

Influences of Christian Religion on African Traditional Religion And Value System

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Abstract

African society is a homogenous and close one with its unique belief systems. Some of these beliefs and practices have been found to be evil and out dated in nature in the contemporary times. Such obnoxious practices like caste-system (osu-one dedicated to idol/god), and slavery (igba-ohu) in Igboland, killing of twins, and abinos, ritual killing, oppression of widows, to mention but a few. This need to be sermonized against so as to review them in the light of superior religion like Christianity. The methodology adopted for the study is the qualitative phenomenological approach whereby data were collected from both primary and secondary sources and treated analytically and descriptively. The findings of the study validated the fact that there are some practices in the traditional society that needed to be dropped completely, some to be amended, and some to be retained because of their rich qualities and that in spite of the influx of foreign cultures and values the core values of the people still remain the same in most places.

Key words: Religion, Christian, Influence, African traditional religion and Value systems

Introduction:

The African traditional society is a homogenous and close one with its unique characteristic features that set it apart from other cultures of the world. Some of their beliefs and practices like Caste-system (osu-one dedicated to idol/god), and Slave (ohu) all in Igboland, killing of twins, and abinos, burying of chiefs /kings with slave witchcrafting, polygamy nude dressing and certain practices against women and widows etc appear to be evil in the contemporary society and therefore, need to be sermonized against so as to review them in the light of superior religion like Christianity. These evil beliefs and practices have become a source of great worry to some scholars in Africa, hence the birth of the topic under review. The work bears its search light on the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, although references are made to other parts of the continent. This work aims at identifying those obnoxious practices with a view to reviewing them in the light of Christian religion and culture, and in the end proffer suggestions that will help to make the traditional belief systems a better one. The findings of the study validated the fact that there are some practices in the traditional society that needed to be dropped completely, some to be amended, and some to be retained because of their rich qualities.

Concept Clarified

It is necessary to have the perception of the basic concept of the words **Religion and Value** before exploring the extensive area of Influence of Christian Religion on African Traditional Religion/Value Systems. Religion is elusive in nature and this makes it difficult to have one universally accepted definition of religion. The elusive nature explains why tens and hundreds of definitions of religion litter our textbooks today. In somewhat different Madu, (1997) added that none of these definitions has been to be flawless on critical analysis. Collaborating the view on the elusiveness of religion, Metuh (1987), commented thus:

That this is partly because the object of religion invisible and spiritual beings who are subject to observation and are conceived in different ways by different peoples. Besides, the study of religion interest people with a widely differing interests as theologians, anthropologists psychologists and sociologist, each of who see it from different perspectives.

However, religion is derived from the Latin words as: *Ligare* (meaning to bind), *Relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link), and *Religio* (meaning relationship). Thus, the etymology of the word 'religion' shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man. Religion is essentially a bipolar phenomenon. On the one end is man (the religious man) while on the other end is the transcendent being, the deity he believes to exist and which he worships (Omeregbe, 1993). Bouquet in Omeregbe (1993) sees religion as a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God." Vennon (1962) described religion as that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural, the sacred and man's relationship thereto, but which also relate them to the unknown

world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as what is good (harmony or not in harmony with the supernatural). Furthermore, Yinger (1970) defined religion:...as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration and to allow hostility to tear apart their human association. Religion is also construed as a belief in and worship of a Supernatural Being, the creator and the controller of the universe through an intermediary. **Value Defined:** Okolo (1993), said that value in its ordinary meaning means ‘...worth of some sort, such that a thing is said to have value if it is worth something. In common usage, this worth is usually in terms of economic or quasi-economic senses. Values is also defined as the criteria with which a group of people assesses their daily life. And this includes rules, norms and regulation that guide the behaviour of the people.

Brief Account of ATR and Christianity: African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Man’s search for God has led to many pathways. The result has been the enormous diversity of religious expressions found world-wide today from the endless variety of Hinduism to the monotheism of Judaism, Islam and Christianity and to oriental philosophies of Shinto, Taoism, a Buddhism and Confucianism. In the other vast religions, mankind has turned to animism, and magic (Watchtower, 1990). It becomes, therefore, a matter of concern at this juncture to examine the two religions of ATR and Christianity that will be used in this study.

a. Christianity

Christianity is planted in Nigeria not long after the ex-slaves repatriated from Europe and America were resettled in Sierra Leone, Christian missionaries were drafted to the colony to evangelize them (Anyika,2000). The word Christianity was first used in New Testament at Antioch in Syria where the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians meaning the followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). Christianity is based on the life, teaching and the death of Jesus Christ the founder of Christian religion. In line with this Ituma (2003) argues that Jesus is the foundation of the New Testament and that New Testament itself is the foundation of Christianity. The first contact of Christianity in Nigeria was through the activities of a set of missionaries from Portugal in the fifteenth century (Ryder, 1969). Their initial contact and success were in the coastal areas. They recorded initial success in the kingdom of Warri but this did not endure for a long time because the European visitors to Nigeria such as the Dutch, French and English were not in a position to propagate the religion. In fact, enduring and successful missionary enterprise began in the nineteenth century and this initiative was this time taken by the protestant churches of Europe and America with the Catholics following about the 1840s (Onwubiko, 1973). The year 1841 was particularly remarkable in the history of missionary enterprise in what is today called Nigeria. It was the year of the first Niger Expedition which marked the beginning of the missionary movement to re-establish in Nigeria (Ajayi, 1975).

With all the unprintable difficulties encountered by the missionaries by the beginning of the twentieth century Christianity had been planted in most parts of Southern Nigeria, (Okwueze, 1995). The arrival of Christian religion like the Moslem religion in Africa has a far-reaching effect on the society. The tenets of Christianity are recorded in the book of books called the “Holy Bible.” It has different sects such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, Baptist Church. Cherubim and Seraphim, Aladura, Christ Living Faith (Winners), Zoe Ministry, Christ Embassy, Deeper Life, Church of God Mission, Grace of God, Lord Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement and many others.

b. African Traditional Religion (ATR):

African traditional religion is the belief system that has been handed down from one generation to another. It originated from the soil of Africa. The people were born, nurtured and they grew in it. It is a tolerant, accommodative and peaceful religion that fights those that attack it. The above views were expatiated by Onyeidu (1999) when he observed that the Traditional African Religion is a tolerant and non-missionary religion. Its adherents were not converted (proselytes) but members of the society born into the religion of their ancestors. The traditional religion has no room for religious propaganda, or bigotry. It is moderate religion which only attacks its opponents who provoke it to anger.” .Anyika (1998) said that it is a religion that is indigenous to African soil, but their origins are lost in antiquity. Ajayi, (1981) describes it,” as those beliefs and practices that are indigenous to Africans which according to Mbiti (1969), has permeated every facet of the peoples life”. It is a religion that has no known founder and scripture unlike Christianity and Islam. The tenets of the religion is written on the songs myths, dances of the people. In the same frame of mind Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) asserted that this is a religion that has no written literature yet it is written everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples’ myths and folklores, in songs and dances, in their liturgies and in proverbs and pithy saying. A more elaborate definition was given by Ekwunife (1990) as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of African which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectal process of continuities and discontinuities.

Before the advent of the imported religion of Islam and Christianity into the continent the traditional religion has sustained Africans for generations. More so, the traditional African religion shares many characteristic features with other living religions of the world. Such common features include: belief in God or gods (theism), a system of worship (cult) prayer, sacrifices and the clear-cut distinction between the holy (sacred) and unholy (profane). These were some of the good elements in the primal society which prepared the mind of Africans for the acceptance of Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, in the traditional African society, instruments of social control include: Taboos, swearing of oath, making of blood pact, trial by ordeal, oracles, vows, secret societies and the meticulous observation of customs and traditions. Thus, as in other parts of the world, God did not leave himself without revelation and witness in Africa (Onyeidu 1999). Parinder in Onyeidu (1999), in his attempt to quantify the strength and membership of this ancient faith said that probably over 50,000,000 people in Africa keep to this indigenous religion, and that many more mingle it with the new scriptural religions". With special reference to Igboland, Jordan in Onyeidu (1999). observes that "A whole system of taboos and ritual ordinances controlled native life"

Influences of Christianity on the Traditional Beliefs of African People:

As stated earlier the emphasis is on the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria although references could be made to other parts of the country. This section tries to look at the part played by foreign religion (Christianity) towards the changes that have occurred in the society Christianity is a foreign religion imported into Nigeria while the traditional religion is the indigenous faith (Onyeidu, 1999). Christianity has in time past and at present impacted so much on African culture in general both positively and negatively and it is still doing so now. Against this backdrop Ugwu (2002) said, "although the imported world religions have brought in some positive influences or effects on the Nigerian communities, they have also dealt a staggering blow on our social, economic, religious and political systems." However, change is the only thing that is constant in human life and as such it is inevitable in human interaction. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defined change, "as act of passing or making somebody or something pass from one state or form into another" "The writer adopts the above definition as his working definition, Therefore, African society like any other one is a dynamic one, hence it is susceptible to change. The pattern of change among many West African societies has been an on-going process, moving in different directions. This can be deciphered by a close look at the historical development of religion. The whole theme of religious change in Africa has been seen from the perspective of a phenomenon, which only began when Africans came into contact with Europeans.

Fundamentally, rapid social change in Africa, owing to the western influence in the second part of the nineteenth century helped to transform very simple, harmonious and homogenous society into complex and heterogeneous one. The people strictly observed the religion and culture of their communities (Chuta,1992). Foreign religion (Christianity) and their cultural baggage which accompanied their preaching have been identified to be responsible for this state of affairs. This cultural baggage (i.e. education and urbanization) served as the sweet pills with which Africans were enticed and captured, (Ozigbo,1988) No wonder, Wood, (1942) aptly remarked that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all acted as social revolutionary forces in our societies. It should be noted that some of the changes are inevitable because they are a part of the survival strategy; others are irresistible in the presence of conquering culture. A reinterpretation of theme has, therefore, shown a few instances of those changes. In the words of Bolaji Idowu in Ugwu (1999) one or two things have happened to man's religion in any given situation: modification with adoption or extinction. This is very true of the influence of these imported religions on any culture it interacts with.

Consequently, the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa marked the beginning of religious pluralism on the continent, thus putting to an end the monolatric religious system that operated in the traditional African societies. Most of the people, for varying reasons, opted for the new religions without necessarily understanding the implications of their new choice, (Chuta 1992). But when their desires were not met, they opened up new religious sects, as off-shoots of their frustration. Hence the comment by Dale cited in Onyeidu, (1999) cautioned that "A sincere man does not change his beliefs hastily". This situation undoubtedly, led to a compromise. Here, the traditional religious beliefs and practices are blended with those of the foreign religions

(syncretism). Hence the emergence of independent churches such as the cherubim and seraphim, Aladura, Christ Apostolic Church, etc and some engaged in herbal healing, (Okeke, 1998). Writing on the level of syncretism, Leith-Ross, (1939) drew attention to the case of the Igbo, who were often regarded as exemplary in the way they embraced western ways: Thus...an Igbo attends communion at the same time as he believes in the potency of traditional magic, he ties in the same handkerchief, the rosary and the traditional talisman.

In the same vein, Ajayi, in Ogbu Kal., (1978), wrote that an African
...gets himself baptized as a Christian sends his children to school, comes to terms with modern technology by buying a lorry and learning to drive it and yet insists that the lorry is not just a mechanical device but also a force whose control properly belongs to the god of iron, whose emblem and charms he therefore, displays on the lorry.

In consonance with the above, Onunwa (1990) came to the conclusion that “syncretism has been a feature of religion all through human history”. Basden cited in Onunwa, (1990:)) in his contribution, written after over thirty five years of missionary work, after a careful and a painstaking field work in Igboland, made an important observation. He wrote at the close of his field research that: religion, language and custom of the Igbo have been tinged with outside influence superimposed with ancient Igbo beliefs and practices.’ African traditional religion has a very rich cultural heritage and this rich values and virtues have sustained Africans for so many years before the advent of Islam and Christianity. Jordan (1948) wrote that a whole system of taboos and ritual of ordination has controlled the entire life of Africans particularly the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. These whole system of taboos and ritual of ordination that controlled the entire life of the Igbos were expanded by Onyeidu (1999) to include: swearing of oath, making of blood pact, trial by ordeal, oracles, vows, secret societies and the meticulous observation of customs and traditions. Unfortunately, these whole systems of taboos and rituals are no longer strictly observed because of the influences of Christian doctrines and this perhaps explains why there are so many crimes in the traditional communities today

Christianity condemned polygamy and upheld monogamy, but Africans from pre-history and timeless immemorial, had polygamy as part of their cultural heritage. The Nigerian society, for instance, is an agrarian one, and there is the vast land for everybody to cultivate. The more the number of wives and children a man possessed, the greater the manpower to cultivate the arable land, and this increased the economic status of the people. In addition, they saw polygamy as an ideal way of dispensing social justice to women by providing husbands for all women. Another area that has been eroded and discarded was that of oath-taking. People now take oath according to their religious inclination and no longer on the basis of their original rich cultural heritage. This undoubtedly, has provided room for moral decadence and other vices in our society (Ugwu, 1999).

The introduction of western education in Africa brought in western idea of rationalism and individualism into Africa, (Chuta, 1992). Many Africans began to doubt their religious traditions, and subsequently decided to live without it, and that was the inception of secularism in Africa. This created conditions for the rise of new elites with western educational outlook in African societies, who had their own elites. Among these were chiefs, priests and war leaders, many of whom normally owed their elite status to birth, (Afigbo, 1976) There in school, the children acquired a whole body of new teachings, touching on all aspects of human existence, and these were openly and widely advertised as anti-theatrical to African way of life. Western education weaned African children from their control and influences of their families.

a. **Politics:** In terms of politics, African traditional political leaders no longer follow religiously the laid down rules and ritual practices that guide their offices because of their contact with the west and this is causing serious problems among the so called His Royal Majesties (HRM), the Igwes and their subjects. According to Ugwu (2002), “the king is brainwashed and indoctrinated into accepting that rulership has no meaning here on earth and that nobody rules except God.”

b. **Pattern of Dress and Dressing Style:** Undoubtedly, pattern of dressing has changed immensely. Children now wear western dresses at the expense of local made dresses

c. **Design of Houses:** The architectural designs of resident houses are not left out in this movement. It is only in the most remote parts of Nigeria today that you will see people building houses with sticks, red sand and roofing their houses or huts with elephant grass and palm fronds as against block cement and zinc.

d. **Pattern of Greeting:** The greeting patterns of Africans have been influenced also. People no longer bow or prostrate while greeting, rather they prefer to wave hands and to say” hi.”

e. **Occupation:** The occupation of Africans is no longer the usual farming work of cultivation of crops and rearing of animals. People now prefer white-collar jobs in the urban areas and this has led to importation of virtually everything in Nigeria today and overcrowding in the urban areas.

f. **Carting away and Burning of Objects:** Most of our valuable objects are burnt from time to time. Such objects, worthy of mention, are the rich artistic and symbolic works of our forefathers which after been burnt

would be hard to recover, and put in our museums. This makes meaningful and fruitful research practically impossible for scholars. The powers of most of the divinities and deities are thereby undermined, underrated and consequently treated with contempt and levity (Ugwu, 2002).

In spite of all these odds, the glorious influences and practical utilities of Christianity cannot be over-emphasized. Prior to the advent of Christianity, some parts of Africa engaged themselves in such ugly practices as killing of twins and albinos, which they see as an abomination to the earth deity and ancestral spirits. It was in line with this that Ezeanya (1979) writes thus: "these were done in fulfillment of convinced religious obligations at the time". In the words of Ugwu (1999) "It was much later when Christianity was preached and such injunction given in (Gen. 17:24); "I will make my covenant between me and you and I will multiply you exceedingly" that the practice was put to an end. This quotation certifies God's acknowledgement of giving birth to any number of babies at a time. The act of offering human beings to gods and goddess, caste system (osu), slavery (igba-ohu) in Igbo land and the practice of burying dead chiefs along with living slaves whom they believed would continue to serve the chiefs in the world beyond and ritual killing during festivals and when the land is being cleansed of abominable thing. The African traditional religion encouraged ritual killing because there were evils that the people believed that could only be propitiated by sacrificing human beings during festivals and when abomination is committed against the gods of the land. These evil practices were eradicated by Christianity. Commenting on human sacrifice, Ugwu (1999) asserted that, "the eradication of human sacrifice was also another positive contribution of Christianity to the Nigerian communities." This was normally carried out in form of an atonement when extreme abomination to the land leading to a breach of harmony between the spirit world and the communities had been committed. For instance, the burial of chiefs along with slaves who would serve them as chiefs in the underworld was stopped only on the arrival of Christian religion. Speaking on the issue of "Osu" (outcasts) in Igboland, Ogbuehi (2014) opines that: "there is a group of people who are called "Osu" (outcasts) who were sacrificed to the gods but they are "living sacrifice. The outcast (osu) were sacrificed to the gods as a means of averting the wrath of the gods upon the community, and they were seriously discriminated against by the freeborn" It was on arrival of Christianity that this attitude was sermonized against..Another direction where Christianity excelled was in the area of reducing discrimination against women in the traditional society. There is no gainsaying the fact, that women are seriously discriminated against Very few of them were giving the opportunity by their parents to acquire higher education Some women their parents arranged their marriage and impose husbands on them contrary to their wish.. Furthermore, evidences of such discriminatory attitudes are replicated in the traditional taboos and rules. Attesting to this truth Ukah (1999) write to say that: This was reinforced by African myth, folklore, taboos and proverbs, all of which attributed most of the ills in human society to women. This accounts for the reason why they were denied their rightful place in the scheme of things.For instance, most African myths attribute God's withdrawal from humans as a result of so much noise made by the women. Many taboos regard women as witchcraft and as a carrier s of misfortunes and as such they are abused and discriminated against".

Furthermore, Christianity helped in character modification of our children and made our young ones imbibe such virtues like love for one another, truth, obedience and respect for elders, parents and people in authority. Similarly, Kanu (2004) expressed thus:.

Numerous Nigerian heads of state at one time or the other ordered that there should be ethical re-orientation. The church has also through the Sunday School cared for the youths, adults and elders and not just the erring children. With government takeover of schools, the only ways the church influences the young ones ethically is through Sunday School and moral instruction in schools. Through this way help to develop the young ones who are leaders of tomorrow.

On the issue of spirituality of man, it must be said that religion helped greatly in building up man spiritually. Attesting to this fact, Aristotle (1964) asserted that, "...the end of the state is not mere life. It is rather a good quality of life, similarly, it is not the end of the state to provide an alliance of mutual defense against all injury."

In line with Aristotle's view Nnadi (2004) wrote that:

the development of a nation such as we envisage cannot be achieved by the mere accumulation of material things or the procurement of a life of comfort and ease often to a limited few. This alone will not make man really happy for the simple reason that man is not mere matter. He has a spiritual part which matter is too base to satisfy."

Widowhood Affairs: Widows are seriously discriminated against in Igboland. They are meant to mourn their husbands for along period of time with black clothes. They are compelled to shave their heads and a times to sleep on the floor Any widow suspected of killing the husband will be made to drink water used in washing

the dead husband's body as a way of proving her innocence. It was on the people's contact with Christian religion that this human acts were checkmated. The Christians did a lot in ameliorating the sufferings of the widows. Writing on this Okoli (2008) said that Christians recognize the low status of widows and their suffering and make provision for them and warns against their maltreatment as evident in Deut 14: 29b "...the stranger, the fatherless and the widow who are within the gates shall come and shall eat and be satisfied that the Lord thy God may bless them in all the work of their hand which thou doest"

Christianity in collaboration with Europe brought European language and culture and western science and technology (including imported goods) as supportive gifts (sweet pills) to the redemption and salvation mediated by Christ, (Ozigbo 1988). In Northern Nigeria, for example, by 1929, the government had 106 schools with a total of 4,578 pupils on roll, The missions ran 152 schools with a total enrolment of 4,446 pupils. By 1910, there were sixteen leper settlements under the auspices of the various missions in Nigeria, (Grooves, 1958). This and many more are the fall outs of our contact and encounter with the western religion and there accompanying baggage.

Recommendations:

- a. **Dialogue/Persuasion:** Christians should employ dialogue and persuasion in their course of transforming the presumed obnoxious practices of the people rather than being forceful.
- b. **Persuasion:** Persuasion should be employed through regular visit to the areas where the natives are finding it difficult to accept changes, and a fellow-up visit aimed at ensuring that the people did not go back to their old changed practice.
- c. The rate of burning materials collected from the people's houses or shrines should be reduced.
- d. Some of these materials collected either from their houses or shrines should be carefully examined and studied and, if found useful, should be kept in the museum as a historical material for future study.
- e. The church should organize workshops, enlightenment programmes and conferences to educate the people on the negative implications of their presumed bad/evil practices.

Conclusion:

It is crystal clear from the review that there are some practices in the traditional African belief systems that are no longer useful in the contemporary society that require to be changed by superior belief system preferably Christianity. The changes have brought new lease of life by exposing the people to new frontier or horizon of living (Christian/western cultures) different from their ancient faith, although not without some disadvantages. Some the adherents of the primal religion are now mixing the two thereby engaging in syncretism. That the notion of a static religion and culture which got a dynamic and violent shake-up only when impacted upon by western culture is no longer tenable. That in spite of the influx of foreign cultures and values the core values of the people still remain the same in most places. It is the contention of this paper that the changes brought about by Christianity are useful ones, therefore, they should be welcomed and sustained for posterity..

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