The Influence of Religion on Culture in African Society

By

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Abstract

This paper is on the influence of religion on culture in African society. Ultimately, religion and culture are inseparable in many ways. For thousands of years, various societies have had some form of religion at the centre of their cultural beliefs and practices. When people in a culture believe strongly in a given religion, it can have a huge impact on their culture. Their culture comes to accept only those behaviours and ways of thinking that are acceptable to their religion. The aim of this paper is that some aspects of African culture have been civilized by wholesome interaction with Christian values which have had a purificatory effect and as such religion could shape the cultural pattern of the people and restructure the community perception and values. This paper adopts a phenomenological method. The findings shows religion as a means that influence the everyday life and that the laws and the social customs that exist in society are almost all based on religious teachings and precepts. The work concludes that religion has a positive influence in African culture through fostering community, giving and quality fellowship that unifies the people and brings about brotherhood in the society.

Keywords: Religion and Culture

Introduction

Religion has doubtlessly played significant roles in the whole of African societies and cultures. As Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so it is not easy or possible to isolate it from other aspects of African society and culture. A study of these religious systems is, therefore a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of traditional and modern life. All African culture and societies, traditional and contemporary, across the continent and regardless of differences in national origin, language, or ethnicity are deeply religious.

Given the centrality of religious belief and practices in African societies and cultures, the study of religion and its influence in African society is important in building a better understanding of African peoples, cultures, and societies, and of events in Africa. As Peschke (1999:19) defined society in the wide sense as a lasting association of men for the attainment of a common goal. So literature searches were conducted to identify religious teachings related to culture in African society. Both for Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religious traditions. Religious scholars from each of the major religions were consulted for additional information regarding how various subgroups within that religion may interpret and apply religious teachings in specific circumstances. This paper adopts a phenomenological approach.

African Historical Overview

Africa is divided into a great number of ethnic cultures. The continent's cultural regeneration has also been as integral aspect of post-independence nation-building on the continent, with recognition of the need to harness the cultural resources of Africa to enrich the process of education, requiring the creation of an enabling environment in a number of ways. In recent times, the call for a much greater emphasis on the cultural dimension in all aspects of development has become increasingly vocal.

During the period of decolonization in Africa, there were changes in Africa countries. Most of these socio-political changes attracted social changes between the individual and his community on one hand and between the relationship of man and the supernatural world on the other hand. Many individual were destabilized in the process, Nmah (2008). During colonialism in Africa, Europeans possessed attitudes of superiority and a sense of mission. The French were able to accept an African as French if that person gave up their African culture and adopted French ways. Knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture and abandonment of traditional African ways defined one as civilized. Some argue that the future of Africa can only be forged from accepting and mending the socio-cultural present. For them, colonial cultural hangovers, pervasive Western cultural inundation, and aid-giving arm-twisting donors are, he argues, here to say and no amount of looking into Africa's past will make them go away. However, our culture provides us with an ethos we must honor in both thought and practice. By ethos, we mean a people's self-understanding as well as its self-presentation in the world through its thought and practice in the other six areas of culture. It is above all a cultural challenge. For culture is here defined as the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself and introduces itself to history and humanity.

Religion

Let me concentrate on specific areas such as religion and social life to determine the extent of the influence of Christian values on culture. Nmah (2008) citing Wach, says "religion is a response to what is experienced as ultimate reality; that is, in religious experiences we react not to any single or finite phenomenon, material or otherwise, but to what we realize as under guiding and conditional all that constitutes our world of experience". First, let us treat religion or the belief system, as the main carrier of Christian values. Further, this belief in the existence of such relations is a general human conviction, common to all peoples and to all

stages of culture. According to Iwe (2003) religion may be considered from four basic points of view namely; subjectively, objectively, morally and institutionally. Traditional African society believed in the existence of gods; each object has a separate creator; therefore, the traditional African society was pantheistic in its belief. On the contrary, the Christians are monotheistic; their God is an omniscient, omnipotent, supersensible supreme being. In the Christian sense, God is accessible by reason and human spirit. To the Africa, the god's existence is both material and spiritual. His belief assures him that gods exist, and their affirmation and justification of their existence is the fulfillment of their contractual obligations.

The African, contrary to the Christian manner, is in daily direct contact with his gods for the good of all. Religion is a personal thing for the Christian; it is for the salvation of the individual. In contrast, African traditional religion was usually a communal affair, practiced not just for the spiritual and physical benefit of an individual or his immediate kin, but for the well-being of all within the purview of the celebrant. Shrines of deities erected in compounds and in villages generally honoured these deities and invited them to protect and prosper all within the compound or village. The collective erection of these shrines of deities is often a collective response to a collective responsibility.

Although the traditional African has been invited to embrace the Christian religion which is practiced two to three hours a week, as a member of the extended family he makes use of religion in his day-to-day activities. His life is religion and religion is his life: the constant and general foundation of African tradition is the spiritual view of life. Pope Paul VI was simply amplifying Bishop Shanahan whose conclusion on the life of the Igbo people was that the average native was admirably suited by environment and training for an explanation of life in terms of the spirit, rather than of the flesh. He is no materialist, indeed nothing was farther from his mind than a materialistic philosophy of existence: it had no appeal for him. For the African, to be is to be religious in a religious universe.

From the above it can be seen that there have and still do abound areas of similarity between Christian and African values. Differences surely existed in the application and in the living of some of these values. Probably, the traditional African extended family system was defective in that it failed to value to the same degree all men the world over and adopted a different attitude towards those who did not come from the same "town." According to many African traditions, the sacredness of life cannot be applied universally to include every human being to the same degree. The killing of human beings, for example, was common in the olden days, either in the course of funeral rites as a means of providing attendant spirits to accompany a dead chief into a great beyond, or as a sacrifice to atone for sins. In each case, the victim was someone procured or bought from a distant town. Acts of injustice committed against a "non-native" belonged to a different moral species from that committed against one who was a son of the soil. Towards a foreigner of equivalent status, injustice had no longer the same character as against the elders or brothers of a clan, to kill whom was a crime and abomination against the earth god, Ala. Other anti-religious practices such as the killing of twins and the ostracism of their mother, local slave trade, child-kidnapping and human sacrifice existed partly on account of defects in the extended family system, attitudes regarding the value of man and ignorance or superstition.

It is true that the traditional religious practices of the African are anthropocentric in the sense that all the religious practices invariably point to one objective, namely, human life and its preservation. Prayers and sacrifices offered to the gods and the ancestors all have one end in view, namely, the welfare of man. However, it was not until the advent of Christianity and its interaction with the native culture that the extended family system took on macro-dimensions. All human beings, irrespective of race or ethnic origin, are seen and accepted as members of this extended family, that is, as children of God and hence members of one family. In other words, man is now giving his value simply because he is man, and is not discriminated against because he hails from a different area.

Some aspects of African culture have been civilized by wholesome interaction with Christian values which have had a purificatory effect. It is due to Christianity that today twin's babies are no longer destroyed, that their mothers are no longer tabooed and ostracized, that the practice of local slave trade, child-kidnapping and human sacrifices have been dropped, and that the frequent local community feuds and bloody clashes have been immensely reduced or, in some localities, even totally abandoned.

Similarly, such acts of robbery, arson, rape and burglary, which were considered to be acts of bravery if perpetrated against enemies, but as horrible crimes when committed against members of the same community, now receive general and objective condemnation as crimes and evils wherever and on whomsoever they are committed. This extension of the scope, meaning and application of the traditional African extended system is a benefit deriving from the contact between Christianity and African culture.

Religion and Cultural Life

Let me examine religion and cultural values on our social life in African society. Here, close examination reveals a situation similar to an injection which was intended to procure life, but instead brings death to the patient. Rather than the complimentary and revitalizing role which Christian values played on some of the religious sphere of African culture, their relation with certain aspects of social life permitted no comprises.

Generally, Christianity as a religion crushed Igbo African beliefs and methods of social control such as divination and such dispute-settling methods as the consultation of oracles. The place and authority of dead ancestors were doubted and shaken. John Christopher Taylor (first C.M.S. Missionary and Pastor at Onitsha, 1857-1869) is quoted as saying that already the native doctors were ashamed in his district as their craft is now in danger of being exposed before the light of Christianity in the eyes of their long down-trodden vassals. Reporting how glad he was to see the converts throw away the traditions of their homeland in their enthusiasm

to embrace the new faith, Taylor gives testimony to the overwhelming of African culture by an invading Christian one..

Religious intolerance is more manifest in the dealings of Christianity with such aspects of African culture as marriage. Almost all the Christian churches have refused to recognize polygamy within the African context. Others refuse inter-denominational marriages involving theirs members. The Africans regard polygamy as a healthy institution which insures respect for husbands and love for wives, assures social security, and checks flirting or prostitution. The insistence of Christianity on monogamy is an arbitrary imposition without adequate consideration of the *raison d'etre* of the traditional institution of polygamy which sustains the extended family patterns and assures continuity, the bedrock of the traditional ancestral worship.

The African practice is to bury an elderly person soon after death with preliminary ceremonies; after a year or more the second burial takes place with more vigorous and detailed ceremonies. It is this second burial which helps the spirit of such a departed individual to join and rest happily with the ancestors in the land of ancestral bliss. Without, it the spirit of the departed hovers about in the air and may harm its kindred living members. But once this second burial is performed, the spirit of the departed assumes his place in the land of ancestral bliss where he can plead effectively with the gods for the well-being of the members of his family.

Culture and Religion

This is all about our human and how the social forces of culture and religion can bring people together for cooperative success or can divide people for persecution and suffering. Culture defines the social forces within a community involving its conventions for behaviour, ranging from food preparation techniques, to forms of entertainment that keep the community together like music or dancing, to dating, rituals, and so on. Religion defines how the community members interpret their role in the universe, with this teaching based on the local culture, so different religions

rise out of different cultures. Similarly, when members of one religion convert members of a foreign culture often the resulting religion in that area is affected by the host culture. According to Niebuhr (1966) Jesus was a product of a culture, so that there is not a word of ethnical or religious counsel in the gospels which cannot be paralleled in the Jewish culture and writings. I suspect those valuing conformance higher than tolerance can be influenced into intolerant behaviours. This book also point out the inherent groupish nature of people. These tendencies provide the foundation for the typically divisive political leadership of today. Religion surfaces as something important to a community after the group has grown to such an extent that layers of leaders are in place to manage Religion surfaces as something important to a community after the group has grown to such an extent that layers of leaders are in place to manage the larger population and its resources. Religion is often a tool of politicians.

Religion is a divisive tool for political leaders as it enables one group to be defined and divided from another, just as race has been used. Whenever one political group can unite against an opposing group, persecution and suffering is often the result for that group now isolated forms the others. The book GGS also describes how different cultures have conquered or disappeared over the course of human history around the world. In our modern times of high rates of literacy across so many different cultures around the world, we should have learned that cooperation is part of our human nature and its practice will be successful in most endeavours, where a group of people of diverse skills and backgrounds can succeed when individuals or a group of uniform skills cannot. Instead the problem is 'divide and conquer' remains the most widespread leadership technique, so only a privileged few will benefit to the detriment of so many others.

This was because American political and religious leaders were using the Christian religion to justify the wars in the Middle East. This message is emphasized throughout our media, with the ever present phrase 'God bless America' as if our country is exceptional as the conduit for God's master plan during our campaign of dominance over competing cultures

and religions in the world. The point here is we are all part of this global community and it is not fair that only a few benefit while most suffer. I find it quite appealing our world is approaching the dystopian world described in the infamous book of fiction 1984, as if no one of importance has recognized such dangers.

How Religion Influences Culture in African Society

Religion influences culture in many ways. According to Anyacho (1994), just as the laws of the state influence the religious practices of the people, so also do religious laws affect the machinery of the state where such a religion has been accepted. People of different cultures have a set of beliefs that influence their daily lives and how they act. For example, Muslims pray five times a day in the direction of Mecca, the most sacred place on earth to them. The women of Islam must dress in cloaks that cover their whole bodies and hair. Also, in the fall, they have Ramadan where they must fast for their religion. If someone were to convert to Islam, it would really change their life because of all the things they have to do or sacrifice.

Religion is like a way of life. Many people take their religion very seriously, so their lives and cultures are majority affected by their religion. For example, serious Christian read their Bibles daily, get baptized to express their faith to their peers, and attend church every Sunday. They also pray multiple means a day. The Bible states that Christians are supposed to love and help each other always. Many Christian try to be kind and help people in need. What someone believes in will help them to make choices that shape their daily lives. Whether people realize it or not, religion makes up a huge part of someone's life. It affects the way people look at life, communicate with others spend their time, and how they act. Religion unifies and separates people based on what they believe in. for example, Christians and Muslim don't get along that well because of differences in beliefs. Disagreements and fights have occurred because of them not getting along. Many people wish that all religions could coexist and live

peacefully with each other, and we are working together towards coexisting with each other.

Society and culture are bound together by codes of behaviour, and by tacit agreement to live together in harmony. Some cultures identified themselves by their religion, i.e, their religion was the centre which held the culture together. Home, farming, relationships, marriage, birth and death, these are all common events in cultures; often these events have a religious significance.

Religion gives transcendental meaning and purpose, and often, a goal to aspire to when life is complete. So many cultures have cultures have bound themselves together in common that they might all achieve the goal of life in common, by providing those social structures which bind religion and man. The word "religiare" (from which we get our common word Religion) means to bind back.

Religion often gives codes of behaviour for society and culture, such as the Ten Commandments. Another example is "Love God", have morality in society, and abhor sin". All religions have values. Values are guides to behaviour, such as do good, avoid wrong. All religions have the five human values, Truth, Right conduct, Love, Peace and non- violence at their core. These are values which sustain the very core of family, home, society, nation and world.

Probably, the biggest influence that religion has on everyday life is that the laws and the social customs that exist in society are almost all based on religious teachings. While it could be argued that similar laws would be made by a society that had no god, the fact remains that the laws as they exist are mostly an extension of religion. These laws form, the basis of society as we know it, so, religion has had a massive impact on the world. Since these laws govern almost all your daily behaviour, you are being influenced by religion in almost everything that you do.

Religious beliefs influence culture in a variety of ways. Certainly before societies were as civilizes as ours, religious beliefs and culture were much more effectively mixed. Today, religious beliefs help determine the

value systems used in a culture. In America many of the regulations and laws are based on concept and principles articulated in the bible. This makes great sense because Puritans helped build our great learning institution like Harvard and Yale. These principles set forth accepted behaviours and necessary consequences for breaking them. These similarly align to the Ten Commandments in the Bible.

Another way religious beliefs influence cultures has to do with service to others. In our own selfishness, we easily turn inward and focus on the self, not society. Religious groups help to foster community, giving, and fellowship. Having common beliefs puts people in accountable relationships. Research has even demonstrated that participants in churches, regardless of denomination or sect, live happier and longer lives. Religious beliefs often unify people in a culture. Coming together for meals, listening to the same music that identifies a religious belief, and practicing the same methods of worship gives people a shared identity.

The Influence of Christian Values on Culture in Africa

In dealing with the subject encompassed by the above title, some definition must be given for key terms or notions. In this work, therefore, Christian values are defined as those ideals or principles which Christianity cherishes. Our preoccupation here is not to treat the worth of Christianity or its values, for the high values of Christianity are well-known and appreciated, especially in Africa

Our main concern here is to relate and evaluate this worth to a definite culture, namely, to Africa. The choice of Africa is obvious for an African author. It becomes attractive and obvious, too, once we exclude European, including United States, culture, which Africans, rightly or wrongly, identify with Christianity. That is, since European culture has been synonymous with Christianity, African culture as a recipient of that culture bears the influence or weight of Christianity and can reflect its influence on its Culture.

Our second duty will be to select certain sections of this culture to highlight these Christian influences. To fathom the extent of the influence of Christian values on an African culture, some historical and sociological perspectives will be necessary as they will mirror this influence where it exists. The missionaries came to Igbo land in 1875, where they met a pattern of life not all of which ran counter to Christian principles. The spread of Christian influence was backed by such elements as the vast size of the area, the complete absence of roads and means of communication, as well as other harsh environmental circumstances which inhibited free movement of the early missionaries to all corners of the area. These facts may have accounted for the less universal preponderance of the Christian influence on the host culture.

Such claims as these may be seen as too lofty in view of the allegation of mass caving in of Igbo culture to the invading European culture. But the assumptions that local culture and Christian values were polarized and conflicting and that Christian values dislodged their host counterparts can be maintained only with notable qualifications, for it must be remembered that the host culture was traditional and natural, that is, it was unadulterated, original or God-given. It approximated in part, and accorded with Christian values and to that degree was not in conflict to them. Equally important in this regard is the similarity in human nature which tends to minimize the differences. We have been purposely cautious because there were indeed areas where conflict existed between the host culture and the Christian values. Nonetheless, since grace builds upon nature and nature exists in Africa as elsewhere, there is much of enormous positive value in African traditions and religious consciousness.

Religious Influence on Political – Cultural of African Society

Libertarians are fond of observing that the longevity of a free society ultimately depends on its citizens' will to remain free. We can design the constitution so as to slow down the process of decay as much as possible; we can rely on market incentives to keep the system stable. But ultimately,

if free men and women lose their understanding of and commitment to freedom – if freedom no longer seems natural to them, if it ceases to answer to their deepest convictions – then in time they will lose their freedom, bartering their sacred birthright for some new idol that has taken the place of liberty in their hearts.

The right political structure can help a society remain free, but political structure is not enough. Its effectiveness depends crucially on the broader social and cultural context. I don't want to overstate this point. Classical political thinkers such as Aristotle believed that religious homogeneity was crucial for political stability. Fustel de Coulanges (1966:24) who studied the classical cities of Rome and Greece came to the conclusion that the social and political foundations of these cities were strictly and exclusively religious.

But this example is a sword that cuts both ways. For in the long run these same societies ended up abandoning their quasi-anarchic political structure, and one of the forces driving them toward a centralization of power was the Catholic ideology of kingship, which served to legitimize the aspirations of war chiefs. So culture matters. And religion, as in the case of some, can be a powerful factor in shaping culture, for good or evil. How, then, might a culture's religious ideas influence the stability of a free society?

Conservatives often maintain that a strongly religious society is more apt to remain loyal to the ideals of liberty. Specifically, they claim that religion offers two advantages; that it provides a firmer foundation for moral character and personal responsibility, thus creating a citizenry more honest, self-disciplined, and self-reliant, and so less likely to be tempted to advance themselves at the expense of their neighbours through government coercion and that it offers the authority of God as an alternative to the authority of the State, and thus serves as a check on governmental aggrandizement.

Such conservatives frequently conclude that the government of a free society should take active measures to promote and strengthen

religion. Even if we accept the premise, however, this conclusion does not follow. A society in which the coercive power of the state is enlisted in the support of certain religious ideas is no longer a free society, at least as libertarians understand the notion of freedom. Hence, even if religion should prove to be a necessary bulwark of freedom, such a bulwark would have to be held in place through voluntary means only, lest coercion in the means undermine the freedom that is sought as an end, an enemy of liberty – that by discouraging independent thought, fostering intolerance toward non-believers, and demanding submission to authority.

Many libertarians hold precisely the opposite view, that religion always simply reinforces habits of mind that predispose citizens to become obedient slaves of the State. For such libertarians, the best guarantor of liberty is a society without religion; hence the laissez-faire utopias of libertarian fiction are frequently atheistic utopias. But if liberty cannot triumph until religion has withered away, then I suspect we are in for a long wait; the religious impulse seems to be a basic fact about human society, and shows no signs of vanishing any time soon. Libertarians had better learn to live with it.

Fortunately, the notion, held by many libertarians, that religion is the natural enemy of freedom, is as much a caricature as is the conservative idea that religion is the natural bulwark of freedom. It all depends on the *content* of the religious ideas in question. Religion has certainly served as a force of oppression, as the simplest survey of history will show. And religion has served as a pro-freedom force too; for example, historians are beginning to recognize that the American Revolution was motivated nearly as much by religious Dissenters' resistance to the Anglican establishment as by Lockean republicans' resistance to King and Parliament. Idowu (1973:16) responding to religious issues said, those who translated the bible into Nigerian languages have undoubtedly left us an invaluable heritage.

If we who seek to build a Free Nation wish to gauge our prospects for success, we might want to ask ourselves two questions. First, which

sorts of religious ideas may be expected to advance, and which sorts to hinder, the establishment of a libertarian society? And second, which of these sorts seems likely to gain cultural dominance in the near future? These questions show how much religion has influenced culture in African society.

Conclusion

Observations about African society, including culture and influence of religion, and about life with our inherent social nature, group behaviours are important. We have observed the undulating influence of religious values on African culture, that is, the good and bad effects of the influence of religion especially on the religious and social aspects of culture in Africa. Some of the havoc is of a permanent nature, for example, the dismantling or divulging of the masquerade cult or secrets. The knocking and shaking of others have been withstood due to the resilient forces inherent in the culture. The effect has been a more distinctive and permanent manifestation of the legacy or influence of religion.

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