

## THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS INCLUSION IN THE NIGERIAN ARMED FORCES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN ISLAM AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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### Abstract

*The paper explores the religious relevance within the Nigerian Armed Forces, specifically comparing the influence of Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). The paper examines how these religions contribute to the moral and ethical framework of military personnel and address the spiritual needs of soldiers. Through a comparative analysis, the paper aims to shed light on the similarities and differences between Islam and ATR in their application within the military context, emphasizing the importance of religious tolerance, understanding, and the need for an inclusive framework that would accommodate diverse religious followers within the armed forces. The methodology used is qualitative. Both primary especially observation and secondary data were used in the study. The researcher concluded that African religion and Islam have many things in common within the context of worship, but there are dissimilarities in certain aspects of their practices, notably the use of intermediaries, functionaries, songs, drums, symbols and places of worship. Findings of this study revealed that there is lack of official recognition of ATR by the Military and there is disunity among the members of ATR in the Military among others.*

**Keywords:** Religious relevance, Nigerian Armed Forces, Islam, African Traditional Religion,

### 1.0 Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of individuals, shaping their values, beliefs, and behavior. In the context of the Nigerian Armed Forces, the relevance of religious inclusion is an important aspect to consider due to the religious diversity within the military. This paper aims to analyze the significance of Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) within the Nigerian Armed Forces. It explores how these religions contribute to the moral and ethical framework of military personnel, their role in addressing the spiritual needs of soldiers, and the importance of religious tolerance within the armed forces. The Nigerian Armed Forces refers to the military forces of Nigeria, composed of several branches: the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Navy, and Nigerian Air Force. When interviewed, Gen. Mustapha stated that the Armed Forces are responsible for safeguarding the nation's territorial integrity, defending its citizens, and providing support in times of national emergencies, among other key roles. The following is an overview of each branch:

1. Nigerian Army: The Nigerian Army is the largest component of the Nigerian Armed Forces. Its primary mission is to protect Nigeria's sovereignty, maintain internal security, and defend the

country against external threats. The army also assists civil authorities in maintaining law and order, tackling insurgency, and conducting peacekeeping operations abroad (Mustapha 2020).

2. Nigerian Navy: The Nigerian Navy is responsible for protecting Nigeria's maritime interests, enforcing maritime laws, and ensuring the security of Nigeria's waters. The navy carries out various operations, including surveillance, patrols, and defense against piracy, oil theft, and other maritime crimes. It also contributes to peacekeeping efforts and conducts search and rescue missions.

3. Nigerian Air Force: The Nigerian Air Force is tasked with defending Nigerian airspace, providing air support to ground forces, and conducting air surveillance and reconnaissance. It plays a vital role in counterinsurgency operations, border patrols, and maintaining national security. The Air Force also contributes to humanitarian missions, disaster response, and peacekeeping operations (Danfulani 2001).

The Nigerian Armed Forces collaborate closely with other security agencies, such as the Nigerian Police Force and State Security Service, to ensure the safety and stability of the nation. They cooperate with regional and international partners in efforts to combat terrorism, promote peace and security, and participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, it's important to recognize the efforts of the men and women who serve in the Nigerian Armed Forces. They undergo rigorous training and dedicate their lives to protecting the country and its citizens. Their commitment and sacrifices contribute to Nigeria's national defense and overall security.

## **2.0 The Concept of Religion**

Emara (11) opines that religion is an elusive and imprecise concept. It is difficult to define with precision and objectivity because it is emotion laden. Relatively (Ekeopora, 1996). observed that the word religion though lacks a universally acceptable definition is very relevant in man's life on earth. It is rooted in Latin words: *relegere* (to unite or link) and *religious* (relationship or bond). It therefore means a link or a relationship between man and a Being that exists which is greater than man. Man and religion are inseparable in all human cultures. Moreover, (Danfulani, 2001) explained that religion has been variously defined as a body of truths, laws and rites by which a man is subordinated to transcendent being.

### **2.1 The Concept of African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

The concept of African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous **religious** beliefs and practices that have been followed by various African communities for centuries. ATR is diverse and varied, reflecting the rich cultural and spiritual traditions present across the African continent (Rawl 12). ATR key elements and beliefs are as follows:

1. Ancestral Worship: ATR often emphasizes the veneration and communication with ancestors who are believed to have the ability to influence the lives of their descendants. Ancestors are seen as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual realm.
2. Connection with Nature: ATR recognizes the spiritual presence and power within nature. It often involves reverence for natural elements such as mountains, rivers, trees, and animals. Nature spirits or deities are believed to reside within these elements, and their worship and respect are integral to ATR practices (Emra 2007).
3. Rituals and Ceremonies: ATR involves a wide range of rituals, ceremonies, and practices to connect with the spiritual realm and seek blessings or assistance from deities and ancestors. These rituals may include offerings, sacrifices, libations, divination, and dances.
4. Community and Ancestors' Influence: ATR places a strong emphasis on communal life and the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. Ancestors are believed to have a

continued presence and influence, and their guidance and blessings are sought for various aspects of life, including important ceremonies, decision-making, and problem-solving.

5. Oral Tradition and Sacred Knowledge: ATR relies heavily on oral transmission of religious knowledge through storytelling, proverbs, songs, and myths. Elders and religious leaders play a crucial role in preserving and passing on this sacred knowledge to future generations.

6. Diversity and Adaptability: ATR is not a homogeneous belief system but rather a collective term that encompasses countless local and regional variations. Practices, gods, and beliefs vary based on geography, ethnic groups, and cultural context. ATR has shown adaptability over time, incorporating elements from other religions, such as Islam or Christianity, in some instances. It's important to remember that ATR is a living and dynamic faith, and its understanding and expressions may differ from one community to another. It plays a significant role in shaping African identity, culture, and worldview, coexisting alongside other religious traditions practiced on the continent (Nanji, 2021).

## 2.2 The Concept of Islam

Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion that originated in the 7th century CE in the Arabian Peninsula. Its central belief is the submission to the will of the Almighty Allah. Islam is based on the teachings found in the Quran, which Muslims believe to be the word of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (SWT) through the angel Gabriel (A.S) (Ahmed, 2012). Some of the fundamental teachings of Islam are as follows:

1. Monotheism: Islam strictly adheres to the belief in and worship of one God, known as Allah. Muslims affirm the oneness and uniqueness of Allah (SWT), rejecting the concept of any partners or intermediaries.
2. Five Pillars of Islam: These are the foundational acts of worship that form the core of a Muslim's religious practice. They consist of:
  - a. *Shahadah*: The declaration of faith, affirming that there is no god but Allah (SWT) and Muhammad (SAW) is His messenger (Ahmad (2016).
  - b. *Salah*: The ritual prayer performed five times a day facing the Kaaba in Mecca.
  - c. *Zakat*: Giving a portion of one's wealth to support the less fortunate and fulfill societal needs.
  - d. *Sawm*: Observing the fast during the month of Ramadan from dawn to sunset.
  - e. *Hajj*: Making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a Muslim's lifetime, if physically and financially capable.
3. Prophet Muhammad (SAW): Muslims believe that Muhammad (SAW) is the final Prophet sent by Allah (SWT), and they revere him as the ideal exemplar of how to live a righteous life. His teachings and practices, as recorded in the Hadith, serve as important sources of guidance for Muslims.
4. Qur'an: Muslims consider the Qur'an as the literal word of Allah, revealed to Muhammad (SAW) over a period of 23 years. It serves as the ultimate authority for Muslims' faith, worship, moral and legal guidance, and spiritual reflections (Ahmad, 2016).
5. Day of Judgment: Islam teaches belief in the afterlife and a final day of judgment, where individuals will be held accountable for their actions in this world. It emphasizes the importance of leading a righteous and just life, with the hope of attaining Paradise and avoiding Hell.
6. Universal Brotherhood and Social Justice: Islam promotes the concepts of unity, equality, and social justice. It values compassion, kindness, humility, honesty, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or social status. It's important to note that Islam encompasses a wide range of interpretations and practices across various cultures and regions worldwide.

## **2.0 Practice of Religion in the Nigerian Armed Forces**

The practice of religion in the Nigerian Armed Forces is guided by principles of religious freedom and respect for diversity. Nigeria is a multi-religious country, with a significant population that adheres to Islam, Christianity, and traditional indigenous beliefs. The Armed Forces recognizes this diversity and ensures that its members can exercise their religious beliefs in accordance with their faith. Both the Nigerian Constitution and the Armed Forces Act guarantee the freedom of religion and prohibit discrimination based on religious beliefs. This means that members of the armed forces have the right to practice their religion and observe religious rituals, as long as it does not interfere with their duties or infringe upon the rights of others (Mustapha, 2020).

The Armed Forces provides facilities and support for the religious needs of its personnel. Military bases and units often have dedicated spaces for prayer and worship, such as chapels, mosques, or designated areas for religious services. Religious officers are appointed within the military to offer guidance and assistance to members of their respective faith communities. Chaplains and Imams play a significant role in providing spiritual support, counseling, and religious ceremonies, ensuring that the religious needs of personnel are met. These religious leaders are responsible for promoting religious tolerance and fostering a climate of respect among the various religious groups within the Armed Forces (Mustapha, 2020).

Throughout their service, military personnel are encouraged to practice their faith while also upholding the military's code of conduct, discipline, and professionalism. They are expected to show respect for the beliefs and practices of others, regardless of their own religious affiliation. The Nigerian Armed Forces recognizes the importance of promoting unity and religious harmony within its ranks. It endeavors to maintain a strong sense of camaraderie and cohesion, transcending religious differences, to effectively carry out its mission of protecting the nation and its citizens. Overall, the practice of religion in the Nigerian Armed Forces is guided by principles of religious freedom, respect for diversity, and the need to maintain the unity and effectiveness of the military (Ahmet, 2012).

## **3.0 The Influence of Islamic Moral and Ethical Value in Nigerian Armed Forces**

Islamic moral and ethical values have a significant influence on the Nigerian armed forces, as the country is predominantly Muslim and Islam plays a prominent role in shaping societal norms and behaviors. One of the key principles in Islamic ethics is the concept of "*Taqwa*," which emphasizes self-discipline, righteousness, and the fear of God. These principles guide the behavior and actions of Muslim military personnel, promoting a sense of integrity, honesty, and accountability in their service (Ahmet, 2012).

Islam also places a strong emphasis on justice, fairness, and compassion, which are essential values in the armed forces. Nigerian Muslim soldiers are often trained to prioritize the protection of innocent lives, uphold justice on and off the battlefield, and treat prisoners of war with respect and fairness. Moreover, Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of unity, cooperation, and camaraderie within the armed forces. Muslim military personnel are encouraged to work together as a team, offer support to their comrades, and foster a strong sense of brotherhood and sisterhood amongst themselves.

Islamic ethical teachings also address the issue of corruption, a problem that can undermine the effectiveness and trust within any military institution. Islamic principles strongly condemn any form of corruption, bribery, or deception, stressing the importance of honesty, transparency, and the proper use of authority and resources. It is worth noting that interpretations of Islamic moral and ethical values can vary among individuals and groups, and not all might adhere to these principles equally. Additionally, the Nigerian armed forces, like any other institution, may face

challenges in fully implementing these ideals due to various factors such as systemic issues, personal motivations, and external influences (Ahmet 2012).

Human characteristics of Islamic ethics undoubtedly has influence on the military especially on the military discipline and loyalty as Islamic ethics improve human relations and shield civilizational constructs with metaphysical ramparts of decency and order. The several characteristics of Islamic ethics are exemplified in the message of Qur'an as revealed to Prophet Muhammad and as inscribed in his Sunnah Nanji, A. (1991). Major characteristics of Islamic ethics include bravery, consideration, experience, fairness, justice, honesty and the pursuit of knowledge. Each ethic is discussed in detail below, along with evidence and reference from the Qur'an and Sunnah:

Bravery Courage is required for those working in the realms of military. A courageous soul will survive the incredibly wild growth of military (Rawls, 1999) and subsequent influences on the development of modern Muslims life ways. Military activity requires much effort and risk taking, including failures and even harm when one is striving to achieve desirable outcomes. Hence, a brave, courageous attitude helps armed forces overcome confrontations with numerous challenges. The brave character is mentioned numerous times in Qur'an with respect to protecting lives and properties. Muhammad (SAW) set an excellent example of noble manners and merits, including courage. Qur'an presents the Prophet as the best of moral role models:

You are surely of a sublime character, and do act by a sublime pattern of conduct (Qur'an 68:4).

His valor was a byword among his contemporaries because he gallantly stood against the greatest odds while enduring painful injuries and still victoriously fought on to overcome and afterwards show mercy to stone-hearted ignorant Arabian infidels (Emara, 2007). He endured pain and sufferings for thirteen long years in Makkah while inviting people to Islam, without ever being intimidated by the sheer force. The Prophet (SAW) never succumbed to fear or threats in extremely difficult situations and crises. He put his full trust in Allah and depended on Him alone (Syed, 10). He accepted the decrees of his Lord, was satisfied with Allah's support, and trusted Allah's promise. Such bravery also applies to those working as military who should be courageous enough to stand up and protect knowledge from unethical applications (Pollock, 2007). When conducting military activities or operations, the personnel should always have faith and rely only on Allah (SWT), who said:

Do not fear! Surely, I am with you, hearing and seeing" (Taha, 20:46); and "As for those who believe and do good, righteous deeds, and have humbled themselves before their Lord, they are the companions of Paradise; they will abide there-in." (Qur'an 11:23)

In summary, Islamic moral and ethical values have a significant influence on the Nigerian armed forces. These values promote integrity, justice, fairness, compassion, unity, and oppose to corruption. By incorporating Islamic principles into their actions, Muslim military personnel strive to uphold a standard of conduct that reflects the teachings of their faith and contributes to the overall functioning of the armed forces.

### **3.1 Challenges Fac Muslims in Practicing their Faith within a Military Context.**

While Nigerian Muslims make up a significant portion of the population and serve in the armed forces, there can be challenges they face in fully practicing their faith within a military context. Here are some of the common challenges:

1. Prayer accommodations: The Islamic faith requires Muslims to pray five times a day at specified times. However, in a military setting, operational demands and rigid schedules can make it challenging for Muslim service members to find appropriate and dedicated spaces for prayer. It can be challenging to ensure that prayer times align with military routines and deployments.

2. Dietary restrictions: Muslims adhere to certain dietary restrictions, such as consuming halal food, which requires meat to be prepared according to Islamic guidelines. In a military environment, the availability of *halal* food options can be limited, particularly during deployments or in remote areas. This can make it difficult for Muslim service members to adhere strictly to their dietary requirements.
3. Burial rites: Islam has specific burial rites that involve timely and respectful handling of the deceased, including prompt burial. In certain military contexts, such as combat zones or areas with limited resources, arranging for the appropriate Islamic burial practices can be challenging due to logistical constraints and time pressures.
4. Accommodation of religious attire: Muslim service members may face challenges related to the wearing of religious attire, such as hijabs or beards. Military dress codes, uniform regulations, or safety and hygiene protocols might conflict with religious requirements, leading to potential tension between adherence to military standards and religious observance.
5. Cultural sensitivity and understanding: Sometimes, there may be a lack of awareness or understanding about Islamic practices and traditions within the military hierarchy or among fellow service members. This lack of familiarity can lead to misunderstandings, discrimination, or barriers in accommodating Muslim service members' religious needs.
6. Balancing military duties and religious obligations: The demanding and unpredictable nature of military service can sometimes create conflicts between military duties and religious obligations. Muslim service members may struggle to balance their responsibilities in the armed forces with their commitment to practicing their faith, especially during times of intense training, deployments, or combat operations.

#### **4.0 African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the Nigerian Armed Forces**

Nigerian Armed Forces as a body did not officially recognize African Traditional Religion the way it recognized Islam and Christianity. There are only three places of worship that are for now existing in all the military Barracks in Nigeria. These are the mosques for Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Churches for the Christians. The personnel that are manning these worshipping centres comprise both the commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers, depending on the size of the Mosque or Church. Officers and men of the A.T.R faithful do not enjoy any public holidays of their own religion, unlike their counterparts Muslims and Christians where they go for Christmas, Easter, Sallah and *Eid-el Maulud* breaks. No single shrine in all the Barracks and they are not entitle to go for their own pilgrimage if at all they have, the way Muslims and Christians are released and sponsored by the Military to go Saudi Arabia for Hajj and Jerusalem respectively.

Another obstacle that the officers and soldiers of the A.T.R faithful confront in the military according to Commander (Rev.) DP Bobbo (RTD) is lack of strong African Traditional Religion Organisation outside the military that will fight for their rights. Example, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is an umbrella body of all Christians in Nigeria that is concern with the promotion and protection of the common objectives and interests of all Christians and has its branches in all the states of the federation with National Headquarters in Abuja. So also, *Jama'atu Nasril Islam* (JNI) function for all Islamic faithful in Nigeria with the sultan of Sokoto as the National leader. These organizations do assist immensely to their followers among the members of the military in cash and in kind.

#### **4.1 Challenges Facing the ATR Faithful in Practicing their Faith within a Military Context**

Nigerian African Traditional Religion (ATR) faithful may encounter specific challenges when practicing their faith within a military context due to the prevailing dominance of other religious traditions and the lack of formal recognition and accommodations for ATR. Here are some common challenges:

1. Lack of recognition: African Traditional Religion is often not officially recognized or accommodated within the military structure. The military typically revolves around the Abrahamic religions, such as Islam and Christianity, which can lead to an underrepresentation of ATR faithful and a lack of understanding or accommodation of their religious needs.
2. Rituals and observances: ATR involves various rituals, ceremonies, and traditional practices that are essential to the faith. However, the military's rigorous schedules, code of conduct, and operational demands may not provide adequate time or space for these rituals to be performed, which can hinder the ability of ATR faithful to fully practice their faith (Latifa, 2009).
3. Ritual objects and attire: ATR often utilizes specific objects, symbols, or attire in religious ceremonies and practices. However, military regulations and dress codes may not allow for the use or display of these objects and attire, potentially restricting ATR faithful from expressing their religious beliefs openly.
4. Discrimination and misunderstanding: A lack of awareness and understanding about ATR within the military hierarchy and among fellow service members can lead to discrimination or misunderstandings. ATR faithful may face prejudices, stereotypes, or a lack of acceptance due to the unfamiliarity and misconceptions surrounding their beliefs and practices (Latifa, 2009).
5. Access to spiritual leaders and resources: ATR faithful may find it challenging to access spiritual leaders, traditional healers, or practitioners who can guide and support them in their religious journey. This lack of access to community resources and spiritual guidance can make it more difficult for ATR faithful to sustain their religious practices and connect with their faith community.
6. Balancing military obligations and ATR practices: The demanding and structured nature of military life can create conflicts between military obligations and ATR practices, particularly during training, deployments, or critical missions. ATR faithful may struggle to navigate and reconcile their military duties while maintaining their religious commitments (Commander DP Bobbo in an interview).

Addressing these challenges requires increased recognition, awareness, and accommodation of ATR within the military framework. It involves fostering an inclusive environment that respects the diversity of religious beliefs and practices, ensuring that ATR faithful have the necessary resources, access to spiritual leaders, and opportunities to observe their rituals within the military context.

## **5.0 Comparative Analysis**

Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) are distinct belief systems with some similarities and differences. The following are some of their similarities and differences:

### **Similarities:**

1. Belief in a Higher Power: Both Islam and ATR acknowledge the existence of a divine or spiritual entity. In Islam, this is Allah (SWT), while ATR recognizes various deities and spirits linked to nature and ancestral energies.
2. Spiritual Rituals and Practices: Both Islam and ATR involve rituals and practices. In Islam, these include regular prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and the Hajj-pilgrimage to Makkah. In ATR, rituals may involve offerings, sacrifices, and ceremonies to honor ancestors or nature spirits.

3. Sense of Community: Both Islam and ATR emphasize the importance of community and communal life. Places of worship, such as Mosques in Islam and shrines in ATR, serve as gathering places for believers to worship, share experiences, and support one another.

#### **Differences:**

1. Origin and Scriptures: Islam originated in the 7th century CE in Arabia and is based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), as recorded in the Qur'an. In contrast, ATR is a collection of diverse indigenous beliefs and practices that have evolved over centuries without a centralized scripture.

2. Monotheism vs. Polytheism: Islam is a monotheistic faith, believing in the oneness of Allah (SWT). ATR, on the other hand, encompasses a range of beliefs that may include polytheism, animism, and the veneration of nature, spirits or ancestors.

3. Formal Structure: Islam has a well-organized and formalized structure, with Mosques, prayer times, religious leaders like Imams, and an established legal system (*Shari'ah*). In contrast, ATR lacks a centralized structure or authority, with rituals, practices, and beliefs varying across communities and regions.

4. Outreach and Proselytization: Islam is a globally significant religion with a strong emphasis on outreach and proselytization, seeking to spread its teachings to people of other faiths. ATR, being rooted in indigenous cultures, is generally not actively seeking converts outside its communities.

5. Moral and Ethical Codes: Islam has an extensive moral and ethical code outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad). ATR, on the other hand, generally derives moral and ethical principles from cultural norms, communal values, and ancestral teachings (Gen. Mustapha, 2020).

#### **6.0 The Possibility of Recognizing ATR in the Nigerian Armed Forces**

While Nigeria recognizes and respects religious diversity, it's true that African Traditional Religion (ATR) might not have an official status within the Nigerian Armed Forces due to its unique nature. The Nigerian Armed Forces predominantly recognizes Islam and Christianity as the major religions within its ranks. This is largely due to historical, cultural, and demographic reasons. However, it's important to note that even though ATR might not have an official recognition, the Nigerian Armed Forces and the country as a whole uphold the principles of religious freedom and respect for individual beliefs. This means that members of the armed forces who practice ATR still have the right to privately observe their religious traditions, as long as it does not interfere with their duties or infringe upon the rights of others. The Nigerian Armed Forces also promotes an atmosphere of religious tolerance and respect, encouraging its personnel to appreciate and understand different religious beliefs and practices. This includes respecting the cultural and traditional aspects associated with ATR.

Additionally, the Armed Forces periodically conduct religious events and ceremonies where representatives from various faith communities are invited to participate. While these events may primarily focus on Islam and Christianity, efforts can be made to include representatives or elements of ATR, demonstrating inclusivity and acknowledging the country's diversity. It's essential to recognize the importance of maintaining unity and cohesion within the Armed Forces. The official recognition of specific religions helps in fostering a sense of common identity and shared values among the military personnel. However, this doesn't negate the fact that individuals are still allowed to privately practice their own faith, including African Traditional Religion, within the bounds of the military's general regulations. Promoting religious harmony and respect among different beliefs is a continuous effort, and the Nigerian Armed Forces strive to ensure that all



personnel are treated fairly and respectfully, regardless of their religious affiliation or practices (Latifa, 2009).

## 7.0 Conclusion

While Islam maintains a higher level of uniformity in worship and practices within the Nigerian Armed Forces, the lack of uniformity in African Traditional Religion diminishes its relevance or significance. Both Islam and ATR can offer spiritual guidance and support to soldiers, albeit in different ways. Recognizing and respecting the diversity of religious beliefs within the armed forces remains crucial for maintaining a harmonious and inclusive environment.

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## Interviewees

Commander D.P Bobbo Eastern Naval Command (ENC) Chaplain age 60 on 15 June, 2020.