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CONTINUITIES OF ELEMENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Africans have a religion which is called African Traditional Religion; this religion has its own beliefs and customs, known as its article of faith. Just as Christians especially Catholics believe in one God, three persons in one God, resurrection etc and these revealed doctrines one has no right to question. In African Traditional Religion they also have their belief systems whose one dimension are the elements. The elements of faith and practice are found in all religions. Any culture that loses its identity does not exist in the real sense of the word. Every culture strives to protect and promote its values. This work will enhance the understanding and appreciation of the African exposition of the importance of the African values. It also discusses the Christian cultures and values to see possible areas of inculturation. The methodology applied in its analysis is socio-cultural approach.

Keywords: Elements, Continuities, African Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Appraisal.

Introduction

The African values are fast deteriorating and this trend is fomenting various kinds of disintegration among Africans. The young Africans are caught in this web of confusion and crisis of identity. Despite the efforts expended to rediscover these African values, a lot are still left unsolved because new problems and challenges arise and seemingly truncating any further progress.

Circumstantially, colonialism with its precedent Christian evangelization, nurtures this unwholesome development which today perturbs the Africans. Arguably, Christianity contributes to magnifying the problems to the extent that no remedy appears to be in sight. Hence, many may hold that colonization and Christianity are central to the identity crisis in Africa. All the above, therefore, prompts the writer's curiosity to study the elements of A.T. R that have entrenched themselves in African. Christianity vis-a-vis the consequences for present and future practices of Christian faith in Africa.

The African cultures and identity are in crucible crisis. The African cultures and values are almost destroyed by the adulterated Christian messages. These unrefined Christian messages denigrate the African values and debunk the objectivity of the African cultures. Thus, Africans are convinced to loathe their own cultures an imbibe an alien identity. As a matter of fact, the African cultures and their value are in the dark. Presently and quite unfortunately, only few Africans

appreciate an practice these values. African values are regarded as obsolete and outlandish. The sense of communality is lost.

Nonetheless, this expose is deeply involved to establishing that the message o Christianity cannot strike deep into the heart of the Africans unless it is related to and even embodied in, the peopled own culture and tradition. What is needed some way of helping people to come home to their traditional heritage? Once they rediscover and appreciate their own roots they have a solid basis for ethical behavior and service of the community because it is a basis without which Christian faith remains superficial. In effect, we want to establish that it is only people who are rooted in their own culture that can evaluate that culture, preserving the best of their traditional values and collecting or adapting aspects that need further development.

Any culture that loses its identity does not exist in the real sense of the word. Every culture strives to protect and promote its values. This work will enhance the understanding and appreciation of the African values by the Africans. The significance of the work lies primarily in its exposition of the importance of the African values. It will provide the framework for the continuous motivation and urge to retain these values in spite of the misguided conception already imbibed. However, the work is not a repudiation of Christianity but a redefinition of the Christian message with regard to the African cultures and values.

Continuities of Elements of African Traditional Religion in African Christianity

Element of African Traditional Religion

Many scholars have given different elements found in African traditional religion. In this research, the researchers shall adopt the elements posited by Idowu. Idowu classifies the elements found in African traditional religion into five namely belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in the Ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine (C.O.T Ugwu and L.E. Ugwueye 2004:32). Every one of this element relies on God, while God exists alone and is the chief controller of the world and the ultimate element. By implication, God is the source of all beings (Edeh, Emmanuel 1985:1 16).

Belief in God

In African traditional religion, the notion of God as the Supreme Being is an obvious fact to all Africans. This is manifest in Africans understanding of God which is explicitly seen in the names ascribed to him. Similarly, Mbiti in Gbenda (1997:27) observes that "all peoples in Africa, without a single exception, have notion of God as the Supreme Being". Among the Igbo is known as "Chineke" or "Chukwu" (the Creator God or Great God). Yoruba people know God as "Olodumare" (Creator God), for the Hausa, God is called "Allah" (Almighty God). In other African countries like Ghana and Sierra Leone, God is known as "Nyame" and "Ngewo" respectively. Also the nature or conception about God reflects in the names Africans give to their children. God is known as Creator, Omnipotent, Transcendent, Immanent, Omnipresent, Omniscient and what have you.

Belief in Divinities

Divinities are gods with small letter "g". By implication it can be said that they emanated from the Supreme Being "God". As such, they acquire the qualities of the

Supreme Being. The purpose of their existence is to do the will of the Supreme Being (God), in the theocratic government of the world.

The various types of divinities are Okombo in Tiv, others are Anyanwu (Sun god), Agwu, Amadioha, Igwe (sky god) and Ala. They are also categorized under primordial divinities, deified ancestors and Myraid spirits. Similarly, in western religion (Christianity), the angels and saints are seen as divinities. This is because they are believed to be powerful intercessors through which one's prayer can easily be answered.

Belief in Spirits

According to Ugwu and Ugwueye, "Spirits are apparitional entities, which form a separate category from those described as divinities" (2004:46). In African Traditional Religion, spirits are believed to be everywhere. In some places, there are trees considered to be the abode of the spirits, however, the being or the existence of spirit does not depend on any material object. Spirits are of different categories. Those whose dead bodies are not buried with proper burial rites, consequently they hover around in the world because of deprivation from entering the land of the dead. Another category is Ogbanje or Abiku spirit; which are believed to be "born to die". This spirit enter into a woman and soon after birth dies to reincarnate. Another spirit is the one sent to harm people, known as witches. Sometimes this spirit takes the form of animals to go and attack others while the person's body is sleeping. The Africans also believe that every person has chi; which leads and guides the individual. As such, one has to work in accordance to this spirit for success, and one can as well upgrade it in case it is of low standard. This spirit can be likening to individual gifts and talents naturally endowed.

Belief in Ancestors

In African Traditional Religion, Ancestors are "Those who have realized to a remarkable degree the values and aspirations of their communities or groups" (Abanuka, Batholomew 1994:37). These Ancestors are seen as "living dead" of the community. Again, Ancestors are the heroes because of their achievement in the community. From the negative point of view, Ancestors can be seen as those who did not commit scandal when they are in the flesh. Ancestors are revered according to the level of their achievement in a particular community. Those who died in a ripped age are also regarded as Ancestors, in that sense, old age is regarded as a blessing in the notion of death for the Africans. Also included in the rank of the Ancestors are those who died young but did outstanding things for the community. The final group of the Ancestors is the anonymous group. Those who lived godly lives but were not identified. Remarkably, the African notion of the Ancestors could be seen in the Christian notion of saint hood and canonization.

Practice of Magic and Medicine

In African world view, Magic and medicine are based on the belief of some vital forces in the universe. These forces are believed to be tapped and controlled by man. Thus, magic can be seen as man's attempt to control the supernatural powers in the world, and medicine as the act of using the available forces to prevent disease and restore man's health (Ugwu and Ugwueye 2004:50). Ritual and incantation are the common element to magic and medicine. Magic and medicine are enclosed with taboos which if thwarted against it, it renders them powerless. Both the medicine men and the user are to observe these taboos for the effectiveness of the medicine.

The Effects of These Elements to the Moral Lives of African People

These element no doubt have helped to shape the moral lives of the Africans. They have helped the Africans to come to the consciousness of the fact of eschatology. Eschatology here means the final end of man. As such, their action is conditioned by their final end. The moral code of African Traditional Religion is regarded as that which has been handed down by past generations and sanctioned by the spirits and the ancestors, and occasionally by the Supreme Being. Traditional Religions do not generally lay claim to revealed books. The riches of their contents, and their many values, are more often in their celebrations stories and proverbs, and conveyed through attitudes, customs and code of, conduct. In many traditional societies there is a strong sense of the sacred.

Religion permeates life to such an extent that it is often difficult to distinguish between strictly religious elements and local custom.

Accordingly, authority is not as something secular but is regarded as a sacred trust. People of Traditional Religion show great attention to the earth. They respect life and celebrate its important stages like birth, entrance into adulthood, marriage, death. There is a strong sense of the family, which includes love of children, respect for the elders, and a community link with the ancestors.

The Effects of These Elements to the Social-cultural Lives of African People

It should be noted that the African Traditional Religion particularly the Tiv people of Nigeria acknowledge the supremacy of the Christian God as the creator of heaven and earth (Aondo gba sha man tar chii). The Tiv equally believe that God the Almighty acts through the subordinate gods (tsav and Akombo) with supernatural powers believed to live on earth with men in order to regulate the behaviour of the society. Against this background, the Tiv people's actions and behaviour are informed by the fear of these subordinate gods especially when the norms and taboos of the society are transgressed; especially in societies where every member believes that a person consent of this subordinate gods.

Similarly, Tiv people equally believe that success or failure in life is determined not by hard work or indolence but supernatural cults. The society is dichotomized into those initiated into the tsav and the akombo (lesser or subordinate gods) cults on one side and the novices (vanger-gbirin) on the other. This is in accordance with the Christian system of worship by which people picked their guardian saints or the likes and desire and hope that through their intercession they could be protected and good fortune in turn may come their way. Mbiti (1968) commenting on the issue of social-cultural change all over Africa says "Africa is caught up in a world revolution which is so dynamic that it has almost got out of human control.

Furthermore, in many African Traditional societies there is a strong sense of the sacred. The African people permeate life to such an extent that it's often difficult to distinguish between strictly religious elements and local custom.

African people show great attention to the earth. They respect life and celebrate its and a community link with the ancestors. Symbolism is important for interpreting the invisible world and the human love of ritual. Obviously, with the aid of these elements, attentions have

been given to locating man in his environment and making him feel at home in it. Also through these elements, tradition is being handed on from generation to generation important stages: birth, entrance into adulthood, marriage, death. There is a strong sense of the family which includes love of children, respect for the elders, and a community link with the ancestors. Symbolism is important for interpreting the invisible world and the human love of ritual. Obviously, with the aid of these elements, attentions have been given to locating man in his environment and making him feel at home in it. Also through these elements, tradition is being handed on from generation to generation.

The Entrenchment of These Elements in African Christianity

The rapid growth of many religions in Africa and their revival of African Traditional Religion brought about the urgent necessity of inter-religious dialogue. Unlike the Colonial encounter with African Traditional Religion, which was characterized by hostility and the condemnation of African Traditional Religion, the postcolonial encounter is characterized by mutual respect, understanding, tolerance, and some level of freedom and liberation, in this way, suspicion will be reduced, because despite the adherence confession of Christianity, African Traditional Religion is not to be extinct.

The entrenchment of African Traditional Religion in African Christianity is so open that a blind man can see it. The present version of Christianity and the increase in their membership of African Traditional Religion is alarming. The missionary version of Christianity accepted by Africans can be described as hypocritical because many African Christians still patronize African Traditional Religion, especially in times of emergency. This means that the influence of African Traditional Religion is still strong, especially in moment of crises (Mercado 2004, 2005:104). Even today, many who claim conversion to Christianity still patronize priests of African Traditional Religion. In line with this thought, Bascom and Herskovites writes: " Despite the intensity of Christian missionary effort and the thousand years of Muslim proselytizing which have marked the various parts of Africa, African religions continued to manifest vitality everywhere. This is to be seen in worship of African deities, the homage to ancestors, and the divination, magic, and elements of African Traditional Religion...." (Bascom and Herskovites 1959:3). Mbiti testified to this fact when he stated that "many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register or be counted in census as adherents of only one religion" (Mbiti 1975:30).

Many recent converts to Christianity came from a background of traditional not only in those churches where the gospel has been preached within the last century or so, but also in some countries where the church has been established for many centuries. Many of these converts live in cultures and contexts influenced by these religions. This is to prove the fact that at some important moments in their lives (such as sickness, danger, marriage, birth of a Christian, funeral of a relative) they tend to have recourse to practice their traditional religions or to prayer houses, healing house, witch-craft, "prophets" or fortune -tellers.

Obviously, there is no doubt saying that elements of African religion and the culture influenced by it can enrich Catechesis and liturgy, and therein attain their fulfillment. However, an in-depth study is necessary in order to discover those elements Christianity can

adopt and purify, and those which must be rejected *(Lumen Gentium* 13), with constant attention to the danger of syncretism.

The Importance of the Elements of Atr to the Present and Future Practices of Christian Faith in Africa

It is important to note that in African society, religion serves as the structure around which all other activities, such as cultural, economic, political and social organizations are built. To the people of Africa, religion is literally life and life is religion. African communities believe in God as the Supreme Being, the existence of man, the universe, life and life after death, the power of deities, the idea of sacrifice, rites of passage from childhood to adulthood and ancestral ties. Africans also recognize eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, holiness, justice, mercy, faithfulness and transcendence of God. In Christian religion, these elements are also common in its practices. There is no doubt that Christian religion will have and continue to have ground in its practice of faith in Africa. This is because they have common elements both in their beliefs and practices. Where the problem lies is majorly in understanding and in some cases method of approach and application. One important aspect of African traditional religion is the presence of spirits. In the African world, spirits are everywhere—in persons, trees, rivers, animals, rocks, mountains, and even in automobiles and other personal effects. The presence of these spirits in the African society offers a serious challenge to the behavior patterns of the people on the continent and elsewhere because traditional religious practices permeate every aspect of life on the continent. These spirits communicate their wishes, demands and prescriptions to the larger society through the traditional priests. These traditional priests are able to satisfy their clients through the performance of rituals. This is similar in Christian religion where an ordained minister communicates to the people of God the message and mind of God through rituals such as Holy Eucharist and other sacraments and sacramentals.

The practice of medicine and magic is also important in most African societies. They engage in fetishism, in which they believe that certain objects, mostly man-made, have supernatural powers in them. Magic or sorcery refers to the influencing of events and physical phenomena by supernatural, mystical, or paranormal means. They are complexes of beliefs and practices that believers can resort to in order to wield this supernatural influence, and are similar to cultural complexes that seek to explain various events and phenomena by supernatural means. In Christian religion, there are use of images and symbols through which they communicate some ethical principles of life based on the life history of particular saints or ancestors as the case may be.

The roles of certain religious functionaries are also important. They have native doctors/physicians, diviners, traditional birth attendants and the likes. All these people have important roles to play in the traditional African society. This also applies to Christian religion where we have some ministers both clerics and non clerics who render assistance as regards any ritual or sacred celebrations. We have catechists who assist in catechetical work, lay readers, church wardens and the likes. These when understood in the light of African traditional ceremonial assembly, paves the way for Christian to make their impact in evangelizing Africa both at present and in the future.

The beliefs and practices of African traditional religion and society are based upon the faith of the ancient indigenous people who are referred to as ancestors. This is why it is qualified as

traditional. Traditional comes from the Latin verb "tradere" which means to hand down doctrines, customs etc., from generation to generation. The belief in ancestors is an important element of African traditional religions. The belief occupies an important place in the understanding of the role of the traditional religion in inculcating the ideals of culture and religion among African peoples. The ancestors are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died 'good' and natural deaths, that is at a ripe old age, and received the acknowledged funerary rites. They could be men or women. This means that not all who die become ancestors, but there are conditions which must be fulfilled while the person is alive. This element is very much important looking at its connection to the Christian notion of Apostles, Martyrs, Doctors and Saints. How Christianity respect the Saints has intimate connection with how Africa traditionalists relate with their ancestors.

Traditional Africans hold the ancestors as the closest link between the physical and spirit worlds. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them. Africans believe that the ancestors are essentially benevolent spirits. They return to their human families from time to time and share meals with them, however, symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in their families. So it is suffice to say that for the most part, African traditional religion depends very much on the spirit world. In Christian liturgical assembly, they also believe in the communion of the saints most especially in the breaking of bread. Therefore, there is no doubt that the elements of African traditional religion have important roles to play in accommodating Christian inculturation mission in Africa. These are some important aspect of African traditional religion with respect to Christian evangelization and inculturation.

Dialogue between the Elements of Atr and Christian Faith

The first important thing to observe in achieving a genuine dialogue, is finding a common ground. Despite the real differences and even disparities between culture and religions, there is a basic stratum of human commonalities that can make it possible for people to communicate with one another and to discover points of contact with others (Gort 2008:756). Such commonality may include common experiences, fears, questions and sorrows that people everywhere share.

For a genuine dialogue to take place, the participants should be concerned with the nature of dialogue. A genuine dialogue with ATR should take the nature of what Knitter calls 'liberative dialogue' (Knitter 1995:218). In this case, the dialogue should start with nonreligious issues, reflecting the existing problems of the community. Such dialogue should include compassion, collaboration, comprehension and conversion (Muwahidah 2008:79-92). As Nkulu-N'Sengsha (1996) states: If dialogue hides the real problems that divide people of Africa, and if it does not help them to make their life better and more human, then it is a futile enterprise and even an insult to human intelligence and a crime against humanity (Nkulu-N'Sengha 1996:554).

The historical origin of Christianity and ATR may be the common ground for dialogue. The main source of these religions is the beliefs in God and his attributes. Several scholars have demonstrated the fact that ATR believe in the Supreme God, the creator of the heavens and the earth (Idowu 1962; Awolalu 1979; Mbiti 1970). The question of the attributes of God in ATR and Christianity can be a great place of departure. Holiness, goodness, mercy, immutability, righteousness and others are attributes of God in both religions. That the

Supreme Being is the creator and the father of all that exists, that there is unity of life and participation can be a common ground to start a genuine dialogue.

It is a fact that any genuine dialogue, especially religious dialogue, depends on the cultural settings from which the partners speak; therefore, it is imperative not to overlook the cultural differences that are expressed in different religious beliefs if genuine dialogue is to be achieved. It means that the first requirement for a genuine dialogue is to find 'a firm ground where the dialogue itself may take place. Such common ground is the local myth' (Panikkar 1975:407-409).

For a genuine dialogue in Africa, it is absolutely important for the participants to recognize and accept the fact that all human life (not just an artificially isolated segment called the religious life) and that all human beings (not just Christians) are part of God's activity in the world and share common future' (Ariarajah 1976:3-4). One has to take one's partner seriously and seek to learn from their religious experience. There should be a clear understanding of the nature of the community we seek to dialogue with, because dialogue has to do with the question of the relationship of the Christian community to the human community of which is a part. A genuine dialogue should therefore take the human community as the locus of God's activity.

There must be an equal preparation for the two parties, both theologically and culturally, to avoid misunderstandings by any of the parties. Mutual trust is also an important requirement to genuine dialogue.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that some believe that any individual who jettisons his root in the name of accepting new religious orientation is doing him or herself a disservice. Christ Jesus is our Vine and we are his branches as Christians. This is in line with that biblical injunction "cut off from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:6). A conscious effort to give the elements of ATR which have close affinity with our culture and life a due attention in our African society will provide a good platform for the flourishing of any new faith orientation. Since Africans marry their faith and religion together, it is obvious that for any minister of any religion to make impact in their world, the pastor must accept the religion and culture of the people he has come to evangelize.

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