

RELIGIOUS BONDAGE AND REGRETS OF A COLONIZED NIGERIA

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Abstract

That Africans are chronically religious is no longer a debatable topic. Prior to the arrival of colonial masters Nigeria as part of Africans had her religion generally called African traditional religion. With the advent of Christianity the belief and ethical practices of Africans were bastardized and described with degrading terms like juju, demonic, black magi to mention but a few. With the advent of violent and religiously coated terrorist attacks across the Nigerian State, African Traditional religious ethics which is centred on the sanctity and value for human life can be used as an example of a religion that welcomes all. Foreign religions which does not have much spiritual impact as it does not command much respect for Nigerians does more harm than good to a post contact Nigeria. A phenomenological approach was applied to analyse gathered information. The result showed that when African Traditional religion is restored to its proper place, it will promote physical and mental well-being, discourage illegal or reckless behaviour, and advocate ethical conduct, thus indirectly promoting peace and a better country. The presence of many buildings housing foreign religions devoid of morality and value for human life is portraying a negative image of the Almighty God as witnessed by Africans before contact with the colonial masters.

Key words: Bondage, Regrets, Colonialism.

Introduction

African continent was a land of so many greens and fresh breath, a quality that made it contagious to Europeans that had contact with her. The major contact Africa had with Europe that changed her nature is generally known as colonialism, Christianity came alongside with colonialism. The African people believed strongly in the presence of God in everything and this belief formed the Religion known today as African Traditional Religion which Mbiti (1975, p.12) calls "the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers". Though not pantheistic, African Traditional Religion has a god for every activity and place. Thus in Africa there are pantheons of gods who are believed to work closely with the almighty God; these gods are seen as sacred beings and for the

fact that they are placed in charge of activities and places give a divine nature to every activity. There is a god for fertility, water, farming and justice and these gods work with the almighty God. In the face of every new challenge, Africans consult the almighty God who sends them helper these helpers are agents of the almighty God and this accounts for why there are pantheon of gods, as noted by Omoregbe (1988:23) who opined that, when the African man reflects on his own life, its brevity, the vicissitudes, joy, sorrows, suffering, achievements and failures of life, fundamental questions arise in his mind. Man's powerfulness to control even his own destiny, stark reality of disease, death and decay, to which he is subject, can lead to deep reflection about his nature and dependence upon a being higher than him.

Metuh (1998:38), pointed out that the concept of gods can never be treated outside a people's religion because it is through religious worship or activities that man relates with his god. Human life is dynamic and the mind of man continues to yearn for the absolute good which is truth and life. As observed by Adegbehingbe (2008:34), African religious revelation designates a Being from whom all good things, like power to cure sickness, flow by the term God. In African Traditional Religion, it is a belief that the gods inspire man on the right herbs to use in curing any ailment.

While the western propaganda machine would lead those who don't know to believe that African traditional religious believer are practitioners of witchcraft, it is important to note that African belief does not encourage or condone witchcraft or any of the negatives that her religion has been described with, it merely accepts that witchcraft or bad medicine exists in Africa; the same way that a particular religion does not support or condone adultery, but must accept that some of its practitioners partake in it. As in any religion, people set up their own concept of what it means to live in harmony with their philosophy and find ways to excuse their evil.

The contact Nigeria had with Europe changed a great percentage of the world views. Scholars like Nyamiti (1984:68), are of the opinion that the process of modernization in Africa is intrinsically connected with foreign intervention particularly in areas of health and democracy. These interventions gave different views to the perceptions of Africans.

The scope of this work is limited to Nigeria as a country; however more emphasis will be placed on the southern Nigeria where the practice of African Religion was more prevalent before the advent of Christianity.

Contacted Bondage

As noted in Achebe (1958:124) though fictionally;

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

Religion no other but African Religion held Africans together and the destruction of that religion made Africa to fall apart. There is of truth only one Almighty God who made heaven and earth, but that his creature approaches him on the same plane and ways is an illusion. Schmidt (2006:3) for example, maintains: that the belief in, and worship of, one supreme deity is universal among all really primitive peoples—the high God is found among them all, not indeed everywhere in the same form or with the same vigour, but still everywhere prominently enough to make his dominant position indubitable. He is by no means a late development or traceable to Christian missionary influences. This factuality notwithstanding, the Foreign religions with which Africans had contact with totally condemned her aboriginal ideas of God and by so doing they left African in bondage having destroyed her pride. Isichei E (1976) *A history of the Igbo People* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd) The triangular trade contributed vastly to the wealth of Europe. Her ships with their suffering living cargoes, made profits which were invested in Europe developments... but for the African societies it touched the trade was a disaster.

Ekwunife (21) in addition the early Christian methodological negative approach to African traditional religions cultures augmented the African suspicion that Christianity in Africa was an ally of western imperialism. He went on to observe that African contact with these two western forces has given rise to the present African hybrid cultures which were neither wholly African traditional pre-colonial cultures nor entirely pure western European cultures.

The religious bondage and regrets faced by Nigerians today shall be discussed under the following heading.

- i. Security
- ii. Corruptions
- iii. Ecology
- iv. Indolence

v. Industrialization

Security

The Nigerian state enjoyed a lot of peace prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity. There wars and blood shed experienced were mainly as a result of tribal wars which were triggered by boundary encroachments. When Nigerians engaged in inter-tribal wars, they consulted their gods who will either tell them to embark on war or to retreat. There is no known recorded of any situation in Nigeria where and when people were forced to embrace African religion, but this cannot be said of Islam and Christianity. Onunwa (1990:136) observes that: The traditional religious heritage has shown remarkable versatility in its history and development; for in spite of the onslaught of several external change-agents as well as internal factors, it has survived up to the present time.

Christian religion psychologically and physically compelled Nigerians to accept her religion. Taylor (1859) as quoted in Ilogu (1974:271) narrated a dis-heartening report a missionary sent back to Europe maintaining about Africa that;

“her idols *Ikenga, Tshi* and *Ofo*, their country gods are now tottering and I hope will be forever paralyzedThe *Tchukwu* (god) of *Igbos* in general, shall fall down before the gospel, as the dragon fell before the ark”.

Most Nigerians today are usually encouraged to bear at least one English name to show their affiliation to Christianity. There were cases where and when Nigerians were executed under the watch of Christianity. Elders were imprisoned upon protest for forceful cessations of lands.

Islamic jihadist group Boko Haran has never tormented the state of Nigeria the way it has in the last eight years. Although the Islamic community has exonerated themselves from the activities of the Boko Haran sect, yet these group of people still insist that people must be converted to Islam reject western education in order to be safe. Severally, we have heard threats associated to the Fulani herdsmen that the whole of West Africa belongs to them and that jihad will continue to be fought until what the British took from them is restored. The establishment of caliphates in parts of the nation like Ilorin in Kwara State is a clear indication of this quest, any area conquered is usually Islamized. This reason was a major argument against the establishment of cow colonies in various parts of the country.

The presence of foreign religions which has almost the same history with colonialism has taken away the religious freedom that Nigerians enjoyed prior to the advent of foreign religions. African religion allowed one and all to pay allegiance to whatever deity he or she is at home with without been threatened by anybody. This assertion cannot be attributed to foreign religions. A Muslim is not very comfortable praying in an environment surrounded by Christians, on the other hand, Christians especially residents of the North also worship their God in fear.

Activities leading to the Nigerian civil war were also fuelled by the sentiments fostered by foreign religions. The civil war almost became a religious war between Christians and Muslims. The country is still being traumatized by the effects of the war.

Youths till date are usually very sacred of being sent to the North to serve the compulsory post-graduation youth service (NYSC). This is because of the fact that many have been killed while serving in the North in the face of foreign religiously motivated wars.

Corruption: the researchers could not lay their hands on any literature that shows that there were corruption cases prior to colonialism in Nigeria. There is a general belief that Africans were very strong people who worked for what they ate, built their modest houses themselves, when a man lacked what the other has, he does not go stealing but negotiates to give the other what he lacks in the spirit of trade by barter.

The 21st century post contact Nigeria is in a great bondage, heavily chained by corrupt individuals who were encouraged by the descendants of colonial masters with whom Nigerians had contact with; these master stole Nigerian art works which attract income all over Europe today.

Europeans, if truly and sincerely in love with Africa should report all thieves who embezzled or re-invest this fund into their usually black states of origin. Repatriating funds back to their states of origin has always been a difficult task both for Nigeria and other countries involved. There is no major case of corruption that does not connive with a foreign bank or company.

Prior to contact with foreign religions, Nigerian had no need to steal funds belonging to the entire community. People had respect for deities guiding every community. Stealing from the community means invoking the wrath of the

community gods. Recently a man sent money through his friends with the intention of donating a cow to his community in Ibusa Delta state but the recipient stole the money; thinking that nobody knows about it, he in his greed came to partake in the sharing of another cow donated by someone else but breathed his last on the chair where he sat waiting for the turn of his age mates to pick their share.

In matters of collective properties, African gods whom we shouldn't forget work in tandem with the almighty God are active in protecting it. One may ask why the gods are not active today; the simple answer lies in that fact those most African deities apart from Ekwensu are benevolent. Foreign religions have also weakened the efficacy of these gods, as Ugwu (2014) noted the gods are on demise.

Colonial religions did not help a lot in fighting corruption. Today most agents of the foreign God are the most corrupt. In some places of worship of these religions, if you are not rich enough you cannot see some men of God. In a recent scandal, a popular priest in Enugu State was captured asking politicians to come and donate money in his church for political blessing.

Most worship centres in Nigeria today were built with stolen funds a thing not heard of any African shrine. Real African deities abhor stolen gifts. Public office holders are not scared of stealing because they are daily been assured of prayers and benedictions by pastors. This state of corruption has shut up the mouth of Christian and Islamic clergy.

Rosalind (1996:36) argues that; Indigenous religions are being invigorated through the universalization, politicization, commercialization, individualization of religious ideas and practices. The religious belief of Africans has future for many reasons. First, this religious articulates worldview that continues to provide a basis for morality, supporting what is called "the moral tradition of abundant life". Secondly, African traditional religions are linked to royal authority, influencing the selection and installation of royal fathers and their system of governance. Third celebrations and rituals will keep indigenous religions alive.

Ecology

The major threat to human existence in the world today is the attack on the eco system. Nigerian contact with Europe saw the dawns of the condemnation of

sacred forests and rivers. The descendants of holy places, animals and rivers have today left Nigeria with ecological threats. Forests were common sights in Nigeria, these forests existed because they were dedicated to a particular god, people were not allowed to hunt in these forests nor get wood for their fuel. Upon contacting the fever of westernization, Nigerians started felling trees, killing sacred games and consuming everything. Apart from vulture and owl that still possess their mystical natures, humans in Nigeria eat virtually everything. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, pythons were held to be sacred, today only a very few communities in the East still respect the python.

There are very few sacred forests in Nigeria today, those still remaining like the Osun Oshogbo sacred grove are at the mercy of foreigners. The Osun Oshogbo today have been declared a UNESCO heritage centre not Osun Heritage centre but UNESCO heritage centre.

Oil exploration has reduced the naturalism that existed in Nigeria. The Niger Delta region of the country is now a shadow of itself prior to her contact with the western world. People in some parts of present day Nigeria Delta community can no longer fish from their river neither are they able to cultivate and harvest clean food from their bio-diversified environment.

The most pathetic of the Niger Delta sad story is that 5% of the resources from the region are not re-invested back to them. When provisions are made, the people entrusted with these funds embezzled the funds and invest them abroad where they send their children to for studies.

Deforestation has done more harm than good to our eco-system. The gods of the forest who once kept these places sacred have been desecrated, chased away and their territory destroyed. According to Comoroff (1993:13): The tendency to equate the powers of traditional religions with demons and to equate a particular divinity with the devil has its root traced to the nineteenth century. The early Catholic missionaries to Africa had a good deal to say about hell and the devil. In every sense, they and their successors reinvented the traditional religion of those among whom they worked with. The first missionary to the Eastern Igbo land wrote, in words with innumerable parallels: "All those who go to Africa as missionaries must be thoroughly penetrated with the thought that the Dark Continent is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of the devil".

The destruction of some of these sacred places has given rise to erosion, ozone depletion, flooding to mention but a few. Adults interviewed around Anambra and Delta State all attested that the rate of flooding witnessed today in the region was not the same experience previously. Despite the advent of dry season, people are still using canoe to get to their houses.

Indolence

In an interview, the incumbent Nigerian president once made an assertion that most Nigerian youths are unwilling to work. Though most Nigerians condemned this presidential assertion, but the truth is that the presence of foreign religions has made a good number of our youths lazy. In the Northern part of Nigeria a lot of able bodied men upon graduating from Almajiri statute still join the adult-almajiri statute of sitting down in front of a privilege alhaji's house to eat from the Hajias pot.

In the south most youths want to make it quick by all means. This get it quick syndrome has led many into Advance Fee Fraud popularly called 419 or yahoo yahoo with the latest been one that involves ritual termed yahoo-plus.

A good number of Christian preachers teach and convince their congregation that they can become rich instantaneously to which the congregation thunderously responds with a big AMEN. Assurances like "you will be rich tomorrow" are the daily benedictions heard in Nigerian churches today. The congregation usually believe such prophecies because they see it manifest in their pastors' life, since they see him drive big cars and live in mansions forgetting that these agents of foreign religion has learnt the act of tongue-picking the pockets of their followers. The Christianity practised by Jesus the Christ who owned nothing and no tent to cover him is different from what we see today. In some churches it is a big curse not to pay tithe. The researchers were told that some churches now charge consultation fees.

The act of struggling to be successful is always been presented as a curse to our youths. A walk into some churches and Mosque during working hours will reveal that a good number of young able bodied men spend a lot of time in the church praying for miracle and money instead of going out in search of job. These activities have planted laziness into our youths.

Poor Industrialization: a recent statistics shows that almost every street in Nigeria has a church of the branch of the over 1,000 denominations registered

with Corporate Affairs Commission. The pastors of these churches live in the best houses drive the best of cars at the expense of their parishioners. There is a great competition among general overseers to own private jets.

Nigerian contact with Europe was more religiously contagious than industrially. The colonial masters and their descendants have not allowed indigenous companies to survive. Aja-Okuta steel mill died a natural death because of politics and over dependence on foreigners.

The three years of Nigerian civil war saw the manufacturing of war equipment but these are all faded away.

If Nigeria has the number of churches as industries, Nigeria will be better developed. A lot of resources go into church business today and little comes out. Our corrupt leaders donate stolen funds to churches, a situation that have bounded Africa till date. The voice of the people mouthed in pastors and Imams is now under bondage the people too are under bondage.

The Regrets of post contact Nigeria

Our gods by whom people swear to protect the interest of one another and the society have been destroyed.

Our culture that sees human life as the most sacred have been disintegrated, daily voices are heard, voices of men, gallant men are heard in the forest of the North East, voices of dying men killed in the name of God.

-Young pretty Nigerian ladies now eat tears for bread because they have found no suitors to marry them. Not that they are no men but those with whom Africans had contact stipulates that it should be one man one woman.

Our forests are no longer productive because our youths no longer see the need to farm since cleaning the house of the descendants of the colonial masters will pay them more dollars enough to buy labourers back home in Nigeria. An hour job in the USA is ₦3850 with a days job in Nigeria is a lesser amount.

The international monetary fund has rendered all African currencies paltry to keep that black man perpetually dependent on her. What will happen if all currencies of the world are at par with each other, indeed only good things will happen if this is done? Our youths will stop stealing, they will go back to hard work and value of life will be restored.

On and on shall we go listing our regrets? Our agricultural produce are now filled with processed food, our herbal biodiversity are no longer effective because the real herbs our ancestors worked with are no longer viable.

Great scholars of African origin like Achebe, (1958); Afisi, (2009); Offiong, (1980); Rodney, (1972) had pointed out these regrets; this Afrocentric attitude is made manifest particularly in the 'modes of knowledge production'. These scholars mentioned slavery, capitalism, colonialism and imperialism, neo-colonialism and all forms of dominations and exploitations that are embedded in these epochs as major stumbling-blocks in the actualization of indigenous African development especially in areas of African Traditional Medicine.

Similarly, while some critics of colonialism have focused on the economic and political impacts, others have shifted attention to the impact of colonialism on indigenous herbal knowledge system; such views underscore the negative impact of colonialism on indigenous medicine. It is explained that the introduction of Western medicine and culture gave rise to 'cultural-ideological clash' which had hitherto created an unequal power-relation that practically undermined and stigmatized the traditional health care system in Africa because of the over-riding power of the Western medicine. According to Hassim (1996:2)

...a century of colonialism and cultural imperialism have held back the development of African traditional health care in general and medicines in particular. During several centuries of conquest and invasion, European systems of medicine were introduced by colonisers. Pre-existing African systems were stigmatised and marginalised. Indigenous knowledge systems were denied the chance to systematize and develop.

The suppression of African Traditional Medicine continued in most African countries even after independence. Indeed, local efforts were initiated to challenge the condemnation and stigmatisation of African Traditional Medicine in some African communities during and after colonialism. Adejoh, (1971:6) reported that the first protest against the marginalization of African Traditional Medicine in Nigeria is dated back to 1922 when a group of native healers insisted that their medicine be legally recognized.

Conclusion

A man that does not know where the rain started beating him will not tell where it stopped raining. This African proverb as a matter of fact shows that there is an urgent need to return back to our ethical roots for we all know where we

deviated. Cultural studies should be taught in our schools. Our children need to be re-educated on the value of life and the need to nurture their conscience with truth. Hard work still pays. Nigerians did not experience the real effect of Christianity because it is not part of our culture. Our culture is coated in African Religion. Thus for there to be meaningful development, our leaders should be made to swear by our gods; our gods are the god of justice. Our country will develop faster if politicians are sworn in by oath in front of our shrines for they know that our gods will surely kill whoever fails to execute developments

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