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AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, TOLERANCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

All religions tell their adherents how to behave in everyday life. In Africa religion was and is still a very powerful factor in human life. Religious pluralism is the reality of Africa today. The inception, evangelization and missionary activities of Christianity and Islam Nigeria resulted in the conversions of the indigenous people, mainly, from African Traditional Religion (ATR) to the two mission religions. The religious beliefs, practices and the provision of social services of these immigrant religions have impacted on the religious and cultural life of the traditional communities. Yet, the indigenous religious beliefs and cultural values have served not only as the mediation of expressions for both indigenous Christians and Muslims in this area; they have, also, shaped, to a great extent, the forms of Christianity and Islam that developed as well as the relationships between members of the diverse religious groups. This paper is an attempt to examine the impact of the traditional religious beliefs and cultural practices (with their underlying values) on the religious pluralistic context of Nigeria, particularly, on Christian-Muslim relations. Besides this quest, which has not received a sufficient scholarly attention, the need for this work also became evident in view of the emergence of religious extremism and intolerance by some Christian and Islamic groups in the country, which, at times, has undermined some of the traditional religious and cultural values, which have fostered peaceful co existence over the years. The research tools used, namely interview and observation (of transitional rites and festivals), made it possible to explore both the religious and socio-cultural history of the people, which existed, mostly in oral tradition.

Keywords: African, Religion, Culture, Tolerance, Identity

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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.

Religious and cultural pluralism has been a prominent feature in human societies and this became intensified with the impact of modernity. The phenomenon of such pluralistic experience presents opportunities as well as challenges, particularly, for religious traditions and cultures today. H. Byron Earhart states in his foreword to E. Thomas Lawson's book *Religions of Africa* (1985) that one of the most fascinating aspects of our history is the richness and varieties of its religious traditions. This has tremendous impact on human relations in view of the resurgence of religion and its growing role in both public and private life. The social and political processes of secularization, which were thought to supplant religion and its influence, have, in fact, served to strengthen it. In the age of globalization, religious traditions and pre-modern cultural forms, which used to be localized, have now become global phenomena.

One may argue that in certain instances religion plays a major role in instigating violence, social unrest and cultural tension. Some scholars have gone so far to assert an essential connection between religion and violence. Rene Girard's "mimetic desire" theory in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) posits that religion is intrinsically related to violence. Furthermore, Appleby affirms that religion invariably plays a role or roles in violent situations. These assertions indeed hold to some extent in view of the tremendous influence of religion in the lives of many people. It has been observed that in Africa, the sources of social conflicts, and even wars, cannot be restricted to (among other things) ethnocentrism or dictatorship. Inter-religious relations, especially, among African Traditional Religion (ATR) worshippers, Muslims and Christians are becoming sources of social tension and violence.

Religion according to Ugwu, 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

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by nature. By doing this ATR, Christianity, and Islam can co-habit and have peace, love, unity and understanding between them.

Conceptual Clarification

There is a fallacious conventional wisdom that holds that Africa did not know God prior to its Arab incursion and European colonialism (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). It is believed that traditional African religions have been around since the beginning of humanity. Although there are varieties of traditional African religions, they share more similarities than differences in their practices (Stinton, 2004). One observable commonality is that most of them do not have a written Holy textfor references. Therefore, it is difficult for any Westerner and non-African to have an in-depth knowledge about them because their beliefs and practices have not been canonized as was the case with the Bible when the Council of Nicaea met under the auspices of the Roman Emperor Constantine I to initiate the writing of the Scriptures. It is also difficult for Africans living in the diaspora to bequeath the religious traditions to their offspring due to the lack of their own scriptures. Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) argue that one major feature of traditional African religion is that religion isa way of life for Africans. Africans' *modioperandi*are inextricably intertwined with their religions. The only slight distinction one can notice is between the more religious and the less religious individuals in terms of the frequency of their visits to the shrines and temples, or lack thereof, to consult with the diviners, perform rituals, or transmit messages to the ancestors. Of several definitions of traditional African religion that exist, the most suitable for this study is the one that defines it as, "the observance of rules of conduct in the way the individual conducts his or her daily life, the practice of rituals, and the recognition of the ever presence of the living-dead (ancestors) to allow the person to coexist in harmony with other members of the community in order to please God." (Kamara, 2000, p.503). In a nutshell, traditional African religion is part and parcel of culture in Africa. As Mbiti(1970)states, it starts before birth and does not end after death. Whether Africans are part of the modern organized religion today or not, they invoke God in their everyday conversations. In fact, the word "God" and its derivatives in various African languages is one of the most uttered words in their daily conversations.

Morality is highly associated with God. Thus, if one does not want to invite God's wrath onto himself/herself, he/she must not indulge in any evil deed. So men and women are taught right at birth to eschew immoral acts. In Nigeria, a Yoruba refers to a well-educated person as O*moluwabi*, which means somebody who was created in the image of God and should therefore be appreciated and trusted (Omolewa, 2007). The fact that the Yoruba would use a qualifying adjective that is comparable to God to describe a well-educated person underscores the value of a Creator in the traditional African society. Such a

reference would mean that the well-educated person would tend first to attribute his/her success to God, and so too would his/her family members.

Christianity

God is esteemed by both African religion and Christianity as both the very ground being, and the necessary of life, and any form of being or existence, such as the creation itself. Anthropology is the basic starting place for both religions, human beings are the temporal mirrors and mediators (imago Dei) of God in the feature world. The Christian idea of church has similarities with African traditional life in which brotherhood and the extended family play a central role. The Church is the Christian family, in which all are accompanied to one another through belief and baptism in Jesus Christ. The Church also combines those who have died and those who still live. This is parallel view to the African view of the family of both the living and the omitted. It 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. *Emmanuel K. Twesigye (1996)*

Islam

African traditional religion is often regarded to have influenced African Islam and vice versa. Islam has been in Africa for so long and has become so acculturated to the African landscape that some scholars have argued that it is a traditional African religion. Conversions to Islam were generally pacific in nature and heavily incorporated pre-Islamic rituals and beliefs. Beliefs in local myths, spirits and magic often remained intact and were even approved if it didn't compromise the preeminence of Allah. Many African peoples often equated their remote high god with Allah. The continuation and active participation of Muslims in traditional masking events, the maintenance of local shrines (Islamic and pre-Islamic), and other rituals is common throughout Africa, *Lewis, I. M. (2017).*

Traditional African religion still has notable traces in northern Africa. Followers of African religion in Muslim dominated areas can be found, adhering their beliefs, rituals, magic, medicines. Generally they have adopted the Muslim way of dressing but in matter of deeper subjects such as life, birth, marriage, death, they remain the followers of African religion. 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, *René A. (1974)*.

Africans, Culture and Religion

For many Africans and Yoruba, in particular, it is religion more than anything else that shapes their worldview and participation in social life. The African traditional religious belief is that human beings do not live in this world alone; there is a sense of human beings" close relationship with nature. Humanity, animals and plants have "their own existence and place in the universe as independent parts of a whole." *Douglas E. (2005)*. There are also spiritual beings that are more powerful than humankind and this opens up the African to the divine and to seeking affinity with these spiritual powers. Religious belief is thus diffused in all spheres of life filling them with meaning and significance. In almost every form of activity such as family gathering, child-naming, funeral, fishing and trading, there is a religious observance. Gyekye captures religion's deep presence in African life in these words: "To be born into African society is to be born into a culture that is intensely and pervasively religious and that means, and requires, participating in the religious beliefs and rituals of the community." This understanding of the pervasive influence of religion on humanity from cradle to the grave, and the African consciousness of the divine is captured in a Yoruba proverb: "no one teaches the child to know God"; the consciousness of God is considered inherent in the child from birth.

One notable aspect of traditional African religion is the practice of offering sacrifices and prayers to God through their ancestors, otherwise called gods. According to Mircea Eliade's *Deus otiosus* theory, the practice of praying to God through ancestors is premised on the belief that God, upon creating the world, retired in heaven delegating the responsibility of taking care of humanity and the world to the hands of disciple gods otherwise called ancestors (Ukpong,1983). The mediumistic theory of Evans-Pritchard supports the *Deus otiosus* theory by contending that the ancestors and gods serve as the intermediaries between human beings and God. Therefore, the sacrifices and prayers they receive are ultimately received by God. Broadly analyzed, these two theories are not completely off base in the sense that the theorists at least recognized the preponderance of belief in God and gods in West Africa in particular. However, the theories are flawed in the sense that African traditional religious beliefs and practices encompass invoking both the gods and God. They pray directly to God as well as to the gods in the hope that the latter will relay their message to the Creator.

It is very likely that visitors from European countries in which Christianity is the dominant religion would find some of the traditional African religious rites repulsive. It is, however, advisable not to leap to conclusions, especially when such conclusions are intended to denigrate the unfamiliar religious practices of some people. The religious traditions and customs in the Bible are more sync with the traditional African religions than with the modern religious practices in the Christian churches in Europe and North America. It has been an established historical and scientific fact that Africa is the birthplace of humanity (Wayman, 2011;Tattersall, 1997), so it could also be the birthplace of religion owing to the similarities of practice.

Christianity and Islam's Intolerance with ATR

The vast majority of people in many sub-Saharan African nations are deeply committed to the practices and major tenets of one or the other of the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam. Large majorities say they belong to one of these faiths, and, in sharp contrast with Europe and the United States, very few people are religiously unaffiliated. Despite the dominance of Christianity and Islam, traditional African religious beliefs and practices have not disappeared. Rather, they coexist with Islam and Christianity. Whether or not this entails some theological tension, it is a reality in people's lives: Large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believes in witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions. Lewis (2017), at the same time, many of those who indicate they are deeply committed to the practice of Christianity or Islam also incorporate elements of African traditional religions into their daily lives. For example, in Yoruba land people believe that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm. Sizable percentages of both Christians and Muslims, say they believe in the protective power of juju (charms or amulets). Many people also say they consult traditional religious healers when someone in their household is sick, paganism, ancestor worship or simply superstition, but today scholars acknowledge the existence of sophisticated African traditional religions whose primary role is to provide for human well-being in the present as opposed to offering salvation in a future world. Because beliefs and practices vary across ethnic groups and regions, some experts perceive a multitude of different traditional religions in Africa. Others point to unifying themes and, thus, prefer to think of a single faith with local differences.

In general, traditional religion in Africa is characterized by belief in a supreme being who created and ordered the world but is often experienced as distant or unavailable to humans. Lesser divinities or spirits who are more accessible are sometimes believed to act as intermediaries. A number of traditional myths explain the creation and ordering of the world and provide explanations for contemporary social relationships and norms. Lapsed

social responsibilities or violations of taboos are widely believed to result in hardship, suffering and illness for individuals or communities and must be countered with ritual acts to re-establish order, harmony and well-being, Thomas (2005)

Ancestors, considered to be in the spirit world, are believed to be part of the human community. Believers hold that ancestors sometimes act as emissaries between living beings and the divine, helping to maintain social order and withdrawing their support if the living behaves wrongly. Religious specialists, such as diviners and healers, are called upon to discern what infractions are at the root of misfortune and to prescribe the appropriate rituals or traditional medicines to set things right. African traditional religions tend to personify evil. Believers often blame witches or sorcerers for attacking their life-force, causing illness or other harm. They seek to protect themselves with ritual acts, sacred objects and traditional medicines. African slaves carried these beliefs and practices to the Americas, where they have evolved into religions such as Voodoo in Haiti and Santeria in Cuba

Aspect of Tolerance and Cultural Identity in Africa

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 Tesbi 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 "*Eledumare*", Islam has "Allah," and Christianity has "God."

Religious tolerance is an essential component in the propagation of any religious view, faith, or doctrines; moreover, in a world with a multiplicity of religious groups the need for religious tolerance can never be over emphasized. The need for religious tolerance in Africa (Nigeria) has been discussed by several authors (Hunwick 1992; Baba, 2003; Momoh and ElMiskin 1989; Falola 1998) but most of these discussions are focused on the relationship between Islam and Christianity. Very little has been said about ATR. The nature of tolerance in ATR and its relationship with other religious groups has not been adequately explored. Thus, a significant aspect of the discussions towards religious tolerance among the various religious groups in Africa (Nigeria) is often ignored. This article explores the nature of religious tolerance in ATR in order to discover what patterns of tolerance exist in its practices that may provide resources for the ongoing discussions on the need for peaceful co-existence among three major religious legacies (Islam, Christianity, and ATR) in Africa (Nigeria).

Influence of ATR on Muslim and Christian Society Liturgy

According to Tagbo,"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 and Christian religions 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."

It is good to note that some practices of Islamic and Christian religions 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 or Christianity 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.

In modern society that is saturated by Islamic thought and Christian belief, we still observe some notable influence of African traditional religion in the affairs and religious lifestyle of some adherents of the modern religions. For instance, Muslims still exhibit some syncretic characteristics which show their affinity to their indigenous religion. It is still observable that many Muslims and Christian 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 people do not trust in the Supreme Being; it shows rather the fact that Africans find it very difficult to leave their way of life, especially in matters of religion. 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.

Conclusion

In summary, the nature of tolerance in ATR may be understood from various angles. The absence of a holy book or scriptures that could provide unified doctrinal beliefs and practices allows for change in religious belief without creating religious controversies. Also, ATR does not trace its origin to an individual founder who might have commanded his or her followers to proselytize people of other faiths—a situation which often leads to bitter religious rivalries and controversies. Moreover, African moral ethics, which place high value on humanity as the pivotal point of God's creation, help create an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. In ATR, it is held that all human beings have a common universal descent from the same Creator God. This lays the foundation for respect of all human religious orientations.

Recommendations

- There should be Interreligious dialogue which supposes to become an urgent issue, where all humanity from religious, racial and cultural divides search in desperation for justice, peace and hopeful future.
- The government should as a matter of fact organize seminars of inter-traditional religious tolerance between the adherents of all the religions
- Moreover, each religion is important and has a lot of things others can learn from it, hence, each and everyone should learn from one another

- No religion should be seen as superior to the other. The paper is of the opinion 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.

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