tying him on a tree in the village square and giving him the beatings of his life. In the cases of rape and incest, the age grade naked the culprit and force him to go round the village with palm frond tied on his waist to show that he polluted the land (*okpara aru*). He is paraded around the village by age grade for others to learn. Thereafter he would be banished for many years. Sacrifices would be made to purify the land and appease the earth divinity for violating and endangering the peace of the community.

Figure 1: A man who committed an incest being ostracised by Age grade organization



Source: field work 2024

Daughters of the land (*Umuada*) and Married women (*inyom di*)

Daughters of the land were another women organization that enjoyed immense power and contributed positively in the restoration of peace in traditional society of Nsukka, not minding the fact that the Igbo society is a male dominated society where women are seen but not heard. The *umuada* are perhaps the most powerful of all organized women groups. According to Donna (2000), their responses take many forms which include coordinating grass roots, building cross-community coalitions, and stepping forwarded as

role models and mediators. They develop mechanisms to improve the quality of life of their families, their neighbours and their society. If a wife of the kindred or lineage had a serious quarrel with her husband, it was the duty of the *umuada* to intervene, settle the quarrel and compel the wife to submit to her husband and in some cases fines were demanded from the wife. In support of this Agbasiere (2000) affirms that:

The power of *umuada* is as extensive as they are ambivalent. They include the right of arbitration within their natal lineage, settling of quarrels concerning political, economic and ritual matters which are beyond their male relative power to settle. The task of disciplining obstreperous or disobedient relatives' wives also falls within their domain..., the *umuada* have the power to ostracise any proven incorrigible (male) lineage relative. In consequence, the funeral of such a person would be boycotted, which would initiate a ritual crisis, since the funeral of a relative are regarded as indispensable (p.41-42).

Therefore, Onyesoh (2021) observes that *umuada* functions as traditional justice mechanism that are not only mediate but also engage in fact finding and adjudication. In support of this, Obasi and Nnamani (2015) advance that the *umuada* will extract the facts, analyse them and decide appropriate measures of penalty to be apportioned on the guilty party. They were known to settle long standing kindred versus kindred land disputes that had defied the arbitration of the elders in Nsukka traditional society. *Umuada* in Nsukka had performed such feasts and compelled the men to obey their decisions. In Nsukka traditional society, women dress in black to demonstrate their feelings concerning injustice in the land. The study observed in 2023, how Echara married women gathered themselves and teamed with a Rev father, Cyril Chekwube Ozioko from Obechara Nsukka to go round the ten villages that made up Echara Nsukka to pray for justice in the land. After which they invited all the traditional leaders, youths and church leaders at St. Joseph Catholic Church Agu Echara to make peace. Leaders and youths poured out their grudges and were reconciled. As a result, peace was restored in Echara Nsukka. Eze (2016) rightly observed that the *Umuada* are known to be strict disciplinarians who can compel members of their lineages to obey decisions taken by them in difficult circumstances. In the light of the above discourse, it will not be an overstatement to say that *umuada* is a strong stabilizing agent of peace restoration in Nsukka traditional society.

Summary and Conclusion

General Assessment

The study reveals that before the arrival of foreign religions and cultures, life in Nsukka was peaceful and orderly, largely due to the influence of African Traditional Religion

(ATR). ATR shaped the people's values, promoting justice, respect for life, and communal harmony. Traditional institutions such as deities, age-grade groups, and the *unuada* (daughters of the land) played a crucial role in maintaining peace and enforcing cultural norms. These institutions upheld a community-oriented philosophy that fostered unity and stability. However, the introduction of Christianity and modern cultural influences disrupted this traditional order. These new forces often condemned and undermined traditional practices, leading to a decline in communal values and the rise of negative traits such as jealousy, hatred, and segregation. Despite this, many people in Nsukka still turn to traditional institutions in times of conflict, especially as crime and insecurity increase, highlighting the enduring relevance of ATR in maintaining justice and social cohesion.

Recommendations

Having discussed the African Traditional Religion as an agent of peace restoration in Nsukka cultural zone, the study offers some recommendations that would help to further the restoration of peace in Nsukka.

- i. Traditional institutions like deities, age grade organisation, married women organisation (*inyomudi*) and daughters of the land (*umuada*) should be encouraged by government to handle sensitive matters in rural communities.
- ii. The government should train the youth in traditional peace resolution mechanism. Peace education and traditional peace management and resolution should be taught at all levels of the education system in Nigeria.
- iii. More researches and studies on Traditional religious institutions as agents of peace restorations in Nsukka cultural zone should be encouraged in order to foster peace with effortless ease using their cultural platforms.

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion is to date a living religion in Nsukka where it remains inscribed in the hearts of people. In spite of the new religions, political systems, African Traditional Religion has remained the way of life and is largely responsible for shaping, nurturing the character and culture of the Nsukka people. Since religious pluralism has not helped Nsukka where conflicts, tensions, violence, inter-tribal wars, injustice by both government and private sectors have continued to prevail in the midst of a religious environment, there is need to think of the place of traditions as this problem is addressed. African Traditional Religion can be relied upon by the Nsukka people as they seek to promote peace, justice, and reconciliation in a troubled environment. African Traditional

Religion is itself a religion of peace, hence very instrumental as we restore a peaceful environment in Nsukka.

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LIST OF INFORMANTS

S/N	NAMES	SEX	STATUS	AGE	DATE	PLACE
1.	Agbo Christopher	M	Diviner	60	9/7/23	Ibagwani
2.	Eze Christopher	M	Ozor	65	9/11/23	Iheaka
3.	Attanike Paul	M	Igwe	68	21/5/23	Nsukka
4.	Ngwuoke Linus	M	Chief Priest	85	18/5/24	Nsukka
5.	Ugwuanyi Augustine	F	Traditionalist	62	6/10/24	Nsukka