CHRISTIANITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION:
A Focus on Burial Rites, Leadership and Festivals

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Abstract
This paper interrogates the influence of Christianity on the African Traditional Religion (henceforth, ATR). These two religious poles are examined from the prisms of burial rights, leadership and festivals. The troika would enable us to understand the rationale for the ascendancy of the Christian faith while the ATR has taken a cheerless nosedive. Indeed, the latter should serve as the first port of call in the ancestral home for the exchange of cultural currency between the adult, the supposed custodian of sociocultural values, and the impressionistic child, who should be the direct beneficiary of the gains of the transaction. Is it tenable to posit that Christianity has suppressed the African Traditional Religion or more rational to think that the ATR suffers from self-implosion? The Christian faith has been successful in its dialectical openness, where it is seen to have a massive comparative edge over the ATR in terms of the freedom it seems to guarantee from the encumbrances of life. Quite naturally, it is easier to choose an alternative that liberates the mind, body and soul with a guarantee of a place in the hereafter and from the contrivances that shield it from the illuminating rays of curious explorations. This paper follows this trajectory in its discursive explication of this tale of two religions.

1.0   Introduction

The massive conversion of people from the African traditional religion to Christianity is what motivated this study. This action prompted the writer to enquire if their gods are no longer capable of solving their problems. Could some person's interests be dead to idol worshipping? Should it be that some are trying to run away from deceit? Or what could be responsible for this sudden change? Considering the existence of these religions, one could imagine what could have happened to the practitioners of the ATR that is making them embrace Christianity. Religion is as old as the creation of the world. There is no society without religion, and there are no religions without people. The ATR is older than Christianity in Africa because our forefathers worshipped God through various means to communicate to the divine Being, the Creator of the universe. Those various means brought some validity to their perception of God as the Supreme Being. When they were in need or in trouble, they turned to God through the lesser gods for assistance, which they always got from them. The ATR is not bad in its complementary role to other forms of religion in society, though some people may argue to the contrary. Nonetheless, the ATR still embodies some important aspects that helped our forefathers, which have not lost their utilitarian essence today. Therefore, present-day Christians cannot utterly ignore those important cultural aspects of traditional religion. Ironically, Christians also observe some of those good practices in their daily

routines without knowing it. The reality today, however, is that a good number of ATR adherents have now embraced Christianity because of its unique styles of worship and other defining peculiarities. The Christian religion, which differs from the ATR, has also introduced other benefits to their level of faith. Falola (2003: 203) submits that:

> Christianity is now firmly established in Africa. Indeed, it is an old religion in places such as Ethiopia and Eritrea. In many places, successful conversion began during the nineteenth century, and Christianity became a mass religion during the twentieth. The literature on the early history of Christianity is rather extensive, full of episodes of voluntary acceptance of Christianity, resistance to the new religion, violent encounters, and the ability of Africans to "translate the message" in a way suitable to their needs and environments. The adoption of Christianity had its advantages, mainly the association with the symbols and power of Europe. It brought Western education, medicine, and opportunities for work in the formal economic sectors. It enabled several African chiefs and kings to use religion to promote international trade and consolidate their power. To the elite produced by the missionaries, it led to an assumption that they were equipped with the knowledge to transform Africa. It provided an avenue to build social networks in the new cities: the elite and church members could share and circulate information about jobs, social services, public policies, and other things beneficial to them. As many as the changes might have been, they did not amount to any noticeable transition from a traditional world to a modern one.

The writer agrees with the view of Falola that Christianity has greatly influenced the ATR by bringing development and other social infrastructure. To further substantiate this point, education, medicine and other development are outcomes of the activities of the missionaries that came to evangelise Africans and the beneficiaries are both Christians and non-Christians.

2.0   Understanding African Traditional Religion and Christianity

According to Shishima (2014:2), "the term African religion is called 'African' for certain reasons. First, it is called 'African'because it is indigenous, aboriginal, and foundational or handed down from generation to generation."(Shishima 2014: 3) further states that "African religion is considered 'traditional' due to many factors. African Religion is traditional because it is a religion and culture based on the life of the Africans."Ukaoike&Iyamu (1992 :27) opine that the"African Traditional Religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. It has been handed down to us from generation to generation. It is not a westernised religion, and it is wrong to say that it is a religion of the past people." We can clearly deduce from the above submissions that the ATR is not the same as the White's, but a religion that saved our forefathersand helped them to love and maintain equity and justice among one another. Indeed, a tradition could be said to be religious if it is having affinities with some systems of belief and values from which a community of worshippers have evolved.

Markshaw&Wanjiru (2020: 8) state that "The word,'Christianity', is not monolithic but rather a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms." Charles, Howard & John (2001:338) are of the view that:

> Christianity is the religion founded by Jesus Christ. Following His ascension, the apostles, in the power of the Holy Spirit, preached in His name. They taught that He was God's Son, the Messiah; they gathered a community of believers; and urged all to a holy

life.

The word,"Christian", means Christlike characters, Christlike service, worship, and Christlike actions." In one sense, the traits of the Christ are goals we press on to reach, like a runner training towards the finishing line. From another perspective, we grow to the attain these Christlike traits not by self-efforts, butby yielding ourselves ultimately to God's divine control and direction. Christianity is a religion where people believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. This body of Christians worship and fellowship together. They put their faith and trust in Him by following the tenets and principles of the Bible. The point of convergence in all these submissions is that Christianity has emerged fromthe exemplary lifestyle, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, and has today become one of the leading religions in the world. Christianity focuses on Jesus Christ,and it aggregates its beliefs, practices, and other traditions aroundthis historical figure. Hotchkiss (1985:27) asserts that "Jesus Christ belongs to the essential character of Christianity. Christians belong to local gatherings, which are commonly referred to as the church."

3.0   Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (CATR)
The advent of Christianity in Africa has tremendously affected Africa, due to the progress and transformation that occurred in both human and infrastructural development, an aspect that will be discussed in the paper. Christianity has had some significant influence on the ATR through the introduction of education that brought enlightenment on some of the African beliefs and practices that stood in contradistinction to the ordinances of the Bible, which are seen as the immutable word of God and that prescribes God's rules of living for his people. Based on this, those who converted to Christianity now adopted the biblical method as against their former religion. Some of those practices are:

4.0   Christianity and the Traditional African Women with Burial Rituals
According to Willie (2005:91) burial rites and their associated beliefs are practised by various societies. The number of different funerary customs practised among the populations of Africa provides some idea of their significance. Funeral rites have held an integral place in society from ancient times and often appear to have developed to express a belief in reincarnation or regeneration. Ashante&Mazama (2009:148) have noted that:

> It is generally accepted in Africa that the dead will be buried. There is no extensive tradition of cremation of the deceased. If a person who dies is not buried in the Earth, they might be left in a tree or hidden in a cave, but burning a corpse is unheard of in most societies. Those who have violated the values and norms of society are often banished in death away from the common burial area.

Burial rites in the ATRare no secrets to the people who practice them since all aspects of the tradition are observed without leaving any aspect unattended to as required by custom. Indeed, the belief is that if any aspect was left out owing to any form of negligence, it would result in somecollateral harm to the community in question. For example, tradition has stereotypically positioned women at the receiving end, especially in the case of a husband's death. The erroneous belief is that when a man dies, the woman killed him, except in a few instances where the man dies due to his evil deeds. It is a severe accusation against the women folk. Sometimes, women are made

to go through the harrowing experiences of a burial rite to ascertain their culpability or innocence. Ashante& Mazama (2009:148) recount plangently that "In some traditions, if a man dies, his wives are stripped of their clothes by their sisters, who then cover the wives with ashes. The women are instructed not to drink, eat, sleep, or speak until their husband is buried."As part of the rituals, they are subjected to drinking the water used to bathe the dead body, crossing the grave seven times, breaking the broom into the grave, eating with the left hand for seven or fourteen days, sleeping on the floor without bathing and swearing with the head of the dead body. She is made to take that oath that if she was truly responsible for her husband's death that death should visit her within a time not longer than the period of the late husband's interment. This level of inhuman treatment has made African women unhappy and insecure in the same society they all belong to. On the flip side, the question is, when a woman dies, who killed her?Here lies the missing link!Thisis where Africa has failed to provide answers to the burning issue of spousal death.

Interestingly, theadvent of Christianity has helped the women in the African society to be free from all the obnoxious rituals around spousal death because, in the Bible, there are no provisions wherein the woman should suffer for the death of her husband. When Sarah died, Abraham was not asked to go through their ancient tradition as the first woman to die in the Bible. The first burial we record is that of Sarah (Genesis 23). The first recorded transaction was the purchase of a burial ground, in which Abraham 'weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.' (*King James Version*, 2008, Gen. 23:16). Thus, the patriarch became the owner of part of the land of Canaan. It is the only part he owned. When he died, 'his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah' next to his wife, Sarah (*King James Version*, 2008, Gen. 25:9). The Hebrews were always very careful in the burial of their dead, (Gen 25:9, 35:29).

To be deprived of a befitting burial was perceived as one of the most degrading marks of dishonor, or cause of unhappiness (Ecc 6:3, Jer 22:18, 19). It is denied none, not even to enemies. Good men made it a part of their piety to inter the dead. Indeed, how shocking must the sight of unburied corpses have been to the Jews, when their land was thought to be polluted if the dead were in any manner exposed to view (2 Sam 21:14) where the very touch of a dead body, or of anything that had touched a dead body, was esteemed a blasphemy and required a ceremonial ablution, (*King James Version*, 2008, Num. 19:11-22).

5.0   Christianity and the African Traditional Children with Burial Rituals

Ezenweka&Kanu (2012: 123) define a rite as "a set of given religious activities that are usually prescribed and performed for particular purposes; rites of passage are a set of such activities that are committed to marking or ritually celebrating the various stages of transformations in the life cycle of an individual."Ashante& Mazama(2009:575) support the view that "Rituals are set forms or prescribed procedures for carrying out religious actions or ceremonies. African rituals constitute joint statements of continuity and unity that express communal definition through group participation."Ezenweka&Kanu (2012:123) further observe that "rites take a glaring place in traditional African life, which is an issue with the African lifestyle." In Africa, the role of children in burial ceremonies cannot be over-emphasised based on the ritual that involves them topay their deceased parent(s) their last respects. The children, especially the eldest son of the dead, plays a significant role in ensuring that all necessary burial rites are followed to the letter as the one who

would finally replace their deceased father in carrying the responsibility of the living. The implication is that if the eldest son fails to perform or get involved in all the rituals of the burial ceremony, and the younger male child does it, the old automatically loses his rights and privileges from the family as well as the inheritance. In the African tradition, it is believed that the eldest son has buried his deceased parents as long as he is responsible for buying the native soap, bathing sponge,thecoffin, and the rituals that come with the burial ceremony. Based on the above fact and the advent of Christianity, the majority of today's burial ceremonies are now done in the Christian way. Whether the deceased was a Christian before death or not, the children prepare for a Christian burial. Ashante& Mazama (2009:195) agree that "Typically, bodies are buried in family compounds, although in some cultures, they may be left in the forest. Rituals consist of preparation of the body and periods of public grieving, which include singing and dancing, settling estates, and transferring family eldership. These rituals are spaced over days, weeks, and months after death."
Ashante, & Mazama (2009: 277) further add that:

> Rituals for sending away the deceased address the body's handling. In some cultures, the body is shaven, washed, and wrapped in clothing. In the past, the body could be wrapped in animal skins or even covered with bird feathers. The Ancient Egyptians are noted for their elaborate preparation of the deceased's body.

The Christian burial ceremony is more straightforward, has fewer financial implications, and is ritual-free. Peter (2019:346) avers that:

> 'Funeral service is Bible-based. It was practised in the Old and New Testament times. Though "Funeral" is not a biblical term, the practice of burying the dead is biblical. The proper interment of the dead was a matter of great importance to the people of the ancient Near East. It is attested to by frequent references to burial in the Bible and other ancient writing and the presence of thousands of tombs which modern archaeologists have excavated in Bible lands."

6.0   Christianity and the African Traditional Belief in Eschatology

Ashante&Amazama (2009) are of the view that from the most ancient times to the most contemporary in Africa, human beings have always believed in the idea of eternal life. Although there are slight differences in the models from east to west or north to south, the particular understanding of everlasting life occurs in almost all African societies, and the results of this belief in the hereafter can be seen in the richly textured acceptance of the vital and active ancestral realm. This entry looks at the beginnings of the concept in Egypt and its presence elsewhere in Africa. Corroborating the position above, Samuel (2012: 210) remarks that "the end of life and what happens after that is a matter of ultimate concern for every human being in the entire universe." There is no known religion without eschatology because every religion came from somewhere and believes in God, the ultimate Being. Although there are divergent views about eschatology, all of them point to one leading source: heaven as the end of all men, whether good or bad. The idea of Christians regarding eschatology is heaven, ultimately. It is believed that only those that believe in God through Christ, the only son, and observe the rule about heaven and the entire Gospel will make it as their final destination. Heaven is life, everlasting life: glory, an eternal weight of glory: salvation, repose, peace, the fullness of joy, the joy of the Lord. There are different degrees of that glory of never-ceasing advancement. It will be a social state of ethereality, and its happiness will spring from mutual communion and interactions and the exercises of mutual benevolence. It will

include the perfect purity of every saint; delightful fellowship with those we have here loved in the Lord, (Mt 8:11,17:3,4, 1Th 2:19 ,4:13-18) the presence of Christ, and the consciousness that all is perfect and everlasting. We are taught that the body will share this bliss as well as the soul: the consummation of our pleasure is after the resurrection of the body; for it is redeemed as well as the soul, and shall, at the resurrection of the just, be fashioned like unto Christ's glorious body. By descending from heaven and reascending thither, he proves to the doubting soul the reality of heaven; He opens its door for the guilty by His atoning sacrifice, and all who are admitted to it by His blood shall be made meet for it by His grace and shall find their happiness forever in His love.

Christianity and the Traditional African Festivals

Mbiti (1979) has observed that:

> There are many occasions when festivals add to the grandeur of personal and communal rituals. Festivals for individuals and families may accompany birth, initiation, marriages, and funerals. In the community's life are harvest festivals, planting festivals, hunting and fishing festivals, victory festivals, coronation or accession festivals, and many others.

Festivals are an essential aspect of Africa's rich heritage, and they speak volumes to the cultural practices, events, and behavioural patterns of the people and reveal the well-being of a particular society. In most African communities, festivals are gradually dying out due to how people have embraced Christianity. Some of the festivals known worldwide have existed since the advent of Christianity in Africa. In some societies, the festival is a way of gathering the indigenes of a community or calling them home to eat and meet with their fellow indigenes for familiarity and, at the same time, for continuing the laid down cultural practices of their forefathers which have now been dominated by Christianity. During the festivals, many sacrifices are made for the safety of the people who would travel far, and for blessings for them, even as they return home. These sacrifices are made to different deities in charge of one thing or another because all the gods do not function in the same way but have one source they look up to. Today such is no longer done in most parts of the African society due to Christianity that has taken over African nations. People have seen the need to follow Christ and have abandoned their old traditional African religions due to the differences and many miracles Jesus Christ has done for them. Most of these festivals are now being replaced with Christian activities.

7.0   *Christianity and the Traditional African View on Leadership*

Leadership in Africa is critical and is mainly dominated by men, starting from the family. The leadership pattern of Africans is structured in such a way so that there is no place for women to exercise their power. For instance, when a man or woman dies, the only person that stands with the bereaved family in ensuring the burial is done is the male child in the family even if he is the last child and still tender in age.It is believed that he is the one to bury their late parent while the other children who are females are to stand behind him during the burial rites. It is the same in governance where women are madeto stay behind, even in the early part of the Bible. But the coming of Christianity has broken all that and has begun to promote equality globally. Today women can now head churches where men worship; some are presidents and founders of various ministries in Africa; women today have a voice in governing society, occupying sensitive positions even at the federal level. It is what Christianity has done for us to bring both men and women to meet at the same round table, doing things together, unlike in the past when tradition separated them. One among numerous biblical

female characterswho led her community from a respectable position was Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, who judged the Israelites and dwelt under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel. She sent for Barak, directed him to attack Sisera, and promised him victory. However, Barak refused to go unless she accompanied him, which she did, but told him that the expedition's success would be credited to a woman and not to him.

8.0 Findings

The paper reveals the following in its findings:

1. That Africans have enslaved themselves as a result of the rites and rituals involved in the practice of tradition, and it has made the people to be far from the supreme Being.
2. That some African women have been subjected to discriminatory practicesthat have dehumanisedthemduringtraditional practices of rites.
3. That some communities in Africa have yet to embrace the light of Christ which requireschanging their old ways of living to further enjoy the benefits from Christianityinitiatedby the early missionaries that came to Africa.
4. That leadership positions should not be the exclusive preserve of men. Women should be given leadership positions to complement the men because they are partners in progress in nation building.

9.0 Recommendations

This paper ends with the following recommendations as its contribution to the body of knowledge in this controversial area of scholarship:

1. Based on the findings, the study recommends that Africans should not be subjected to traditional rituals, whether wives or children of the deceased. They are to be allowed to bury their loved ones in ways that do not overburden them.
2. Africans are to consider their children's future before involving them in burial rites and rituals. Some of these rituals have spiritual implications on the lives of children of the deceased.
3. Christians are to preach, teach and lay emphasis on some of these spiritual things that can hinder the future of anyone.
4. African parents should encourage their children to follow Christianity,whichde-emphasises further ritualism and sacrifices outside the one made once and for all by Jesus Christ himself on the cross. This paper does not suggest that befitting traditional burial ceremonies should be discouraged.
5. Christians should practise the doctrines of the Bible and bury their loved ones in the right way as an example for the non-Christians to emulate.

10.0 Conclusion

Religion is meant for man and not man for religion. If this axiom is anything to go by, then it is tenable to state that religion should serve as the platform for seeking a better understanding of what life is all about and how to go about it. Therefore, the right religion is that one which brings illumination to the mind about propriety in preparation for the hereafter. Any form of religious practice that enslaves people through its practices has failed in its function to point the way forward to a life of equity, justice and freedom from the law like Christianity does. Cultural practices that celebrate the human essence should be upheld while those which dehumanise and violate the rights

and dignity of the human entity as God's most important investment on earth should not be practised.

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