

## **EXPLORING AFRICAN SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION ON COMMON GROUND: A PANACEA FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN A PLURALISTIC CONTEXT OF NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*There is no gainsaying that the need for peaceful co-existence is still dominant in human affairs and that has become all the more urgent whenever and wherever it is contradicted by opposite ideas or deeds. The necessity for peaceful co-existence in all spheres of human life is all the way and partly attributed to the pluralistic nature of the global community and how the diversities seem to have resulted in the contentious atmosphere in the most pluralistic-prone contexts of the world. The story of Nigeria cannot be told devoid of its pluralistic nature rooted in its diverse ethnic groups, multiple languages, cultural differences, multiple religions, and political and social diversities. The presupposition is succinct by the way and manner in which these elements of diversity are employed, upheld and considered as the determinant factor for human treatment irrespective of the codes that bind humanity religiously, politically, and socially. In the public discourse on the quest for peaceful co-existence in Africa, Nigeria being the largest country in Africa is rated among countries facing grave challenges to peaceful co-existence. Some of the systemic and symbolic violence against the dignity of human life experienced in Nigeria is attributed to the frictions, contentions and conflicts against peaceful co-existence aggravated by the pluralistic nature of Nigeria. While acknowledging the beauty in diversity, various responses to the misconceptions of this God's giving personality to humanity and the threats this misconception has posed to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria, this paper through an African symbolic expression of the Pyam ethnic group residing in Plateau state, Nigeria, proposed an alternative approach for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The Pyam symbolic expression is entrenched in its religio-cultural expression and adage "Do ta hoi na ram" which means humanity supersedes land. It is an expression within the Pyam language and system of thought which offers a symbolic response to the contentious and conflicting atmosphere aggravated by an abuse of the pluralistic nature of Nigerian society. This task is achieved through a systematic review of literature that has unpacked relevant ideas on the subject under consideration. The paper*

*concluded that the approach to building harmonious living in a pluralistic context such as Nigeria is not monolithic and that through exploring African cultural experiences more cogent approaches can be realized.*

**Keywords:** Exploring, Africa, symbolic, panacea, common ground, pluralistic peaceful-coexistence.

## **Introduction**

There is no conflicting thought on the quest for peaceful co-existence in any human community. It is undoubtedly dominant and is continually agitated and needful, especially in the face of threats that contradict it. The quest for peaceful co-existence is more pronounced in a pluralistic context. The nature of Nigeria cannot be told devoid of its pluralistic nature rooted in its diverse ethnic groups, multiple languages, cultural differences, multiple religions, and political and social diversities. The presupposition is succinct by the way and manner in which these elements of diversity are employed, uphold and considered as the determinant factor for human treatment irrespective of the codes that bind humanity religiously, politically, and socially. In the public discourse on the quest for peaceful co-existence in Africa, Nigeria being the largest country in Africa is rated among countries facing grave challenges to peaceful co-existence.

The nature of the violence against human life in Nigeria can best be described as systemic and symbolic violence. In other words, it is sometimes physical assault and sometimes psychological. They are mostly attributed to the frictions, contentions and conflicts due to the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian society. Couple with animosity, resentment, unforgiveness and bigotry which can be described as take away from the violent conflicts that irrupted Nigeria in the past. Due to the contentious atmosphere in Nigeria, different approaches to violence were socially constructed and demonstrated through systemic and symbolic violence depending on whether it is political, religious or ethnically inclined. The notion of two mediums of expressing violence in a pluralistic context such as Nigeria is made necessary in this paper due to the nature and manner in which violence is being carried out in Nigeria

Consequent to the critical analysis of the different approaches and responses by the Nigerian government and the Church to curb the scourge of violence in the pluralistic context of Nigeria, the paper acknowledged the contribution each has made and also identified the limitations of these responses with the view to explore other alternatives to violence against the dignity of humanity. Since approaches or perspectives to solving human problems are not monolithic, this paper explored an African symbolic expression which is rooted in the religious-cultural experience of the Pyam ethnic group residing in Gindiri, Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State Nigeria. The symbolic expression is entrenched in the adage “Do ta hoi na ram” which if translated into English means humanity is more

important than land. It offers a common ground for dialogue and can neutralize barriers relational that are socially constructed against peaceful co-existence in the pluralistic context of Nigeria. The research objective is realized through a systematic review of literature that has unpacked relevant views about the subject under consideration. The literature review will capture the fundamental elements of the research paper. These include the Nigerian context, the contribution of religion in building peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic context such as Nigeria, the use of African symbolic expressions in mitigating threats that deny the fullness of life in a pluralistic context of Nigeria, The Pyam system of thought

### **Nigerian Pluralistic Context**

Nigeria is located within the Western part of Africa bordered by the Republic of Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger with the climatic condition that varies within the Equatorial, tropical and Arid respectively. The complexity of Nigeria as the most populated Nation-State in Africa is attributed to its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious character. In all, it has about 500 ethnic groups. Three-quarters are from the Middle Belt and forty-four of these are from Plateau State. According to Habila Danfulani, the pluralistic nature of Nigeria contributed greatly to the religious and ethnic violence experienced in some parts of Nigeria (2006: 2)

According to Mwadkwon, Nigeria's complex socio-political identities have been exploited by those who wish to use its religious and cultural diversity as a reason to engage in violence against others that do not belong to their ethnic, religious or political group: Nigeria can be described as one giant tinder box of religious and ethnic intolerance. Sometimes it begins from a simple misunderstanding and consequently, metamorphoses into religious, communal, and ethnic conflagration Nigerian urban and semi-urban areas have been affected mostly by these religious and multi-ethnic conflicts. Whenever conflicts of this nature reoccur, they erupt much more and claim many more casualties (2001:1).

In light of this reality, violence in contemporary Nigeria is attributed to the contentious environment shaped by a multiplicity of religions, ethnic groups and different cultures that sometimes produce socio-economic conflicts. As Mwadkwon (2001) has shown, it is as a result of these affiliations, that conflicts are sown. Mwadkwon states that: In recent decades religious and ethnic affiliation have become major criteria for appointments to key offices, the military, the police force, the civil service, enrolment in schools, colleges and universities the military the police force, the civil service, enrolment in schools, colleges and universities, and so on (2001:2).

The effects of the pluralistic nature of the Nigerian context are expressed through the method of governance. Appointing people in public and private offices is carried out on the bases of religious and ethnic identities. Such partiality serves as an indirect contributor to

the emergence of physical and psychological violence in many communities that undermines human dignity and respect. Hurst argued that similar factors that create violence were also present in the socio-economic, religious and economic environment that resulted in the 'Biafra'/Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. Indeed, throughout colonization in Nigeria that continued into the Independence era, the emergence of violent conflicts between the Hausa/Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the Southeast each attributed to the complexity caused by cultural, ethnic and political factors. This situation presents an atmosphere of rancour and domination within the Nigerian community (Hurst, 2017: 1-2).

According to Arbuckle (2004:4), violence can be triggered through symbols because they can speak and provoke people's emotions which can result in violence. Accordingly, the violence in Nigeria does not only seek to destroy or cause physical damage to lives and properties but also has psychological connotations that undermine human dignity due to cultural, religious, or political affiliations. Hurst (2017:1) has further argued that such forms of violence were reflected in the course of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, which was also known as the Nigerian Biafra War. Part of what informed the contentious and violent atmosphere in Nigeria was the rise of religious fundamentalism as a political discourse towards solving issues related to identity politics. This paper draws attention to the Boko Haram insurgency which, according to Bagaji (2015), is an example of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria (2015:2-3). In other words, it is a sect that is against Western education, to enforce their brand of religious ideology/belief system in a country that is religio-cultural and socio-political (2012:33). According to Obaji, the reason for their persistent attacks on Muslims and Christians during divine worship is contained in a video by the Boko Haram leader where he states that, "whoever follows democracy is an infidel. This is Shekau; this is why I am in enmity with you" (2015:2). Obaji (2015:1) further argues that the idea of democracy, according to this sect, means that anything Western must be rejected. The outbreak of violence at regular intervals in Nigeria sometimes makes it difficult for observers to ascertain whether it is the result of religious, economic or ethnic factors. Mwadkwon (2000:56) has observed that peoples' social location influences their attitude in analyzing religious and ethnic violence in Nigeria. However, whether violence is religious or ethnic, it remains a factor that poses a threat to the life and security of communities. It is important for this present study that attention should be given to the response of the Nigerian government to violence within this context. The Nigerian military and police services are frequently used by the government at national and State levels to neutralise violence through the use of force. However, instead of using well-tested peace-building measures as central to their strategy of operation, they accused the public of exacerbating the violence through the collection of bribes (Danfulani 2006:21). According to Danfulani (2006:22), the Nigerian government claims to be building a society where individual rights are respected; whereas, it also engages in violent attacks through the military against the Boko Haram insurgency. The endemic prevalence of violence within society that denies the fullness of life within the country has led the Nigerian government to

appoint judicial commissions of enquiry on the causes of such violence within the nation and recommend ways of curtailing it (Danfulani, 2006:6).

Following the controversial atmosphere among religious and ethnic communities during the colonization and post-Independence eras, the civil war has been attributed to a complexity of issues, relating to the three major cultural, ethnic and political struggles between the Hausa/Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the west and the Igbo the Southeast.

### **Systemic and Symbolic Violence**

The African symbolic expression as used in this paper aimed at doing a critical re-examination of the nature of the violence that erupted in Nigeria as a result of pluralism, identify the different responses and approaches employed by the Church and Government and consequently offer an alternative notion for re-building peaceful co-existence in Nigeria irrespective of the diversities. Linden (2012:2) argues that violence becomes systemic when it is widely accepted as a physical or psychological force employed to respond to a particular violence committed by a group of people. Systemic violence according to Torrance (2013:1) is a form of violence that has become part of a system within a particular community. He further argues that systemic violence can be informed by violence that features religious, ethnic, cultural, social, and political connotations and mostly takes root in remote causes that have links with historically unresolved social and political conflicts (2013:1).

The relevance of systemic violence to the pluralistic context of Nigeria cannot be underestimated. Violence becomes systemic because it is linked to unresolved religious, ethnic, and political conflicts within the religio-cultural and socio-political context of Nigeria.

Nicolaescu (2010:10) defines symbolic violence as a particular line of thought or perception that is imposed to marginalize or dominate a person or group of persons. De Haan (2008:32) on the other hand, argues that symbolic violence is an intentional effort to perpetrate psychological harm against a person or group of persons. According to Arbuckle (2004: xiii) and Kaunda (2015:4), symbolic violence seeks to cause psychological harm by dominating through action or failure of action and can be expressed in language, words, idioms, and concepts. Symbolic violence as defined and described by these scholars is thus relevant to the understanding and practice of violence in Jos because of the following factors:

The quest for political and ethnic recognition among ethnic groups in Nigeria is prevalent. The use of dominant languages to undermine the use of other languages by minority groups seems to have become the order of the day. The use of non-life-giving speeches and threatening letters creates fear and animosity aimed at undermining human dignity. Symbolic violence can be described as the medium

through which the use of religious or cultural language facilitates violence (Kaunda 2015: 5).

## **Effects Of Ethno Religious Conflict In The Pluralistic Context Of Nigeria**

Ethno-religious conflict connotes a sharp disagreement between two religious groups combined with ethnic and cultural intolerance. It is a situation in which two different religious adherents coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds engage in a serious disagreement and opposition in their ideas, opinion, feelings, beliefs and values (Danfulani, 2006: 5). Danfulani and Fwatshak argued that this way of describing religious conflict seems to be the reflection of the ethnoreligious conflict between adherent of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. They further noted that the opposition between the two religions is ethnoreligious because it has the connotation of both ethnicity and culture. The ethnoreligious conflict has continually become a grave concern in the development of Nigeria in all spheres of human life. Most national institutions which are the life wires of the nation have been weakened by this challenge thereby becoming impotent in delivering the expected services to the Nigerian society. One of the marks that define Nigeria is its educational system which is considered the bedrock upon which its national objectives can be achieved. However, the cumulative effects of ethnoreligious conflict seem to have devoured the tenets of the Nigerian educational system. The effects of ethnoreligious conflict can be highlighted post-serious challenges in the realization of Nigerian educational goals and objectives (Ngwoke and Ituma, 2020).

## **Government Approach Towards Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria**

Following the quest to maintain peaceful co-existence in the pluralistic context of Nigeria, the Nigerian government have made attempts to curb factors that marred peace and good living relationship between the different religious, ethnic and political groups in Nigeria. The Nigerian government have employed the utilization of the military and police force as a measure for building bridges of peace in Nigeria. However, it was proved abortive due to religious, ethnic and political sentiments. The military and police forces were accused to have sided with their religious counterparts to fight the other. Furthermore, as a result of the influx of firearms and counterfeit uniforms within the warring points, the military and police lost credibility among warring communities (Krause 2010:49).

Another approach to building and maintaining peaceful co-existence in Nigeria is the declaration of a state of emergency. Danfulani and Fwatshak (2002:252) captured instances in a violent-prone context within Nigeria where the federal government had to declare a state of emergency as an intervention strategy. Examples of states that were victims of such intervention include Plateau, Kaduna, Borno, and Adamawa states (Krause 2010:21).

Judicial Commissions of enquiry were established for dialogical purposes. (Higazi 2011:31). However, Danfulani (2006:6) attributes the failure of the judicial commissions of enquiry aimed at peacebuilding in Jos to the inability of the government to arrest and charge the perpetrators of the violence and to try them in the judicial system where if found guilty they could be sentenced. The warring groups within the local context failed to cooperate with the government but rather protected the wrongdoers within their different communities and ensured that they were not handed over to the authorities to be prosecuted. Higazi (2011:31) has argued that the recommendations from the Commission of Enquiry seemed to exacerbate the violence rather than build bridges of peace.

### **The Place Of Symbols In Africa**

African symbolic hermeneutics is an ongoing perspective within the African milieu that focuses on the African religio-cultural experience as a symbolic medium of communication. This perspective stemmed within the African system of thought on how myths and rituals can be informative and imaginative (Umeogu 2013:113) According to Louis-Dominique Komo, African symbolic hermeneutics is a paradigm in the African system of thought where African cultural experience is considered a medium to express human thought and creativity (2017:81). He adds that African symbolic hermeneutics is a perspective in Africa that explores meaning and symbols relying on African languages and cultural myths, proverbs and rituals (2017:81-82). Tsenay Serequeberhan delineates that African symbolic hermeneutics dwell on African culture and historical experience (1994:7-8). From the foregoing, it is clear that African symbolic hermeneutics is contextual. Although its construction and application can be utilised universally its particularity is within the context of Africa. African symbolic hermeneutics offers an alternative praxis where African religio-cultural symbols can be informative and imaginative while discovering and responding to the reality of life within the African context. African symbolic hermeneutical perspective is inculturation since it seeks culturally related symbols for the expression of human thought and creativity.

In his examination of the power of symbols in culture, Arbuckle (2004:4-6) states that: Symbols are at the centre stage of all cultures and are what give definition and limits to how people behave in a given community and they are not merely signs but mediums through which norms and values are expressed or media that define the way of life of a particular cultural people. According to Ott, it is through these symbols one finds deeper meanings of the African way of life (2000:332). In this sense, the use of African symbolic hermeneutics as symbols becomes relevant because it deals with how African people respond to situations based on the meanings they attached to such symbols. This perception is relevant to the paper because the mission-cultural lens used is an element of African symbolic hermeneutics through which the church's missional identity engages with the culture (2000:332).

In his way, Umeogu states, “symbol in the African philosophy is something, but it’s something for something; that is, something that stands with something, for something and to something. The symbol begins from something and ends towards something for which it is the symbol” (2012: 113). The philosophy of symbolism constitutes African philosophy and represents important and deeper meanings within the religio-cultural experiences of human life within the community. as regards communicative functions. The power of symbols is gotten from their ability to represent something that can effectively communicate meanings and information within African society (2012: 114).

### **The Pyam African Symbolic Expression**

The use of symbolic expression within the Pyam ethnic group is entrenched in their system of thought which provides an enabling environment for peaceful co-existence in the context of plurality. Rooted in their system of thought is the idea that the human person comes before any other affiliation.

The Pyem system of thought takes root in the word *Ba-Pyem*, which is the name of the language of the Pyem people through which ideas, feelings, requests and knowledge are communicated. Symbolically, this reveals how language constitutes the way of life within any given community (Blench 2010:2). The Pyem ethnic group expresses ideas, requests and knowledge through its distinctive language and culture (Daspan 2002:1). Blench (2010:1) adds that language among the Pyem ethnic group serves as a medium for expressing matters that concern social, religious and cultural aspects of the community. Accordingly, the *Ba-Pyem* language of the Pyem ethnic group constitutes an integral part of their cultural experience, especially in times of prosperity and adversity (Daspan 2002:1-2).

It can thus be argued that since the Pyem notion of peacebuilding is dialogical, language serves an important role in communicating with warring communities. In other words, *Ba-Pyam*, like any other language, cannot be divorced from the culture of its people. Through this cultural symbol, this present study seeks to utilize the Pyam notion of *Do ta hoi na ram* which means “humanity is more than land” to translate the penal substitution theory in such a way that it can offer a religio-cultural understanding for peacebuilding in the violent context of Jos. Hospitality and tolerance are part of what informs the Pyam system of thought.

The widespread knowledge about Pyam hospitality and tolerance is rooted in the religious and cultural understanding that all of humanity comes from the same source (Machunga 1964). This paper argues that although there could be other ways of justifying this presupposition, the peaceful co-existence between the Christians and Muslims among the Pyam ethnic group speaks volumes about this system of thought (Temple 1965:120). The religio-cultural experience that informs this system of thought denotes that love within the Pyem worldview is supreme (Daspan 2012).



## **The Pyam Notion Of *Do Ta Chalai Ram* Humanity Is More Important Than Land**

Following the Pyam symbolic expression and the connection of their system of thought to the land and language, the fundamental notion that this paper explored is rooted in the symbolic expression *Do ta hoi na ram* which if translated in English means Humanity is better than land (Daspan, 2012: 12). Pyam ethnic group as highlighted is among the minority tribes in Plateau State. However, migrants from other Local Government Areas and people from other states are currently residing in the land. Currently, it is composed of more than ten tribes. Furthermore, it was a missionary centre from the United Kingdom which resulted in the establishment of premier mission institutions that have produced some of the elites not only in Plateau but the whole of Nigeria. The hospitality the Pyam people are known for raises lots of questions about the motivation or secret behind their welcoming attitude (Temple 1965: 123).

The Pyem ethnic group is popularly known for their hospitality and tolerance. This is evident in the way they accommodated many other ethnic groups within the plateau state of Nigeria (Temple, 1965: 120). Machunga, (1964) noted that due to their hospitality, tolerance and love welcomed and received Christian Western missionaries especially under the Sudan United Mission (SUM) and Islam adherents from the far Northern part of Nigeria. Consequently, Christianity and Islam become predominantly the two religions practised among the Pyem ethnic group. Gilbert Diche (1991) noted that despite the religious differences among the Pyem ethnic group for more than a hundred years they have lived harmoniously. This could be attributed to their beliefs and practices which focus more on their understanding of God about life and humanity.

The welcome and hospitality offered to adherents of the two religions stemmed from the Pyam African religious and cultural *adage do ta chalai ram* which means “land must give way to humanity”. Harvey Sindima (1995) describes this cultural practice as ‘social bondedness’ enshrine in respect for human dignity. The cultural experience of the Pyam people seems to have empowered them to resist threats that deny the fullness of life. It is in light of this that Laurent Magesa delineates that the African religio-cultural experience like the Pyam people perceives religion in functionalist terms as being at the service of humanity to help realize abundant life (Magesa 1997). The Pyam African cosmology presupposes a distinctive way of understanding and interpreting reality. It is unique in the sense that their ethnic disposition seems to advance beyond the triumphalist and competitive tendencies noticed within the practices of Christianity and Islam in Jos that have led to colossal loss of lives and properties.

Although more of this religio-cultural representation of the Pyam people is reflected in the section that explained the Pyam notion of peaceful co-existence yet it can be argued that the hospitality and love expressed within the African religio-cultural experience of the people even before the coming of Christianity and Islam in the locality connotes that the Pyam

communities are peace-loving. Therefore, the hospitality and love expressed within the cosmology of the Pyam become favourable when applying the colonial ethics of conflict resolution through a pluriverse perspective. This approach can contribute towards neutralizing division and bigotry in a pluralistic context such as Nigeria.

The Pyam religio-cultural experiences in connection to the symbolic expression *Do ta chalai ram* affirms the Pyam perception that all forms of violence (such as domestic violence, sexism, verbal etc.) as being injurious to the humanity of others.

The Pyam notion offers as distinctive as it corresponds with the African notion of humanness as a common ground irrespective of the pluralistic nature of Nigeria. Humanity supersedes any other social construct and human treatment should be carried out based on the commonness that is entrenched in the symbolic expression of the Pyam system of thought. Scholars have warned that a failure to take cognizance of indigenous perspectives on reconciliation and conflict resolution has the unfortunate potential to perpetuate conflict as culture functions as a “control box” (Tafese, 2016). They stress that in the traditional African system of thought, there is a locus for the unification of the African people’s thoughts and ideas of life. Tafese (2016) highlights that indigenous knowledge for reconciliation and conflict resolution is an accumulated knowledge that emerged within the indigenous religio-cultural experience for maintaining harmonious relationships in the community. According to Tutu (2012), indigenous knowledge for conflict resolution takes root in the understanding of humanity as being ultimate in the quest for reconciliation in the African polity.

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