

## Christianity and African Culture (15th-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries): An Appraisal of the Nigerian Milieu

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### **Abstract**

Before the coming of the Christian missionaries in the mid fifteenth century to Nigeria, every ethnic group advocated her own separate indigenous religion, which ranged in conventional beliefs and practices as relative to each community. Simply put, the indigenous people of Nigeria believed in divine beings which they feared, popularly labelling them as 'gods of instant retribution'. This belief maintained peace and orderliness in varied communities. However, the introduction of Christianity and the concept of "supreme being" - "Christ" changed the traditional worldview of Nigerians towards the deities. Most importantly, the concept of the divine and forgiveness towards sinners converted them in their numbers. This Christianity later world view appears thus to have given way to clandestine activities in Nigerian society. Christianity appears to be obnoxious to the tedious and inhumane sacrifices which were commonly practiced in traditional religious worship.

**Keywords:** Christianity, African Culture (15th-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries), Appraisal, Nigerian Milieu

### **Introduction**

Can Christianity be seen as the hope for Africa in this post-modern era? Can we say that Christianity has improved the Nigerians or given a leeway to evil perpetrators to easily conduct their activities with the notion that God in Christianity worldview will always forgive even when the offence is committed intentionally? These questions then gauge the mind: where do we draw the line between culture and Christianity? Can the supremacy and reverence given to the deities in the African conventional worship be attributed to Christianity in African context especially in the present Nigeria? Thus, this chapter will do a comparative study, attempt to critically examine the African Chris to-cultural aspects and make some suggestions.

### **Overview of an African Culture and Society**

Olaniyan (1982) unveils that the people of Africa, like all other people of the world, are indivisible from their history and culture, for their history is the record of what they did, thought and said; and their culture is the ideas, concepts and values that illustrated their societies. He added that "African historical tradition, myth, and symbolism are often employed to explain origins of peoples, historical causation, migrations and relationships among various communities" (p. 2). According to Mbiti (1969), the indigenous people of Africa claim to have lived for hundreds of years, and continue in units or clusters commonly referred to as tribes. It is estimated that there are about 3,000 tribes, partly depending on where one draws the line in case of closely related people. Each group has its own dissimilar language and not simply a dialect. Simply put, these languages are related to one another naturally. Kirwen (2011), however, added that "socializing in African community is organized around the lineal family and in it is made up of the living, the dead and the unborn children" (p. 650). Andah (1982) proposes that African societies were identified by their intra social groupings as the family (which maybe nuclear or extended), the lineage, the clan; the age group or grade. Andah (1982) added that,

*African culture embraces all of the material and non-material expressions of a people as well as the processes with which expressions are communicated. It has to do with the social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic and intellectual expressions and process of a people usually ethnically and/or nationally or supernaturally living in a geographically contiguous area; what they pass on to their successors and how they are passed on (pp. 4,5).*

### **Overview of the Concept of Culture and Religion in Nigeria**

According to Adewoye (2011), Nigeria in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, has about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups which comprise major and minor tribes. The issue of her origin has been engaged in by the traditional and modern historians over hundreds of years. Adewoye (2011) further posited that different traditions suggest that Nigerian people came from the Hamites or members of the semi-white race or probably from other settlements or similar territories within Nigeria through a series of complex local areas. Similarly, it was evident that human societies have always existed from the earliest archeological findings in the late Stone Age (LSA) to the coming of the Europeans between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries. According to Falola *et al* (2008),

*Human societies have been constantly present in all regions of Nigeria for several thousand years. Initially, their societies were*

*decentralized in nature, focusing on small village or village group units until the advent of European colonization (p. 16).*

Eregare (2010) however argues from the Christian worldview that human societies had existed only few thousand of years. To be precise, the human existence since creation is only a little above six thousand years. Igwe and Adeyemi (2011) succinctly shared some of the aspects of Nigerian culture that they are both material and non-material. The Nigerian indigenous societies have had a developed technology for tools and household utensils and the like since the pre-colonial epoch. They include farm implements, food and medication which include mode of preparation and the use of herbs respectively. According to Eregare (2013),

*Culture is fundamental to human experience and human civilization. It is dynamic and it embodies a people's response to the challenges of life and living. Culture offers meaning, purpose and value to the socio-economic, political and aesthetic ethos of the society. (p. 40).*

Elmer (1993) reveals that God authored culture or human diversity. These facts necessitate the consciousness to celebrate and honour it as the work of the wise and sovereign Creator. Igwe and Adeyemi (2011) further opined that Religious worship is also an aspect of Nigerian culture. Each group, before the advent of the two major religions-Islam and Christianity, had its religious practices. This is the African Traditional Religion that projects the belief of the Supreme Being who was worshiped through his agents or gods such as Sango, Ala, Obatala etcetera. In addition, Nigerian society also held in esteem its values. However, some ethnic groups have some aspects of culture that resist foreign influence in their varied festivals. Eregare (2013) added that these festivals are to mark "harvest seasons, or make appeals to gods for purification of the town, commemoration of ancient expeditions or reminiscences of or tribute to tribal heroes" (p. 31). Igwe and Adeyemi (2011) sum up that the Nigerian communities had their taboos, because a number of offences were considered abominable among the different groups. There had been changes over the Nigerian culture; some had been forgotten or modified to suit contemporary times. Mbiti (1969) affirms that " It is true that Africa has always had a contact with the outside world, but religious and cultural influence from this contact cannot have flowed only one way; there was always a give-and-take process" (p. 6).

By the end of 7<sup>th</sup> Century, African Traditional Religion had been the sole religion in Nigerian societies. According to George (2011), Islamic religion came from

across the Sahara to the northern part of the country about the 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Christianity on the other hand came from western Europe in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The coming of Islam and Christianity had influenced greatly the socio-economic, political and cultural lives of Nigerians.

### **African Christianity and the Concept of Divinity, the Nigerian Experience**

According to Mbiti (1989), Christianity in Africa can be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion because of its age and existence. Before the advent of Islam in the seventh Century, Christianity had already been established all over North Africa, Egypt, parts of the Sudan and Ethiopia. It had been a dynamic form of Christianity which great scholars and theologians like Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine had contributed to the position it is today in Africa. African Christianity made a great contribution to Christendom through scholarship, participation of Church councils, defence of the Faith, movements like monasticism, theology, translation and preservation of the Scriptures, martyrdom, the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, liturgy and even heresies and controversies. A famous philosopher once reiterated that "religion, the opium of the people; a sign of the oppressed." Karl Marx. In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, Christianity is the hope of our people. In fact, for most people, their religious convictions are their most cherished assets. However, this idea tends to contradict itself, especially when people tend to leave religion when discussing crucial matters. There is an assumption that Christianity is a private matter which must be confined to every individual. Religion should be a tool of inspiration and grace for societal transformation, economically and socially. Thus, when understood properly in all its truth, religion should be a delivering resource, however, when misunderstood, religion may stand as a "weapon of mass destruction", as the current situation in Nigeria illustrates.

### **African Traditional Worship and Concept of Divinity, the Nigerian Context**

According to Kirwen (2011), Africans, at the end of nineteenth century, did not have a concept of a monotheistic creator God. The early writings as influenced by Darwinism assumed that Africans were polytheistic rather than monotheistic which was later censured. Africans pictured God as supreme and non-human being who is the creator of all and presented as a life giving power. This life giving power surrounds and engulfs all human beings. It is said that small human problems should be addressed to the ancestors who are familiar to the local people. God should only be approached in case of major problems. For Africans, God is approached in reverence as the source of all life and reality. Manus (2002) attests that in Nigeria, anthropologists and sociologists posited that

religion is, a language, a universal phenomenon in every human society. He said further that,

*The various ethnic groups in Nigeria have had their own cultural expressions or conceptions of a super empirical or non ordinary reality with which they give the names: gods, spirits or deities. These entities are believed to influence and to rule human existence (p. 350).*

Scholars of religion in Nigeria attest to the fact that Nigerians are naturally religious. Nigerian peoples' everyday life, utterances and worship patterns distinctively mark them out as seriously committed religious people. He affirms as well to the fact that religion is a potent force and a-meaning giving activity. Ejenobo, D.T as cited in Eregare (2013) posited that each kingdom in Nigeria has its own religious beliefs, deities and ancestral worships. In pre- Christian era, the African Traditional worship enforced limitless taboos and restrictions on their believers as admitted by Eriwo (1972). According to Eregare (2013), the coming of Christianity to Africans is a leeway to escape from the clutches of the African traditionally imposed ceaseless taboos and restrictions on their devotees even much more on their priests. For example, no adherent can eat any food that is forbidden by the idol and go unpunished. Thus, let us take a case study of one of the minority tribes in the south, the *Urhobos* in Delta State that serve *edjo*, a traditional deity for an ancestral worship. Although many desire to eat yam and cassava, the people's staple foods, many *edjo* adherents had to abstain from these items of food against their will. They had to do this in compliance with the rules and regulations. No wonder still, Eregare (2013) said:

*When Christianity came, those who embraced it defiled all edjo taboos and restrictions with impunity, for which reason the Christian church was designated Orugbagiua (that-which defiles-taboo). Consequently, thousands who desired to be liberated from the somewhat tyrannical rule of edjo gladly embraced the Christian faith (p. 93).*

To examine further the Christianity worldviews on African Culture from an Historiographical experience, Eregare (2013) attested to the fact that belief in the some Christian churches stand for the total rejection of the African culture. Others believe and teach without reservations the complete acceptance of the African culture or equate the culture with the scriptures. However, Christianity ought to stand out basing its values on the scriptures alone for general developments in any given society.

### **Impact of Christianity on the Socio-Political and Economic Strata, the Nigerian Context**

Ilesanmi (1997) argues that there is no one single ethnic group that does not have some religious impact in its historic roots in Nigeria. He stressed that Christianity in Nigeria plays an enormous role in the formation of moral values and cultural and social identity in all of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. This study is insightful because it provides us with a tool through which we can look at Christianity and its impacts in the past and at present. Christianity permeates every aspect of human behavior of its adherents. It is all encompassing because of its natural ability to provide a transcendent moral perspective. Ilesanmi (1997) opines that "the world is filled with various value systems and worship systems which direct our lives". He defines religion, even Christianity, as that aspect of human culture, constituting the response of individual (groups) to the prevailing concept of the supernatural. This includes what people believe about the supernatural and how their beliefs directly affect their actions and practices. That is to say, Christianity is part of the social system which gives a society its social and cultural identity, "self affirmation and self definition".

Coward and Smith (2004) argue that the responsibility for discerning and developing appropriate roles for religion and religious actors belongs jointly to political, religious and nongovernmental organizations and their leaders. This means that, the notion that religion is a personal matter should not exist anymore, as people have shown that they cannot be relied upon to take appropriate actions which are morally correct at any point in time. The state and other supporting organizations should support the view of religion and make it a societal issue, so that morality or the moral codes become a public issue where people are compelled by situations and institutions around them to act correctly. Expanding the community to that which religious principles and virtues are applied is crucial to the achievement of peace locally and internationally.

### **Challenges of the Religious Groups on Nigerian Society, an African Experience**

Uchegbue (2010) evidently demonstrates that in addition to its religious or spiritual foundations and motivations, the quest for an eventual coming and establishment of Christianity in Calabar was predominantly socially or secularly motivated. This argument is based on some self evident premises. Firstly and for example, the earliest contact of Christianity with the indigenous people of Calabar; the Efik, in particular, was not religiously motivated. It was their

commercial and mercantile transaction with the Europeans, rather than a deliberate organized missionary expedition that brought the initial contact. The result of that transaction was their realization of the superiority of the white man's culture which ignited in them a strong passion and aspiration for the adoption of the colonial masters' civilization and technology. Actually, the Efik chiefs and kings deliberately requested for Christianity. Their request was not premised on the thirst for religious and spiritual uplift, rather it was based mainly on educational progress for economic prosperity. As a matter of fact, the request for religious enlightenment by these local chiefs was at the critical period when slave trade had just been abolished. This greatly crippled their source of income and increased their motivation towards Christianity as another explorable option and resulted in the establishment of a school in the old town on arrival of the Scottish missionaries. This further affirms that the coming of Christianity to Calabar and some other parts of Nigeria had strong foundations of social and secular motivations. The implications of this truth is the tendency of its recipients to pick and choose what they want to obey/adhere to and to reject what is not relevant to them. This is what we may refer to as instrumental or opportunistic approach to Christianity, which, to some extent, explains how Christianity works in our society today.

The question sometimes arises, do we really need Christianity and ethics in socio-economic planning? What has happened to religion that it now requires repositioning? How can Christianity, faith and ethics help promote good economic and social attitudes? What have Christianity, faith and ethics got to do with economic and social matters? There are numerous reasons for repositioning Christianity for a viable and sustainable economic, societal transformation and individual destiny at the close of earth's history. Nigeria needs a true and unadulterated religion; monotheistic religion. This, with its moral values, has the capacity to encourage social and economic order, freedom and justice. It will encourage character virtues such as honesty, truthfulness, trust, hard work, selfless service, moral rectitude, integrity, compassion, love and justice.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined critically the African conventional culture, the impact of Christianity on the African socio-economic and political culture, their impacts and challenges on the Nigerian societies before and between 15<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. Evidences suggest that every ethnic group in Nigeria advocated her own separate indigenous religion, which ranged in conventional beliefs and practices as relative to each community. Nigeria has about two hundred and

fifty ethnic groups which comprise the major and minor. The issue of her origin had been complex and are always fundamental to continuous examination by the traditional and modern historians. Simply put, varied traditions suggest that Nigerian people came from the Hamites or members of the semi-white race or probably from other settlements or similar territories within Nigeria through a series of complex local area. Similarly, it was evident that Nigerian societies were decentralized in nature, focusing on small village or village group units until the advent of European colonization in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This research revealed that over the thousand years of existence of the country Nigeria, the indigenous societies have had a developed aspect of culture in technology, medicine and religious worship. However, there had been changes over the Nigerian culture because of her contacts with foreign cultures. Nigerian culture had their taboos, some of which had been forgotten or modified to suit contemporary times. Thus, it is considered as a give-and-take issue. Christianity to Africans is a leeway to escape from the clutches of the African traditionally imposed ceaseless taboos and restrictions on their aficionado even much more on their priests. For example, no adherent can eat any food that is forbidden by the idol and go unpunished which help the Nigerian society. Evidences otherwise suggest that at the advent of Christianity, it was seen as a leeway to evil perpetrators to easily conduct their clandestine activities with the notion that God will always forgive even if their offences are committed intentionally.

Meanwhile, Christianity in Nigeria is the tool meant for the formation of moral values and socio-cultural identities. Simply put, Christianity is part of the social system which gives a society its social and cultural identity, "self affirmation and self definition". There appears that the perfect orderliness experienced in the Nigerian conventional society before people of Nigeria had any contact with the foreign religions or affairs are now missing. People hide under Christianity and do not understand the right concept of its moral standards that need to be upheld by its adherents. Therefore, this paper recommends the following:

1. If Christianity was a escape valve from the African conventional religion and its coercive taboos, there is a need for the repositioning of the educational quarters to engage every pupil/student in religious studies in correlation to biblical faith and practice to improve contemporary life - cultural, social, political and economic - not just personal and family morality
2. If the African conventional religion before and around the 15<sup>th</sup> Century could establish a society that was orderly and law abiding, Nigerians need



- to know that with Christianity consequences of sin against God may not be immediate at all times, it will be and in a more severe context at His time.
3. If Christianity in Nigeria is the tool meant for the formation of moral values and socio-cultural identities, the state and other supporting organizations should support the view of religion and make it a societal issue. Thus, the morality or the moral codes become a public issue where people are compelled by situations and institutions around them to act fittingly. This will lead to expanding the community which religious principles and virtues that correlate not with tradition and Bible but Bible and Bible alone as creed for societal morality.
  4. For Nigerian societies to be self affirmed and defined culturally there must be an authentic understanding of religion, both monotheistic (Christian and Islam) and traditional religion in Nigeria. This is to enable the adherents to discover unadulterated religious perspective that encourages the creation of an inclusive community. This is to say that a community that is interdependence, respect to God's moral laws (Ten Commandments and human rights is the true religion.

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