Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.5 No.1 March, 2022; p.g. 237 – 245; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

AFRICAN CULTURE AND ITS VALUES, A FOUNDATION TO THE CONTEMPORARY VALUES IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: CHRISTIANITY AS A POINTER

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Abstract

African Traditional Religion is seen by many authors as the religion of an African person. This religion is whole in the sense that you cannot extricate any part of African life from the other. This, the African culture is embedded in it and this African culture has a lot of values which are pronounced and those that are not pronounced. These values are really good and important for Africans. Hence, the contemporary values in Nigeria one can say is against the African values. The disrespect for human values, lack of hospitality, individualistic life etc. These are some of the contemporary values we could see in Nigerian system. These go contrary to the African values. In this work, it was discovered that the original values of Africans have been relegated to the background and the contemporary values enthroned. It suggests that for us to have a corrupt free Nigerian, a contemporary Nigerian society where good values of human life, communal life, etc upholds that we have to go back to the recommended core African values. The work used Culture Area Approach method.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Culture, Contemporary Values, Nigerian Society, Christianity.

Introduction

In recent time, African Christian scholars have been singing like a hymn, the need to inculturate Christian religion in Africa. According to them, the Christian religion that the Western missionaries brought to Africa was packaged in the garb" of Western culture and values. This situation in their view, has led to an inauthentic Christian life and syncretism among African Christians. The simple reason is because Christian religion like the Word made flesh has not been incarnated into African way of life. Instead of this very essential approach to evangelization, Christian missionaries of the West saw most of what Africans treasured and valued in their culture as devilish and demons to be cast out. However, following the emphasis on Mission as Dialogue with Culture which many Christian teachers and scholars have advocated, this paper investigates the possibility of being truly African and truly Christian and postulates that what would bring authentic Christian practice and good living that will enhance the growth of human society in the lives of the large population of Christian men and women in Africa, is the integration of African values with Christian orientations since no one lives authentically who lives outside his nature. This ugly historical past of the African people was associated with Christian missionaries in Africa because, co-incidentally or providentially, their missionary activities were carried out when these "destructive

masters" were wrecking their havocs on the African soil. The missionaries perhaps, because they were also foreigners were accused of the same crime as their brothers in the political setting. However, historical facts, established that the missionaries were indeed not totally free of the accusation levied against them. They were reported to have embarked on their mission bound by the same fetters of misconceptions about the black race and consequently the African people who constitute the majority of this race.

Synonymous with the proverbial case of giving a dog a bad name simply to find reason to find a reason for killing it was the situation with the black race and African people. They were describe as the descendants of Ham who according to "a collection of Jewish oral traditions in the Babylonian Talmund from the second century to the sixth century A.D. holds that the descendants were cursed by being black."1 With this falsification of history, black skin was viewed as an aberration to human history and was handled as such. The black people were represented as animals or subhuman for those who were sympathizers to them. Very amusing and laughably untrue to those who know what amounts to taboo in Africa and the intense fear of the penalty of the gods to a defaulter of this was the accusation that traditional Africans were incestuous. For instance, Joseph E. Harris notes how in the translation of a Hebrew manuscript or a Hebrew manuscript of Benjamin ben Jonah, a twelfth century merchant and traveler, a widespread opinion about the blacks was recorded thus: There is a people ... who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile, and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary Synonymous with the proverbial case of giving a dog a bad name simply to find a reason for killing it was the situation with the black race and African people. They were described as the descendants of Ham who according to a collection of Jewish oral traditions in the Babylonian Talmund from the second century to the sixth century A.D. holds that the descendants were cursed by being black." With this falsification of history, black skin was viewed as an aberration to human history and was handled as such. The black people were represented as animals or subhuman for those who were sympathizers to them. Very amusing and laughably untrue to those who know what amounts to taboo in Africa and the intense fear of the penalty of the gods to a defaulter of this was the accusation that traditional Africans were incestuous. For instance, Joseph E. Harris notes how in the translation of a Hebrew manuscript of Benjamin ben Jonah, a twelfth century merchant and traveler, a widespread opinion about the blacks was recorded thus: There is a people... who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile, and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary human persons.

Discussing African Values and Culture

To do this very effectively, we shall give a brief description of culture and value and briefly examine some of the cultures and values of the African people which will prepare us for our discourse on their integration into Christianity.

Culture

The étymological derivation of the term culture from Latin cultura, which means cultivation of the soil, is very important in this research. 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 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." Then Mondin gave us three perspectives from which culture could be viewed: elitarian, pedagogical (educational) and anthropological. The first (elitarian) has to do with knowledge; example: artistic, philosophical and literary culture. The second represents the full maturation and realization of one's personality while the third perspective which is anthropological is culture as signifying that totality of customs, techniques, and values that distinguish a social group, a tribe, a people, a nation."6 Quoting R. B Taylor, he also added that culture is the mode of living proper to a society. Two things could therefore be deduced from this exposition. The first is that culture is man-made: that is, culture is not natural to man but a product of man's activity and cultivation which helps him in realizing his personality. The second is that culture defines an individual or a group. Odimegwu summarized it thus: if an individual is identified by his or her community, the community is identified by culture, for culture gives a community both a sense of reality and dignity, integrity and continuity, security and social cohesion....and by his or her culture, he or she is identified.

Value

One of the meanings given to value in Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary is "something regarded as desirable, worthy or right, as a belief, standard, or precept." Another source describes it as "important and enduring beliefs or ideals shared by the members of a culture about what is good or desirable and what is not."9 Values are those principles and standards that are used to determine the behavior of a people. They are concerned with what ought to be and not what is. The meaning is that values could be thwarted, affected or changed entirely when people abandon their standard way of life. Values define cultures and make them meaningful because, it is with values that cultures are judged and accepted as norm for the people. If values are not attached to cultures, the latter become moribund and will never be a life-wire for the sustenance of the people. The reason is that values are the substance of culture that is why there is a constant reference to it even when cultures are changed. This also explains why values are sometimes used synonymously with culture or both taken together. Some of what we shall enumerate here are traditional (pre-colonial) African values which may not be flourishing in the contemporary African society. They include: solidarity and communal living, emphasis on lineage, kinship and extended family system. Others are: respect for elders and authority, sense of the sacred because of deep belief in the supernatural, respect for life, sense of justice and moral rectitude and so on. Even though communal living and corporate existence in the contemporary African society cannot be equated with that found in the traditional African setting perhaps, due to the circumstances at hand in the present African society, there is no gainsaying the fact that Africans still emphasize this value and long to retain it even if it means in a transformed way.

Communalism penetrates all the facets of African ontology. It forms the foundation of African being, sustains it and still gives it hope of continuous existence. Hence, many scholars designate it as that which gives African people their identity. For the Africans, "a person is a person through other persons." The self is meaningful Okolo portrays, to the extent that it acknowledges and accepts to echo: Cognatus Ergo Sum ("I am related to others, therefore I exist"). This does not however mean that a person possesses no individuality in his being but that his individuality becomes significant and relevant only within his communion with

others. Again, traditional African people were known for their deep sense of the sacred. Ekwunife's exposition on this is worth reiterating. According to him, In African traditional conception, the sacred is not so much a category that is opposed to the profane, as Eliade maintained but a way of looking at reality in its wholeness. Traditional Africans regard the entire cosmos, when viewed in its totality (invisible and visible) as sacred. This perception of sacredness in the totality of realities arises as a result of the penetration of the invisible to the visible through the one Unique and Supreme Being called God. Thus Ekwunife affirms: All realities: invisible (divinities, ancestors, and spirits) and visible (man, animals and inanimate objects) become sacred when viewed in their total relationship to the unique wholeness of God. The individual in a society is sacred from the perspective of his/her relationships with the totality of beings around him/her.

This view recapitulates what we pointed earlier about the centrality and deep influence of African communalism in all the aspects of life of African people and the dependence of African sense of the sacred on its deep belief in the supernatural, From this analysis also, one understands the truth in what is almost like an anthem in books everywhere about the religiosity of the African people. They are described as having the reflection of religion in all the rhythms of their life hence Mbiti observes that there is for the African people, "no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life." Another very important value in African culture is the respect for elders and authority. Though African society is communal, it is also hierarchical with regard and reverence given to elders and those in authority.

There is also the respect for life stemming from the sense of sacred of all realities. Emphasis is also laid on kinship and extended family where the notion of family is not simply about the father, the mother and children but also the other relatives explaining why in many African communities, cousins, nephews, nieces are called brothers and sisters while elderly uncles and aunts are called fathers and mothers. Then the last but not the least, there is a sense of justice and moral rectitude. Justice in the context of the African people is not understood in the one directional perspective of *suum cuique tribuere* "to each his due" which the West adopted from it to Igbo context it will read: *ikwuba aka oto* which, beyond its literal meaning as "keeping one's hand straight."

Aristotle. Justice is rather considered as the biblical Greek *dikaiosune* (righteousness). If we take it to Igbo context it will read: *ikwuba aka oto* which beyond its literary meaning as "keeping one's hand straight" will connote, uprightness. This is why justice plays a central role in one's moral rectitude in Africa worldwide.

The Missing Point in the Early Missionary Activities in Africa

That Christian missionaries made great impact in the enlightenment of the African people and contributed to the development of their land receives no opposition. But on the other way round, they were not far from the racism and "ideological fanaticism" of their time which presented history as emanating and culminating in Europe with all other nations only on the corridors of the earth. These appalling and horrendous views spilled into their missionary spirit and led to the two errors which we shall discuss as the missing points in their missionary activities. They are the error of misconception and the error of ignorance. The error of misconception is that delusions which links directly to the superiority complex of the

missionaries that resulted into their false conception of African people as less human, people without any idea of God or any spiritual reality even of the devil and with no sense of morality.

The consequence of all these misrepresentations was the gigantic fallacy of assuming most of what they possess and practice as inheritance from the devil and accordingly, to be done away with. The missionaries were even accused of going as far as describing the African soil as a den of the devil. Specious arguments with tenuous reasons were also posited and given by them on why these misconstrued African values should be obliterated. For instance, the famous South African Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu noted with dismay how Robert Moffat (1795-1883), a Scot and one of the pioneer missionaries in his country echoed in his words, the prejudiced view of the popular physician-historian Olfert Dapper (1663-1729). Olfert never stepped his feet on African soil but had the most authoritative book as so described, about Africa in the seventeenth century. In one of his depictions about Africans he said: "No one, however thoroughly he has enquired, has ever been able to trace among all the Kaffirs, Hottentots and Beachrangers, trace of religion or any show of honor to God or the devil" Motiat, the missionary repeated similar idea in his declaration that: Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas, Hottentots and Bushmen, leaving them without a single ray to guide them from the dark and dread futurity, or a single link to unite them with the skies.16 Even the great and revered Joseph Shanahan, the Irish missionary in the Eastern part of Nigeria who was portrayed as sympathetic to the Igbo people of Nigeria had this ugly expression attributed to him about the same people he applauded: Real difficulties await us in this new field: difficulties of transport. We will be face to face with fetishism, infanticide, the methodical destruction of the elderly. We know that the Igbo are not averse to a meal of human flesh.

Commenting on the avowal of Shanahan, Ebelebe has this important illumination to make: By infanticide Shanahan must be referring to the Igbo practice of killing twins, which they considered as abnormality and as harbingers of misfortune. As to what he means by "the methodical destruction of the elderly," one can only guess, for the Igbo cherished their elderly people as they did their children. He is probably referring to the practice in some lgbo communities of killing old women accused of witchcraft. As condemnable as this practice was, it hardly amounted to a "methodical destruction of the elderly."

As to the Igbo being cannibals, that was true of some Igbo communities but not of others, but that is simply a phase in human evolution, and Shanahan can certainly not claim that there were no cannibals in Irish history. 18 Anyone who is conversant with African material culture will understand that most of what Shanahan and the innumerable early Western missionaries described as fetish were the artifacts of the people which they linked to the devil as their origin.

What does one expect about the contents of a land labelled the den of the devil? Most of the African values were consequently destroyed and some later sent to museums abroad. No investigation was made on whether these items and cultural practices could contribute in any way to the propagation of the Gospel. No doubt that some of these articles and practices might in one way or the other have a link with the deities of the land, but the point is that the

missionaries lacked the skill of the Master in separating the weed from the wheat. They exhibited an amateurish attitude ot throwing the baby they bathed and the dirty water away. The missionaries no doubt hoped to born a "new baby" in the African people but ended up producing monsters that neither follow them nor retain the old way. For instance, the disciplinary and moral enforcement that usually ensue from the African masquerades were discarded when without proper investigation, everything about masquerades was tagged evil and so abolished. Today, festive days even of the ones for Christians are turned into days for orgies of all kinds. Young people troop to hotels where they are drenched in the western romantic dances and other immoral behaviors because there are no attractive traditional displays of the past that bring them together and reduce their evil tendencies. The missionaries have therefore lost the central thing which is the good and moral life of the people. The error of ignorance is that witlessness in the missionaries that made them oblivious of the fact that most of what comprise African values and culture form a preparatory ground for the success and blossom of Christian teaching and practice in Africa. An awareness of this would have led the missionaries into a proper and fitting dialogue between the Gospel and African culture. Pitiable enough, it is the dichotomy created by the missionaries between these two elements that supposed to be in dialogue that brought about the identity crisis in African Christians. Right from the early period of Christianity, there has been the existence of two taciturn opposing camps on whether conversion to Christian religion requires a radical discontinuity between one' culture and what we could call "Christian culture" or continuity with those positive elements in the cultures encountered by Christianity.

The discontinuity camp maintains that becoming a Christian, one must become a new person with a totally different identity from one's original cultural identity. On the other hand, the opposing faction sees conversion to involve a substantial continuity between one's culture and the new "Christian culture." Our position here falls within the second camp where Christianity does not strip one of one's cultural identity thus, one could be truly African and truly Christian without any essential observable clash. The early missionaries were not totally unaware of this because they knew that why they were at home with Christian religion which did not originate in Europe was because there was a profound blend between European culture and the Gospel in such a manner that after a while many could not distinguish between what is western and what is Christian in the European Christian practice. Even among the learned, there is startlingly, a common view that to become a Christian is to become western hence the frequent idea of describing Christian religion as western religion. But Christian religion is a universal religion which though began in the Jewish land and had Jewish ancestry and underpinning because it cannot take off in a vacuum, was in its later expansion substantially extricated from Judaism. Unlike Judaism that is a religion of a people; Christian religion is a religion for all nations because Christ, the centre of this religion, embarked on his redemptive work for all human persons. The error of ignorance becomes a missing point because the same continuity that made Christianity a second nature to western life was denied the African people and their culture leading to the confusion and crisis in the identity of African Christians. The reason is that the foundation on which the missionaries would have built the Gospel was destroyed by them in ignorance, prejudice and misapprehension. The corner stone of this foundation is the African ""positive" cultural values. Hence, we must not forget that before the encounter of Christianity with African culture, it had the notion of God and moral laws which aid the people in their meeting with the supernatural and in good actions that necessarily accrue from that. Christianity simply comes to enlighten the obscure and misty

ways of this culture and not to destroy it. Thus, interpreting a section of Kwame Bediako's text Theology and Identity, Keith Ferdinando asserts that "conversion should be understood more in terms of fulfillment than of antithesis.

Depicting African Traditional Religion as a very important cultural heritage of the African people, he 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, pursing the analogy further, in the same way did African traditional religion prepare Africans. 19 Another important fact that should overlooked or disregarded is that the *metanoia* demanded in Christian conversion is about a renewal from the interior of a person and not a destruction of the person and his identity. Even when Christians say that they live the life of Christ or put on the person of Christ, the understanding is made clear in the message of St Paul to the Galatians that his real life is the faith he has in Jesus Christ (Cf. Gal 2:20). The précis is that living the life of Christ does not imply a destruction of one's identity which is developed from one's culture and values. This is why there is a need for the renewal of mission in Africa via inculturation.

Authentic African Christianity and the Urgent Consideration of Inculturation

Inculturation is the practical response and solution given by the camp that advocates continuity and fulfillment in conversion. The fear of those who hold contrary view is that syncretism could arise from such admixture or correlation and Christian message could be undermined or watered down. For instance, Cardinal Ratzinger before he was elected pope proposes inter-culturality against inculturation expressing fears of two dangers: the danger of syncretism because Christianity could be contaminated and the danger of relativism because there could be several conflicting versions of Christianity. But these fears though genuine are groundless since the incarnation of Christ has smothered them. In fact, the notion of inculturation becomes possible and tenable because of incarnation. However, without going into historical and etymological details about the term inculturation, we wish to simply point that there is a substantial difference between its meaning and that of the other related concepts such as indigenization, acculturation, inter-culturality, enculturation, adaptation and so on, which are often used in exchange with it. While the rest could be seen as more of external influence on African values by Christian religion, inculturation is a wholistic assumption of the positive values of a people as a starting point in mission where these values are united as one Christian value with neither losing its own identity. This is what Donald Dorr meant in his analysis of Alyward Shorter's insight that inculturation is the second and enduring phase in evangelization after acculturation. He interprets Shorter's first phase of evangelization (acculturation) as when "the flow is in one-way direction - from the culture of the missionaries to that of their followers."20 But in the second phase when the missionaries must have become acquainted with the people and their culture and can now sieve out the non-essential elements in their cultural practices. He adds: At this point the Christian patrimony brought in by the missionaries has to be carefully re-evaluated. New culturally appropriate devotions may replace imported ones, indigenous forms of liturgy may be developed and, for instance, an African theology of Christ might be worked out in terms of Christ as ancestor or as healer rather than in terms of Christ the King.

The urgent need for the initiative of inculturation is increasingly glaring as we discover that Christian religion is only growing in bounds but not in depths. As early as 1975 the famous Ghanaian (Kumasi) Archbishop Emeritus, Peter K. Sarpong wrote that "in big cities, like Accra, Lagos, Nairobi and Kampala, the relevance of Christianity and even of Christ, is being seriously questioned. This is the case more among the enlightened elements- students and the intelligentsia in general- than among others."22 He attributed the cause of this to two factors: condonement of evil practices and lack of depth in Christian life." We take the first to be the fruit of the second while the second holds sway because inculturation was not considered by the missionaries in their process of evangelization. But this has been the emphasis in the various missionary encyclicals of popes and mission documents of the Protestants. A very clear and direct one is found in the *Evangelii Praecones* (1951) of Pope Pius XII which was the Encyclical Letter, On Promoting Catholic Missions. In number 56, he announces: The Church when she calls people to a higher culture and a better way of life, under the inspiration of the Christian religion, does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit. Even towards the end of the 20th century during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II in the popular *Ecclesia in Africa* n.67, he showed his acknowledgement of the positive tenets in African Traditional Religion (ATR) when he advised that its adherents "should be treated with great respect and esteem, all and inaccurate and disrespectful language (against them) should be avoided."' He therefore recommends that courses should be taught on African traditional religion in seminaries and houses of formation for priests and religious. What is more? Deeper Christian life can only be assured among many African Christians who are now counterfeits when that which constitutes their personhood is integrated into their new religion. The new form of practicing divination by wanton consultation of prophets, the wrong interpretation of the give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar's portion of the Gospel in order to weaken the prick of conscience while consulting the priests of ATR will minimize. These priests are often believed to be more powerful and to have much quicker response to situations from their gods. But this and other unwholesome combinations, fusions and muddles with ATR will be abated if Christian religion revisits its mission strategy and approach and consider those practices that are good and compatible in African culture and religion.

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 an anomaly in their enterprise which seems very intrinsically detrimental almost to the extent of nullifying their good deeds in Africa. However, that Christian religion has come to stay in Africa leaves no doubt as it is visibly clear to all around. But the challenge is how this widespread religion can be lived authentically 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 religion is not anathema to any culture but, like the incarnate Saviour, it is willing to identify with all cultures in other to salvage its anomalies without itself losing its prime nature. Sarpong 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." By way of interpretation yet in resonance with what we have stressed less minimally in this work, he adds, "Christ became man, in order to make man God, not the other way round. Christianity must become African[ized] before it can influence Africans." In a more practical but stern accentuation,

Dorr points that the whole project of evangelization-inculturation can get blocked if there is a failure to recognize clearly which elements in the cultural patrimony are unchangeable and which can be adapted or dropped." Finally, we express once more that there is no ground for the easily discerned fears among some scholars of religion and divinity that inculturation could breed syncretism, relativism or even pluriformity in Christian doctrines and practice. Contrary to these negative features envisaged about inculturation, it fulfills that natural verity and principle of unity in diversity which, without disregard to the ideal found in synchronization and congruence.promotes and respects uniqueness, the core of authenticity.

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