

New Means in the Post-Pandemic Era Among the NGAS of Plateau State, Nigeria

Rev. Habila Peter Gomos PhD

Dean of Postgraduate Studies, Gindiri Theological Seminary,
(Affiliated to the University of Jos), Plateau State, Nigeria.

Phone number: 08039656396

Email: habilagomos@gmail.com

Abstract

Africans value community living as a source of total well-being and their identity. The pandemic era came and destroyed community living and promoted individualism. Scholars have discussed Coronavirus in the post-pandemic era without referring African communality of the Ngas ethnic group as a case study. There are available new means for the ethnic group to utilize for the reconnection of their lost values. The paper discussed that God is always in control to restore his creation and provides alternative means in the state of this fallen world using the termites' community reconstruction in conversation with Mbiti's African philosophy of commonality as a framework for reconstruction. The work adopted the historical approach method for the collection of the primary source, while the use of relevant books, published works and the internet is used as the secondary source. Conscious of how diverse African cultures are, the paper is limited to the Ngas ethnic group of Nigeria. The paper makes recommendations that commitment to Christianity as well as incorporating elements of African traditional Religion into their daily lives provoked curiosity in the mind of Ngas that the new ideas become a paradigm shift for prospects. The devastating damages by the pandemic become blessings.

Keywords: New means, Ngas, Post-pandemic era, reconstruction.

INTRODUCTION

This piece of work is about the Ngas ethnic group of Plateau State regards commonality and unity of purpose. It discussed new means of life among the People of Ngas in the post-pandemic era. The Ngas are religious people because religion is part of their lives and has a very strong influence on traditional society *vis-à-vis* worldview, the conception of God, ethics, customs, social ceremonies, and, the totality of their belief systems and rituals. Culture and Religion, therefore, are the social, communal, and basic units in the family that is part of the tribe, and a family that neglects the religious observances may endanger the whole tribe. The concerns of religion are those proponents in the life of the community-birth, death, food, health, security, counsel, etc. and there are pieces of evidence that religion and culture are seen virtually in all aspects of their life.¹ These elements of Ngas traditional religion have drastic effects on the belief system of the people group. Similarly, Geoffrey Parrinder in his book *Religion in Africa* pointed out that religion permeates all of life in traditional societies and that is often difficult to separate the sacred from the secular.²

The Pandemic era came and destroyed the communal life of Ngas People and promoted individualism and rendered it as if it is God's wrath on them without hope. The work, therefore, seeks to explain some means that can enhance commonality in society which can positively influence the life of the church.

The pandemic problem through the coronavirus has destroyed hope in the life of Ngas as the People are cut off from each other from distance, they do not sit near each other nor with a handshake or other forms of relationship. Families remained far from each other and religious gatherings and activities have proven to be hotbeds for the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. All these have come and destroyed the entire culture and tradition giving a new thought that life is better in individualism than commonality.

This research aims to identify the disruption by covid-19, how it has affected the Ngas communality, and suggest new means that are still available for the Ngas group to reconstruct their communal life.

This piece of work used historical data as primary as well as a review of relevant literature and the observable experiences and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic as methodology. The use of the examples of the termites' community for reconstruction and rebuilding has helped made it available for reconstruction as a lens for new means.

Mbiti's theory of African communality and the *UBUNTU* concept was used as the theoretical framework.

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE NGAS OF PLATEAU STATE.

The origin of Ngas people, like most ethnic groups in Nigeria today, is lost in myths; therefore, divergent opinions are quite rampant when considering their origin. Captain H.D. Foulkes, one of the first European visitors to *Yil Ngas* admitted that, "The Ngas evince no curiosity about themselves and in the absence of traditions; one must have recourse to outside arguments in the endeavour to piece together their history."³ This means that Ngas did not migrate from outside *Yil Ngas* to the present area. However, they claim a common tradition of migrating from the East, which has been identified with Yemen in the Middle East."⁴

The first wave of migrants made for the protection of the hills, founding such hilltop city-states as Pan and Wokkos, Tuwan and Garram. Latter migrants colonized the Per in turn splits apart after a quarrel within its ruling family; one section stayed put and the other moved out to find the city-state of Kabwir.⁵

Again, history has it that,

A migration from Bornu is impossible...the Ngas migrated somewhere north of their present home and that identification with Bornu came later...when it seemed attractive to identify with a powerful but conveniently

remote state known to be at war with the Sokoto Caliphate⁶.

All these are efforts made to trace the evolution of the complex divergences. However, Goshit averred outside migration theory, that the Ngas along with the Ngizim, Ngasar and other pre-Kanuri inhabitants of Bornu must have come from Kanem living Bornu around c.1100-1350 A.D.

However, the Ngas are indigenous people of Pankshin and Kanke Local Government Areas of Plateau State, Nigeria. The Ngas are also indigenous in Bogoro and T/Balewa areas of Bauchi State.

DESCRIPTION OF COMMUNAL LIVING AMONG THE NGAS OF PLATEAU STATE.

The promotion and enhancement of communality are demonstrated through various avenues in Ngas culture and tradition. The community cannot be separated Ngas life and "Communality is a moral value since good conduct is a basic requirement of human beings; if the order, harmony and equilibrium are to be maintained." ⁷ It is the tool by which the unity of the People stands. Thus, they are seen and practised in the following:

1. Festivals.

The Ngas religion has several festivals and each of them has its deity and masquerades. Deities of each festival are always kept in shrines or special houses in homes as religion and culture are geared towards community life.

Ngas frowned at any practice of religion and culture considered to be individual, and go for communal one, and they emphasized and highly cherished community living as an indigenous value. This is because the promotion and enhancement of oneness is the totality of their life, therefore, this is demonstrated through various avenues in Ngas culture and they help in building the efforts of the community consciously among themselves. The unity of Ngas religion is of

uttermost importance, it is a religious value in that the order, harmony, and equilibrium in the universe and society are believed to be divinely established and the obligation to maintain them is religious.

2. Social family system (*Gantang khi nkarang mwa*)

This system is an extended family which is a combination of blood relations within a big and small family. The gathering of the blood relation (*mwal na mwa khi mal na mwa*) gives room for identifying each other within the family and training the family members to remain smart and hardworking blood relations for future lives and to discourage laziness and the loss of blood relations. The family members, therefore, promote communality among themselves by following the family-accepted rules and norms and any misbehaviour is punished accordingly. The leader of each family ensures that sensitization regarding the welfare of other members of the family and family rules and regulations are highly observed and enforced.

3. Rendering Help to one another

Caring and sharing by helping one another in Ngas culture are usually emphasized and encouraged in all ramifications of life. Usually, an adage that said *ter ka zim khi taposhak pi tong zuum khi met pokin* which means taking care and helping each other is for progress. There are various and diverse ways notable in helping one another as follows:

- i. *Mar sar*-a system where a group of people work for each other in turns.
- ii. *Mar mos*-a club or summoned group to work for each other in turns.
- iii. *Mar ngolong*-assistance rendered to the King or head of the community.
- iv. *Mar kwem*-Assistance rendered for courtship/engagement.
- v. *Mar toro/nam*- working to be remunerated, that is a club or group organized for purpose of assisting the members in money matters and sometimes meat of an animal.

4. Indigenous courts of Law to enhance community life.

The Ngas have indigenous courts of law which are sometimes under the headship of chiefs or kings who are surrounded by elders of repute who are historically knowledgeable and capable of handling matters above nuclear and extended family capability called *pi gol pokin khi deskaam mwa*. They handle various cases and corresponding disciplinary measures. They are expected to have the final say over issues speaking the truth of all matters to each other. Plotting against true judgment is never expected but disciplines are made in love remembering that the divinities are watching all moves.⁸

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE OF THE NGAS OF PLATEAU STATE.

The Pandemic acronym COVID-19 means Costads for 'Corona', 'Vi' for Virus, and 'D' for Disease. The infirmity was referred to in 2019.⁹ The World Health Organization on the other hand had declared its acronym meaning that it is a highly infectious plague called Corona Virus that has plagued the World population over the month from December in the year 2019 till date.

There is a clarion call to all countries of the World to engage in various measures to comply with coronavirus safety rules and regulations such as physical distance and avoidance of handshake, social distancing some meters away, constant hand washing with soap, regular use of face mask and always remaining indoor without much communication with much other humanity and so on¹⁰ The far-reaching effect has affected physical and social distancing with massive lockdown measures that have thwarted and rubbished communal effort of Ngas community in diverse ways as follows:

1. The physical closeness and togetherness which usually is a source of spiritual solidarity in the life of Ngas people has now come with a high risk of spread and infection and therefore stopped. Older People, young Children and the sick among other vulnerable People are more at risk for serious complications and death.

2. Everybody was advised to keep away from all social gathering like festivals of mostar, moslun, moswon, etc.; ceremonies like marriages, birthdays, naming, dedications, and thanksgiving which brings thousands of People for public breaking, events and rituals have been cancelled across the state, country and the globe at large.
3. Religious gatherings like corporate prayers and Sunday worships services were obstructed and had serious restrictions, discouraging and deprivation of People who do wish to go and congregate with each other were stopped. This means there was a shift from public to private worship because these religious gatherings that were stopped had proven to be hotbeds for outbreaks of the pandemic. Many Churches used online worship services and other virtual approaches. Those without or with poor internet ended up in poor or nothing in fellowship.
4. Evangelism which is the great commission of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the visitations aimed at the propagation of the gospel to others among families, and organizations like hospitals, schools, Prisons or correctional centres were stopped.
5. Wearing face masks became emphatic and imperative in the lives of people and it helped many disgruntle elements to sell some poisonous and infected materials which affected the general health of People as well as some used it in disguise and act the wrong path of sinful life.
6. Among several of these consequences, the laws to have complied and they were. For example, social isolation has confirmed psychological effects. There were also many difficulties in accessing food or good food which led to nutritional problems and other lack of physical exercise since People were kept indoors.
7. The pandemic came with trauma and the death of many People of different Religions. The Ngas Traditional Religion is not an exception.

JOHN MBITI AND AFRICAN COMMUNALITY.

Humanity and religion are age mates and they are part and parcel of each other and so they complement each other; religion is capable of making the whole life and the activity of Man. John S Mbiti underscored the important beliefs and sense of the community among indigenous Africans where he says no individual can stay without the other. Whatever happens to the other happens to all and so the individual can say “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”.¹¹ Like the Yoruba Culture, this belief promotes not only communality, but justice and peace in Ngas society and it prepares the ground and influences the teachings of the church in a positive way.¹²

This explained why Mbiti emphatically asserts that:

In traditional life, the individual does not exist alone except corporately. He owes the existence of other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce an individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group...Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.¹³

He strongly advocated communality in African spheres and helms of life; and advanced discussions that African religion belongs to the People. He further asserts that:

This is clear that the individual cannot have the decision overall no matter how good such a decision is but the community's decision is overruled and dictates all of life. This tells of the inbuilt belonging of Religion to its entirety. The whole scenario centres on all the activities that spotted oneness through the community where ever an African found himself because he goes to work, sleep, and eventually dies with it. Even if he cut off from his people for one reason or the other, he

hardly abandoned his African culture. Again Mbiti on such aspect posited that:

Since African Religion belongs to the People, no individual member of the social concern can stand and reject the whole of his People. Even if the individual will mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people, even if the individual is converted to another Religion, this should not mean abandoning his African culture altogether. Where there is no real conflict between Africa Religion and other Religions, the converts retain much of their cultural and religious background as long as he remains within the traditional set-up of life.¹⁴

This is similar to *ubuntu* an African concept of peaceful communality. "The word is a derivation from the Bantu Languages of East, Central Horn and southern Africa".¹⁵ The word posits in the Zulu of South Africa to refer to as 'personhood'. It is not unique to the Zulu, but other African ethnic groups used it as the essence of humanity to look at the positive aspect of 'manhood' or 'personhood'. The concept cannot be understood from the same perspective as the Western perception. The Shona of Zimbabwe called it *unhu*, in Botswana and Lesotho they called it *botho*, in Malawi, and Zaire is of the same understanding in different pronunciations.¹⁶ *Ubuntu* is the direct opposite of conflict in action. This opposite of conflict now is peace and the practice of conflict eventually is never in agreement with 'personhood'. Peace which denotes togetherness become universally an aspect of welcome by African society and discards conflicting ideas, beliefs, rituals, and other rites which capable of disintegrating African People. Conflict can be seen in cultural differences in history whether locally or internationally.¹⁷ *Ubuntu* also gives emphasis to brotherhood or 'personhood' in a sense of equality of human being and a sense of shared destiny and fate.¹⁸ Bishop Desmond Tutu¹⁹ declared that:

Africans have a thing called UBUNTU; it is about the essence of being human, and it is part of the gift that Africa is going to give to the World. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, and being willing to go that extra mile for the sake of others. We believe that a person is a person through other persons; that my humanity is caught up and bound up in yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms, and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in the community, in belonging. Notwithstanding, Africa stands beneficial when it adopts foreign ideas, practices, and values intelligently. Some of the African indigenous knowledge continue to stand the test of time.²⁰

This idea is quite similar to the Philosophical ideology submitted by Rene Descartes who is regarded as the pioneer of a predominantly Western, rational supporter of the personhood who believes that human nature lies in his thought and life, so affirmed "*cogito, ergo sum*", I think therefore I exist.²¹ This remains a catalyst in the African philosophy of life and continues to receive encouragement for such belief and practice on African soil.

COMMUNAL LIVING AMONG THE NGAS OF PLATEAU STATE IN A POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Let those who indicate their commitment to Christianity also incorporate elements of African traditional Religion into their daily lives because they have been handed down the indigenous religion which has already been characterised by beliefs in a Supreme Being.

A study of termites serves as new means of reconstruction. Termites are of great significance in Sub-Saharan Africa because of the role they play in daily life across Religious, social, economic, scientific and political dispensation. The overview of how they are perceived, experienced and utilized speaks volumes. For example in Africa, there are over one thousand (1000) species of termites with very rich

diversity.²² The Ngas population of Nigeria called it *Ncharng or Ntezu* and stories about the characteristics of termites in Africa show religious connotations are so appealing as well as their physical, spiritual and, social organization, the destructive and reconstructive power which have a major role in people's life cannot be overemphasized for the reconstruction of Ngas' culture. Togetherness in all life activities provides unity of purpose.

There is a future, hope, and room for the reconstruction of life as these termites who are not having human intellect yet strive hard.

The bad situation that had befallen the Ngas is believed that it serves as a lesson for the future as they can reconstruct their cultural values and come back to its inception as the rainbow comes from the mound of termites and so prevents it from raining.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following societal health problem caused by the Covid-19 pandemic can be curtailed and minimized:

1. Education of the community be given greater attention during traditional gatherings or occasions like in schools, churches, etc.
2. People should always study the word of God and put them into practice by:
 - i. Avoiding the crown of wicked people (Psalm 1:1)
 - ii. Obey authorities (Roman13:1-2)
 - iii. Washing of hands frequently and thoroughly.
 - iv. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. We often touch our faces without noticing it.
3. Staying indoors when ill even if with a slight fever and cough.

4. Stay informed about the latest information about COVID-19 from trusted sources and pray always (Philippians 4:6-7)

CONCLUSION

This paper did not hesitate to say that Ngas culture and festivals are loaded with many elements that promote communality in the society. Post pandemic era among the Ngas is not without prospects and problems. Though being bedevilled by the pandemic which gave birth to various forms of inhuman activities, instability can become a new means for the reconstruction of life situations. This show that certain situations in life come with challenges and such are part of life in humanity God is always in control of humanity and the situations and challenges engulfed it because the things he created remain his own and are not unsurmountable.

This paper emphasized that culture or tradition is not an enemy because the exposure of Ngas people of Africa to other forms of life and culture has caused a shift in the history of Africa culturally, and that does not mean that Ngas of Africa will continue to remain in personhood or individualistic but the possibilities of rebuilding, reconstruction and development of its high valued culture can overcome the challenges of Covid-19 through same cultural values and by these, the communality syndrome which is the root of the dignity of human life that cared and respect for others can be the litmus paper for new for a base for life after the pandemic. Because it is not the whole truth that African Ngas culture is not without an aspect of the need for adjustment or modification.

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