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African Traditional Religion in the Context of increasing Christian and Islamic Encounter



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Introduction

Religion according to Karl Marx is the opium of the masses. Religion gives answers to a lot of things and problems people face in the world; at the same time religion has also ruined a lot of people because of the way people understand it.

African traditional religion is one of the religions of the world. This religion has contributed a lot to humanity because it is the bedrock and pace setter to all other religions of the world like Christianity, Islam, etc. This same religion that was and still is the bedrock of all other religions in the world has suffered tremendously at the hands of other religions. Nevertheless, granted that it has suffered intimidation, she still struggles to make an impact in the lives of the people directly or indirectly. These impacts will be examined as this work unfolds. Among the things that affected and is still affecting African traditional religion is secularism. This work will try to expose what different religions like Christianity and Islam are all about, the role of African traditional religion, factors militating against it and then its role in increasing Islamic and Christian religion before the conclusion.

What is African Traditional Religion?

Indigenous religion in Africa is the way Africans understand and worship their god. This religion is found in almost all the activities of the African man. Awolawu and Depamu (1979) stated that this is a religion that has no written literature yet it is everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people as myths and folklores, in songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in proverbs and pithy sayings.¹

This religion has no founder and that is why it is called an indigenous religion. It is a religion that is full of life and activities through ceremonies, festivals etc. It places emphasis on virtues, values, and morals. African traditional Religion is found in almost all activities of the African man.

African traditional religion cannot be discussed without mentioning that it is the way of life of the people of Africa and so cannot be differentiated from the politics, education, and socialisation, etc. of the people which are all together. Thus Olikeyi asserts that culture can be defined as the entire way of life of members of a community or language, morality, knowledge, worldview, symbols, kinship, social relationships, types of economy, forms of government, science, religion, tools, technology, ways of feeling, attitudes, behaviour patterns, etc.² From the definition above, we can see that culture summarily is a way of life of the people.

What is Christianity?

This is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Christianity is a missionary religion holding that Christ's message, as intended for the whole world, is not just for a particular area or people, instead it is for everyone as we can see in Mark 16:15 ff. Jesus gave the injunction "Go ye into the world and preach the gospel to all creation." The basic beliefs of Christianity are stated in the Apostles' Creed. The concept of God as a benevolent and forgiving rather than vengeful is a main tenet of the Christian faith. Christianity holds values and morals in high esteem. Another Christian belief is that even though humankind has sinned and separated itself from the love of God, all can be saved by repentance.

What is Islam?

This is one of the world's greatest religions founded in the seventh century AD by Mohammed. The word "Islam" means submission to the will of God. Followers of this are called "Muslims", meaning those who submit (to the will of God). They have their written scripture called the Koran. Islamic religion has also its beliefs and doctrines like God, apostles, Koran, angels, last judgment, etc. They equally have five obligations: profession of faith, ritual prayer, almsgiving (*Zakat*) Ramadan fast, and pilgrimage.

What ATR is Not

African traditional religion has been seen by many from a negative point of view. This input might have been caused by those who claim that they are ATR adherents yet they go to the extreme in order to convince people that their religion is powerful. Those excesses are, as far as we are concerned, not ATR. Some negative terms used for ATR:

1. *Archaic*: this implies old, old fashioned, antiquated, no longer in use. Having observed very well from what we have already discussed, ATR is not archaic because it is the life of the people which has to do with the day-to-day life of an African.
2. *Paganism*: the term, pagan, derives from the Latin word for a rustic, village dweller, and its use in English connotes polytheism. ATR is not a polytheistic religion, rather a monotheistic one. It cannot be paganism.
3. *Animism*: this is a belief that spirits inhabit some or all classes of natural objects.
4. *Heathen*: this implies an uncultured or an uncivilised person or religion. ATR is seen as a religion that is not refined, but crooked. But if it is the religion of the people that has to do with their way of life, ATR then is not heathenism.
5. *Idolatry*: this implies a religion that worships idols. ATR does not worship idols; its adherents worship the Supreme Being just like every other religion.

Functions of ATR in increasing Muslim and Christian Society Liturgy

According to Tagbo,³ “Liturgy is the prescribed form of ritual for public worship. It is the vehicle of communication between man and the Divine being. And since liturgy is the set pattern of worship in each cult, we have reason to believe that it has been preserved without being much distorted.” Africans have been grounded in liturgy; they know the importance of worship. This knowledge was an advantage over Islamic religion when they enter into African territories. They have mastered the attribute of gods and deity. According to Idowu, “. . . from the invocation and prayer we learn the names, the attributes of Deities and the divinities, the confidence and hopes of the people, capabilities attributed to divinities, and general relationship between Deity and man.”⁴

Songs and Dances

Some practices of Islamic religion were just a continuation from African cultures. Africans love songs and dances so much so that in almost all situations they find support and consolation in them. So, when some Africans were converted to Islam they continued with what they already learned. There are so many traditional songs and dances in African religion. There are just enough to reflect different situations in life such as a traditional wedding, naming ceremony, funeral, wrestling, working on the farm, praising people, going to war, etc. In

dancing to the rhythm of the songs, religious feelings are also exhibited. These songs and dances tell stories of the peoples' past. They convey the faith of worshippers and also express joys and sorrows of the people, their assurances, hopes and fears of the future and life after death.

Religious Syncretism

In modern society that is saturated by Islamic thought and emerging movements, we still observe some notable influence of African traditional religion in the affairs and religious lifestyle of some adherents of Islam. Muslims still exhibit some syncretic characteristics which show their affinity to their indigenous religion. It is still observable that many Muslim adherents patronize the traditional medicine men and soothsayers from whom they hope to get answers to their many problems. This behavior however does not suggest that these Muslims do not trust in Allah; it shows rather the fact that Africans find it very difficult to leave their way of life, especially in matters of religion.

Polygamy

In Islam today, polygamy is permitted, and in some cases, even encouraged. Polygamy is the practice of one man taking more than one wife. This practice was and is still common among the adherents of traditional African religion. This implies that polygamy may not be understood as in itself. What is clear however, is the fact that it has two sides, depending on the perspective one is coming from. Economically, we know that in modern society polygamy has not really fared well since we see the difficulty for men catering for extra-large families.

Belief in God

God is real and unique to the African. He is believed to be the absolute controller of the universe. He is a Supreme Being. The concept of Supreme Being is universal in African Traditional Religion. The clear-cut belief in the Supreme Being by Africans is demonstrated by the names given Him by Africans. The principal god of Igbo is called "*Chineke*" or "*Chukwu*". The first means the creator god while the second means great god. Among the Nsukka people the name "*Ezechitoke*" is frequently used for the supreme being. It means the king spirit that is the creator. Here emphasis is placed on the creative activity of God. In fact, this fundamental belief in God, the creator, is something one knows without being taught. One only needs to come to the age of reason in order to realise this. This is to say that the belief in the Supreme Being in Igbo religion as well as in African religion is axiomatic.

Christian Artifacts

Today, Africans carried traditional practices into Christianity, especially in their quest to protect life and property. Africans love artifacts, an imaginary representation of their smaller god. Hence, it gives them the assurance of God's protection and guidance for them. Thus, these things, formerly condemned as fetish, can be seen in today's Christian societies. They are modernized and given new names, but the ideas come from African traditional religion. Christians now have different categories of artifacts with each assigned different powers, all geared towards protection and guidance. Thus, Africans who love to move around with their *chi* and charms for protection and guidance can now freely carry Christian artifacts for protection. Such artifacts are the scapular, olive oil, and holy water, and moulded pictures of different saints.

Community Life

Community life practices among religious groups in Christian societies must have had its teaching and foundation in African traditional religion. Community life is one of the core values cherished by Africans in ancient and modern times. This has become the bedrock for the formation of Christian religious congregations.

The Meeting Point of the three Religions

Every religion has something good to offer to humanity. The three religions we are discussing can still come together and cohabit. For this to happen, each must see something good in the other. Let me take the areas where the three religions can cohabit without much difficulty:

1. *Values*: each of the three religions has core values of hospitality, honesty, peace and each is struggling to preach this in their own different ways. The approach may differ, but these values are evident in the three religions.
2. *Morals*: this has to do with the principles of right and wrong behavior, especially for teaching right behavior. Each religion has this, they have a way of teaching its morals so that when you are born, you follow the traditions of the people.
3. *Circumcision*: circumcision cuts across the three religions. ATR encourages male circumcision, Christianity encourages male circumcision, but Islam encourages female circumcision mostly. Islam circumcises females to tamp down the libido that may push them into looking for men outside marriage.
4. *Scripture*: each of them has scriptures, ATR uses unwritten scripture, Islam uses the Koran, while Christianity uses the Bible. All these different scriptures are used to educate people the way forward and on how to live with each other in their religion. The foundation of each religion is embedded in their scriptures.

5. *Means of protection*: each religion has its own means of protection and its own work for them. Looking critically at each religion it serves the same purpose. The functionality of this protective means is what we are interested in and not the components. ATR uses charms, Christianity uses stickers, holy rosary, crucifix, holy water, olive oil, etc. and Islam uses Chesbi as an object of reaching Allah for protection.
6. *Marriage*: each of the three religions encourages marriage but have their own understanding of how it works for them. Christianity encourages monogamy, ATR encourages polygamy, while Islam encourages polygamy. Each has its reason and basis for what they practice and has no problem with it.
7. *God*: each is a monotheistic religion. They worship one God. ATR has “*Chineke*”, Islam has “Allah,” and Christianity has “God.”

Summary and Conclusion

Religion according to Ugwu⁵ can be seen as faith practices involving the relationship between humankind and what is regarded as sacred. Religion generally includes belief in the supernatural and a code of ethical behavior. This definition of religion takes care of the religion we are talking about. Moreover, each religion is important and has a lot of things others can learn from. No religion should be seen as superior to the other. My humble advice is that each should encourage the other, see something good in the other, appreciate the other, applaud the other and equally condemn the negative sides of the other. Hence, no one should single itself out as the best because they are all monotheistic by nature. By doing this ATR, Christianity, and Islam can co-habit and have peace, love, unity and understanding between them.

Endnotes

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