

## Decolonising the Study of Religions in Africa: Promise and Pitfalls

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that Africa is robbed and has remained robbed; and thus in need of remedial help. This is the regrettable legacy that colonialism has bequeathed. Therefore, decolonizing institutions, particularly religions on the African continent is a compelling and an urgent task. The paper is particular about religions because religion controls man and detects how he perceives and relates with his creator, his fellow human beings, and his environment among others. It is against this background that the paper regrets that the colonizer's content loaded in the religions that are dominant on the African continent is what is causing existential paralysis that have characterized these religions. Espousing on this, with a view to discarding the colonizer's content that is imposed on religion will help to redefine how religion will be perceived and reset it to achieve what is meant to achieve. Otherwise, Christianity and Islam will ever remain essentially foreign than indigenous. The paper demonstrates that even the so-called African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not indigenous, for that matter. The paper points out that the nomenclature of ATR is even a mismatch, caused by colonization and its continued hangover. Using secondary sources (online and offline materials) as well as primary sources (focal group discussions), the paper makes use of thematic analysis to arrive at evidence-based recommendations that will point out the promises and the pitfalls.

**Key words:** colonization, decolonization, religion, emancipation and authenticity.

### **Introduction**

Rebuttal is not a new observable fact at all. Rather, it is as old as man; and it has served the laudable role of expanding the frontiers of knowledge. It is this wisdom of increasing the frontiers of knowledge that underpins the reality that when a lie is told; it should be corrected with superior facts. Similarly, when a

wrong narrative is perpetrated, it should be countered. However, decolonizing the study of religions on the African continent is beyond countering the colonizer's deposit of mischief in religions. Rather, it is a quest for holistic appraisal of religions with a view of yanking off the colonizer's badge that is left on religions and wearing it an indigenous toga that it deserves, so that religions can be learned in an African way. It is long overdue that religions on the continent should be studied using African prisms and with African lens in order to arrive at proper religious categories and understanding.

Reposition the study of religions is important because of the crucial role that religions play in the life of the African. It is incontrovertible that religions occupy the central place in the life of the African in such a way that any study about the African has to begin from religious point of view. Buttressing this view, Ndemanu (2018, p. 71) says that “any attempt at learning about the African peoples and their cultures without considering religions, the bedrock of those cultures, would be shallow and futile”. This means that religion is the necessary and unavoidable entry point to any study regarding the African. More than anywhere else, religions have shown that they are very dynamic on the African continent, and they cannot die as being canvassed in some quarters because religions are living institutions. The manifestation of this is the growing number of religionists on the African continent. Arguably, Africa is the continent that has witnessed unprecedented growth in religions as far as the 21<sup>st</sup> century is concerned.

In Nigeria, there are different religions, just as in other parts of Africa. However, Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous Religion (AIR) are the predominant. It is regrettable that lack of data has left the number of adherents of these religions to be a matter of conjecture and guesswork. Lamenting this reality in Nigeria, Adogame (2010, p. 479) says that:

“Accurate statistics for each tradition are difficult to come by and are largely a matter of conjecture. In the past, the politicization of the census on religious and ethnic grounds resulted in unreliable religio-ethnic demographic data in Nigeria, as population statistics were (and still are) often manipulated for political, economic, and religious ends, not least because such figures constitute one basis for the sharing of national revenue and other resources”.

In a related development, McKinnon (2021, p. 303) bemoans that:

“The absence of census data on religious identification in Nigeria since 1963 leaves much uncertainty about the most basic religious composition of the country. It is generally accepted that identification

with traditional worship declined over the middle of the twentieth century as identification with Islam and Christianity increased, leaving these the two dominant religious groups in the country. The current relative proportions of Christians and Muslims have often been the subject of conjecture, guesswork and assertion, as have trajectories of growth or decline”.

Above notwithstanding, Johnson and Zurlo (2020) put those who identify as Christians on 46.3%, and Muslims on 46.2 and 'ethnic religions' on 7.2%. Meanwhile, both Muslims and Christians will continue to grow as a proportion of the population through to 2050. Their projections predict Christians at that point will make up on 48% of the population and Muslims on 48.7%, both growing at the expense of ethnic religions, down to 2.9% of the population. In Ghana for instance, the US Department of state (2018, p. 2) reveals that “approximately 71 percent of the population is Christian, 18 percent Muslim, 5 percent adheres to indigenous or animistic religious beliefs, and 6 percent belongs to other religious groups or has no religious beliefs. Smaller religious groups include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Eckankar, and Rastafarianism”.

In some countries, such as in southern part of Nigeria there is a new religion, which combines elements of Christianity and Islam, which is called *Chrislam*. In Ghana, it is called *Zetahil*. The crucial question begging for answer is how these religions are studied. Providing a useful hint, Clopham (2020, p. 139-140) observes that “decolonizing the study of religions most basically entails a shift in perspective from looking at Africa through colonial power, and the intellectual apparatus carried over from the global North and applied to other parts of the world, to looking instead at the indigenous origins of African societies and the patterns of thought that these embodied”.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Religion is a very controversial and contested term. Thus, like any other philosophical concept, religion does not have a single universally accepted definition. Explaining this state of affairs, Bonsu (2016, p. 109) says that religion deals with immaterial objects that cannot be empirically verified. It has been defined differently by people of diverse interests, academic and cultural background. Omoregbe (1999) defines religion as interpersonal relationship between a person and a transcendent personal being believed to exist. This definition is deficient because it does not capture group ritual forms of religion.

For James (1902), religion is the “feeling, act, and experiences of individual men and women in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”. Again, reducing religion to

mere feeling is very problematic. Thus, for this study, the definition of religion by Ekwunife (1990) is adopted. According to him religion is an awareness and recognition of a dependent relationship on a transcendent Being, the Wholly Other, nameable or un-nameable, personalized or impersonalized expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour. Just like any other definition of religion, the word 'belief' remains an important core element in the concept of religion.

Decolonization is a buzzword today. However, there was a time that many academics never wanted to hear about the term. There are varying reasons for this in scholarship. The most prominent is the undue romance of the West's hegemonic intellectual meal, than a diet. Thus, it eventually became too obvious to ignore that African studies, founded on Western epistemologies and dominated by voices disengaged and distant from African realities does not serve any meaningful purpose. This is because it has dangerous consequences as it often led to evasion, misrepresentation and self-deception this necessitated and justified the moves for decolonization. Tayob (2018, p. 8) observes that by "adopting the term 'decolonial' as opposed to 'colonial' and 'postcolonial', students and scholars have demanded that universities detach themselves from the assumptions, practices, and values of Western scholarship".

By every intent and purpose, colonization constitutes colonialism. The reason, according to Omanga (2020) is that colonialism is a power structure with metaphysical effect. Thus, it is view as an epistemic project. This is because it invades the mental universe of the people, destabilizing them from what they used to know, into knowing what colonialism has brought, and it then commits crimes such as *epistemicide* (where you kill and displace pre-existing knowledge); *linguicide* (killing and displacing the language of the people and imposing your own); *culturecide* (where you kill or replace the culture of the people). It is perhaps against this background that Ayittey (2002, p. 2) argues that "almost everything that has gone wrong in Africa is the fault of colonialism and imperialism". This implies that the damage done by colonization on the African continent cannot be quantified in terms of its destruction to lives and properties and goes beyond what meets the eye.

Defining decolonization is very challenging. It is against this background that Branch (2018, p. 74) reminds that "given African Studies as well as many histories and geographies, what decolonization means will also differ, entailing different temporalities, transformations and dilemmas." There must nonetheless be some core understanding of the term, capable of encompassing its applications to a vast and varied continent, and this paper starts by attempting a definition of what can (and cannot) legitimately be regarded as constituting 'decolonisation' in this context. Therefore, it is right to agree with

Clapham (2020, p. 139) that “an intellectually decolonised Africa can only be one in which the continent holds a central place, and defines the questions to be asked and the answers to be sought in terms that are clearly rooted in Africa itself.”

It is in this context that Omanga (2020) says decolonization has come to remain a revolutionary term with theoretical and practical value. What Connel (2018, p. 339) says is instructive. According to him “behind this lies the question of decolonizing the knowledge economy as a whole, and the disciplines and domains within it”, including religions. Any attempt at decolonization will lead to conceptual problems about power and agency, the agenda of change, and epistemological structure. This inevitably brings to the fore the following questions: how can we redesign curricula, reshape existential religious landscape, and ensure indigenous and pragmatic epistemology of religions that do not make the students mere customers and consumers?

Nye (2019) opines that just as with other subjects within humanities, contemporary study of religions is a product of European colonial history and remains firmly embedded in colonial matrix of power. Wiredu (1998, p. 23) cautions that “decolonization is a highly conceptual process. This implies that there will have to be intensive studies of those elements of culture that play significant roles in the constitution of meanings in the various African world views. Of these, language stands pre-eminent.” One cannot hope to disentangle the conceptual impositions that have historically been made upon African thought-formations without a close understanding of the indigenous languages concerned. Therefore, I agree with Mbembe (2006) that the idea of decolonization has become the rallying cry for those trying to undo the racist legacies of the past.

Suffice to state that from the foregoing, decolonization means different things for different people. For instance, Held (1980) sees it as an emancipatory theory. For Ghosh (2019), it is a critical theory of education while Kellner (2003) views it as dependency theory. Paringatai (2018) differs from above scholars, as he sees decolonization as transformative concept that is largely grounded on critical theory indigenous literacy. On his part Nabu (2011) understands decolonization as Afrikology epistemology. Amidst this divergence of views, Ocholla (2020) clarifies that the views are related in one way or the other. According to him, “the above theoretical perspectives espouse emancipation, transformation, liberation, empowerment, inclusivity, equality, co-existence and social justice, and, to some degree, are rooted in neo-Marxist radical paradigms and can be used as the theoretical lens for analyzing decolonization and indigenization” (289).

### **Pathway to decolonizing the study of religions: What needs to be done**

If all religions reflect their contexts, which in turn inform their contents; then undertaking the task of decolonizing the study of religions is justifiable. Three critical means of decolonizing the study of religions are hereby presented. First, africentricity is a critical way of achieving decolonization of the study of religions. This is a special decolonisation process that is different from other practical or ordinary decolonization processes, such as enculturation. This is because Afrocentricity guarantees “African centred knowledge should not be developed for the sake of it, but for the sake of emancipating and bringing African consciousness back” (Kershaw 1998, p. 40).

According to its proponent, Molefi Kete Asante (2020, 2017 and 2003):

“The Afrocentricity theory demands that Africans appropriate their realities, their history and ultimately their destiny from an Afrocentric perspective. This builds up a rooted Africanity, the only authentic foundation for the restoration to full-stature agency of African peoples in diverse fields of their own and world affairs. Afrocentricity is indisputably the ground zero for authentic education in Africa”, especially regions.

The emphasis on religions is because of its centrality and influence in all facets of human life.

Churu and Nancy (2022) explain that “the concept of Afrocentricity denotes its etymological meaning with a special emphasis on the African person and African communities wherever they may be in the world. It is the conviction and way of proceeding in all matters of life, by putting the African notion, experience and ideas at the centre of the process of decision-making. Being centred in African interests, Afrocentricity considers that the greatest and most authentic possibility of delivering in its favour is assuming Africa points of departure”. In itself, afrocentricity is not a religion. Strengthening this view, Bonsu (2016, p. 111) cautions that “it should be noted that afrocentricity is neither a religion nor any system of belief, but a way to view data, create, and analyze information”. Thus, Africentricity remains the most productive means of using to study religions so that they can be understood and be made more meaningful to the African.

Second and closely related to africentricity is the issue of referencing of sources regarding the study of religions on the African continent. Participants at a focal group discussion at Federal Capital Territory (FCT) College of Education, Zuba, expressed dissatisfaction with the use of Western referencing styles such as American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA), Vancouver Referencing Style (VRS), Harvard Referencing Style (HRS),

American Chemical Society (ACS), American Medical association (AMA), Australian Guide to Legal Citation (AGLC), and Chicago Referencing Style (CRS) among others. According to the participants, the aforementioned referencing styles have limited usage, especially when it comes to issues of AIR. Therefore, the Western referencing styles are blamed for inhibiting the study of AIR. One of the participants wondered why African scholars have been docile to the suffocation of African scholarship that Western referencing styles have imposed. It was the consensus of the focal group discussion that Western referencing styles are poisonous legacy of academic colonialism that should be resisted. Therefore, decolonizing the study of religion will inevitably imply devising a more suitable referencing style that is essentially africancentric.

Third, language is another means of decolonizing the study religions on the continent. Commenting on the relationship between religions and language Rahimi (2011, p. 1) explains that “the interface between language and religion is so palpable throughout the world that we cannot ignore it”. It is with the tool of language that epistemological and ontological perspectives of religions are taught. In 2015, I conducted a study to find out indigenous words that represent honour, respect and worship among the semi-bantu speaking tribes in the following local governments in Taraba state: Donga (with Jukun tribe), Bali (with Jibawa tribe), Gassol (with Tiv and Mumuye tribes) as well as as the following local government areas in Nasarawa state: Awe (with Eggon tribe) Keana (with Alago), Doma (with Alago and Tiv tribes).

I discovered that all the tribes interviewed have one word for honour, respect, and worship. This is in sharp contrast to Greco-Roman tradition of *dulia* (honour accorded saints), *hyperdulia* (honour accorded the Virgin Mary) and *latria* (worship of God). For instance, among the Tiv of central Nigeria, *Ichivigh* stands for both honour, respect and worship. Similarly, among the Mumuye, the word *boni* stands for both honour and respect. What this means is that studying religions using categories that are none existent in African languages will not aid easy comprehension of religions. This is an indication that using foreign languages in the study of religions is simply disservice that should not be allowed anymore. A 7-man focal group discussion in Dutse of Bwari Area Council, Abuja said it is regrettable that religions on the continent are largely studied in foreign, rather than African languages. Participants at the focal group discussion lamented that Arabic has remained the official language of studying Islam, a situation that inhibits easy studying of the religion.

Fourth, provision of religious laboratories is equally needed in order to enhance the decolonization of study of religions in Africa. Such laboratories will be made of simulations of different religious sites and symbols as well as emblems. In a focal group discussion in Akwanga, Akwanga local government area of Nasarawa state, participants that comprised of 5 Christians, 5 Muslims and 5

votaries of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) argued that simulations could serve a purpose in teaching religions on the African continent. It was contended that there is no need journeying to Israel in order to go and see where Jesus Christ was born. A simulation of it can serve that purpose. In a related development, simulations regarding Islamic practices could also enhance the study of Islamic religion.

Regarding the studies of AIR, there was a consensus that the different variants of the religion can be adequately studied if simulations of the different gods and other deities are made available in religious laboratories of different institutions of learning. If this is achieved, someone studying AIR in Liberia will see the simulated version of *Sango* of the Yoruba, *Imbyorvyungu* of the Tiv of central Nigeria, *Ofor* of the Igbo among others. If simulations of other variants of AIR that are located outside of Nigeria are made available in the proposed religious laboratories, it will enhance the study of AIR generally on the African continent. This might sound like an ambitious project but it is doable.

The focal group discussion revealed something that is somewhat not on the front burner of scholarship. According to the participants some religions rarely expose every of its content to non-practitioners. Therefore, those who are only studying such religions will be disadvantaged from having full grasp of such religions. When asked for examples of such religions, AIR was unanimously pointed out. However, there was intense debate, when for instance, Christianity and Islam were mentioned. From my experience of religious beliefs, especially Catholicism and Islam, I am of the view that except an individual practices the religion he/she studies, he/she runs the risk of not knowing every bit of the religion. For example, the experience during consecration of the Holy Eucharist among Catholics can only be fully comprehended when one participates in it.

#### **Promises:**

- i Wiredu (1998, p. 28) has rightly observed that some of the early anthropologists felt that the concept of God, for example, was too sublime for the African understanding, granting that they had any understanding at all. The present situation in which indigenes as well as foreigners vie with one another to testify to the piety of the African mind is a remarkable reversal of earlier attitudes and prepossessions. There is virtual unanimity, in particular, on the report that Africans have a strong belief in the existence of God.
- ii The study of religions on the African continent has helped in situating some categories in proper context, thereby unearthing proper meaning and interpretation. One of such categories is 'traditional'. Awolalu (1976, p. 1)

explains that the word, traditional, means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a “fossil” religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women. It needs to be pointed out that the word 'traditional' can mean “a belief, customs, or way of doing what has existed for a long time among a particular group of people and not necessarily inborn or aboriginal; a set of these beliefs or customs” (Bonsu, 2016, p. 112). In regard to this definition, Christianity and Islam could be described as traditional religions of Africa, since they have been practised in Africa for over centuries ago.

- iii It is long overdue that the study of religions on the African continent should be done using African languages. This will enhance the easy understanding of the religions. Therefore, I am suggesting that Ki-Swahili be used in places on the continent where it can gain comparative advantage by virtue of its wide usage. Similarly, Yoruba and Hausa languages can equally be used where they have wide usage as their comparative advantage. The use of indigenous languages will deepen conceptual clarity of religious categories.

**Pitfalls:**

- i It is erroneous to assume that religion is a matter of faith rather than reason and that, any critical probing is out of place. Any religion or quasi religion that is not footed on reason is not worth the name.
- ii Another pitfall to be avoided is rightly pointed by Wiredu (1998). According to him, “an African is not to be debited with the colonial mentality merely because s/he espouses Christianity or Islam or any other foreign religion” (p.20).
- iii Furthermore, misleading labeling should be discarded to pave way to thorough investigation and understanding of religions. For instance, African Indigenous Religion (AIR) was tagged as fetish. Meanwhile, linguists have since claimed that the word is of Portuguese origin. The early Portuguese who came to Africa in the fifteenth century onwards saw that African people used to wear charms and amulets and this made them to give the name *Feitico* to such things. This English word also has a cognate in the French word *Fetich* and the Latin word *Factitious* or *Facticius* (Ntreh, 2008). Fetish is any object, animate or inanimate, natural or artificial viewed or approached with a feeling of awe, as having mysterious power residing

in it or as being the representative or habitation of a deity (Awolalu, 1976). It was earlier on believed by some Western scholars that every ethnic group in Africa owned a fetish item.

Another academically misleading word is animism. This term was coined by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), the term animism refers not to a type of religion, but to a theory of religion. After Tylor, many writers have described African traditional religion as animistic. Tylor defined animism which is from the Latin word *anima* meaning life, breadth and soul as the theory of the universal animation of nature (Harper, 2009). Animism is a term coined to serve in an argument about the origins of religion in general, but it has survived the widespread rejection of that theory, and now used as a label for African traditional religion. Bonsu (2016) argues that *fetishism* is not peculiar to African people alone, but to other world religions, so why is it ascribed to the African people and ATR alone? Prayer beads which are used by Catholic Christians (which is called Rosary), Muslims (which is called *Tasbih*), Hindus (which is called *Japa Mala*), Buddhists (which is called *Japa Mala*) and Sikhs (which is called *Mala*) can all be equated to *fetishism*. The crucifix is also fetish used for protection by some section of Christians. Parrinder (1954) has remarked that the word fetish is a most ambiguous word, and the time has come that we can no longer accept this term as a name or description for African traditional religion.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented a barometer of religions on the African continent. It has also demonstrated the central role that religions play in all facets of life. This, therefore, underscores that religions will continue to be relevant. This implies that the study of religions will also continue. However, the paper has refused to accept that religions continue to be studied in a Western style manner. Therefore, the paper has marshal four means of decolonizing the study of religions, insisting that any scholarship that will serve the Africans must be afri-centric. Thus, afri-centricity is the only way to go. Anything short of this it will only serve a counter purpose with attendant consequences of identity crisis.

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