Religion: A New Struggle for African Identity

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Abstract
Looking at most African countries, one realises that the social imaginaries which make us who we are continues to be an issue in every society. It is even more rampant when we think of the role religion plays in determining who we are, what we believe and how we should act and react. This article seeks to look at the nature of religion and how religion over the years played a significant role in African identity. I argue that African identity has been endangered by religion. I propose that there is a need to rethink our conceptualisation of religion and to move away from the understanding of religion as the basis of identity. This is because our shared lives should and must be the basis of identity. In other words, imported religions have their own origin and this origin cannot be disassociated from the belief inherent in the religions. There is a need to free the mind of its conditionings that give priority to religion and may therefore serve to exclude other sources of identity derived from collective histories and collective experiences. The illusion which religion plunges us into is often the reason for the problems of identity which most African societies struggle with today. An awareness of this illusion and a new understanding of identity as derived from a shared African experience will go a long way in resolving the problem of identity in Africa.
Keywords: Identity, Matrix, awareness, African, devalue, religion.

Introduction

Sometimes when I muse about life from the view point of religion, I am forced to wish I were God. I think I would have made things a lot better. One of the things I would have done, among many other good things, is to make people appreciate each other and learn to see their similarities more than their socially constructed differences, especially those of religious affiliations, cultural or ethnic identities. Given our experience of violence, none of us would mind a deterministic configuration of humanity that is at unity with itself; at least peace will be assured. When you look at me you are looking at someone who carries within himself a set of different signals of identity. When someone who knows West Africa asks, 'what is your name?' and I say, I am John Sodiq Sanni, a quizzical look appears on the faces of my questioner. Those who are brave enough go on to ask, 'What sort of combination is that, and where are you from?' I am sure you will also be puzzled and you cannot wait to reach the part where I answer this question that is if I respond to it at all. The tangle of names signifies the diverse origin of my parent. My father was a Muslim and my mother a Christian.

Nonetheless, the crux of the issue is not only about names and how names point to particular culture, but also how cultural hermeneutical underpinnings of names have been displaced by religious identities. African identity has become not so much about my ethnic background but also my religious view points and some people in Africa may give the latter more significance than the former. The problem is that recent events in several African states have given a greater urgency to the place of religion in determining culture and identity. Circumstances have valorised religious affiliations so that we think of a person in terms of religion and as a result a person thinks of herself in terms of religion. Our subjectivities are constructed not by what we think but how society has constructed how we should think. Religion, as a strong social structure, plays a holistic role in determining a person's understanding of his/her origin and purpose.

Daniel Dennet rightly observes "…that one of the most difficult tasks is finding the right questions to ask and the right order to ask them in. You have to figure out not only what you don't know, but what you *need* to know and *don't* need to know, and what you need to know in order to *figure out* what you need to know, and so forth" (Dennet 2006:19). Our apparently unending quest to provide answers to the unknown has often been the justification for religion. This desire to adequately grasp the 'unfathomable' has also influenced our disposition towards thinking. The use of the intellect, has over the years, been considered as inefficient in the attempt to grasp realities that are beyond the immanent. The conflation of these and other worldviews have result in the eruption of one form of identity or another.

The aim of this paper is to differentiate between "identity as origin" and "identity as religion" and to prioritise the wider commonality that is inherent in identity as origin. I will also consider the need to empty the mind of its conditionings that gives priority to religion and may therefore serve to exclude other sources of identity derived from collective histories and collective experiences. This implies that religion is not a collective experience when it usually is and that is something that I shall have to address. A prejudiced humanist may accuse religion of directing our attention to a transcendental teleology and in the process distracting us from our contingent reality. Religion the same person might say sometimes, if not always, erodes our identity. It is,

however, impossible to theorise contemporary Africa and ignore the presence and influence of imported religions. Africa is multicultural and many of the sites of that multiculturalism have been constructed by both imported and indigenous religions.

A theoretical approach as to how we can resist imported religions' oversimplification of African identity is provided by revisiting Charles Taylor's notion of 'multiculturalism and the politics of recognition'. I will argue that there is a need to rethink the significance of religious diversity and an ontology that recognizes the Other as part of Oneself. For Taylor, the politics of recognition proceeds from the proposition of an ontological ethical notion of the Other as a relational identity. I shall first offer definitions of important concepts.

Conceptual framework

Beginning with religion, amidst the different definitions, for this paper, I appropriate the definition proposed by Monica Toft's:

> Religion can be usefully seen as a system of practices and beliefs sharing most of the following elements: (1) a belief in a supernatural being or beings; (2) prayers or communication with those beings; (3) transcendent realities, including 'heaven,' 'paradise,' or 'enlightenment'; (4) a distinction between the sacred and the profane and between ritual acts and sacred objects; (5) a view that explains both the world as a whole and humanity's proper relation to it; (6) a code of conduct in line with that worldview; and (7) a temporal community bound by its adherence to these elements (Toft 2011:115).

Toft's definition of religion has a holistic dimension to it which accommodates African traditional religion. Religion becomes the convergence point for other multiple perspectives which all seem to proceed from religion or seem to have their basis on religion.

Does religion also encompass identity or does it create identity? This brings us to the next definition. Identity, as presented by scholars like Taylor, is two dimensional: 'collective' and 'personal'

> […]Personal identity may be defined as the capability of conscious subjects to remain identical with themselves, despite changes that affect the structure of their personality. It is the unity and continuity of self-consciousness. Persons as conscious subjects are repeatedly face with situations that challenge the existing structure of their consciousness – in other words, which contradict the way they feel, the way they think, the way they act. They can meet those situations and cope with the experience they involve only by reconstructing their personality or acquiring a new self, as we say (Taylor 1994: 134 -135).

The collective dimension plays a significant role in enacting and authenticating the personal identity. It is important to also add that the response to the question of identity is also determined by context. Thus, identity has a local and international dimension which influences response. This will be further explored during the course of this paper. According to Taylor, "Personal identity, as also collective identity, is a normative concept, not just descriptive. It is not used merely to describe a state of affairs, but to express an ideal to be striven for, a value to be embodied. For that reason, we can speak of a 'loss of identity', and 'identity crisis', of a 'weak identity' and so on" (Taylor 1994:135). The nature of the idea that is implicitly inherent in the understanding of identity is one that is not solely individualistic; it also has a collective understanding that a slight derailment from the norms can be spotted as a violation of the tenets of the collective identity.

Is Identity Religious?

At the beginning of this paper, I asked how religion shapes or impacts our identity especially in an African context where identity and culture are often implicated in one another. What does one make of religion in relation to identity? Is it possible to delineate culture without explicit reference to the religion? These among many other questions show the complexity of the intermingling one finds in identity as religion and identity as origin of a person. These questions connect culture and identity because it is only from cultural relations that identity is realized.

Insofar as it can be argued that culture and religion can be separated, a point which will be argued as this paper unfolds, it is important to note that most African creation narratives always have a religions dimension to them which is intrinsically connected to cultural habits and actions. African traditional cultures often trace their origin to some religious narratives of some sort. The Yorubas of Nigeria talk about *Olodumare* as the creator of all, and they allude to other demigods who are mediate between *Olodumare* and human beings. Similar narratives span through other African cultures. Does this justify the religious interpretation of cultures or the 'religionizing' of identity? Perhaps not! John Mbiti's dictum – 'African is notoriously religious' sheds light on the understanding of the religious nature of most cultures. If most cultures are religious why should Africans be notoriously religious? Every activity in most African cultures is often accompanied with prayers: the birth of a child, naming of the child, puberty, and all other activities that one can think of. For instance when a child is born, the prayers involve the use of different kind of items like, *epo* (oil), *obi* (kolanut), *eja* (fish), *iyo* (salt), *oyin*

(honey), *orogbo* (bitter-kola), *ataare* (alligator pepper), *omi* (water), and so on. These items are symbolic. The eldest member of the family picks each of the items and prays for the child. The leader of the ceremony touches the mouth of the child as he or she prays. The prayers have to do with asking God to bring prosperity to the family and to bless the child.

In these rituals, religion is not conflated with culture as the source of identity but is rather a dimension of it. If the rudimentary definition of culture as a total way of life is adopted, religion is not a total way of life of any given culture. It is only a facet of a larger world view. This does not rule out the fact that religion 'As a complex of symbols and as a cultural institution, religion claims in some form to provide answers to questions of ultimate meaning, questions about the nature and destiny of human beings. And religion, unlike comprehensive ideologies …, seeks its answers in a transcendental realm, in an appeal to some supernatural power' (Davies 1994: 22). Religion only provides transcendental explanations to reality and this only serves to placate people in their desire for explanations. Even if religion can be said to play a significant role, it does not necessarily justify the claim that it is dominant since, it can be distinguished from other facets of life which have nothing to do with religion.

The question of differentiating religion from culture is a daunting task. The question of what category religion belongs to cannot be left unaddressed. Before I attempt the question, I will like to nuance my understanding of African traditional religion. When I refer to African traditional relation in relation to culture, I mean that religion and culture have different modes of expression in the society. In Africa's diversity, there is a commonality which is connected to African experience and an appeal to a transcendental reality often referred to as God. Religion has a category of its own which justifies my initial claim that religion is only a facet of culture. Religion is a plea to God to intervene in realities which cannot be 'understood' by human beings. Even if one is to argue that religion is to seek divine intervention which we do understand: joblessness or sickness, there is still a dilemma regarding the interpretation on how divine interventions are to be interpreted. At this point, allow me derail a little in order to better explain the point I have been making.

Religious Matrix

The word *Matrix* derives from the movie of the same name which the movie which astounds in action and makes astonishing use of special graphical effects. Since the first Matrix was first screened, philosophers over the years have acknowledged that the movie has some philosophical implications which point to modern and contemporary intellectual systems. Hubert Dreyfus and Stephen Dreyfus argue that

What the phenomenologist can and should claim is that, in a Matrix world where bodies are in vats, the people whose brains are getting virtual reality inputs correlated with their action outputs, are nonetheless directly coping with *perceived* reality, and that that reality isn't experienced as *inner*. Even in the Matrix world, people directly relate to perceived chairs by sitting on them. Thus coping, even in the Matrix, is more direct than conceived of by any of the inner/outer views of the mind's relation to the external world that have been held from Descartes to Husserl (Dreyfus:3).

The implication of this to religion, which the movie *matrix* and the sequel construe, is that it has had a numbing effect on humanities' conceptualized of what constitutes reality. The movie shows that '…the people who live in the *matrix* have no other source of experience than what happens in the Matrix' (Dreyfus: 3).

Dreyfus goes on to argue that the only way one can comprehend the happening in the Matrix, it is important to consider grasping the source of the Matrix illusionary powers. Dreyfus's diagnosis is that 'Part of the power comes from the way the inputs and outputs from the computer are plugged directly in the brain's sensory motor-system. When we experience ourselves as acting in a certain way, say walking inside a house, the computer gives us the correlated experiences of seeing the interior' (Dreyfus:5). What this indicates is that even within the illusory world there is a sense in which, more than just a cognitive action, there is need for a pragmatic awareness of the Matrix. As such necessitating a correlation between the cognitive and the pragmatic within the Matrix.

The religious *Matrix* can be likened to the vat to which people willingly or sometimes forcefully allow themselves to be connected to; a reality that presents ethereal horizon as where reality which contains an ideal state of being resides. The acceptance of these ideal states of being often results in the creation of ideologies to further legitimize this ideal state. This is why 'Religion sets criteria for judging what human beings imagine or make is good and worthwhile. It questions whether we are right to regard as valueless everything we have not made ourselves' (Davies 1994: 22). While I was writing this paper, *boko haram* were bombing schools, the abducting of little school girls in northern Nigeria was and the bomb blasts in Nairobi were taking place. Elsewhere on the continent a Sudanese woman was condemned to death by hanging for apostasy in marrying a Christian, and religious fundamentalists' attacks have taken place in France.

What one realizes with religions today is that there is an obsession with the ethereal: a reality that justifies the Christian hymn – 'this world is not my own' and the Islamic quest to make the world 'the abode of Allah' – *dar Islam*'. A unique difference is however identified in the African traditional religion as there is great

emphasis on the realities of the culture and this has often been the contextualized matrix for relating with God. In most African cultures, when there is doubt about the credibility of a *diviner*, more credible diviners are sourced from neighbouring villages. This is not to defend African traditional religious forms of ritual killing[s]. Perhaps instances like this are questionable and also require that Africans adopt fully the phenomenological understanding of religious beliefs.

With the advent of imported religions, it can be argued that Africans have not been able to live their identities and theorize themselves in a world where Africa's own contributions to cultural and social organization have been denigrated or even ignored. The African traditional religions have been frequently devalued and only the authority of imported religions is seen to have significance. One of the questions this might provoke is, is religion a new form of western colonialism? – the suppression of an identity and the imposition of an ideology? It is no exaggeration that African traditional religions have been seen as culturally irrelevant and imported religions are now so embedded in the psychology of Africans that most Africans have been lulled into. 'The human capacity to wonder – a capacity that is universal – may give rise to two different attitudes: one of superstitious leading to beliefs and presuppositions that can hardly be rationally and scientifically grounded; the other is rational leading to beliefs and explanations that can be grounded in reason' (Kwame Gyekye 'Our Human Nature, Our Human Values' 2004: 29).

This justifies the argument that 'Traditional religious people have a conventional identity. Their religious identity is tired to the fixed contents of a tradition, to its institutions and practices…. Any substantial change in the normative content and rules of the tradition is experienced as a loss of identity and, consequently, is fiercely resisted' (Davies 1994:141). Davies goes on to say that 'History shows that such a conventional religious identity may flourish in a naïve fashion while simply ignoring the existence of other traditions and thus evading the reflection which a taking cognizance of their existence would provoke' (Davies 1994:141). Religion has a tendency to suspend the experiential dimension of individuals and it is a reality which needs to be subdued in order to be in touch with the actions in realities of the world which provokes certain reactions.

Colonialism has had a role in effecting this reality in the imaginary of Africans. As Taylor argues, "It is held that since 1492 Europeans have projected an image of such people as somehow inferior, 'uncivilized,' and through the force of conquest have often been able to impose this image on the conquered" (Taylor 1994: 26).

Religious *Matrix* and Multiple *Matrix*

Identity has to do with the experience of a certain *matrix*. It has to do with a certain awareness of one's 'situatedness' as a starting point. This is where the question of who am I? What am I? And other important personal questions are raised. It is important to note that religion often creates a *Matrix* which can sometimes promotes a new structure within society. This is not purely negative as it can be said to have unifying nature to it in that it creates a new unity. However, there is a sense in which these new religious structures base their authenticity on a transcendental justification which may not be accessible to those who do not adhere to their beliefs.

Such a structure would include Menachem Begin who once said, 'Nobody has the right to tell me whether I can stay in Judea and Samaria, since this right is given to me by God and Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'(Davies 1994: 112). Also would be included the self ascribed nature of Christian and Muslim religious monopoly of validity. 'The monological ideal seriously underestimates the place of the dialogical in human life. It wants to confine it as much as possible to the genesis' (Taylor 1994:33).These realities have not been of great significance to African understanding of their identity as little or no emphasis has been placed on the African experiences. If such experiences have been mentioned at all they have been distorted by religious obfuscating rhetoric which draws its authority from the hegemony of an imported religion. More and more in African, we experience a trans-boarder religious relationship. A reality that has made people more interested in what is happening among the people whom they share the same religion with rather than those they share the same experience with. There is something fundamental in imported religion which cannot be separated from the cultural *matrix* in their origin and the cultural *matrix* in which they are received. This justifies the bond often promoted across borders.

As much as cultural matrix is considered as '… what we mean by identity. It is who we are, 'where we're coming from'' (Taylor 1994:33) is important, it is equally important that our strivings for multiple matrixes does not obliterate the consciousness of our cultural matrix. As already highlighted, religion cannot be separated from its cultural matrix. As Africans, gullible tendencies must not override our reflective impulse. As Armstrong recounts 'In all cultures, human beings have been driven by the same imperatives: to be intelligent, responsible, reasonable, loving and, if necessary, change. The very nature of humanity, therefore, demands that we transcend ourselves and our current perceptions and this principle indicates the presence of what has been called the divine in the very nature of serious human inquiry' (Armstrong 1993:185).

The attempt to include the human inquiry has often resulted in a major lapse in the conception of religion. In fact it raises a fundamental question as to how '… the dignity of the individual as an absolute value

be retained without a relation to the Absolute?' Davies goes on to 'suggest that the individual is of unconditional worth, because at the deepest level the personal self is one with Absolute Reality' (Davies 1994:151). To claim that the self has an absolute reality can actually plunge us back to the reality which further raises the question of the origin of this absolute reality. Then we are back to square one!

Amidst the religious differences which can be identified, the point which should take precedence in the midst of the diversity is the idea of recognition of the difference and the integration of imported religion to the cultural matrix in which we find ourselves. This assertion does not rule out the fact that imported matrix should not give reason to rethink our matrix. The point is that it should not make us, Africans, oblivious of our matrix. Most Christians have talked about the whole idea of inculturation as a way of being in touch with how different African cultures can be incorporated to Christianity and vice versa. However, one realises that this has not really being in touch with the experiences of the people and consequently ignores the main part of the African identity.

Imported religions from the onset have engaged in a monologue and they have insisted on imposing this monologue on Africans, and Africans have unconsciously appropriated this monologue and ignored the significant of dialogue with experience. Taylor argues that 'General recognition was built into the socially derived identity by virtue of the very fact that it was based on social categories that everyone took for granted. Yet inwardly derived, personal, original identity doesn't enjoy this recognition a priori – "Recognition has to be attained through exchange and the attempt to fail" (Taylor 1994: 34-35). This is an assertion that may also imply that '…religious traditions do not have to be conceived as static and unchanging. Rather, they possess a temporality of their own, a rhythm which may be more fundamental than the time of the philosophers' (Rosemann 2007:161).

Politics of Recognition: A Phenomenological Unifying *Matrix*

The onus is ours "The God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is a God who -in some sense - speaks. His Word is crucial in all three faiths. The Word of God has shaped the history of our culture. We have to decide whether the word 'God' has any meaning for us today" (Armstrong1993:16) as Africans. When we pledge allegiance to a particular religion, it is a commitment to a set of norms. It is important to know that "[…] norms are not created out of nothing. They are formed out of the needs, interests and wants of actual human beings. The normative thus presupposes and builds upon the factual truths about human beings established in the cognitive sphere of culture; but the normative should be distinguished from the cognitive. Human beings come together in society, creating norms and embodying them in institutions through a process of social interaction" (Davies1994: 27). This calls for constructive possibilities as a good disposition for understanding the multiplicity inherent in experiences. I guess it is equally important for the outside to pay attention to their experiences so as to better engage the experience of mission venues.

It is evident that over the years, religious ideas have spilling into politics. 'Religious beliefs are the changing, limited, culturally particular manifestation of religious faith. Therefore, in political argument, religious people must be prepared to see their religious beliefs challenged. They must refrain from using any weapons to advance their beliefs other than the force of better argument' (Davies 1994:36). The question is who determines the criteria for determining what a better argument entails. Taylor responds to this when he writes, "[…] our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor 1994:25). The significance we give to each other enables us to live together and respect epistemological diversities and experience as the foundation. However, it is a misconception "… to suppose that human beings easily relinquish their prejudices or readily allow their cherished convictions to be questioned. Political arguments that touch deep-seated truths and values cannot be sustained unless the members of society can transcend their individual selves (and, indeed, transcend humanity itself) to open out to Unlimited Reality with an unlimited response" (Davies 1994: 36-37). This reality must not replace African realities, but it can challenge Africans in their situatedness. For Taylor, the politics of recognition proceeds from the proposition that an ontological ethical notion of the Other as has a relational identity which must not be ignored.

Conclusion

Africans have appropriated the notion that "Religions typically claim to possess truths that are absolute, eternal, and therefore not subject to development and revision in time. Many Jews, Christians and Muslims, for example, strongly hold the belief that they possess written revelations from God that are inerrent" (Rosemann 2007:171). An ideology that shows how 'Religion elevates the rhythm of nature to a symbolic level, conferring spiritual meaning upon it. This sublimation of natural time enables us to live in accordance with natural rhythms of summer and winter, life and death, and so forth, while also creating a distance from them – a space in which authentically human meaning can arise that transcends merely natural cycles' (Rosemann 2007:178). The point here is that we have become more in touch with nature [experience] and the reason behind our experiences. This

can be achieved if we return religion to its rightful source which is experience.

Quoting Rabindranath Tagore's *Man the Artist,* Martha Nausbaum recounts, "At a certain bend in the path of evolution man refused to remain a four-footed creature, and the position, which he made his body to assume, carried in it a permanent gesture of insubordination" (Nausbaum 2013: 82). The significance of imported religions should be to better help us be in touch with our experiences. To walk on four-feet when we have to and then not deter us from walking on two feet when we know it helps us see what we cannot see when on four feet. And our decisions must be influenced by our own experiences as Africans for it is who we are and where we are coming from. A healthy mutual understanding of the contingencies that makes us who we are, and the contingencies of the matrix of which we are formed, should be given priority in Africa. It is only in understanding the contingency that makes us that we realize that identity is not religion but origin.

As Taylor recounts '… negate identity by forcing people into a homogeneous mould that is untrue to them' (Taylor 1994: 43). Like Neo in the movie *Matrix*, 'We are lead to expect that, in return for accepting everyday vulnerability and suffering, the people liberated by Neo [experience] will be reborn to a new and better life' (Dreyfus 2014: 7). Hence, 'What's ultimately important to us, then, is not whether most of our beliefs are true or false, or whether we are brave enough to face a risky reality, but whether we are locked into a world of routine, standard activities or are free to transform the world and ourselves' (Dreyfus 2014:11) and to focus on our experiences. We have given power to religion. We have to reclaim the power we have given to religion and channel it to experience where our identity lies.

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