

African Traditional Religion vis-à-vis the Tackle It Suffers

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Abstract

African Traditional Religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. The religion that has existed before the advent of western civilization which came with secularism as an umbrella that shades Christianity, education, urbanization, colonization and so on. These features of western civilization were impressed upon African Traditional Religion. Hence, the presence of alien cultures and practices in contemporary African traditional practice, as well as the presence of elements of traditionalism in contemporary African Christian practices. This somewhat symbiosis was discussed in this paper and it was discovered that African Traditional Religion was able to jump all the hurdles of secularism, Christianity, urbanization etc and came out successfully though with bruises. The paper used socio-cultural approach in its analysis.

Keywords: African, Traditional Religion, Tackles.

Introduction

It is noteworthy that African Traditional Religion is the Religion of the Africans; and in African World view, all the facets of life are seen to be interconnected. Such facets include Religion, Politics, economics, social and so on. Each and every one of them is connected to the religious practices and that is why Mbiti asserted that Africans are notoriously religious, they do everything religiously, even sin religiously. Thus this paper is all about the entire African life and what it has suffered from the different angles of the human endeavour.

The umbrella that shades the battle that African traditional Religion suffers is secularism; it is this secularism that gave rise to a lot of things like, Christianity, urbanization, identity crises, colonization and so on. These elements of secularism will be treated extensively on how it has affected the African world and its religion.

In the words of the executive Governor of Anambra State, Chief Willie Obiano, in the interactive session he held with the Catholic Priests of Awka Diocese in 2018, it is only those who have the ball and are heading to the goal post that faces tackles; these tackles are to distract the player from scoring a goal. He concluded by saying that the interest of the player is to head to the goal post and score a goal. Following the above, African Traditional Religion and of course African culture is out to score a goal, and in the struggle to do this, it faces some tackles, nevertheless, these tackles which we have narrowed as secularism and which gave rise to identity crisis, urbanization etc are the distractions which posed some challenges to African Traditional Religion.

Secularism

Secularism is the transformation of a society from close religious value identification towards non-religious values and secular organizations. The secularism thesis is understood to mean that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance. The term secularism can also be used in the context of lifting monastic restrictions from a member of the clergy.

Secularism has many levels of meanings both in theory and in history. Social theorists such as Karl Max, Sigmund Freud, Max Webber and Emile Durkheim, postulated that the modernization of society would include the decline in level of religiosity. Some theorists argue that the secularism of modern civilization partly

results from our inability to broaden ethical and spiritual needs of mankind to the increasingly fast advance of physical sciences.

Madu (2003), in trying to throw more light on secularism and its meaning, asserted that:

It is discovered that each historical epoch is dominated by a certain mood or self-understanding which has taken captive the consciousness of the age, namely, all forms of thought and overt behavior of the age. It is within such a consciousness and self - understanding that the people operate if they are to be relevant and active. (p. 19).

This implies that secularism is what appeals to the particular epoch we are in. For Madu, the people of the present era have to operate within the consciousness of understanding what secularism is all about and make good use of it. Secularism is sometimes credited to both cultural shifts in the society following the emergence of rationality and the development of science as a substitute for superstition. Webber (1964) called this process the disenchantment of the world.

At the most basic stages, this begins from the slow transition from oral traditions to a written culture that diffuses knowledge. This first reduces the authority of clerics as the custodians of revealed knowledge, as the responsibility for education has moved from the family and community to the state.

Two consequences have arisen:

- a. Collective conscience is diminished
- b. Fragmentation of communal activities leads to religion becoming more of a choice thing rather than observed social obligations.

A major issue in the study of secularism is the extent of reduction of population in the places of worship, especially in most of the places in Africa. This indicates a decrease in religiosity or simply a privatization of religious beliefs, where religious belief no longer

plays a major role in public life and in other aspects of decision making; instead it takes the least position in decision making and other aspects of the public life of the people.

Africa as a continent is undergoing a serious case of secularism. The ways of the religious are fast being abandoned or in sharp decline while most elites are beginning to clamour for a cultural change or better put, for the return to the African cultures which have long been overlooked for the more grand - seeming European ones. The change in cultural taste has seen a more serious route to secularism as both the old and new culture do not seem to satisfy the insatiable want of the contemporary society and is finally turning to the most concrete or satisfying explanation for their social dilemmas; the secular sciences route.

Secularism in Africa

Africans are notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1969). These classic words of Mbiti are quite as well-known, even after four decades, as just the religiosity of the African people. In spite of all the religiosity of Africans as Mbiti observed, religious leaders, as far back as the early 1990s, were beginning to grow discomfort in the happenings on the religious front in this “notoriously religious continent”. John Paul (1995) in his post-Synod exhortations after the African Synod pointed to the growing threat of secularism in Africa. He said:

Although the subject scarcely received a mention in the speeches, messages and propositions of the synod, the rapid evolution of the society has given rise to new challenges linked to the phenomenon, notably of family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularization and an intellectual upheaval caused by the avalanche of insufficiently critical ideas spread by the media. (p. 97).

The pope spoke of the media intrusion and about the temptation of individualism. Secularism may stem from explicit unbelief, the denial of the existence of God or of any religious dimensions to human life. Such unbelief is rarely the product of a formal atheistic rational philosophy. It stems more from the allegiance to the popular myth of science as the ultimate theory of everything; a conviction that the only truths are those which are accessible and proven by scientific observations and experiments. It is a faith in the unlimited human progress, apparently confirmed by the spectacular achievements of western technology.

Consumer materialism is nowadays the most common cause of secularism. Rather than formal unbelief, it is religious indifference induced by the preoccupation with material things. Douglas (1970) pointed this out thus “It is the world of impersonal things, a world in which personal relationship is at a minimum and in which symbolism and ritual are discounted as forms of expressions in the interpretation of reality” (p.70). However, the reality of secularism is very obvious in Africa. One may not see it vividly as it is in the western world, but that does not mean that secularism is not or cannot be traced in Africa.

Causes of Secularism in Africa

- Colonization
- Identity Crisis
- Rationalization
- Modernization
- Christianity
- Poverty
- Urbanization
- Globalization

Colonization

Colonization is a political repression of a nation by a more powerful nation. It brings about the thrust of political, social and religious beliefs of one nation and it forces unto another. It is therefore appropriate to say that colonialism is one of the greatest agents of secularism in Africa.

Colonialism and religion are closely interwoven as most of the colonial leaders came along with their religion, education and social life. According to Anderson (2010):

Christian Missionaries were portrayed as visible saints, exemplars of ideal piety in a sea of persistent savagery. However, by the end of the colonial rule, in the half of the 20th century, missionaries became viewed as 'ideological shock troops for colonial invasion whose zealotry blinded them. (p. 20).

Religions are being targeted by colonial critics due to the part they played at this period. It is believed that the tenets of religious beliefs were used by colonialists to justify their actions.

Boer (1998) states that:

Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on divine mandate and designed to bring liberation - spiritual, cultural, economic and political, by sharing the blessings of the religion - inspired civilization of the foreign world with people suffering from the influence of another bad form of religious belief- Satanism (p.50). They claim to bring cure and relief to the diseased, oppressed that are under the influence of bad choice made out of poor religious, political and economic forces. (p. 4).

According to Sameh (2010), “much of the standard of western scholarships of Christian mission for example, are individually motivated and are parts of the western culture of imperialism” (p. 106). Most of the countries in Africa were colonized by the western world. Nigeria for instance was colonized by the British. This colonization came along with Christianity. They then brought

distorted religion to the people of Africa. Africans, who were known to be notoriously religious, were now taught about politics. They equally made away with some of our shins, which we were told were fetish. Ekwuru (1999) puts it this way: “Obviously, the primary intention of the colonial master was to conquer, dominate and exploit every bit of available human and material resources of the technologically underdeveloped, for the benefit of the so-called “developed” or “civilized” nations” (p. 12).

They, according to Ekwuru, showcased their efforts as if they wanted to liberate Africa whereas the reverse is the case. They enriched themselves with African values. Also, Ugwu (2004) has it that they termed our religion fetish, idolatry etc, yet it imposed on us a foreign religion which gave rise to a lot of evil today. With the advent of Christianity and the attitude of the people that brought it, people comfortably now can still lies and still damn the consequences which was not the case in the primordial Africa and its practices was still operative. Ugwu (2004) thus says:

It is a point of fact to note that early Europeans, many anthropologists, ethonologists and historians... have cast aspersions and poured sarcasm on the nature of African Traditional religion. This religion of the Africans has been mishandled by many misinterpretations of their foreign investigators leading to misconceptions and there those who base their study of this religion on mere hearsay. (p. 13).

Colonialism alongside with Christianity gave rise to the devaluation of African values such as African regard for God, who for them is the source and giver of life. This also can be seen in the way Africans name things, dance, pray, work and live their day-to-day life. The advent of colonialism, granted, has positive effects on the African culture, but the negative effects were more than the positive. It was during the era of colonial masters that secularism came in full force. They introduced western education. It was through western education

that free thinking, individualism and science came into the African world. Thus, reasoning and individualism were enthroned; communalism and regard for the sacred were dethroned.

Identity Crisis

Identity crisis is a factor pushing Africa into secularism. Africa is a continent with numerous cultural ethnic groups and belief identity. This has brought about the issue of identity crisis among Africans. Africans being very religious people have always sought for a cause to believe in. The search and thirst for knowledge have driven many Africans in search of a common ground to belief against the general influence of middle - Eastern and Western belief systems. Due to the great influx of these foreign beliefs into Africa which has led to the obliteration of most African norms, beliefs and customs, this leaves the searching Africans empty and devoid of a central belief system at the core. With the Eastern and Western cultures at battle for the domination of Africa and Africans at a loss for an indigenous common ground for a central belief, it leaves Africans at a loss, an identity crisis.

The modern sociologist provides the Africans with an escape route from the religious battlefield, an answer to its problem in the practical sense, a world devoid of mystery but rich in details and reason. The sociologist provides the Africans with the secular view of things based strictly on physical science, reason, logic and thought, and not religion and mystery. This of course promotes the course of secularism. The need to unite the world with science, the trend of progress, was ushered in, these were imbued in the psyche of Africans, they, therefore, started pursuing these new trend. There is no better way to buy a confused man's trust more than to show him the light for the solution to his problems.

Speaking on a radio interview recently, former South African President, Thabo Mbeki lamented the issue of victimization of the African youth thus: The young African, having gone through studies

and experiences where he is being viewed as a victim always, will at some point get uncomfortable with the victim tag and thus in a haste to belong to the victory side, refutes the religious ways of his fathers for the more acceptable, logical and secular facts and reasons.

There is a big dichotomy between the contemporary African and the primordial African. The mind of the African in the contemporary world seems to be distorted. This, we can see vividly in the African attitude towards African indigenous languages, morals and values. According to Nwala (1985), Igbo religious life is an integral element of their total cultural life which aims at self-realization of some sort that consists in living in harmony with cosmic order. Law, ethics and religion aim at securing man's orderly and peaceful existence, but each, with different instrument. Nwala's argument was that the African world works holistically, ordered smoothly and that every other thing like the values, morals, laws which Africans have, are all ordered for man's existence.

Africans seem to have adopted this science oriented facts which on the surface tend to help solve the numerous challenges facing people in their various walks of life. However, the present researcher is of the view that had Africans had a more central and concrete culture and identity, capable of supporting their origin and satisfying their societal challenges, there would have been no need for acculturation. Secularism would have been seen as a religious threat rather than a course to follow.

In Igbo land for instance, the language is going into extinction gradually, some of the youths do not want to accept the fact that they are from Igbo land. In no distant time, Igbo language might disappear into thin air and this is largely because people seem not to be interested in it, they rather prefer to speak English language. The little child today might know how to say everything in English but knows little or nothing about the indigenous language.

Modernization

Modernization has been one of the major contributors of secularization in African. It is the progressive transition from a pre-modern or traditional society to modern or first world society. It looks at the internal factors of a country while assuming that with assistance, the less developed societies could be brought to the same developmental state with the more developed societies.

Hornby (2001) defines ‘modern’ as ‘of the present or recent time’. Modernity on its own, “means the condition of being modern”, it thus implies that modernity has to do with the contemporary happening as against old. In the modernization of ‘traditional’ societies, people are brought into sharp contrast to their fundamental beliefs. They are made to understand that most of their problems and questions have answers and solutions. The traditional societies are given practical solutions based on rational thinking and physical science as against the religious and divine assistance. While the physical sciences, rational thinking and modern social beliefs seem more concrete, convincing and progressive, the traditional societies are made to absorb this new medium to solve their problems, integrate themselves into the world frame, and facilitate better life and hopeful living against the religious beliefs of old. Thus, the religiosity is abandoned.

What are these contemporary things or happenings which may cause secularism? They are the style of dressing (immodest dressing), the electronics, the flashy things and cars and even communication gadgets. Many Africans are now interested in modern things and even want to answer modern man.

The westerners therefore showcase a lot for Africans to buy but some of these things are not good for the Africans. Africans have not been able to realize that theatre or stage wears are different from ordinary wears. The whites use all these for acting drama but Africans use them as fashion. The Sunshade eyeglass is meant to be used when the sun is much but Africans enjoy them *as* fashion. The increasing

numbers of rape and incurable diseases are all results of this entire "modernity syndrome". Nevertheless, the westerners have studied Africans and discovered that they are good in consuming things, so they shift a lot of used things that are outdated in their place over to Africans and Africans glory in them without questioning. The problem then is in the mind of Africans who allowed themselves to be deceived by the westerners in the name of modernity.

Christianity

It might sound bizarre but the fact is that Christianity has contributed to the cause of secularism in Africa. Mannin (1995) held that Christianity is the greatest contributor of secularity in the world. He wrote, "The greatest single course of Atheism today is the Christians; they acknowledge Jesus in the Church with their lips and walk out of the door and deny Him with their life style" (p.30).

It is fair to argue that the greatest evils committed in the continents of Africa today are done under the facade of religion. Be it the bombings by the Muslims, the church embezzlement by the Christians or the ritual killing by the traditionalists. Christians in this regard do not cover themselves in glory; the churches are going through a lot of things. Talk about the cases of children sexual molesters which have been boiling over in the Catholic Church. Mannin (1995) also asserts thus:

It defies human logic why priests who are supposed to be the very embodiment of chastity will be involved in a crime as serious as sexual harassment and the fact that this crime was committed on underage children makes it an eyesore. (p. 40).

The constant conflict in Churches among Christians especially within the Protestant brotherhood has decimated the faith of the followers on the fact that the Church is a medium through which power and wealth driven individuals propagate their selfish moves. Cases of church leaders owing assorted automobiles, dining in five star hotels, living in luxurious mansions and assembling fat bank accounts while members of the

congregation cannot even afford three square meals in a day, have left many followers abandoning the religious ways for the secular world where the only rule card is reason and logic.

The Church itself in Africa has been commercialized. To go to Church now is no longer about having faith, holding a Bible and moving into a place of worship. Money rules the church, the clergy, the pastors, the religious seem to be more interested in what brings them wealth and power. To go for prayer sessions now demands a certain amount of fee; some churches now book appointments with their clerical heads through appointment cards worth some amount of money. Politicians have resorted to patronizing religious bodies for the votes of the electorates. The churches with the higher number of worshippers now command who enters political offices to the detriment of better candidacy and good governance. Just protect the interest of the church leader for you to become the 'divine mandate'. The Church is going astray and Africans are moving out of them.

These things happen because some of the religious leaders have gone astray. They are being carried away by the pursuance of material things. However, the poor who are supposed to own the Church are not involved by the religious leaders, the rich, on their own part because they are valued, do not attend regularly. This exactly was why Nietzsche made a categorical statement that God is dead. He meant that we have killed God by the way we lead our lives; on our day - to - day activities. Nietzsche, having evaluated the things happening in world, how Christians practice the Christianity, has come in with that statement to advise Christians and at the same time, counsel them.

Poverty

Poverty is one of the causes of secularism in Africa. One may ask, is Africa really poor or that the westerners infused it in us that we are? Onyancha and Shorter (1997) in their research that was conducted in Nairobi on the relationship between the poor and the rich state that:

There was a considerable quantity of poor relief. Collections for the poor were regularly taken up by the rich Westerners who are in Nairobi, especially in connection with the annual Lenten campaign, the Samaritan fund and organizations such as the Undugu Society of Kenya. (p. 49).

These collections made by the rich to the poor sometimes push some Africans to move out in search of the greener pastures. However, looking at the African continent, one can say that even though the Africans appear to be poor, they are not completely poor as people think and claim, at least Africa is blessed with human and natural resources. The problem then can be traced from the way Africans reason.

During the colonial era, the colonial masters impoverished Africa and made away with most of the Africa's valuable things like shrines and artifacts. They made Africa understand that they need them for survival. Then they brought up the issues of hunger, how to quench the thirst of hunger etc. Africans then started looking for a way of survival and moved out for greener pastures. This led Africans even going to the countries that they are better than. Consequently, when Africans leave African soil in search of greener pastures, their contact with other cultures will enable them to come back with bad ideas in the culture they met and all these things are not in the interest of the African world. People of Africa in their own way struggled to be rich by all means, when they succeed they are given titles by the Church. What then do you expect from the poor? As Onyancha and Shorter opined, the poor will struggle to be rich so that he or she can also be recognized since the Bible made it very clear that blessed is the hand that gives than the one that receives. Thus, the poor man will abandon the Church in search of greener pastures, since the poor would not be recognized in the Church. Shorter and Onyancha (1997) warned:

That even though the rich do it as charity by helping the poor and do fund-raising for their upkeep, however such giving must not be

allowed to dehumanize the “have-nots” and increase their state of dependency on the “haves”.(p.48).

According to them, by doing so, they may be worse than other politicians and rich people who use their money to seek for power, cause corruption as we have in Africa today. However, in trying to argue in favour of what poverty has caused Africa, Uzoh (2014) x - rayed the malicious act which was perpetrated by some thieves who went to steal the powerful *Omaliko* Oracle of Abatete. This, they did without fear of what the oracle can do to them, having known that *Omaliko* is a powerful oracle. The thieves were caught, and Uzoh (2014) reported that one of the thieves, when they were being interrogated, said that it was a result of poverty that made us to steal the oracle. We know that *Omaliko* is a powerful oracle, we equally know that it will yield us so much money, and this was what led us to this act. In fact, it was poverty. We were ordered to do so by a pastor, who wants to use it for rituals. This is the height of secularism - when people have no regard for the divinities, or fear or reverence for the sacred. They were only interested in their own selfish interest and not even what the gods or oracle will inflict on them or on their generation. It is degrading to African traditional religion and so secularisms.

Urbanization

Urbanization is one of the causes of secularism in Africa. Urbanization is a term, which may mean different things to different people. It implies the expansion and multiplication of towns in the urban areas at the expense of rural areas. The people living in the rural areas leave for the urban centres in search of greener pastures. By doing this, urban areas are over-populated which may give rise to other negative things. Shorter and Onyanha (1997) echoed that:

For most of the town population, urbanization does not substitute a coherent modern culture for a traditional one. What it does is to modify traditional cultures in a drastic manner, eroding traditional

concepts and behaviors, impoverishing human sensibilities, and substituting material value for religious and moral ones. (p. 33).

Shorter and Onyancha frowned at urbanization especially on what it does to the culture it is leaving and the one it is going to meet. Nevertheless, the attitude of the people would change when they move from rural to urban centres, because they are in the urban centre for business and equally, they can do anything to survive including drug trafficking, prostitution, robbery etc. All these are then slaughtered at the altar of respect for African values and respect for the African tradition. According to the research made by Shorter and Onyancha (1997) in Nairobi, they discovered that:

There was a remarkable failure among the urban residents of Nairobi to attend church, the reason being that most of them are poor and have come for money. In the rural areas, people are relaxed and the church records high population. (p. 38).

Globalization

Globalization, “think globally and act globally” syndrome is not helping matters. This implies the oneness which the world propagates, that each country knows what happens in the other without suffering or traveling to the country and applied them also in their country. African worldview examines and interprets African’s ways of living and acting. An inherently reactionary worldview, in the understanding of Ekwunife (2011), should be able to provide man with a character for interpreting and coping with life experiences. African worldview is global. It is the African's universal or global perception of realities around him. It is never individualistic. It is interpretation of African experiences past and present. For the Africans, the world or reality is fluid because events and situations confront man on daily basis. African worldperception is not rigid but flexible. In the present dispensation, African worldview is affected by currenttrends in the world. Like any other people living in the world today, African

cosmology operates on belief systems, assumptions and interpretations given to issues and events. Beliefs can change alongside the diminishing or extension of events according to the trends. Hornby (2001) explained trends to mean “a general direction in which a situation is changing or developing - economic, social and political trends” (p. 1278). Trend as explained by Hornby above has the same characteristics and notion with globalization. Globalization is not all about having a united or universal economic, political, social and technological practice, it also incorporates the principles that influence African individuals and community lives. African perception of reality is an ideological trend which still influences greater a percentage of Africans that ascribe to it.

Globalization, according to Ohuabunwa (cited by Ugwueye, 2007) is, “An evolution, which is systematically restructuring interactive phases among nations by breaking down barriers in the area of culture, commerce, communication and several other fields of different endeavours” (p. 101). Ugwueye (2007) notes other trends of globalization thus:

Globalization has continued to attract increased scholarly and analytical attention across the globe. It is not fortuitous that globalization has been at the epicenter of most developmental and intellectual discourses. This is not unconnected with the fact that world developments have been increasingly characterized not by their growth dynamics but by their links to the process of globalization. (p. 102).

Globalization since it is the current trend in world affair should include investigation or rather appreciation of certain elements in African worldview. The African concept of reality which is holistic can explain unity of all created things to the ultimate source of all existence namely, God. The African strongly believes in community bond. It can also explain the culture of untidiness in the pursuance of world peace and others. Globalization is a force that impels world developments. Beginning from its

primal pursuit of economic gain, globalization has moved to politics, socialization, information technology and culture.

One of the current trends in globalization is the gradual formation of a universal social culture for all races which ironically eliminates some values in some localities while at the same time promotes some cultures. Some African writers have cried against the adverse effect of globalization on African values. Globalization favours the materialistic society of the West as against the religious and dogmatic society of Africa.

Conclusion

We have seen the causes of secularism in Africa as dealt with in this paper. They are: colonization, identity crisis, rationalization, modernization, Christianity, poverty, urbanization and globalization. However, we have seen that secularism did not just creep into Africa, it came through the means mentioned above, and affected the African culture negatively. Africa on her own part did not keep quiet, she made her own effort and is still making the effort to stand on her feet to welcome the things necessary in secularism and then reject out rightly the ones that are not welcomed.

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