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## **REMAKING OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF MODERNITY**

It is hard to imagine the scope and rapidity of change that has taken place throughout the African continent in the last one century or so. Changes that have evolved gradually in Western Europe and America over many years have taken place in many parts of Africa at alarming speed. Changes that gradually came about by way of response to changing conditions and evolving perspectives have been forced upon African culture with little psychological or physical preparation. This change and its rapidity is in large measure due to the influence, welcome or otherwise, of western culture on Africa. The fusion and symbiosis of traditional African culture and Western Euro-American culture has not proved to be either an easy or a desirable fusion. Many problems have arisen and many areas of so-called "progress" have viewed as a highly questionable force for good.

The simplicity of the title of this paper suggests that the impact of "modernity" on African Traditional Religion is a clear-cut, easily definable question to be dealt with in a straightforward manner. However, this is far from being the case. The complexity of the situation is likely to lead one to vast over-generalizations and simplistic views. African Traditional Religion exists and has long existed in very many varied and differing forms. Its encounter with western influences has taken as many varied forms. Similarly, western modernity is anything but a uniform phenomenon and the aspects of it which have influenced African development are similarly varied.

Influences have included western Christian missionary activity, colonial and political activity, economic and trading links, economic "aid" and the general scientific-technological milieu which has penetrated most aspects of western culture. Further, it is often not possible to separate these influences from each other. All inter-relate and inter-penetrate so that the matter becomes highly complex.

This paper, however, cannot hope to deal comprehensively with the issue of the encounter of these two cultures. All we can hope to achieve is to highlight some of the major areas of concern and interest. In doing so, it is hoped that naive over-generalizations can be avoided and some insights into the complexities gained.

The first major problem is the nature of the sources available. Much of the published literature on African Traditional Religion has been written by Europeans and takes the form of writings and tales of explorers and missionaries, as well as colonial officials. Even more recent studies in the field of religion have often been carried out by non-Africans and, as such, must present a highly enlightening view. Sources of African origin, although growing in number are few, and much knowledge of the religious traditions and culture must be gained second-hand. There are few primary sources in written form. Yet Christian theologians stress that theology cannot be produced in a vacuum. It arises out of a worshipping, believing community. An outsider cannot fully understand nor empathise with a religion until it is his own. Otherwise, such scientific studies treat religion as a phenomenon, minimizing emotion and personal involvement in their quest for 'objectivity.' However, in the realm of personal beliefs and values, which comprises much of religion, the scientific method is inappropriate, incapable of dealing with values and personal involvement. Furthermore, any religion is a living dynamic entity and the static approach of analysis and classification produces a false abstraction.

Such studies in the past have tended to treat African Traditional Religion as a static, unchanging phenomenon. Anthropologists in the past have focussed attention on the social and behavioural contexts in which religion functions without making any attempt to understand the religion as a living dynamic faith and without any attention paid to the historical developmental aspect of the religion until very recently.<sup>1</sup> Often African Traditional Religion is regarded as a static, fossilized anachronism that will disappear spontaneously with the introduction of modernity and Christianity. But Lucas had the insight to see that this should not be. He said :

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1. Ranger T. & Kimambo I.: *The Historical Study of African Religion*, Heinemann, London, 1972.

If we could justly regard the rites and customs of a people as an antiquary regards the uncovered ruins of some ancient temple, the problem would be immeasurably simpler. . . . But a living people cannot be treated as a dead ruin. They are dynamic not static.<sup>2</sup>

The need is for a literature of material sources to be developed which emanate from the living, worshipping, practising context of African Traditional Religion which will make the values, beliefs and world-view more accessible to the Western mind.

Secondly, the fact that the author of this paper is a westernized African by virtue of his being a Christian must hamper understanding and present a biased approach to the existing subject-matter. In attempting to systematize or analyze the impact of modernity on African Religion, it is impossible to totally eliminate value-laden interpretations. Where gaps exist in the source material, or where beliefs and practices seem strange, interpretation is always undertaken in terms of one's own psychology – a point illustrated by Rattray as follows :

There is . . . a danger when we have before us description of a rite which leaves us uncertain of its real meaning or its true *raison d' etre*. We may commit the possible error of filling this gap in our knowledge by construing the customs in terms of our own psychology.<sup>3</sup>

In the past this tendency has been all too common. E. Troeltsch in his *The Absoluteness of Christianity*<sup>4</sup> argued strongly for the history of religion's approach to world religions where each is assessed on its own terms and then a judgement as to the comparative merits and value is made. However, the criteria of his judgement were so derived from his nineteenth century European-Christian culture that there was no possibility that Christianity would not come out on top, and African Religion remain unassessed. Similarly, John B. Cobb in his survey of world religions, *The Structure of Christian Existence*<sup>5</sup> makes no reference whatever to African Religion due to his prior commitment to western criteria.

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2. Lucas, V.: "Missionary Adaptation of African Religious Institutions – The Masasi Case" in Ranger, T. and Kimambo, I., *ibid*, p. 245.
  3. Rattray, R.S.: *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, O. U. P., Oxford, 1969.
  4. Troeltsch, E.: *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, Richmond, 1971.
  5. Cobb, J.B.: *The Structure of Christian Existence*. Westminster Press, London n.d.

This kind of approach is well evidenced by the nomenclature often utilized by western writers in their mention or treatment of African Traditional Religion. Idowu analyzes this problem in *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*.<sup>6</sup> The use of such words as tribe, pagan, heathen, idolatory, fetishism, animism, are attacked. African religion is often referred to as primitive, implying that it is either old or fossil, or that it is nearer to its original. However, Idowu points out that there is both continuity and discontinuity in all cultures and that no living religion can be truly primitive in either way. African Religion is a living religion and must be treated as such, not as some fossil or a less worthy member of the species of religions. It deserves to be accepted on its own terms. Similarly, the word 'savage' was often applied, carrying with it the inference that technological and scientific advance has produced a 'civilization' in western society which has an objective superiority over African culture. Again, technological backwardness and 'savagery' are not the same.

Thus it is important that the Westerner, in attempting to get inside and understand African Traditional Religion, should do so in full recognition of the fact that his perceptions are coloured and distorted by western acculturation. The accepted criteria of the west are not necessarily valid for Africa. There are other ways of doing and thinking about many than the western way. Hence value judgements or value-laden assessments should be avoided as far as possible.

#### **The Nature of Western Influence on Africa :**

It is clear that the West has been a formative influence on modern Africa. The changes that have taken place in African society are the result of many causes – political, economic and religious. The rapid developments of scientific and technological skills built up in Europe and America over two or three centuries, were rapidly introduced into the continent of Africa.

The freeing of African slaves in America gave rise to, at least, two major movements from America back to Africa. In 1885, the Berlin Conference in Europe carved up and shared out Africa amongst the Europeans and this led to widespread economic interest in the continent. Business and trade interests developed and centred on the natural resources of the land. Gold and diamond mining and exploitation of the land followed. Political control in the form of colonization led to the imposition of alien forms of government over almost the entire continent.

6. Idowu, E. B.: *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*, Orbis, New York, 1973.

The 19th century missionary movements did much to foster western influence in Africa. Christianity brought much more than the Gospel to Africans: it came along with a package of cultural, political, scientific, technical and educational wrappings – all these were thoroughly steeped in western ideology. The desire of the missionaries was not simply to preach the Gospel to the Africans but to ‘civilize’ them and give them all the benefits of western civilization. The 19th century European world-view was highly optimistic. Writers like Goethe praised highly the achievements of modern European culture and civilization. And many viewed Christianity as forming an integral unity with this advance of culture. Albert Ritschl and the culture-protestantism movement saw the ends of religion and the ends of European culture as being the same. Ernst Troeltsch, in similar fashion, regarded Christianity as being wedded to the European culture and the two as being of obvious and unambiguous merit. It is thus not surprising that amidst this optimism and confidence any attempt to introduce Christianity into an African content meant also the introduction of an entire superstructure of European civilization.

Education was instituted along European lines and training in technical skills taught along with the introduction of the English language and a British governmental system in large areas of Africa. This was regarded as being a preface to the European way of life.

Education has been by European methods and with European teaching materials. In consequence, a finished product of the system inevitably becomes a Pseudo-European, trying to live and think like a European. His education, especially in Mission schools, has directly and indirectly taught him that his true dignity lies in being like a European in every way.<sup>7</sup>

Along with religion and education came the advances of science. Increased mobility and improved farming techniques preceded the move from a subsistence to a cash-oriented economy along with the introduction of cash crops and plantation farming. Western medicine and hygiene led to a dramatic increase in population and changing attitudes.

#### **The Effects of Western Influence:**

If Christianity could not be separated from its cultural context, then this is even more the case with African Traditional Religion. The African attitude does not distinguish the religious from the secular as the Western

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

mind tends to. Religious beliefs and societal structures are intimately bound up together. "Religion permeates African life and . . . it is in fact, a vital key to the understanding of Africa.<sup>8</sup> Thus any force which changes African societal structure will have its repercussions on the traditional religion. Similarly, any attempts to change the religious structures will have repercussions on the entire culture.

Indirect attacks on African Tradition Religious were made by the forces of education, economics, urbanization, technology, and medicine. Economic trends towards a cash economy and production have led to changes in the social organization of African life. Societies, firmly based on the extended family, barter and trade, are being replaced by market and profit-oriented production with a change in the concept of wealth. Ideas of collectivism and co-operation are abandoned. Similarly, workmanship, seen as being a gift from a spirit power, is abandoned in favour of the quality demanded by such a market economy. The sense of contribution to the common good is being replaced by the western ethic of individualism. The abandonment of the extended family has led to a development of class consciousness previously unknown.

Such economic changes from traditional to modern forms have brought with them many tensions. Education has led to tension within the family where the children have been to university while their parents remain illiterates. Economic standards may be different and outward expression in clothing, etc. may highlight such differences in attitude.

Such external tensions are indicative of a deep, existential tension within many Africans. The Africans came from a heritage in which solidarity is fundamental aspect. Solidarity exists within the extended family unit, within the tribe and with the corporate humanity represented by the ancestors. On being cut off from these roots, an extreme alienation may result. Individualism often leads to alienation and so these tensions are seen by many as not being creative.

Probably most significant in this process is the phenomenon of urbanization. There are still relatively few cities in Africa but the movement towards urbanization is taking place very rapidly, and it is in the cities above all, that problems seem to be concentrated and highlighted

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8. *Ibid.*

In western Europe, a cursory glance at the percentage membership of churches indicates that the transition from an agrarian to an urban society resulted in a significant loss in church members. If this is so in western Europe, it is certainly more so in the case of Africa. African Traditional Religion is intimately bound up with the structures of society based in an agricultural community, and the transition to an urban-based society would involve deep and significant changes in the religious consciousness. However, the rapidity with which such a change has taken place is far more pronounced than the European transition, and this has meant that African Traditional Religion has not managed to acquire any significant foothold in urban life.

In traditional village life many of the social controls on society were exercised through customs and rituals. Religious oaths and the position of the ancestors as the custodians of morality were all bound up with the solidarity of the village community. These customs and practices have been largely abandoned in the cities. Tribal or family solidarity has been destroyed, and the common norms and values of village life abandoned. The moral education that was previously the concern of the extended family and the village community is not provided in the city. For example, prostitution previously unknown, is common in every African city. The quest for wealth and status previously unknown also surfaces in city life. Unemployment, alcohol abuse, corruption, housing problems all arise in urban contexts where the roots have been severed. Increasing wealth among a few has led to discrimination in general.

Urban life requires new morals to meet challenging new problems. The openness of everyday moral life is far removed from the isolated individualism fostered in cities where one has to search for loyalties. The "individual discovers individualism but doesn't know what it is."<sup>9</sup> Change is also taking place concerning the concept of marriage. Divorce is creeping in and polygamy dying out. Often, the man has to work in a city leaving the wife and family at home in the village to tend the animals and crops in order to subsist. Great strain is placed on such marriages and the rearing of children in such circumstances.

Points of this nature have been covered by Ilogu<sup>10</sup> who traces the patterns of change in the Igbo society due to technological and scientific modernization. He uses three case studies of individual towns - Ihiala,

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9. Mbiti, J. S.: *African Religions and Philosophy*. Doubleday, New York, 1970.

10. Ilogu, E.: *Christianity and Ibo Culture*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1974.

Nsukka and Aba – to substantiate these claims. More specifically, he cites the building of a church in Ihiala on a site traditionally associated with bad deaths as a challenge to traditional religion. In Nsukka, he illustrates some “native” rites being adopted by Christians.

Ilogu talks about the problems of urban society, the youth drain to the cities from the villages, and the resulting poverty in the villages. He stresses the lack of community consciousness in the urban context and the abandonment of traditional religious rites. Cities are composed of many people from differing traditions, and assimilation is not easy. In his conclusion, he rightly stresses that modernity, technological and scientific advance and urbanization universally challenge religious values, both African Traditional and Christian.

Along with urbanization and its resultant trend toward uniformity, there is the suggestion of an equivalent development of national consciousness. With the birth of new nations and the general cry for freedom from the colonial oppressors, national solidarity is tending to replace tribal solidarity. However, Mbiti<sup>11</sup> argues that this is not the case and that tribal solidarity is still dominant. With freedom and independence, there is a revival of tribal rites and consciousness, and an effort to preserve these. More and more, there is an attempt to evolve a system where the needs of the African Traditional world view are incorporated with its corporate life-style into modern nationhood. In this movement, the tribal consciousness is still dominant.

It has already been stressed that it is not possible to isolate the impact of Christianity from the cultural-political-economic packaging in which it came to Africa. It is, however, useful to attempt to identify some of the more direct influences of Christian religion on African Traditional Religion. Mbiti<sup>12</sup> argues that Mission Christianity did not penetrate deeply into the religiosity of the African peoples. The Africans are a deeply religious people whose religiosity is an integral part of their lives. They cannot but be religious. For the African, “to be, means to be religious: a religious universe.”<sup>13</sup> However, Mission Christianity does not seem to provide the kind of spirituality which the African demands of his religion. It appears

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11. Mbiti, J. S.: *op. cit.*,

12. *Ibid.*,

13. *Ibid.*, p. 343.



to be more a set of rites which are empty of real religious content. It appears foreign, drab, monotonous and dull to the African religious consciousness.

Williamson,<sup>14</sup> in his analysis of the impact of Christianity on Akan Religion, stresses that the main concern of the missionaries in many cases was to "civilize" and to modernize the traditional way of life. It was often thought that once this was accomplished, the ancient, outdated form of religion would die. As in the case of urbanization, this is to some extent true. But sadly enough, Christianity is dying the same death since it is always regarded in a very negative way, thus leaving a spiritual void that needs to be filled.

#### **Confrontation Between Christianity and African Traditional Religion :**

Mission Christianity meant a disbelief in gods and fetish, membership in a church and the obedience of certain rules and regulations. It proved unable or unwilling to work within the traditional religious milieu and so was unable to sympathize or gain converts at the deeply spiritual level of the spiritual outlook of the Africans. It sought to call the convert out of the traditional environment rather than seeking to redeem him within it.

Examples of this kind of confrontation between Christianity and Traditional Religion are provided by Schoffeleers and Linden<sup>15</sup> and Ranger<sup>16</sup> in their discussions of the place of initiation rites and their exposure to Christianity. Schoffeleers and Linden<sup>17</sup> discuss the missionary activity amongst the Nyau in Malawi. They emphasize the conflict and confrontation of the two sides. African Traditional Religion is regarded as being the effective solidifying factor of the Africans, providing them with socio-cultural identity against the onslaught of the planter, administrator, and missionary.

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14. Williamson, S.G.: *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, Ghana University Press, 1965.

15. Schoffeleers, M. & Linden, I.: "The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi" in Ranger and Kimambo, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-273.

16. Lucas, V.: *op. cit.*, pp. 221-251.

17. Schoffeleers, M. & Linden, I.: *op. cit.*

Typical of this confrontation was the total misunderstanding by the European of the function and significance of initiation rites which led them to be regarded as immoral, obscene and "primitive." This is to be attributed to ignorance and narrow-mindedness rather than to any "sinister, premeditated cultural imperialism," but it led to the banning by the Christian missionaries of any participation in initiation rites, death rites and dancing, and other traditional expressions.

Consequently, those who had been through initiation rites were alienated from those who had not. Many converts accepted the new western values of progress, individualism, education and technology, and became increasingly estranged from traditional values. The Christian mission was regarded by many as an alternative way to higher status. Nevertheless, it was clear that the traditional religious communities were to play an important role in the opposition to the European cultural onslaught.

Ranger<sup>18</sup> discusses a different type of encounter between Christianity and Traditional Religion among the Masasi of South Tanzania. Here some attempt was made to "Christianize" some of the integral parts of their religion, especially the initiation rites. The Masasi history was one of rather frequent adaptation and change of rituals, due to widening contacts with other peoples, and so they are to some extent more open to change than some others. Here the Christian mission attempted to re-interpret many of the traditional rites and customs in terms of Christian theology. Lucas, the chief proponent of this view there, sought to win the African people to an understanding of Christianity by an extension of the themes and symbols of their own religious beliefs, having full regard and respect for the indigenous spirituality and religious consciousness of the Masasi people.

Liturgy and symbol, rather than dogma and argument, were regarded as the key to conversion. For example, the symbolism of the Masasi tree and that of Calvary were linked. The flower and cup of the African sacrifice were re-interpreted in terms of the Eucharist. Initiation rites were incorporated into Christian practice but more success was evident with the male rites than with the female rites due to a lack of adequate theology of sexuality in christianity. In this case, theological ritual was replaced by rather innocuous homelies with impoverished symbol and liturgy.

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18. Ranger, T. & Kimambo, I.: *op.cit.*,

However, this incorporation of traditional rites into Christian practice did lead to some conflict. There was now a struggle for power for the control of initiation ceremonies. Indeed, the resulting tension may be regarded not merely as being the result of the adaptation of rites, but more importantly, as part of the interaction between Christianity and traditional roles, and thus as being indicative of even deeper tensions.

In spite of the limited 'successes' of such attempts, it still remains that in general, Mission Christianity has penetrated but a short distance into African Traditional Religiosity. The greatest impact was made on the cultural level. Mission Christianity has often given the impression of being shallow and superficial and too bound up with the alien and harmful materialism of western culture. However, there is perhaps now a demise of the king of cultural and religious imperialism of Mission Christianity - a realization that the missionary has to serve as well as convert - a realization that African traditional culture has its own right to development and status.

With the independence of many nations in Africa, two trends are noticeable. One is the rapid growth and proliferation of independent churches which are often much more in tune with the religiosity of the people. Such movements arise out of the spirituality of the people and interpret Christianity much more in terms of the cultural milieu, and as such are much more likely to penetrate more deeply into the religious consciousness of the African. Such movements, however, are often very conservative in nature and rather than helping to cope with and interpret the changing situation in Africa, merely oppose such change.

The second important factor or trend is that since independence in many areas there has been a great resurgence and renaissance in African Traditional Religion. It had been assumed by the missionaries that the social institution with its religious core would disappear under pressure from the churches. However, like in Malawi so also in many African countries, "the colonial period . . . provides an eloquent testimony to the comparative strength of traditional religious institutions . . ."<sup>19</sup> Such a display of the resilience of African Religion indicates the important role it must play in the evolution of the continent. The rapidity of change that has taken place in Africa shows no sign of slowing down. The challenge to religion - both Christian and traditional - is clear.

19. Schoffeleers, M. & Lindin, I.: *op.cit.*

It is vital that a spiritual and moral dimension is developed in line with the changing society in Africa. This the West has largely failed to do, as witnessed by many of the problems of modern, western society. That 'modernity' presents a vital challenge is clear. This challenge has not been met adequately by Christianity in the past. Africa must now struggle with the problem on the basis of her own spirituality.

The situation also demands that Africa must also challenge the criteria on which the changes are taking place. Western values of progress, individuality, education, technology need not and should not be adopted without question. It has been and must continue to be one of the major functions of African Traditional Religion to provide such a questioning. Mbiti summarizes this sentiment beautifully in the following words :

Man cannot live by the bread of science and politicians alone. He also needs the vitamins of ethics and morals.<sup>20</sup> Africa cannot merely appropriate the ethics and morals of the West. Its own contribution is vital.

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20. Mbiti, J.S.: *op.cit.*