

AN ABUSE OF AFRICAN CULTURE IN CHRISTIANITY: A QUEST FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND AFRICAN CULTURE IN YORUBA LAND

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Abstract

Religion permeates every facet of human life. No religion can exist in isolation. In the recent time, African Christian Scholars have been singing hymn, the need to inculturate Christian religion in Africa. According to them, the Christian religion brought by Western Missionaries to Africa was packaged in the “garb” of Western culture and values. Majority of the Christian gathering today had been enveloped with the African mode of worship. This paper intends to investigate the possibility of being truly African and truly Christian since no one lives authentically outside his nature.

Keywords: *African, Culture, Christianity, Religion.*

Introduction

The lingering issue on the abuse of Yoruba culture in Christianity had become the quest of discourse in a contemporary society of Nigeria where religion is pluralistic. The Yoruba people of south western Nigeria are religious to the extent that, it is all the major religious in Nigeria that are practiced by them (i.e, Christianity, Islam and Africa Traditional Religion). They are so receptive to these religions in a way that is not obtainable in other parts of Nigeria. For instance, in the Northern part of Nigeria, Islam has firmly established and in the East, Christianity had taken her place as a leading religion with African Religion, whereas, all the religion are on equilibrium in the south west which is occupied mainly by the Yoruba people with zero tolerance for religious crisis except in few occasions. This region housing all these religious body brought some level of interactions among the adherents of these religions. They interact in time of culture, social and religious gathering. In Yoruba land today, African Christians are in a dilemma on how to understand the relationship between the Christian faith they have accepted and their traditional cultures. This creates a chasm in which it is apparently impossible for the Christian faith to meet African Traditional religion and African cultural practices. In recent times these chasm is ever widening as Christians faced with the dilemma of engaging in their cultural practices to Christianity which eventually like to the abuse of this cultural practice in tackling religious activities. Most religious gathering has enveloped with the African culture in their mode of worship, liturgy, and ways of communication.

This paper will try to look at this issue critically and seek to answer the question on possibility of being truly African and truly Christian since no one lives authentically outside his nature. The paper will re-evaluate the issue and try to present a way forward towards resolving this problem.

A Conceptualization of Culture.

The etymological derivation of the term culture is from Latin word *cultura*, which means cultivation of the soil. The relevance rests on the exposition that culture has link to the root of a people since it is cultivated by the people. This view is buttressed in the various definitions given

to culture by scholars. However, we shall select only the few that are very relevant to this article. For instance, Okafor and Emeka (2004) explained culture “as all knowledge, beliefs, customs, values, ideas and skills available in a society and by which the society can be compared to or differentiated from others”. Again, Amaegwu, citing Gomez, defines it as “an integral whole or configuration, a magnifying glass through which people perceive the many facets of the world (Amaegwu,2013). Ezeogu, (2008) interrogates the interphase between the Christian Bible and African culture as an issue in African theology. Ezeogu first affirms the fact that Christianity’s rise in Africa has been very spectacular and Africa is on record the continent with the highest numerical Christian growth rate in the world. However, for Ezeogu African Christians face some issues which has to do with how to understand the Christian Bible and their cultures. He posits two models of relationship between the Christian Bible and the African cultures which are Dialectic and dialogical. For Ezeogu in the dialectic “the gospel and culture are opposed to each other, in perpetual conflict with each other, and are ultimately irreconcilable.” While in the dialogical model culture and gospel are viewed “as two compatible entities that could and that should be reconciled. According to this view culture and Gospel could blend harmoniously. For Ezeogu the reality is that it is the dialectic tendency, which dichotomizes the Bible and African cultures, which has been dominant. However for him, “the dialogical paradigm is more in consonance with the true nature of both gospel and culture of openness to universality. Its promises are those of mutual enrichment of both gospel and culture alike.” Dialogue is important to realize this and for Ezeogu “to enter into this dialogue we need to have as aim to unify, as much as possible, the African Christian world-view and experience.”

Humanity and the Culture, An Appraisal.

Culture is generally defined as the way of life of a particular people (Barker, 2002). It is what defines a particular people and what is at the core of their worldview and attitude towards life. People are born into cultures to which they identify themselves with. Culture forms many aspects of our lives and is evident in the way we eat, our clothes, our beliefs, our language, our values and vices, etiquettes, etc. It is also the case that we always refer to our cultural codes in making certain decisions in life; it is the reference book containing unwritten codes that we always have recourse to. One cannot but agree that God ordained culture for the good of people after all the Scripture says “behold they were all good” (Gen 1:31). Azorji hence affirms that “there must be much to affirm in a local situation... as any cultural milieu with the creative act of God has more positive quality than negative ones” (Azorji ,1988). In the Scriptures, God calls people and relates with them according to their culture and tradition. The Israelite nation understands that God accepts them in their culture, so they worshiped and made rituals to God basing from their cultural understanding of the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the covenant with Noah, (Gen 9:1-29) theologians see all humanity being called to God and of course they can only come to God from the different cultural backgrounds in which the scattered children of Noah found themselves (Busenitz,1999). Hence, one does not see God making a preference to one culture as more acceptable, since it is God’s will that people are born into and live in different cultural situations.

Perhaps, the Incarnation is the most substantial prove that God accepts us in our human culture. In the Incarnation, the Son of God Jesus Christ took flesh and was born into the Jewish people and culture. God willed his Son to be born into a human culture (Jewish), which tells us that God does not reject human cultures. Christ grew up in this Jewish culture and appropriated the religious and cultural values of His Jewish origins. Christianity was borne out of the Jewish

culture and religion (Judaism). The early Christians were Jews, who still believed in their culture and took part in their religio-cultural practices like going to the synagogues to pray and worship; celebrating the ritual of the Passover; and partaking in other Jewish home rituals as stipulated in the law and the prophets and as believed to have been ordained by God himself. One does not read in the Scriptures that God disapproved of these religio-cultural practices if performed with the proper attitude, as they were the means through which the Jews maintained a strong relationship with God.

Christianity in Yoruba land

Christianity came to Yoruba land through the missionary activities of Wesleyan and Christian missionary society precisely in 1842. At this time, Thomas Birch Freeman represented the Wesleyan Methodist while Henry Townsend represents the C.M.S as both Missionaries came through Badagry and went to Abeokuta for the establishment of this religion among the Yoruba people. Abeokuta therefore became the first Yoruba town that had the seed of Christianity planted in her. It is in this regarding that Abeokuta is referred to as "sunrise within the tropic". Apart from the above missions, we also have the Baptist that came in 1850 through the effort of Thomas Jefferson Bowen. The Catholic came in 1863 through the Missionary activity of Francis Xavier Boredom who earlier settled in Lagos (Makozi & Afolabi, 1982). Of great importance was the contribution of the Axis in Sierra Leone to the emergence and development of Christianity in their traditional homeland. This is corroborated by Oshitelu, (2002) who draws our attention to the significant roles the Akus played in the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria.

Since the permanent establishment of Christianity in Yorubaland, it had witnessed a lot of transformation from the Protestants and Catholic ends. The most fascinating was the emergence of Aladura movement in the southwestern Nigeria in the early 1918 through the activities of precious stones society. The leadership of this movement used that Yoruba worldview to promote Christianity in their understanding. Ogunbile, (2008) unequivocally points out in his anthropological, phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis of Ijesa culture of how it has contributed to the development of Nigeria Christianity. The vanguard of indigenous Church in Nigeria can be trace to the southwest of Nigeria. Prominent among them were Joseph Ayodele Babalola of Christ Apostolic Church, Moses Orimolade and Christiana Akinsowon of Cherubim and Saraphin, Josiah Oshitelu of the Church of the Lord Aladura and Samuel Bilewu Joseph Oshoffa of Celestial Church of Christ. There is no doubt about that proliferation of this movement in the nooks and crannies of Yoruba land.

The emergence of Pentecostal movement in Yoruba land was not without the assistance of this Aladura movement. The Classical Pentecostal also made their inroads into the south west in the early 1930 and this church was Apostolic Church from Great Britain and it was regarded as the first Classics Pentecostal Church in the South Western Nigeria (Fatokun, 2007). Today, we have many Classical Pentecostal churches in Yoruba land. We also have other strands of Pentecostals in the region. Other sects found in the south west are the Jehovah Witness, the Ekankar and Grail Movement just to mention a few (Omidiwura, 2016). These sects are considering because they seem to be easily associate with Christianity. Within the religious purview of the Yoruba people, Christianity has been well entrenched to the extent that she had gained global recognition from this region.

Christian Teaching and Culture

If culture is a way of life of people ordained by God, one can then ask: why must a person do away with his/her cultural identity in order to accept the message of Christ? Is it because the message of Christ cannot fit into these receptor cultures without annihilating them? Some people obviously thought so among whom are the early missionaries to Africa; however let us also note that the same problem reared its ugly head during the early days of Christianity.

The Apostles of Christ and early Christians came in contact with people of other cultures right from the beginnings. Hence, there were cultural problems in the early Church of the Acts of the Apostles, between the gentiles who accepted the message of Christ and the Jewish followers of Christ (Acts 15:1-35). One of the issues raised concerns circumcision, a Jewish cultural practice that marked one as a member of the Jewish community. The problem was that some Jewish Christian elders wanted the gentile converts to become circumcised and also to jettison some of their cultural practises and accept the Jewish ones. Their reason was that it should be so since Christianity was born into the Jewish tradition and assumes its religious worldview. However, the Apostles and elders meeting at the first council at Jerusalem were enlightened to realize the problem in asking people to leave their cultural identity and accept that of the Jews because they wanted to accept the message of Christ. So they ruled that circumcision was not necessary for Christians, but that they should abstain from cultural practices that involved idolatry and immorality. In effect they were able to discern that the message of Christ is not culturally bound as Peter had earlier asserted that in any culture anyone who receives Christ pleases God and is saved (Acts 10:34).

It is therefore not true that the message of Christ cannot fit into other cultures without uprooting them. According to Ilogu (1974) "Christianity is intended to be the religion not of one particular race of people, but of the whole world; but in different countries it will wear different clothes." Such different "cloths" take the shape of the cultures of the people to whom the Christian Gospel and faith is brought to. Pope Paul VI (1975) observes that "there are many links between the message of salvation and cultures as God spoke according to the culture proper to each age." St Paul at Athens was able to make people understand the way to the true God, through their own traditional religion. He (Paul) was the epitome of a good missionary who understands that the message of Christ can find means of expression in different cultures without uprooting or annihilating the said culture. Hence, Christianity can find a way of growth in any culture but this can only be possible, if the evangelizers of the Christian message adopt the approach of the Apostles of Christ. It is hampered when, these evangelizers like some missionaries to Africa cannot not distinguish between their own cultural bias and the Christian message they bear. It is this failure that has resulted in the conflict between Christianity and the African culture.

Interplay between Christianity, the Yoruba's and African culture.

Religion as a word is used as something relating to religion. Religion therefore pertains to God and belief. It permeates every facet of human life no wonder it cannot exist in isolation. There, for religion to stand, it must adapt to the cultural background of the people. Mbiti (1969) opined that "an African man is notoriously religious" – meaning that, wherever he goes, there is religion. It is crystal clear that religion cannot move out of the society in other for it stands. The early Christians, who spread the Gospel of Christ, did not employ the method of destroying cultures, but one of sowing the seed of Christianity within the culture to let it grow to maturity. Although they might have felt strongly about their culture (as surely anyone does), they understood the cultural problem. They preached the essential *kerygma* and let the Spirit make it

grow in a way that reflected it in the shape of the local culture. Hence they taught only what Christ taught and allowed the message to sanitize whatever element in the culture of the people was contrary to the message brought by Christ; as evidently not all tenets of African culture agree with the message of Christ, since culture is a human construct and revealed religion is a divine construct.

One must then assert that the relationship between Christianity and the Yoruba/African cultures should not be seen as a means of abusing the use of the culture. Most religious gathering today incorporate Yoruba incantation or proverbs while praying such as “*ko si eni ti n bo mi so ta* – they is no one that hate the water” therefore “you will not be hate or ignore by your helpers”. African Christians went as far as praying for protection as thus:

“*Enikan o kin mu afefe* – no one can capture the wind”

“*Gbogboro lo wo n yoo ju ori* - the hand is always raised above the head”

Whereas, there are numerous biblical quotes that are suitable for human protection instead of the Yoruba chant. This is not the agreement with the Christian religion relation with African culture. This is so if we agree that God works His ways through every culture and if we also acknowledge that the message of Christ can find root and grow in any culture. Christianity and the Yoruba/African culture need compatible to a high degree, and there is need to bring the two into a mutual relationship for the sake of the many African Christians who are in a dilemma today. There is need to re-evaluate this issue in order to find a way forward to rectify the abuse of African Christians and Christianity, so that African Christians could be proud to call themselves true Africans and true Christians.

Our position is that Christianity does not strip one of one’s cultural identity thus, one could be truly African and truly Christian without any essential observable clash. African Religion is very important in cultural heritage of the African people. Keith (2007) argues that:

Before the incarnation, all knowledge of God, whether in Greek philosophy or in the Hebrew Scriptures, was partial and incomplete, awaiting its fulfillment in Christ. So just as the OT prepared Jews for the coming of Jesus Christ, Socrates and Plato in the manner of OT prophets prepared Greeks too, and, pursuing the analogy further, in the same way did African traditional religion prepare Africans.

Dialogue as effective way forward

The word dialogue has its etymology from two Greek words, “*δια* - *dia*” and “*λογος* - *logos*”. “*Dia*” means “two” and “*logos*” means “word”. By implication, dialogue is a conversation between two people. Dialogue is a process in which individual and group learn how to wipe out fears and distrust to each other so as to develop new relation based on mutual trust (Omidiwura, 1999). Buber in American Encyclopedia stated that the term dialogue does not necessarily involve words, but is a way of recognizing another being as no mere objects or “it but as a thou”, for Socrates, dialogue as a way of life.

Dialogue as envisaged by African theologians is geared towards the realization of an effective and genuine inculturation. In dialogue two parties with varying views meet to talk with each other in order to understand the points of agreement and dissensions and this is done in a spirit of respect for each of the parties and their views and it leads to a realization of a point in which the two parties can agree to foster mutual relationship. Dom Nwachuku (2002) emphasizes this point when he says that “in going about these dialogical roots, the Church should be aware of the principles of effective dialogue, which among other things regards the listener as an equal and respects his/her views.” In dialogue as proposed by African theologians, Church

theologians sit with the experts in the African religion and cultures and try to understand the practises and tradition of the people in order to see how to allow the people's culture to "come to Church" without abusing or negate each other.

Conclusion

It is good to state that this paper is not a representation of the position that denies the numerous efforts and contributions of the early missionaries in the development of African society. Far from that! We are simply pointing out anomalies that engross the African Christians to incorporate African incantation to their mode of worship. However, that Christian religion has come to stay in Africa leaves no doubt as it is visibly clear to all around. The Church teaches that culture is ordained by God as evident in the theme of the theology of Incarnation. But the challenge is how this widespread religion can be lived originally by many Africans in such a manner that they become truly Africans as well as truly Christians with neither of the identities losing its character. What should be clearly understood is that Christian religion is not anathema to any culture but, like the incarnate Saviour, it is willing to identify with all cultures in order to salvage its anomalies without itself losing its prime nature. Sarpong (1990) was plain on this when he stated that "Christianity's claim to universality is validated, only when it can be expressed in any cultural form. We can then commend the effort of dialogue since culture remains the total ways of life and religion cannot survive without culture.

Recommendation

Dialogue is a process in which individual and group learn how to wipe out fears and distrust to each other so as to develop new relation based on mutual trust (Omidwura, 1999). The paper therefore recommend that there is need for African Christians to be reoriented on the use of African language, norms, culture and sayings in terms of their Christian activities in order to settle the lingering issue between African Christians and Christianity. Christ teaching on Culture should be examine in order to bring about possibility of being truly African and truly Christian since no one lives authentically outside his nature.

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