Peace Studies and Practice
Journal of the Society of Peace Studies and Practice

2018 Edition
Pp 48-56

Promoting the Culture of Peace among Religions Through the Spirit of Sportsmanship

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Introduction

The world over, violence associated with religion is on the increase and no religion is left out of what this phenomenon that has become a global issue (Muggah and Velshi, 2019). In 2018, more than one-quarter of the nations across the globe experienced violent hostilities instigated by religious hatred, mob violence that is associated with religion, homegrown terrorism, religious extremism, punishing and persecution of women who are perceived to be irreverent to the moral code (Pew Report, 2019). Jews, Muslims, and Hindus are experiencing increased hostilities across Europe, while countries like Russia, India, Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey have imposed tougher restrictions on religions (Muggah and Velshi, 2019). These trends and events affirm the submission of the World Economic Forum (2019) that the past decade has experienced a dramatic increase in religious conflicts, violent sectarian or religious violence and tensions.

According to the Pew Report (2015), the surge of religious violence is both and within religious groups. Afatakpa (2019) affirms that violent conflicts between and within religions are traceable to doctrinal differences, denominational supremacy, religious fundamentalism, exclusive claims to truth, and leadership succession among others. These have resulted in widespread bloodshed across the world. Countries like Northern Ireland, Indonesia, France, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Nigeria, Spain, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Ghana, Vietnam, Sri-Lanka, India, Philippines and the USA have, on different occasions, faced inter and intra religious conflicts (Grim, 2014; PEW,2015). These conflicts have left trails of hardship, internal displacement and humanitarian crisis. While Armstrong (2000) reflects that Islam is in the spotlight for contemporary issues of religious violence, other religious traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism are equally not exempted from aggression towards the 'other'. Is it not puzzling that religions which are expected to champion peace, love and harmonious living are dominantly linked to violence, intolerance and untold hardships across the globe?

Dominant Arguments Supporting Religious Violence

In his seminal study, *Religious Pluralism*, Basinger (2015) offers an insight into the causes of religious conflicts in society. According to him, religious

conflicts are caused by differences in the theological conception of all religions. He explains that religious conflicts are also dependent on truth claims that border on religious exclusivism, non-exclusivism, and pluralism. In a related study, Emman El Badawy, Milo Comerford and Peter Welby (2015) contend it is the interpretation of the sacred text by the elites within religions that leads to religious conflicts, and not necessarily doctrinal differences. For Wuthnow (1988) and Zuckerman (1999), religious conflicts are caused by religious conservatives or liberals. This corroborates Hunter (1991) that religious conflicts are influenced by adherents with leaning towards progressivism or orthodoxy. Likewise, Back and Lindholm (2014) concede that religious conflicts result from mainline denominations' refusal to allow other sectarian groups to fledge, because they do not want the existing traditions to be challenged. Accordingly, they would rather prefer to use conflicts and violence to settle scores.

According to Crabtree (2009), atheists and scientists do not kill one another over dogmas. He posits that Newton and Einstein had disagreements, but they did not escalate into violence. The followers of the two scientists did not kill themselves. However, the disagreement between Arius and Athanasius in the 4th century, on the nature of Christ ended in murder, aggression and arson, and the ultimate annihilation of the Arians. Rhetorically, he asks, "Why is violence the way of religions?" It should be noted that religious conflicts and violence have negative implications for the peace and development of nations, affecting economic and national development. Religious conflict and violence affect peaceful co-existence and promotes a culture of crime and impunity.

The answer to the question of Crabtree (2009) is found in the submissions of Boyer (2001), Ehrman (2003) and Fenn (2009) that religious conflicts and violence should be blamed on the framework of monotheism, especially among the Abrahamic religions. They contend that the Abrahamic monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam have dominant narratives of violence across time and space due to their prejudice of 'other' gods, and a general sternness regarding the details of their beliefs and practices. Boyer (2001), Ehrman (2003) and Fenn (2009) further argue the Abrahamic religions project a history that is filled with spectra of repression and violent intimidation; intra-sectarian tensions, schismatic inclinations, and hostility towards other sectarian groups outside the mainstream body. But contrary to their submission, *Igbe Orhe*, a monotheism non-Abrahamic religion with major sectarian groups, presents a counter-narrative of non-violent conflicts outcomes. This article explores how *Igbe* Religion has used the concept of sportsmanship as well as the thesis to religious pluralism to manage conflicts, prevent violence and promote a culture of peace with members of other religions across Nigeria.

Problem Statement

The management of religious conflicts, violence and the establishment of a culture of peace across the globe has attracted the attention of scholars (Policy Brief, 2015; Basinger, 2015). Extant studies advocate that religious conflicts, religious violence and peace culture can be achieved through secular pluralism. Other studies opine that violence in the name of religion can be managed through interreligious dialogue. Some scholars believe that religious conflicts can be managed and peace entrenched in the society through tolerance, mental reprogramming and elite mobilization (Rowley, 2015; Engender, 2015; Irvine, Rahim and Keegan, 2015). While studies have focused on violent conflicts and their implications for peace and global development, this article transcends the clichéd domain to animate the implications of the spirit of sportsmanship as well as the thesis of religious pluralism to manage conflict,

prevent violence and promote the attitude of peace with members of other religions. This article fills a major gap in scholarship on these challenges.

Conceptual Clarification of Igbe Orhe as a Monotheist Non-Abrahamic Religion

Igbe Religion *or Igbe Orhe* as it is popularly called was founded by Ubiesha Etarakpor around the mid-19th century in a town called Kokori, located in present Delta State, Nigeria. Dance is the major ritual expression of the religion and the consumption of the native white chalk called *Orhe* (Nabofa, 2005). It will however be important to clarify Igbe as a religion before proceeding further. Johnstone (2007) and Breaux (1993) cited in Afatakpa (2019) affirm that religion is a social institution with many constituent parts. Therefore, five sociological characteristics have been established as anatomic features of a religion. 1. Religion is established and sustained by a group of persons who develop a set of common values and reverence for the same things; they are important to the establishment and the continuation of a religion. 2. Religion ought to have binding beliefs that are accepted by the adherents and are equally considered sacred. 3. A religion must have a well-defined pattern of practices that become norms and prescribed rites which are known as rituals. 4. Religion has its own set of morals, beliefs which modify the behaviours of its adherents. 5. Religions also revolve around the veneration of certain things. Religion separates things into two spheres; the sacred and the profane. Johnstone (2007) and Breaux (1993) conclude that without these five integral parts, religion is not able to establish itself. These sociological characteristics are well articulated in Igbe Orhe, which establishes the fact that it is a religion. The anatomic features of *Igbe Orhe* cohere with the submission of Nielsen (1993). Nabofa (2005) concludes that religion is the effort of humanity targeted at nourishing and satisfying his emotional, spiritual and moral needs. Also, he states that religion meets the material needs of man, while ensuring a cordial relationship with their fellow men and God. The explanations of Nielsen (1993) and Nabofa (2005) are fully exemplified in *Igbe*. Thus, *Igbe Orhe* assumes the status of a religion.

Abrahamic Religions are not the Repository of Monotheism

The dominant narrative in the study of religion centres on the primacy of the practice of monotheism only in the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism and Islam). However, little is known about the genre of monotheistic, non-Abrahamic religion in both Western and African scholarship. It has been observed through empirical investigations, that members of *Igbe Orhe* believe in one God, known as *Oweya*. In the cosmology of Igbe religion, *Oweya* is the one, indivisible God, and available to be called upon directly. Nabofa (2005) contends that *Oweya* carries the idea of one indivisible, all-mighty God who has an infinite capacity to influence the activities of mankind. The submission of Nabofa fits into the concept of classical monotheism espoused by Baaren's (2020) as the belief in the existence of one God or the oneness of God. Therefore, the argument that classical monotheism is the exclusive preserve of the Abrahamic religions and that it cannot be found in indigenous African religions is hereby contested with the empirical evidence of *Igbe* religion. Accordingly, *Igbe Orhe* has been conceptualised as a monotheistic, non-Abrahamic religion because the members acknowledge Ubiesha as patriarch, while *Oweya* is the Supreme God of history and revelation.

There are three major sectarian groups within the *Igbe* religion and they have been classified in this study as the orthodox, charismatic and traditional syncretic sectarian groups. Like the older institutionalised Abrahamic monotheisms, *Igbe* religion has been confronted with conflicts arising from leadership succession, which has led to breakups within its structure. Some of its doctrines

and practices are being challenged by some adherents, while some circles within *Igbe Orhe* have stopped paying homage to the mainline denomination in Kokori. These themes have equally played out in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Interestingly, unlike the older and more organised monotheistic Abrahamic religions, these issues have not translated into violent clashes in *Igbe* Religion. Equally, adherents of *Igbe* religion are stigmatised by worshippers of the Abrahamic religions in Nigeria. In spite of stigmatizations, there have been no reported cases of violent altercations against other religious groups by Igbe members.

Clarifying the concept of the Spirit of Sportsmanship

Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, BriEre and Pelleier (2008) contend that the absence of a universally accepted definition for the spirit of sportsmanship has made scholars use certain features to describe the phenomenon. They identified commitment towards participation, respecting the rules and officials, obeying social conventions and respect for the opponent as some of the outstanding features of the spirit of sportsmanship. The submission of Vallerand *et al*., (2008) implicates that the spirit of sportsmanship thrives on the character and attitude of the sportsman. U.S sportswriter, Grantland Rice (1880-1954) opines that "for when the one Great Scorer comes to mark against your name, he writes not that you won or lost- but you played the game". Sportsmanship is not all about winning, but respecting and keeping to the rules is sacrosanct. Thus, the spirit of sportsmanship speaks to the character and actions of an athlete. The WYCAA Basket Ball Team (2020) outlines some rules that pertain to the spirit of sportsmanship. Among others, these include treating others the way they also expect to be treated. The spirit of sportsmanship therefore, is subsumed in the ethics of reciprocity which is well captured in the *Igbe* religion. A very important rule is applause, courtesy and appreciation must be accorded the opponents. Likewise, religion is all about people, and adherents of the various religions should see members of other religious groups as also working for the good of the society and their efforts should be acknowledged. Equally, practitioners of the dominant religions ought not to coerce people into conversion. Since all religions preach peace and strive to advocate for an egalitarian society, adherents ought to embrace different religious stakeholders with the spirit of sportsmanship. They should see other religious practitioners through the lens of collaboration and not competition. Religious fundamentalism will be better managed when religious elites buy into the concept of the spirit of sportsmanship while they practice their religion. In other words, the spirit of sportsmanship is a value based methodology that can aid the management of religious fundamentalism and create an atmosphere of positive peace.

Methodology

This is an ethnographic and empirical study conducted in Delta State, located in the South/South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is a qualitative study and data was collected through twenty in-depth interviews. The participants include the *Uku* Supreme (Paramount Spiritual Leader), *Uku* **(High Priest)**, *and Omote* ***Uku*** **(High Priestess).** Two (3) Focus Group Discussions comprising ten (10) participants were purposively selected among the followership from each of the sectarian variants of the religion were conducted and non-participant observations of how conflicts are managed in *Igbe* religion within and across other religions. The total numbers of respondents are fifty (50). The data collected were analysed using the narrative style.

Presentation of data and analysis of findings

According to the supreme leader of Igbe religion, *Uku* Supreme Obaoga Ibodje:

> We cannot fight ourselves; neither can we fight the members of other religions because we are guided by the principles of *Ufuoma Akpoeje* (for the universal peace of mankind). No matter *how* we are provoked, we cannot embark on violence against any human being. We respect members of the different sectarian groups and other religions. All members of Igbe religion have this attitude inculcated right from childhood. (Interview conducted on October 7, 2019, at Kokori, Delta State, Nigeria).

The explanation of the Supreme Leader of *Igbe* Religion establishes the notion that peace can only evolve in our societies when adherents of religions have peaceful attitudes. Peace in the society is possible and attainable when practitioners of religions put humanity first before their religions. For instance, the decision on lockdowns by different governments across the world, in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, included the closure of places of mass worship in different countries. This action, informed by safety concerns signifies the triumph of humanity over religion. It brings to the fore the argument that humanity ought to precede religion. This is fully captured in *Igbe* religion's concept of *Ufuoma Akpoeje (which is interpreted to mean for the universal peace of mankind)*.

The manner in which people perceive their religions has been identified as one of the major drivers of violence (Albert, 2001; Appleby, 2005). According to a respondent, practitioners of *Igbe* monotheistic non -Abrahamic religion do not believe in the absolute claim to truth. In his words:

> Where it concerns meta-empirical realities, adherents of Igbe religion do not claim absolute insight. Therefore, we do not challenge the faith of other religions. We do not query how they worship their God. We do not insist that people must accept our mode of worship, if they must enter the kingdom of God. We do not believe that our religion is superior to other religions. These are some of the principles that have influenced how we practice our religion. It has also influenced our dominant narrative of peace, contrary to the Abrahamic faiths (Interview with *Uku* Okagbare at Jesse town, Delta State, Nigeria on October 19, 2019).

Unlike the Abrahamic religions, empirical findings show that adherents of *Igbe* do not believe in the primacy of the religion over other religions. This has greatly influenced their peaceful co-existence with members of other religions. An average adherent of *Igbe* is proud of the religion, and does not look down on other religions. It coheres with John Hicks (1989) theory of religious pluralism that all religions, whether mainline denominations or sectarian variants, are valid when viewed from their socio-cultural contexts. Accordingly, members of *Igbe* religion are tolerant of other sectarian variants, as well as other religions. It is in tandem with the spirit of sportsmanship because a team accommodates plurality of talents. The spirit of sportsmanship demands that all members of the team must embrace the uniqueness of each talent. This will make room for a healthy and robust team. When practitioners of religions embrace this attitude, peace will become the norm across the globe. While empirical finding in *Igbe* monotheistic non-Abrahamic religion justifies the statement of Grantland, practitioners of the Abrahamic religions are of contrary opinion. Thus, an atmosphere of peace can only be guaranteed across the globe when practitioners of religions are conscious of their attitudes toward adherents of other religions.

Unhealthy Competitions among Religions

Unhealthy competition among religions has been identified as one of the causes of religious conflict (Olupona, 2014). A respondent of *Igbe* religion confirms:

> We see other religions as collaborators, not as competitors. Our concept is synonymous with a football team. We see other religions as complementing our efforts toward building a peaceful and egalitarian society. When we see good things in other religions, we learn and adopt. To this end, we are constantly improving. Adherents of Igbe religion do not take offence when their members convert to other religions. It is not about winning or losing. As long as their spiritual needs are met, we do not have a problem. We have managed many intra-sectarian conflicts through this model of thinking (Interview with *Uku* Festus Ikoba, at Oria Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria on the August 14, 2019).

The concept of peace, collaboration and conflict management are subsumed in the above response. It correlates with the spirit of sportsmanship principle that was articulated by WYCAA Basketball Team (2020) that one of the defining rules is appreciating the efforts of other members of the team. It also espouses that team members must see themselves as collaborators and not competitors. Seeing other religions as collaborators in the establishment of an egalitarian society is one of the critical factors that have helped to define the dominant narrative of peace in Igbe religion. This is, however, contrary to the disposition of the Abrahamic religions because they see other religions as competitors, thereby opening the avenue for extremism and violence (Basinger 2015).

Findings in *Igbe* religion are well captured in the game of soccer. In the game of soccer, it is assumed that the overall objective of the team is to play well and win. So, if there are conflicts generating issues among teammates, efforts will be made to resolve them. Otherwise, an eruption of violence will destroy the entire team and winning the game will be truncated. In light of the above submission, building a peaceful society is a process of teamwork and moulding of character is the goal of all religions. Achieving this feat can only be possible when all religions come together, despite their differences and peculiarities. However, empirical findings show that the Abrahamic religions, unlike Igbe monotheist non-Abrahamic religion are still struggling with this reality.

Conclusion

Conflict can be better managed and the culture of peace instituted across the globe if adherents of religions can draw insight from a soccer team. In a soccer team, the eleven players have different positions and responsibilities. These positions have their uniqueness, yet they cannot function in isolation, which justifies the structural functional theory. They must be able to collaborate to achieve their set goals. Thus, when a soccer team member abandons his position, the entire team suffers. The spirit of sportsmanship demands that in the quest for peace, all the teammates must maintain their position and appreciate the uniqueness of others. In doing this, the ultimate end will be victory for the team. Likewise, no single religion can meet the needs of the entire world population and it justifies the Demand Matching Theory of Back and Lindholm (2014). According to the theory, people are free to embrace the religion that can meet their needs. And when they feel that their needs are not being met by a particular religion, they can look out for another religion that can satisfy them. Instead of engaging in unhealthy competitions, practitioners should focus on building their capacities to enable them satisfy their members. That is why 84% of the entire world population identifies with different religions because

human needs are diverse. As exemplified in *Igbe* monotheistic, non-Abrahamic religion, adherents of religions ought to appreciate the value other religions add to society. They should appreciate the uniqueness of other religions and work out possible ways of collaboration. It also affirms John Hicks' theory of religious pluralism which postulates that all religions are unique when they are viewed from their social-cultural context. Accordingly, the world will know peace, progress, devoid of violence when practitioners of religions embrace the spirit of sportsmanship as they seek to build a healthy society through the worship of the One Great Scorer-God.

Violence in the name of religion has caused untold hardships across the world. As a result, peace has become elusive in many societies. Using *Igbe Orhe*, this study has been able to draw a nexus between religious violence, conflict management and the promotion of the peace culture through the spirit of sportsmanship. Using the theory of religious pluralism, the study establishes that a culture of peaceful co-existence of all religions across the world is possible, if they work in the consciousness of religious pluralism which is aptly demonstrated in a soccer team. A team may be made up of players with different religious persuasions yet the overall objective of the team supersedes their religious affiliations. The theory of religious pluralism agrees with the submission of Apostle Paul in the Bible that "we see in part and know in part". Accordingly, no religion should claim supremacy over others. All religions should see their roles as complementary because the general objective is to have a peaceful society. This aligns with the true principles of sportsmanship.

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