

Appreciating the Value System of Pre-Christian Ngas Culture Through Dating of Symbolic Religious Artefacts

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Abstract:- The research is a study in religious symbology, which relies on the rich religious and cultural background of the traditional African religion and culture to determine the values cherished by pre – Christian Ngas society. It fuses classical methods of studying ancient artefacts with religious methods of interpreting symbols. The study is situated among the Ngas people of Pankshin Local Government and Kanke Local Government Areas of Plateau state. Religious artefacts are considered significant by traditional worshippers among the Ngas and are also considered to be symbolic immortalisations of the value system of the times they were produced. The study obtained samples of artefacts of ancient Ngas culture and subjected same to scientific dating techniques to determine their age. It also used analytic methods of interpreting religious symbols to identify the values preserved in these artefacts. It concludes that the values preserved in pre – Christian Ngas religious and cultural artefacts are important towards maintaining values of society and are important for the preservation of contemporary society.

Keywords:- Values; Symbols; Artefacts; Ngas Culture; Carbon 14.

I. INTRODUCTION

The deterioration of societal values in Nigeria has been well documented in contemporary literature; including both books and journals. Several vices are rife in contemporary Nigerian society so-much-so that the cry for national moral reawakening pervades the news and social media as well as public and private discussion forums. Nigeria has become notorious for several societal vices, a litany of which are explicitly documented by Ipadeola (2016) and Imhanrenialena (2017). Falaye (2013) probably best described the situation of Nigeria as a crisis of identity and integrity. This moral crisis is in every segment of the Nigerian society; from the school

system to public service, the police, banks, markets, politics and even the churches, there is a broad distribution of acts and general practices that deny individuals and the society as a whole a claim on integrity. In a 2016 study, Ipadeola found that, “corruption has eaten deep in the Nigeria government system in the area of bribe and kickbacks. All participants believed that corruption is engrained in Nigeria, both in the public and private sectors, family, households, religious institutions, civil service, judiciary, police, house of assemblies and many other such systems.” This crisis is especially made acute when one focuses on the icons of the Nigerian society who should be bulwarks of integrity like the religious leaders, the police, the legislators and judiciary (Fagbemi, 2010; Olalekan, 2014; Adenugba & Omolawal, 2014; Eluu, 2015).

More specifically, the perception of values is poor in Nigeria in virtually all sectors of the society. Poor regard for age old values like honesty, loyalty, hard work, family, care for the aged, respect and so on persistently hamper the development of a reliable society founded on a good value system. Religious values seem to be at odds with one another with the spate of religious crises and religion-sponsored violence in Nigeria.

Looking back, many people would recount with nostalgia the ‘good old days’, when children respected their parents, neighbours cared, strangers were welcome, hard work was a pride, cheap money was a taboo and society feared God. Some of these values, originating in pre-Christian Nigerian societies, were preserved in the pottery, stonework, woodwork and other artefacts that were the heritage of traditional worshippers. With its decaying religious and moral outlook, Nigeria presents a case for going back to days when values were appreciated and society was disciplined. This research is therefore an effort towards unearthing these values preserved in the rich culture and artefacts of Ngasland and repositioning them in the dialogue of national value

reorientation. It rediscovers pre-Christian values preserved in the deep symbolism of Ngas traditional artefacts in order to present them as a foundation for value rediscovery in the contemporary Ngas and Nigerian society.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In contemporary Nigeria, the appreciation of values ranks poor (Elendu, 2012). Many young Nigerians live in a generation that has lost touch with the traditional values handed over to the generations of their fathers and grandfathers. This disconnect with traditional values shows in contemporary cultures of hooliganism, disregard for hardwork, preoccupation with pleasure, disrespect for norms and a general ungodliness (Adenugba & Omolawal, 2014). This situation has resulted in a resonating call for value reorientation within the Nigerian society, the result of which is a large volume of literature. Despite such calls however, the situation in Nigeria seems to continually be on the decline. A lack of proper appreciation of values continues to reflect in individual as well as societal (including national) decisions. While religion is considered to be one of the major custodians of value systems, the Nigerian situation begs the question as the materialistic and self-seeking antics of religious leaders and their followers constantly betrays. The Christian religion and the Islamic religion have both been indicted severally for causing more harm than good to the nation's collective appreciation of values (Eluu, 2015). This research therefore is an effort to reposition traditional values in the discourse for value reorientation by tracing the values of Traditional religion. The contribution of traditional values to this discourse is what necessitates digging into the past to rediscover values that should not be glossed over when attempting to reposition society.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to rediscover values buried in the rich heritage of Ngas material culture in order to present them as authentic and foundational towards national value reorientation efforts. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Establish the pre-Christian origin of traditional Ngas artefacts.
- Interpret the symbolism of traditional Ngas artefacts.
- Present the values buried in these artefacts as authentic contributions to national development.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Nigeria's public life, there is a serious moral crisis (Ipadeola, 2016; Imhanrenialena, 2017). From the school system to public service, the police, banks, markets, politics and even the churches, there is a broad distribution of acts and general practices that deny individuals and the society as a whole a claim on integrity. In a 2016 study, Ipadeola found that, "corruption has eaten deep in the Nigeria government system in the area of bribe and kickbacks. All participants believed that corruption is engrained in Nigeria, both in the public and private sectors, family, households, religious institutions, civil service, judiciary, police, house of assemblies and many other such systems." This crisis is

especially made acute when one focuses on the icons of the Nigerian society who should be bulwarks of integrity like the religious leaders, the police, the legislators and judiciary (Fagbemi, 2010; Olalekan, 2014; Adenugba & Omolawal, 2014; Eluu, 2015).

Over the past decade, Nigerians have been increasingly calling for attitudinal change among the citizenry (Falaye, 2013; Adedugba & Omolawal, 2014; Ebenezer, 2017). This call has been made at all levels of the society, by the government, the political class, religious leaders, academics as well as the ordinary citizens and even the international community (Oseni, 2015; Ipadeola, 2016; Itebiye, 2016; Imahanrenialena, 2017). Nigerians seem to be in agreement that the Nigerian society cannot develop along the right path of greatness if Nigerians continue with the norms of their society for which the country has become notorious. The need for attitudinal change has become dire due to the obvious corruption that pervades the Nigerian society. Corruption has become so endemic in the society as to become institutionalised (Fagbemi, 2010; Olanikan, 2014; Eluu, 2015).

Similarly, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2017) ranked Nigeria 148 of the 180 countries that were ranked in 2017, with a CPI score of 27%. This is not only lower than the 32% average score of ranked countries in sub-Saharan Africa, but showed a 1% decline from 2016; at a glance, it can be observed that the country has been vacillating between a CPI score of 25% to 28% over the past five years (see figure 1 below).



Fig 1: Transparency International's corruption index score for Nigeria 2017

In June 2018, Nigeria's minister of Finance was embroiled in a public scandal regarding the integrity of her credentials, as her National Youth Service Certificate (NYSC) showed to be unauthentic. The Punch Newspaper (online) summed it well when it reported that:

When you piece Premium Times' investigation timeline together, you realise that there was a high probability that she had been informed they were digging up her dirt. She probably knew a scandal was in the offing and she had vowed to sit it out until we are all tired and eventually move on. The woman is a Nigerian; she understands Nigerians. She knows that as a society we do not have the innate integrity to

summon enough willpower and push for what is right. Our sense of right and wrong is mediated by primal sentiments such as religion and ethnicity (18 August, 2018).

This is not new in Nigeria's political space as senators and others in both green and red chambers of the National Assembly, governors, ministers and even Nigeria's President have had questions asked about the authenticity of their academic claims.

Yet, perhaps the deepest indication of the poor integrity that pervades the Nigerian public life could be found in religion and religious leaders in Nigeria (Falaye, 2013; Itebiye, 2016; Ebenezer, 2017). Olalekan (2014, p. 86) captured it adequately saying,

In many Churches in Nigeria, false teaching, preconceived ideas and human formed regulations have too often undermined the Holy Spirit's specification about the choice of leaders. The messages are no longer about salvation, heaven and hell but the acquiring of material wealth, by capitalising on the 'gross ignorance' of the people about the teaching of the Bible on wealth. All over the world and particularly in Nigeria 'marketing' God is fast becoming a top bracket business... This is why people establish churches today regardless of whether or not they possess the leadership qualifications listed by Paul.

This is by no means a reason to conclude that Nigerians individually can all be categorised as corrupt. That will not only be untrue but also unjust. Nigeria has a high number of individuals who can be identified as people of integrity; yet this very fact drives home the nature of society and how values are transmitted and preserved in society (Shadabi, 2013; Oseni, 2015). The importance of the individuals as representative of the values of society is shown by the fact that they are the lens through which society is viewed and ultimately judged (Kohn, 1999; Arslantas, 2015). It is individuals who effectively contribute to the outlook of the society and to that extent, we could say that the norms of a society are those projected by the individuals that make up that society (Savage, 2013; Wojtyla, 2013). The connection between the society and the individual has been made in ethical and political theories (Bevir, 1996; Hinman, 2008; Ryba, 2008; Woelkers, 2016). Many of these theories claim that socialisation is the link between the individual and society, warranting the individual to be an authentic representative of the society. Bevir (1996, p. 6) identified the importance of socialisation for each society claiming that,

We adopt the beliefs we do during a process of socialisation in which the traditions of our community invariably influence us, and we act in our world where the actions of others already have created patterns of behaviour and institutions we cannot ignore. Few people would deny the empirical claim that as a matter of fact the beliefs and actions of individuals usually are informed by their social contexts.

In older times, values that preserved the society like integrity, honour, honesty, commitment, communalism and so on were arguably more cherished and protected than today

(Fagbemi, 2010; Eluu, 2015; Ebenezer, 2017). Fagbemi (2010) argued that integrity was the 'summum bonum' of all qualities that the Yoruba searched for in people of character. Reflected in the meaning of names given to children, integrity goes as far as determining one's level of acceptance in the society. Kings, princes and leaders of society in general were selected because of their integrity. He observed that,

Before the advent of colonialism, democracy was not completely unknown to us; we had monarchical democracy rooted in integrity... This (integrity) was the underlying factor or philosophy in the selection of kings in Yoruba land in the days of our fathers. In fact, it was the philosophy for living in our traditional communities... What was at the heart of this was integrity or good personality, princes who had natural leadership calling, not selfish or arrogant (ones); people who would command respect simply because of whom they are.

In sum, values were developed in society and passed among the members of the society. Leaders in the days of our fathers were people of integrity who would rightly value every member of the community and who could protect the image, culture and maintain the traditions of the people. Integrity determined one's personality and position in society; hence they were called the custodians of traditions and culture. When we place this observation beside the reality of the Nigerian society today, we must conclude that something has been lost. Yet a lot of the values can still be unearthed in the ancient relics, artefacts and heritage of traditional African societies.

Archaeological studies using scientific dating techniques have been used in religious studies to place significant religious objects within the milieu of their origin. The milieu itself is important to better understand the relative age of the artefacts and what such religious pieces meant for the worshippers of the time. Radiocarbon dating has for close to a century presented itself as the surest way of near accurately studying and estimating the age of properties. The concept of radiocarbon dating was developed in 1945 by Willard Libby a professor of chemistry at the University of Chicago. The process of radiocarbon dating starts with the analysis of the carbon 14 left in a sample. The proportion of carbon 14 in the sample examined provides an indication of the time elapsed since death of the sample's source. Radiocarbon dating results are reported in un-calibrated years BP (Before Present), where BP is defined as AD 1950.

The essence of knowing the age of properties in relation to its value is more compelling if the latent ingredients of valuation are put into proper perspective (Okoronkwo, 2016). In one epic study, Diaz, Hansz, Cypher, and Hayunga (2008) recognized the non-linear relationship between property age and value in a study of conservation districts, suggesting that older residential properties may have a higher value due to their unique characteristics and limited ability to reproduce the same structure. This view seems to alter the notion earlier always held that the newer a property, the higher the value. Though the view is still under investigation our enquiry into the applicability of radiocarbon dating to the valuation of cultural properties will shed much light on it.

Udechukwu (2019) holds that “Symbols are anything used to represent, express and stand for an event or situation. They are short expressions for the identification of an object or situation. Symbols serve in transmission of messages as well as focusing the mind on an idea or ideal.” A symbol is an object used to typify or represent quality of something else and abstract ideas. Symbolism, by extension, is the art of preservation an interpretation of these messages. Symbols direct or guide our behaviours and are used to show an event of past, present or future. This involves using function of the human mind. Religion, science, art, myths, dreams and rituals are all manifestations of symbols. Etymologically, the word symbol came from the Greek word “symbolon” which denotes such tallies as the two halves of a broken coin, which were exchanged by contracting parties. Cohen (1969) defines symbols as “objects, arts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings.” This shows that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several interpretations and these interpretations could be given at different levels depending upon the level of the interpreter’s consciousness and intelligence. Udechukwu (2019) also holds that symbols have the characteristics of presenting a setting in life, representing a consensus about their meaning and being mediators of meaning of things and events.

V. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for this research includes both absolute dating methods and symbolic interpretation methods. Artefacts belonging to traditional societies were acquired for the research. The choice of artefacts was done based on estimated age as reported by the custodians of the artefacts. Artefacts predating Christianity were specifically targeted for acquiring. Radiocarbon dating was used to determine the relative age of the artefacts used for the research. Radiocarbon (carbon 14) is an isotope of the element carbon that is unstable and weakly radioactive. Plants and animals assimilate carbon 14 from carbon dioxide throughout their lifetimes. When they die, they stop exchanging carbon with the biosphere and their carbon 14 content then starts to decrease at a rate determined by the law of radioactive decay. Radiocarbon dating is essentially a method designed to measure residual radioactivity. The radiocarbon age of a certain sample of unknown age can be determined by measuring its carbon 14 content and comparing the result to the carbon 14 activity in modern and background samples (BETA, 2021).

Also, religious symbolism was employed to interpret the unique markings of the artefacts used for the research. This involves identification of symbolic representations usually carved or moulded to portray values like family, trust, faith, togetherness etc. Particularly, artefacts depicting markings of hard work, family and community were targeted for scientific dating. Artefacts from traditional Ngas villages of Dawaki, Garam and Ner were targeted for the research.

VI. SAMPLE COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A. Sample collection

The procedure for sample collection proved to be a challenge because of the sacred value attached to the artefacts by their custodians. Only one of the custodians, of the traditional artefacts out of five approached, agreed to a pre-interview – leading to collection of sample. Other custodians refused to allow the researchers approach them citing various reasons including the sacred rituals that were necessary before such artefacts are consulted, the limited rituals/seasons that these artefacts could be approached, the dangerous nature of some of the artefacts (possibly leading to death if mishandled) etc. The procedure involved ritual sacrifice offered by the custodian of the artefact, called Tau in the traditional Ngas language. Afterwards, the custodian allowed researchers to take a sample in a careful and sensitive handling. The sample was hereafter preserved in a small ziplog bag and sent to the laboratory for analysis.

B. Laboratory analysis summary

Dating analysis was conducted on the sample provided with the aim of determining its age based on the radioactive decay of carbon-14. This report presents a summary of the findings and interpretation of the carbon-14 dating analysis.

➤ Methodology:

The carbon-14 dating analysis was performed following established procedures. The sample was carefully prepared to extract the carbonaceous material, laboratory ensured the removal of any contaminants that could affect the accuracy of the results. Afterwards it was subjected to mass spectrometry to measure the concentration of carbon-14 present in the sample.

➤ The sample yielded the following result:

- Sample ID: 35226 GoluSample
- Carbon 14 concentration: $7=.89 \times 10^{-14}$.

➤ Interpretation of the result is as follows:

- Age estimation: 138 years (112 – 164 years)
- Margin of error: 26 years
- Calibration: The carbon-14 dating results were calibrated to account for variations in atmospheric carbon-14 levels over time. This calibration was necessary to align the measured concentration with the known atmospheric concentrations, thus refining the age estimation.
- Contamination: Care was taken, as required by the request, to separate the sample according to the physical and chemical properties presented and only the wooden sample was subjected to laboratory analysis. However, it was observed that a large portion of the sample comprised of other organic material that was not wooden. The wooden portion of the sample was however sufficient for the analysis.

- **Conclusion:** The carbon-14 dating analysis of 35226 GoluSample provided valuable insights into its age estimation. However, it is important to consider the associated error margin and limitations presented above when interpreting the results. Carbon-14 dating provides a reliable method for dating organic materials, and when combined with other dating techniques, it contributes to a comprehensive understanding of chronology and historical contexts. Cross-referencing could strengthen the age estimation and enhance the overall accuracy of the analysis while additional sampling from the same context could verify the estimation and provide context valuable for more comprehensive understanding of chronology.

VII. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

A. Pre-Christian origin of sampled artefact

The estimated age of the sample falls within the age range of the artefact as reported by the custodian, Simbal Dakup of Kabwir. In an interview with the researchers, Simbal recanted how his grandfather claimed he was told the artefact was older than his own great – grandfather. This dates the artefact to the seventh generation before the now 51-year-old Simbal. With a life expectancy of about 58 across generations and an average child – bearing age of 19 across the generations, the researchers determined that the claim amounted to about 133 years. This falls within the estimated age of the artefact determined by Carbon – 14 lab analysis. It is interesting that the estimated age of the artefact as reported by its custodian falls within the age estimation of the laboratory analysis. However, the artefact could even be older. For the sake of our discussion, it is safe for us to stick with the age estimated by the analysed sample (i.e. 138 years).

Ngasland 138 years ago was a very different environment from the present day. An artefact coming from that time predates the encounter of the Ngas people with the Christian or Islamic religions. It therefore, clearly comes from a period when the cultural, religious and traditional practices of the Ngas were well developed and uncorrupted. Hence, we could conclude that the values represented by the artefacts belonged to the traditional Ngas era (used to distinguish from the colonial or predominantly Christian era). Gonet (2018) reveals that the earliest encounter of the Ngas people with the Hausa jihadist was towards the end of the 19th century. This encounter, he stated, had an imperialist tone as the religious structures and other institutions of the Ngas were not affected, but remained intact because the jihadist failed to conquer the hill-people of the Plateau among whom the Ngas were outstanding in repelling waves of campaigns launched from the Bauchi area. Encounter with the European colonialists came even a lot later.

A century after the first encounter with the Hausa, another group came. This later group comprised the white colonialists that had stationed at Ibi for trading activities and had been introduced to tin ore by northern traders. In order to trace the source of this mineral, this group carried out an expedition against the backdrop of claims of attacks against its northern trading allies. Faced with superior firepower, the Ngas could not stand up to the white colonialists as was the

case in their confrontation with the Hausa who used traditional weapons like them (Gonet, 2018, p. vii).

B. Values symbolised by Ngas traditional artefacts

During an interview with Simbal Dakup (20. 12. 2022), a traditional musician and custodian of a pair of artefacts, he revealed that certain values were embedded in the artefacts that make reverence for them a delicate matter for traditionalists. These values could either be found in the image and carvings associated with the artefacts or with what they represent and how adherents to their tenets should approach them.

- Values associated with image and carvings: Figure 2 below shows the image of the female Tau (local deities/powers) from which the sample analysed was taken. From the markings, we can identify the pair, male and female. For Simbal (2022) this represents the value of family and fertility as indicated by the nudity of the female upper body. He claimed that he always uses them together, indicating the unity of family and the support spouses have for other. He did not reveal that any of the spouses was superior in power to the other, indicating a concerted use or harmony in function. Simbal claimed, “(Ngas) were born and multiplied from only two persons, that is why we use them together.” Also, frog5m the adorning of the female and the lack of adornment of the male artefact, it allowed the researchers to determine the significance placed on female beauty/value.



Fig 2: Image of Tau

- Values associated with reverence for the artefacts: Simbal (2022) in the interview granted to the researchers, stated that Tau could be a personal or a community heritage. The custodians of personal Tau, such as himself, use the artefact for a variety of purposes including protection,

medicine, guidance, and even for fashion. While the purpose is usually a closely guarded secret, Simbal revealed that it was never used for harm or to hurt others. Its benefit was only to enhance the custodian and those on behalf of whom it is consulted. Consulting Tau demanded patience because the artefact has specific periods and seasons; it also required ritual (libations) to be performed. The user of the artefact's powers was expected to be obedient to its demands especially with the strict adherence to obedience to instruction, reverence to be given (respect) and goodwill to be borne. Without doubt, the conviction of the custodian that obedience, respect and honesty are values to be cherished with their lives, stuck the researchers as indicating integrity in their reverence.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research set out to determine the age of traditional Ngas artefacts in order to analyse the values they represent and present them as important ones to the discourse on national value reorientation. While it cannot claim to be exhaustive in its analysis of the values as some may be lost to the current custodians, the depth of values imbedded in these simple artefacts are astonishing in the conviction held by those who reverence them. Nigeria, as a country poor in the integrity of its morals, has a lot to learn from the custodians of traditional Ngas artefacts. They obey the rules guiding association with their artefacts and comply to procedure of handling and approaching them. They are sworn to be truthful in dealing with others and have goodwill to bring no harm by the use of the powers of the artefacts. They value family and come to the aid of the sick. In simple terms, this 138-year-old artefact is the source of behaviour which can only be rightly described as behaviour befitting of people of integrity.

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