



CHRISTIANITY, AS IT AFFECTS THE PROGRESS AND CONTINUITY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Innocent Ogonna Nweke, PhD

Department of religion and Human Relations, Faculty of Arts.
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam Campus.
ekedaion@yahoo.com /io.nweke@coou.edu.ng.

Abstract

Religion is a fundamental aspect of human culture, shaping societies beliefs, values and traditions. In Africa, religion has always played a very significant role in the lives of the people. African traditional religion represents the indigenous belief systems and practice that have guided African communities for generations. The introduction of Christianity to Africa, particularly during the colonial era brought significant changes that affected the African indigenous religion; and the effects especially the negative effects are what the writer wants to look into. He employed socio-cultural approach for the findings. The researcher discovered that Christianity destroyed some of the traditional practices like, the way of marriage, the loss of traditional leadership, the knowledge system etc. It recommended that even though Christianity should be given accolade in certain areas that some of the ritual practices which were destroyed in the name of Christianity or being born again should be reintroduced again for betterment of African indigenous religion.

Keywords: Christianity, effect, progress, continuity, ATR

Introduction

African Traditional Religion (ATR) encompasses the indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices passed down through generations among African societies. Embedded in communal living and respect for ancestors, African Traditional Religion holds that the spiritual world influences daily life and governs moral behavior. However, with the advent of Christianity during colonial and missionary expansion, the practice of African Tradition Religion experienced profound transformations. Hence, this paper explores the influence of Christianity on African Traditional Religion as it affects its progress and continuity.

Background to the Study

Religion is a fundamental aspect of human culture, shaping societies' beliefs, values, and traditions. In Africa, religion has always played a significant role in the lives of its people. African Traditional Religion represents the indigenous belief systems and practices that have guided African communities for generations. It is a holistic way of life that connects the physical and spiritual realms, emphasizing ancestral worship, community values, and reverence for nature. The introduction of Christianity to Africa, particularly during the colonial period, brought significant changes to the religious and cultural fabric of the continent. Christian missionaries, often accompanied by colonial powers, sought to evangelize and civilize African societies, frequently regarding African Traditional Religion as primitive or pagan. Overtime, Christianity grew in influence, becoming one of the dominant religions on the continent. While Christianity introduced new ideas and practices that contributed to societal development, it also disrupted African Traditional Religion, often relegating it to the margins of society.



Statement of the Problem

The arrival and spread of Christianity in Africa have significantly impacted African Traditional Religion, leading to a decline in its practice and visibility in many communities. African Traditional Religion, once the foundation of African spirituality and culture, is often viewed as outdated or incompatible with modernity due to Christian influence. This has resulted in the loss of traditional beliefs, rituals, and cultural heritage. However, the marginalization of African Traditional Religion raises questions about its survival, authenticity, and relevance in a rapidly changing religious atmosphere. This study seeks to investigate the ways in which Christianity has affected African Traditional Religion.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This research focuses on the influence of Christianity on African Traditional Religion, as it affects its progress; cutting across its religious practices (rituals and rites) and value systems. The research data will be drawn from existing literature.

The Historical Context of Christianity in Africa

The arrival of Christianity in Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, dates back to early centuries in regions like North Africa (e.g., Egypt and Ethiopia). However, its widespread dissemination occurred during European colonization around the 17th to 19th centuries. Missionary activities often sought to replace African Traditional Religion with Christian doctrines, tagging African practices as pagan or backward (Hastings, 1994). This contributed to a systematic belittlement of native beliefs, as the Christian faith became associated with Western education, development, and political power (Peel, 2003). The dual role of Christianity as both a spiritual and cultural force aided its impact on African Traditional Religion. In Nigeria, the advent of Christianity falls within the period of European penetration in Nigeria. One important question to ask is; were the goals of Christian missionaries independent from the colonial agenda? Christianity was just a tool for colonial westernization, so, there was no room for the missionaries to appreciate and imbibe the culture of the people whom they came to evangelize.

Christianity's Impacts/effects on African Traditional Religion

The indigenous environment into which Christianity arrived was deeply religious; there was that strong awareness of and belief in the existence of a supreme Being, conceived as the maker and sustainer of the universe and with whom humans tried to establish constant ties (Gyekye, 1996). The conception and belief in Supreme Being and complex systems of beliefs in the spiritual qualities of nature are the two significant traits which characterizes African Indigenous Religion. The nature of this traditional religion, as expressed in many African communities is communal and pragmatic, which implies that people born into the traditional community were also born into the religion, in which they, naturally, participated as they grew up through the traditional socialization processes. Hence, African Indigenous Religion is part and parcel of African culture. However, the Christian's missionaries overlooked this fact when introducing Christianity to Africa. Lamentably, the missionary movement imposed western culture on the peoples who were being evangelized on the assumption that western culture was Christian, while other cultures were dismissed as pagan and heathen. Although Christianity has brought in some positive influences and effects in Africa, they have also dealt



a staggering blow on our social, economic, religious, political and most importantly our cultural identity. As a result of the influence of Christian doctrines, the whole systems of taboos and rituals are no longer strictly observed and this perhaps explains why there are so many crimes in the traditional communities today. Be that as it may, let us consider some of the impacts on the traditional systems and institutions.

Christianity and Marriage rite: The traditional marriage institution was a vital link and bond that sustained and strengthened kinship ties within African communities. In the African cultural setting, the marriage between two individuals was understood as a means of initiation or cementing the union of the households and clan from which the couple belonged. In African traditional settings, marriage unites not only the woman and the man; it connects and links families and clans. The process of marriage was characterized by rites of transactions through which the marrying individuals were welcomed into social adulthood. However, the Christian wedding was introduced as a new experience in African cultural and religious life. African Christians, though recognizing themselves as members of the Church, did not and could not entirely sever their ties with their kin. And so, for a Christian who wants to get married will need the approval of his relatives as well as that of the Church by fulfilling both the traditional rites and Church rites which consequently led to dual marriage. This has necessitated the need to ask; at what point can a young man and a woman who have agreed to marry, be socially described as a married couple? Is it after African traditional marriage rites has been performed or after Euro-American Church wedding ceremony? Which of these authenticates a marital union or is it both? Onyima (2014) contends that in most Christian homes in Africa one is not married until they have performed white wedding where they must be blessed by a pastor/priest. This, arguably to a large extent is a clash between tradition and Christianity and this has greatly endangered our cultural identity.

Christianity and Rites of Passage (Death): In African Indigenous religion, death is not seen as an end to a person rather a transition to another world. An elderly person who died devoid of any taboo is said to have joined the ancestors. The ancestors are believed in African traditional religion to be spirits of their fore fathers, they are no longer visible in the sense that they have become spirits but they still play dormant role in the running of the affairs of the family to which they belong. Hence, the dead are buried in graves within the family compound thus, confirming that the departed are still part of the living members of the extended family, and their spirits can be evoked at will. In contrast to this, Christianity came with new rituals for the burial of Afro Christians where the dead are taken to a common graveyard (cemetery) for burial signifying the separation of the dead from their families. Hence, the funeral rites and rituals as obtainable in Traditional African setting is seen by Christians as heathen or paganism. In the "*Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development, Vol. 3(1), p. 40-44*", Nweke, I. O., emphasizes on the burial rite in Igbo traditional culture and the rites of invitation into the community of ancestors. These rites and rituals are of different stages; the burial rites, the cleansing rites, the liberation rites, the ritual dance and the rite of initiation into the community of the ancestors (Nweke, 2020). However, for the Afro Christians, these different stages are heathen or paganism, hence, these rites, rituals and the different stages involve for the burial of the dead in the Igbo traditional communities are not strictly observed for the burial of an Afro Christian Igbo. The advent of Christianity stereotyped these rites and rituals which made them to loss their values and places in the traditional Igbo communities.



Destruction of traditional practices: One of the most significant effects of Christianity on African Traditional Religion is the decline in traditional rituals and practices. Christian missionaries often dismissed African Traditional Religious practices as superstitious and idolatrous, discouraging believers from participating in ceremonies such as ancestor veneration, traditional healing, and communal rites of passage. The building of Churches and establishment of Christian schools fostered a shift in allegiance from traditional religious authorities to Christian clergy (Mbiti, 1969). For instance, many converts abandoned the worship of deities associated with natural phenomena, replacing these with Christian doctrines centered on monotheism.

Christianity's role in the loss of traditional leadership: Traditional African leadership structures are deeply intertwined with African Traditional Religion, as chiefs and elders often serve as spiritual as well as political authorities. Christianity disrupted these systems by introducing Western-style governance. In some cases, traditional leaders who converted to Christianity were pressured to renounce African Traditional Religion rituals, weakening their cultural legitimacy. The destruction of traditional leadership has had long-lasting implications, as many communities lost their spiritual anchors and turned to Churches for guidance. This shift has transformed the social and political atmosphere of African societies, often aligning with Western values and practices.

Christianity and the marginalization of African traditional religion: As Christianity spread across Africa, African Traditional Religion faced increasing marginalization. European missionaries often dismissed traditional beliefs, such as ancestor veneration, spirit worship, and ritual sacrifices. Practices considered as sacred in African Traditional Religion were condemned as superstition or witchcraft, creating a stigma that persists in many African societies. Churches became centers of influence, encouraging converts to abandon their traditional practices. Furthermore, colonial governments supported this marginalization by enforcing laws that outlawed some African Traditional Religion rituals, such as initiation ceremonies or spiritual healing practices, rite of passage and others. This led to many Africans to internalized these negative representations, leading to a loss of pride in traditional practices and a preference for Christianity, seen as more civilized and aligned with modernity.

Loss of indigenous knowledge systems: African Traditional Religion has traditionally functioned as a fountain of indigenous knowledge, encompassing agricultural practices, health systems, and moral teachings. Christianity's insistence on a biblical worldview often led to the marginalization of these knowledge systems. For example, traditional healers, who were once revered as custodians of health and spirituality, were often branded as witches or sorcerers. This stigmatization eroded the community's trust in such figures, disrupting the traditional social structure (Kalu, 2008).

Transformation of moral and social structures: Christianity introduced new moral structures that sometimes clashed with African Traditional Religion's communal and flexible ethical systems. For example, Christianity's emphasis on individual salvation and sin contrasted with African Traditional Religion's communal focus on harmony and retributive justice. Missionaries also played a role in reshaping family structures, promoting monogamy over polygamy, a practice deeply embedded in African Traditional Religion (Bediako, 1992).

Evangelism and Conversion Practices: Evangelism has played a central role in the expansion of Christianity in Africa. Missionaries often employed strategic methods to convert



African Traditional Religion devotees, including offering material benefits such as education, healthcare, and financial aid. These efforts were particularly successful in regions where colonial governments suppressed the religious practices of African Traditional Religion, making conversion a practical choice for many. Some missionaries also used fear-based tactics, portraying African Traditional Religion as demonic or spiritually dangerous to compel conversions. This aggressive evangelism disrupted traditional communities, creating divisions between converts and non-converts. While Christianity brought benefits such as literacy and access to Western medicine, it also created cultural and spiritual dislocations that continue to shape African societies.

Christianity and Modernization in Africa: Christianity is often associated with modernization in Africa, as it introduced Western-style education, healthcare, and governance systems. Missionary schools produced some of Africa's earliest educated elites, many of whom later became political and social leaders. However, this modernization often came at the expense of African Traditional Religion, which was portrayed as backward and incompatible with progress. Urbanization has further exacerbated this dynamic, as younger generations living in cities often adopt Christian or secular lifestyles, leaving behind traditional practices rooted in rural settings. While Christianity is seen as a gateway to global opportunities, African Traditional Religion struggles to adapt to modern contexts, leading to questions about its relevance in contemporary African society.

Globalization and the Westernization of African Religious Practices: Globalization has amplified the influence of Western Christian values on African societies, often overshadowing African Traditional Religion. Through media, education, and migration, younger generations are exposed to global Christian movements, such as Pentecostalism, which offer a modern, cosmopolitan appeal. African Traditional Religion in contrast, is often portrayed in global narratives as outdated. This dynamic creates challenges for ATR's survival, as it struggles to compete with the cultural and economic power of globalized Christianity. Furthermore, in Nweke, I (2019), "*Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies, Vol. 6(3), p. 301-306*" globalization and its processes which influence African Traditional Religion is explained as, a multifaceted phenomenon involving the increasing interconnectedness of societies, shaping political, economic, cultural, and social systems worldwide, often serving the interests of dominant global powers. While it fosters integration and technological advancement, it also disrupts local cultures, promoting monoculture (Western culture in the guise of Christianity) and reshaping identities, with African traditions particularly influenced through historical and modern interactions. However, some African communities are working to preserve their traditional practices by documenting African Traditional Religion knowledge and integrating it into educational curricula.

Christianity and Chieftaincy title: Chieftaincy in pre-Christian African societies was often deeply intertwined with indigenous religious beliefs. Chiefs were seen as spiritual intermediaries between the people and the divine. However, with the arrival of Christianity in Africa, chieftaincy lost its prestige and meaning, as many African societies embraced the Christian God leading to the abandonment of traditional rituals, such as ancestral worship, chieftaincy rituals or participation in indigenous ceremonies. There are so many and different



rituals for Chieftaincy-taking across the African continent, however, let us limit the scope to the OZO title taking in Igbo land.

Ozo Title in Igbo Land: The Ozo title is one of the highest and most prestigious traditional titles in Igbo society. It represents wealth, influence, social status, and spiritual authority. The Ozo title symbolizes moral uprightness, leadership, and connection to the ancestors. It often involves rituals, feasts, and significant financial contributions, making it a mark of distinction. Taking the Ozo title includes participating in traditional rituals and invoking ancestral spirits. Members of the Ozo society are custodians of Igbo customs, laws, and sacred practices. In the *“Journal of African Studies vol. 15, p. 97-102”*, The Ozo Title is the pinnacle of spiritual, social, and religious status in Igbo society, symbolizing uprightness, honesty, and justice. The process involves rigorous screening, stages of initiation, and strict adherence to tradition, and Ozo titleholders are expected to lead by example, mediate between the living and the ancestors, and uphold the community’s welfare (Nweke, 2019). However, with the advent of Christianity in Igbo land, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, a tension arose between Christian doctrine and traditional practices, including the Ozo title. Early Christian missionaries viewed the Ozo title and its rituals as idolatrous because they often involved prayers to ancestors, libations, and rituals deemed incompatible with Christian monotheism. Many Christians were prohibited by their Churches from participating in the Ozo title or other traditional ceremonies. Over time, some Igbo communities have adapted the Ozo title to align with Christian beliefs by removing or modifying certain rituals considered un-Christian. Some Churches have softened their stance, allowing Christians to take the Ozo title if it is stripped of traditional religious elements. Notwithstanding, traditionalists see the Ozo title as an inseparable part of Igbo culture and heritage, and so, argue that its spiritual aspects are central to its meaning and should not be diluted. Hence, many Christians reject the Ozo title due to its perceived association with traditional religion. Others embrace it as a cultural honor, ensuring that their induction ceremonies are free from traditional religious practices. Some individuals manage to balance their Christian faith with their cultural identity by participating in modified Ozo ceremonies that are acceptable to their churches. Consequently, the rituals and sacrifices associated with the Ozo title were significantly affected by Christian influence. Christian converts, particularly those in leadership roles within the Church, faced pressure to abandon traditional rituals. Over time, some communities adapted the Ozo initiation process to align with Christian values, removing elements considered idolatrous (Okeke, 2006).

Hope for the Continuity of African Traditional Religion.

Syncretism and adaptation: While Christianity challenged African Traditional Religion, it also gave rise to syncretism, a blending of Christian and traditional beliefs. In many African societies, converts retained certain aspects of African Traditional Religion, such as the use of proverbs, communal worship styles, and symbolic rituals, while embracing Christian teachings. For example, the concept of a supreme being in African Traditional Religion (often referred to as “Chukwu” in Igbo, “Nyame” in Akan, “Olodumare” in Yoruba or “Ojo-Odobogagwu” in Igala) was equated with the Christian God, allowing for a smoother transition between the two systems (Olupona, 2014). Furthermore, in Nweke, I., and Agaba, S. (2021), *“International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies, vol. 8, p. 88-91”*, an emphasis was drawn on African Traditional Religion (ATR) been influenced by Christianity and Islam, leading to a mix of practices, such as modernized shrines, Christian names, and missionary-like activities. Despite holding onto its traditions, ATR has adopted



some elements, practices, and even responses like “Amen.” This blending shows how ATR has adapted to cultural and religious changes over time.

The resilience of African Traditional Religion: Despite Christianity’s profound influence, African Traditional Religion has displayed remarkable resilience. In many parts of Africa, traditional practices continue to thrive, particularly in rural areas where Christianity has not entirely displaced indigenous beliefs. Additionally, there is a growing movement to reclaim and celebrate African Traditional Religion as a vital component of African identity and heritage. This renaissance is obvious in the rise of cultural festivals, the inclusion of traditional symbols in political and social life (example; the building of ijele masquerade images in roundabout in Enugu town), and the academic study of African Traditional Religion as an independent field in many Institutions of learning.

The coexistence of Christianity and African Traditional Religion in modern African societies: In contemporary African societies, the relationship between Christianity and African Traditional Religion is characterized by both tension and mutual influence. While some Christian denominations still seek to eradicate traditional practices, others have adopted a more accommodative approach, recognizing the value of African Traditional Religion’s communal and spiritual dimensions. The dialogue between the two systems offers an opportunity for mutual enrichment. For instance, Christian churches can learn from African Traditional Religion’s emphasis on environmental stewardship and community cohesion, while African Traditional Religion can adopt ethical principles from Christianity that align with modern human rights standards.

Conclusion

The interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religion has been complex and multifaceted. Christianity has undeniably disrupted the progress of African Traditional Religion by undermining its practices and social systems. However, it has also spurred adaptation and innovation within African Traditional Religion, leading to the development of syncretic religious expressions and a renewed appreciation for indigenous spirituality. In navigating the future, fostering mutual respect and dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Africa’s rich religious heritage.

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