Role of the Church and Traditional institution in addressing contemporary moral challenges militating against the development of Tivland of Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the role of the Church and traditional institutions in addressing contemporary moral challenges hindering development in Tivland, Benue State, Nigeria. The study highlights the critical interplay between traditional institutions and religious organizations in shaping moral standards within Tivland, a region facing significant socio-economic challenges. These challenges, including corruption, erosion of traditional values, and ethnic and religious intolerance,

undermine developmental efforts and contribute to social instability. The problem of moral decay impacted the effectiveness of development initiatives in Tivland. With traditional institutions and the Church being pivotal in upholding ethical standards, their roles are essential in mitigating these challenges. The paper employed a qualitative approach, including literature review, interviews with key stakeholders from both the Church and traditional institutions, and analysis of community-based case studies. It is revealed that both the Church and traditional institutions are instrumental in promoting moral integrity, transparency, and community cohesion. They contribute significantly to reinforcing ethical norms, fostering interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogues, and revitalizing traditional practices that support communal well-being. However, there is a need for more structured collaboration and enhanced engagement in addressing the root causes of moral challenges. The paper recommended that, strengthening moral education programs, promoting transparency and accountability in local governance, encouraging interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogues, revitalizing beneficial traditional practices, and forming strategic partnerships among the Church, traditional institutions, and government agencies. Implementing these recommendations can help in overcoming the moral challenges faced by Tivland and fostering a conducive environment for sustainable development.
Keywords: Church, Traditional Institutions, Moral Challenges, Development, Tivland, Benue State

Introduction

Since the attainment of political independence in 1960, the country has continued to contend with many challenges in development. Okaneme (50-60) submitted that the country is plagued with multidimensional problems which are antithetical to peaceful co-existence, such as socio-economic in-balance, instability and

inequality. Yusuf (72-87) also opined that despite the country's oil wealth, it is still one of the poorest countries in the world where seven (7) million children of primary school age are not in school, youths have no access to quality education and majority are unemployed; educational institutions are without enough infrastructure and no access to safe water, good roads and health services. Also, insecurity, kidnapping, armed robbery as well as unsteady electricity supply have crippled the country.

Many have attributed the cause of these challenges to lack of good governance at all levels whether in the military or democratic dispensation. Okpanachi (74-91) maintained that the several structures and institutions through which effective government can be entranced are heavily compromised from the beginning to the end. This is why Achebe (15) observed that the failure of Nigeria as a nation is not in the system but rather in the calibre of persons entrusted with the management of the nation's vast human and material resources.

In the face of evolving societal dynamics, the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria, confront numerous moral challenges that threaten the development and cohesion of their community. These challenges, rooted in the complex interplay of traditional values and modern influences, call for a concerted effort to address them effectively. Two pivotal institutions—the Church and the Traditional institution—stand at the forefront of this endeavor. The Church, with its spiritual authority and moral guidance, plays a crucial role in shaping the ethical landscape of Tiv society. It offers a platform for moral education, community support, and the promotion of values such as integrity, responsibility, and social justice. The Church's influence extends beyond religious teachings; it actively engages in social and developmental issues, providing a moral compass in a rapidly changing world. On the other hand, the Traditional institution, deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of the Tiv people, serves as the custodian

of customs, norms, and values that have sustained the community for generations. This institution is responsible for maintaining social order, resolving conflicts, and preserving the moral fabric of Tiv society. It offers a sense of identity and continuity, linking the present with the past and providing a framework for addressing contemporary challenges through time-tested practices and wisdom. Together, the Church and the Traditional institution have the potential to synergize their efforts in tackling the moral issues that hinder the development of Tivland. By combining the spiritual and cultural resources they offer, these institutions can provide holistic solutions that resonate with the people, fostering a moral environment conducive to sustainable development. This paper therefore set a stage for an exploration of how these two institutions can collaborate to address the contemporary moral challenges facing Tivland, ensuring the community's progress while preserving its rich cultural heritage.

Conceptual Clarifications
Church

The term "Church" in this context refers to Christian religious organizations that operate within Tivland, particularly those involved in social and moral guidance. The Church is not just seen as a place of worship but as an institution that influences the community's ethical and moral standards.

The church is one of the social and religious institutions in the society that has both the divine mandate and the social responsibility to preach the good news and make disciples of all people (Ononogbu, 5). The church through the ages sees its social role as that of guiding the society into all truth. This makes it incumbent upon the church to concern itself with the problems of social behaviour as well as social justice. Owoh (85) posited that because the church possesses the total truth,

it could be applied at any given time as its influence interpenetrates society at all levels. According to him, the role of the church is bound to influence man's ideas politically, socially and economically. To Ikani (9), the church has the aim of initiating social change and maintaining it. It plays a critical role in shaping the values of individuals and the community through teachings, pastoral care, and community outreach programs (Ihugh, 22). Churches in Tivland, including denominations such as the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Pentecostal movements, are central to promoting virtues such as honesty, integrity, and compassion.

Traditional Institution

Traditional institutions refer to the indigenous structures of authority and governance that have been established and maintained within the Tiv society for generations. These include the council of elders, chiefs, clan leaders, and other cultural custodians who are responsible for maintaining social order, enforcing traditional laws, and preserving cultural heritage (Aondover, 23). Traditional institutions are deeply intertwined with the social and moral fabric of Tiv society, providing mechanisms for conflict resolution, community governance, and the upholding of moral values.

Contemporary Moral Challenges

"Contemporary Moral Challenges" refer to the ethical and social issues currently facing Tiv society that hinder its development. These challenges include corruption, youth delinquency, the erosion of traditional values, social disintegration, and moral relativism (Nyityo and Torkura, 20). These challenges have emerged due to various factors, including modernization, economic pressures, and the influence of Western values. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the moral and social development of Tivland.

Development

In this context, "Development" refers to the process of improving the social, economic, and moral well-being of Tivland. Development encompasses not only material progress, such as infrastructure and economic growth but also the enhancement of social and moral conditions within the community. A key aspect of development in Tivland involves the restoration and reinforcement of ethical values, social justice, and community cohesion, all of which are necessary for sustainable progress (Ayatse and Usman, 211-230).

Development has remained one of the major pre-occupation of governments and yet the concept has defiled a universal definition, and as such the term has numerous conceptualizations offered by scholars and writers. Rodney (213) who argued that development in human society is a many sided process. Three different levels are identified in the process these are: the individual level; social group level and the society level. Focusing on the individual level, development from this scholar's view means increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Even though these are seen as virtually moral categories and difficult to evaluate-depending on issues such as age in which we live, class origin and so on, what is indisputable is that the achievement of any of those aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society as a whole. For instance youths, ages 15-34 form part of the social group level, and in Nigeria they constitute about 70 per cent of the population. Individually, youth as part of a social group level increases skill and capacity and other variables that holistically translate into development through process of development like education at the various levels of the education sector and also training outside the formal school system.

Social Composition and Developmental State of Tivland

Tivland, located predominantly in Benue State, Nigeria, is home to the Tiv people, one of the major ethnic groups in the region. The social composition of Tivland is deeply rooted in kinship systems and communal living, with strong emphasis on family ties and traditional governance structures. Traditionally, Tiv society is patriarchal, with leadership vested in elders and community heads. At the apex of this leadership is the Tor Tiv, the paramount ruler of the Tiv people, who plays a central role in maintaining peace, order, and cultural continuity. Complementing his role is a council of elders who are influential in village governance and in resolving disputes.

In recent years, however, Christianity has taken a strong hold in Tivland, significantly reshaping the social fabric. Many Tiv people are now adherents of Catholicism or Protestantism, and the Church has become a powerful institution in the region. This religious shift has introduced new moral frameworks, sometimes in tension with traditional values, but often blending with them to shape the contemporary identity of the Tiv people. The Church and traditional institutions now exist side by side, both playing crucial roles in influencing moral and social behavior.

Despite its rich cultural heritage, Tivland faces significant developmental challenges. The region's economy is primarily agrarian, with most people engaged in subsistence farming, growing crops such as yams, maize, and cassava. Infrastructure development, however, has not kept pace with population growth and economic needs. Many rural areas lack basic amenities, such as proper roads, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. The education sector, in particular, is underdeveloped, with limited access to quality schooling, especially in more remote areas. Healthcare services are also inadequate,

with many communities lacking access to essential medical care.

Another pressing issue in Tivland is youth unemployment, which has led to frustration among the younger generation. The lack of vocational training and formal employment opportunities has compounded this challenge, contributing to social problems such as crime and a perceived decline in moral values. Corruption, the erosion of traditional values, and other contemporary moral challenges have further complicated efforts at development in the region.

In Tiv society, both the Church and traditional institutions play vital roles, deeply embedded within the social and cultural fabric of the people. Their influence extends to moral, spiritual, and community governance, often overlapping and interacting in unique ways to shape the lives of the Tiv people.

Historically, traditional institutions were the backbone of Tiv society. The Tiv people have long been guided by their traditional leadership structure, with the Tor Tiv serving as the highest authority. The Tor Tiv, together with village elders and clan leaders, provides a system of governance that emphasizes communal values, justice, and the preservation of cultural heritage. These traditional institutions govern through customary laws and practices that promote social harmony, unity, and the settlement of disputes. The elders, revered for their wisdom and experience, play an essential role in guiding younger generations, transmitting cultural values, and overseeing rites of passage, marriage, and land tenure systems.

With the arrival of Christianity, the Church became a powerful institution in Tivland. Christianity, primarily through Catholic and Protestant denominations, brought new spiritual and moral guidance to the region. The Church is not just a religious authority but also a center for education, health care, and social development.

Churches have established schools, hospitals, and vocational centers, contributing to the overall improvement of living conditions in Tivland. They also serve as moral arbiters, addressing issues such as corruption, immorality, and social vices, which have become prominent in contemporary society. Through sermons, community outreach, and welfare programs, the Church provides moral teachings, promotes charity, and fosters unity among the Tiv people.

The Church and traditional institutions often work in tandem, complementing each other in shaping Tiv society. In many cases, the Tor Tiv and elders collaborate with church leaders in addressing community issues, mediating conflicts, and fostering peace. This synergy is evident in the way cultural festivals and traditional events are infused with Christian elements, blending ancestral traditions with Christian beliefs. While the Church preaches against practices it deems contrary to Christian values, such as certain forms of traditional religious rites, it also recognizes the importance of cultural identity. As a result, a form of cultural coexistence has emerged in Tivland, where traditional and Christian values influence moral and ethical behavior.

In addressing contemporary moral challenges, both institutions have pivotal roles. The Church is often seen as a force for moral renewal, advocating for justice, integrity, and the rejection of negative societal behaviors. On the other hand, traditional institutions provide continuity and stability, upholding time-honored values such as respect for elders, communal responsibility, and the protection of Tiv heritage.

Contemporary Moral Challenges Militating Against Development in Tivland, Nigeria

Tivland, a region in Benue State, Nigeria, is currently facing significant moral challenges that are impeding its development. These challenges are deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and political factors

that have evolved over time. One of the primary issues is the erosion of traditional values, which has been exacerbated by the influence of modernity and external cultural forces. This erosion has led to a decline in community cohesion, as traditional mechanisms for social control and conflict resolution have weakened (Kahiga 45). Furthermore, the increasing levels of corruption and political instability have created an environment where ethical conduct is often compromised for personal gain. This has resulted in a lack of trust in leadership and governance structures, further hindering development efforts in the region. For instance, the misappropriation of public funds intended for community development projects has become a significant barrier to progress (Iorver 120). Another challenge is the rise of religious and ethnic intolerance, which has contributed to conflicts and violence in the region. These conflicts are often fueled by competition for resources, political power, and differences in religious beliefs. The resultant insecurity not only disrupts social harmony but also discourages investment and development initiatives (Adum 89). The decline in moral education and the weakening of the family unit are contributing to the moral decay in Tivland. The younger generation is increasingly disconnected from traditional moral teachings, leading to behaviors that are detrimental to the community's well-being and development (Uja 67).

Leadership challenges have always been a dominant concept in Nigeria polity. This is because more than fifty years after independence, the country still lags behinds in her quest for economic, political and social transformation. The reason is that its history has been bedevilled by bad leadership. Political analysts and commentators like Rinji (34) and Achebe (15) observed that the cause or failure of Nigeria as a nation is not in the system but in the calibre of political leaders entrusted with the management of vast human and material resources. It is believed that with few exceptions the

country has been ruled by incompetent leaders at various levels of governance who are gradually running the country aground while less endowed nations that had their independence the same time as Nigeria continue to make appreciable progress. The Nigerian leadership has proven on many occasions that it is unable to inspire and motivate positive productive impact on the nation's citizens. Many of them lack leadership quality and attribute of good governance like the rule of law, transparency, effectiveness, efficiency, equity and accountability which are essential for the development of the society. They often abuse the mandate and trust of the electorates and become the public's enemies as they assume positions of authority. Many political leaders are neither in office for national interest nor are they there with the view to making a difference but are in office to enrich themselves, siblings, kins, tribesmen etc. The resultant effects of these poor leaders on the nation are sectionalism, tribalism, nepotism, election rigging, violence and insecurity (Shamija, Alachi and Moji, 25-29).

There is also an alarming rate of corruption among the political class in Nigeria. Corrupt practices take many forms like embezzlement of public funds, theft, illegal use of public property, bribery of officials and influence on procurement decisions. The issue of corruption at every level of government (past and present) is often seen on the pages of newspapers every day.

Banditry

Tivland, predominantly located in Benue State, Nigeria, is a region with a rich cultural history and a social structure deeply rooted in kinship and communal values. Traditionally, the Tor Tiv, as the paramount ruler, plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and order within the society (Akaave, 45). The elders and clan leaders also contribute significantly to the governance and preservation of Tiv customs and practices, including dispute resolution and moral guidance (Ordu 102).

However, contemporary Tiv society faces numerous challenges, including banditry, which has become a growing concern in recent years. Banditry in Tivland involves acts such as cattle rustling, kidnapping, and violent attacks on villages, causing severe disruptions to rural life and threatening economic stability (Agber 123). The traditional institution, led by the Tor Tiv, has worked alongside local vigilante groups and security agencies to combat these threats, with community leaders promoting unity and communal protection (Ityavyar 89).

Meanwhile, the Church has emerged as a significant moral authority in Tivland, advocating for peace, reconciliation, and non-violence. Church leaders often mediate in conflict situations and provide support to communities affected by banditry (Ngutor 78). The Church also plays a vital role in addressing moral decay by preaching against social vices such as corruption and violence, thus complementing the efforts of traditional institutions (Ujoh 67). Together, these two pillars of Tiv society work in tandem to address both the immediate and long-term social challenges confronting their communities.

The Sankera Crisis

The Sankera region has long been a vibrant agricultural hub, known for its production of yams, cassava, and other crops. However, in recent years, the area has become synonymous with violence, as criminal gangs, often referred to as "bandits," have exploited the region's vulnerabilities. These armed groups engage in activities like cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and violent attacks on communities, causing widespread insecurity. The crisis has escalated due to the proliferation of small arms, the involvement of local political actors, and the economic disenfranchisement of the youth, who are often recruited into these criminal networks.

Key Drivers of the Crisis
Some of the notable drivers of the crisis include;

The struggle for political dominance in the Sankera area has fueled tensions between local elites and rival groups. This has, at times, led to the sponsorship of armed militias who operate under the guise of ethnic or communal defense but often engage in criminal activities for personal gain. Secondly, is lack of economic opportunities for the youth in the region has contributed to the growth of criminal gangs. Many young people, without access to employment or meaningful livelihoods, have turned to banditry and violence as a means of survival. This situation is exacerbated by the underdevelopment of infrastructure and a lack of governmental presence in rural areas.

Thirdly, the region has witnessed the rise of well-organized criminal syndicates that engage in various forms of illegal activities. These groups often operate across state borders, taking advantage of the porous security framework in the area. The availability of small arms has further intensified the crisis, making it difficult for local law enforcement to contain the violence. In addition to organized crime, the Sankera region has also been plagued by communal conflicts, often related to land disputes and competition over resources. These clashes have deepened mistrust among various ethnic and clan groups, further destabilizing the region.

Impact of the Crisis

The Sankera Crisis has had devastating consequences for the local population. Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes, with many seeking refuge in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The disruption of agricultural activities has led to food insecurity in the region, while the destruction of property and infrastructure has hampered economic recovery.

Moreover, the crisis has strained the security apparatus in Benue State, as local law enforcement agencies struggle to contain the violence. Military interventions have been necessary at various points, but these efforts have not been enough to bring about lasting peace. The ongoing insecurity has also made it difficult for humanitarian organizations to provide assistance to affected communities.

The Role of the Church and Traditional Institutions

In the face of the Sankera Crisis, both the Church and traditional institutions have attempted to play roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The Church, with its wide-reaching influence, has advocated for non-violence and reconciliation, urging communities to reject armed conflict and embrace peaceful dialogue. Many church leaders have organized peace talks and community outreach programs aimed at fostering understanding among rival groups.

Traditional institutions, particularly the role of local chiefs and elders, have also been central to attempts at mediating conflicts. Elders often act as intermediaries in disputes, leveraging their authority to negotiate ceasefires and peace agreements between warring factions. However, the scope of their influence has been limited by the rise of armed groups who operate outside the traditional governance framework.

The Role of the Church in Addressing Moral Challenges

The Church in Tivland has long been a vital force for moral guidance and social reform. As Echezona et al. observe, its influence goes beyond spiritual matters, extending into areas such as social justice, education, and community development (101). Historically, the Church has been proactive in promoting ethical behavior, integrity, and social responsibility—particularly crucial in

a society grappling with ongoing moral challenges. Through sermons, pastoral care, and community outreach programs, the Church has consistently addressed key issues such as corruption, youth delinquency, and the breakdown of family structures, which have affected Tiv society for many years.

In addition to its spiritual role, the Church's involvement in education has had a profound impact on shaping the moral character of younger generations. Church-affiliated schools, known for emphasizing character development and ethical conduct, have contributed significantly to the moral upbringing of Tiv youth. According to Ayatse and Usman, the Church's educational programs have long been instrumental in instilling values such as honesty, respect, and hard work, all of which are essential for societal progress (211). The Church's efforts in these areas have indeed been longstanding, though the complexity of moral issues in contemporary Tivland suggests that continuous and evolving interventions remain necessary.

The Role of Traditional Institutions in Moral Regeneration

Traditional institutions in Tivland, such as the council of elders, chiefs, and other cultural custodians, continue to play a vital and practical role in maintaining social order and upholding moral values. These institutions, deeply rooted in the Tiv people's cultural heritage, are responsible for preserving and promoting customs, norms, and ethical standards that have been passed down through generations. In day-to-day life, elders and chiefs actively mediate conflicts within communities, settle land disputes, and provide guidance on family and communal matters, helping to maintain peace and order where modern legal systems may not always be effective or accessible. As Aondover (n.p.) notes, these traditional institutions serve as accessible authorities in areas where governmental presence is

limited, acting swiftly to resolve conflicts and reinforce communal values.

The traditional belief systems in Tivland are intertwined with moral codes that continue to shape the behavior of individuals. One of the key concepts in Tiv society is "tar," or community spirit, which emphasizes collective responsibility, mutual support, and the importance of maintaining social harmony. This communal approach directly counters the rise of individualism and materialism that are contributing to the moral challenges seen today, such as corruption, greed, and the erosion of family bonds. For instance, when a young person in the community displays deviant behavior, the elders intervene not just to discipline but to counsel, ensuring that the individual understands the impact of their actions on the community as a whole.

Traditional institutions reinforce these values through regular community meetings, cultural festivals, and ceremonies, which serve as platforms to educate the younger generation about their heritage and responsibilities to the community. These practical, on-the-ground engagements are crucial in promoting moral regeneration, as they ensure that Tiv society remains cohesive, with a strong sense of shared values and responsibilities that can address contemporary moral decline.

Synergy between the Church and Traditional Institutions

The collaboration between the Church and Traditional institutions can offer a holistic approach to addressing moral challenges in Tivland. While the Church provides spiritual guidance and advocates for ethical behavior, Traditional institutions reinforce these values through cultural practices and communal norms. This synergy is essential for creating a moral environment conducive to sustainable development.

For example, both institutions can work together to combat corruption, which is a major impediment to development in Tivland. The Church can lead by advocating for transparency and accountability, while Traditional institutions can enforce communal sanctions against corrupt practices, thus ensuring that moral standards are upheld at both the individual and community levels (Nyityo and Torkura 45).

Conclusion

The role of the Church and traditional institutions in addressing contemporary moral challenges in Tivland is crucial for fostering sustainable development in the region. Both entities are integral to maintaining and reinforcing the moral fabric of the community, which is essential for overcoming the socio-economic and political obstacles hindering progress. The erosion of traditional values, corruption, religious and ethnic intolerance, and the decline in moral education all contribute to the moral challenges faced by Tivland. These challenges not only disrupt social cohesion but also impede development efforts and discourage investment. The Church and traditional institutions have a pivotal role to play in countering these issues by promoting ethical conduct, restoring community values, and fostering a culture of trust and integrity. By leveraging their influence and authority, these institutions can help to rebuild the moral foundations of the community and create a more conducive environment for development.

Recommendations

Both the Church and traditional institutions should collaborate to enhance moral education within the community. Implementing programs that integrate traditional values with contemporary ethical teachings can help to instill a strong moral foundation in the younger generation. This can be achieved through educational initiatives, workshops, and community outreach programmes.

To combat corruption and restore trust, it is essential for both the Church and traditional institutions to advocate for transparency and accountability in local governance. Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the use of public resources can help ensure that funds intended for development projects are used appropriately.

Addressing religious and ethnic intolerance requires fostering dialogue and understanding between different groups. The Church and traditional institutions should intensify their efforts towards facilitating interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogues to promote tolerance, reduce conflicts, and enhance social cohesion.

Efforts should be made to revitalize and adapt traditional practices that are aimed at promoting communal well-being and conflict resolution. This includes reinforcing traditional norms and values that encourage ethical behavior and community solidarity.

Collaborative efforts between the Church, traditional institutions, and government agencies can enhance the effectiveness of development initiatives. Forming strategic partnerships can help in addressing the root causes of moral challenges and implementing sustainable solutions.

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