LANGUAGE EXPRESSION AND RELIGIOUS REFLECTION IN AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract
There are three major characterizations of religious expressions- the theoretical, a system of belief; the practical, a system of worship; and the sociological, a system of social relationships communicated through language and literature. The correct interpretation of African religious beliefs was one of the problems of Colonial Missionaries in Africa. Similarly, from the way Islam and Christianity are practiced in Africa which is a consequence of the misinterpretations of these foreign religions by its practitioners, one would wonder if they are the same as the ones practiced in other cultures. What is required is language and literature to break the barriers of cultural difference in order to aid the interpretation of religious objects, symbols, expressions, emotions and rituals. Qualitative research is applied to investigate why language and literature are the backbone of religion. Phenomenological and historical approaches are adopted in this research writing because it seeks to understand the phenomena of religion. One of the findings in this research is that, every interpreter/translator is an extortionist of an original idea because she or he cannot exactly represent the idea and emotions of religious behaviours by matching objects and actions as originally intended by the adherer with words in the foreign language, without alterations. Another is that, the inability of some emerging African Western religious actors to understand and interpret the Bible and Qur'an to buttress the religious, emotional, ethical, social and cultural needs and values of Africans have derogated African religious thought. Religious actors in Africa should learn to respect African beliefs, religious groups, denominations and individuals and avoid divisive criticism of others in their writings and preaching. Religious actors in Africa should learn to respect African beliefs, religious groups, denominations and individuals and avoid divisive criticism of others in their writings and preaching. It has discovered the significance of language in the projection and true message of religions.
Keywords: Religion, Language, Literature, Africa, Culture, Interpretation, Empathy and Ethics.

Introduction

There are three major characterizations of religious expressions- the theoretical which is a system of belief; the practical, a system of worship; and the sociological, a system of social relationships which are communicated through language and literature. Language is the human use of spoken or written words as a means of communication. Literature is the body of written works of culture, language, and people in time and space. Language and literature are required in order to properly interpret religious objects, symbols, and rituals whose meanings are steeped in the culture and emotions of a people and thus are representative of a people's religious thought. It is on this note that Oosten (1995: 354) stresses that, "the anthropological study of religion is in many ways similar to the study of language. No language is false or true, inferior or superior. Each language can be considered as an independent design of the world". In other words, the theoretical, practical, and sociological characterizations of any people's religious expressions ought to be done within the ambit of some respect for the people's religious beliefs. For instance, the correct interpretation of African religious beliefs was one of the problems of Colonial Missionaries in Africa (Ikenga-Metuh (1985). Similarly, from the way Islam and Christianity are practised in Africa which is a consequence of the misinterpretations of these foreign religions by their practitioners, one would wonder if they are the same as the ones practiced in other cultures.

However, Oosten (1995), Shorter (1975), Booth (1977), and Ejizu (1977) assert that the religious actor needs to learn the language and culture of the host religion thoroughly before he can attempt to translate it. Translation in this regard comprises the theory (belief), practice (worship) as well as the sociological and philosophical systems. Every interpreter/translator is an extortionist of the original idea because she or he cannot exactly represent the idea and emotions of religious behaviours by matching objects and actions as originally intended by the adherer with words in the foreign language, without alterations. This is why Ikenga Metuh (1985) asks, "How can the meanings of African Religions be expressed in Western forms of expression without betraying their meanings?" It seems Oosten (1995) has a reply to Metuh's question when he says that, "Translations easily imply distortions. The translator should be aware that the terminology he uses is not an objective scientific apparatus that transcends the limits of all cultures. It is determined by the history of his or her own culture". Oosten (1995) projects the anthropological point of view in the explanation of different religious forms and variants. Again he avers that,

> Unlike the participants, the anthropologist is not primarily interested in the truth of a particular interpretation but considers all forms of religion as variants that inform him about its structure. He examines these variants and attempts to construct models that enable him to discover the rules that determine the relations between different variants of religion in time and space (Oosten 1995:355).

Therefore, the anthropological study of religion is a process of confrontation, translation and communication. Ursula King (1995: 97) is interested in gathering ideal facts for religious writings without bias and considers this as the greatest problem: "To collect the necessary data is often not the most challenging but to explain or relate them within a wider context is a more difficult task." Phenomenological and historical approaches will be adopted in this research work because it seeks to understand the systematic and comparative classification of all religious phenomena. The Phenomenological approach has two distinct principles derived from Hurssel, namely, the epoche and the eidetic vision. The epoche is often described as 'bracketing' which is a suspension of judgement on the part of the investigator as to the truth, value, and in some cases also the existence of the phenomenon (King 1995:51). The eidetic vision aims to grasp the essence of phenomena by means of empathy and intuition. This study seeks to buttress why language and literature are the backbone to religion.

Complexity of the Original Intent of Language, Culture and Religious Objects of a Religion
Complexity in this regard implies the condition of the difficulty in analysing, understanding, or solving the religious structure of another culture. The examination of these relations is in practice very complicated because innumerable historical processes (e.g., migrations, processes of acculturation) influence the relationship between neighbouring cultures in many ways. "Christianity developed from the Jewish religion, was transformed by the Greek and Roman traditions, and was deeply influenced by Germanic traditions in the course of history" and was made possible through language and literature. Buddhism proved to be exceptionally adaptable since it tolerated the existence of other religious traditions and considered itself to be a more advanced teaching. Christianity and Islam which were and are still less tolerant in particular succeeded in almost destroying all rival religious traditions in Europe and Africa (Oosten 1995: 367-369).

The colonial administrators and Missionaries were hasty and irrational in the assessment of the religious values of Africa. Value means whatever is actually liked, prized, esteemed, desired, approved, or enjoyed by anyone at any time (Brightman 1940: 88). "Religious experience may be expressed in visual symbols, dance and performance, elaborate philosophical systems, legendary and imaginative stories, formal ceremonies, meditative techniques, and detailed rules of ethical conduct and law. Each of these elements assumes innumerable cultural forms" (Paden 2016). Meanwhile, while the foreign religious actors who were ignorant of these religious and cultural values have gone, their footprints are everywhere in Africa suffocating indigenous belief systems. African Indigenous religion was branded fetish and religious symbols and rituals were regarded as idol worship because these foreign religious actors did not understand the language and literature of African communities. It was because of this that the Minister of Education in the Eastern Nigeria Government, Dr S. E. Imoke, in 1953 told Professor K. O. Dike who was the leader of a commission of investigation into the problem of the inherited education from colonial administration that:

> … No foreigner, no matter how sincere, knowledgeable, and objective can see or feel our problems in exactly the same way as we ourselves; for they are bound to be influenced by circumstances and conditions which, while relevant in their own countries, may not be quite applicable to our set of circumstances and conditions (Afigbo 1978: 187).

The principle of association and assimilation of colonial administrators battered African religious thought and the most affected were the African communities colonized by the French as they were forced to denounce their languages, religion and cultures. This led to a loss of identity, ideology, philosophy, and ethical and moral values. The amateur African interpreters were unable to communicate the actual values of the religious structures of Africa to Christian missionaries due to their poor knowledge of English and the difficulties in analyzing, interpreting and matching objects and beliefs with words in foreign languages.

Such misinterpretations could lead to misunderstanding and perhaps even fear and mistrust of a people. Consequently, America to survive the threat and problems of religions in their territories adopted stringent measures by banning prayers in public schools:

> When the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in 1963 against the practice of prayer in public schools, it recommended at the same time

that the study of religion should be part of every student's education. In Europe, new materials for the study of religion were gathered when European explorers first began to make extensive contact with non-Western cultures. Over the past four centuries, innumerable philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have proposed theories of religion. The common factor in their various perspectives is the perception that religion need not be studied from a sectarian or partisan standpoint but may be approached impartially, as a subject for scholarly investigation (Paden 2016: 2).

This could be the reason for secularity and functionalism in America and Europe that have fostered rationality and objectivity in their religious lives, politics, economy, education, ethical principles and morality.

African political and religious elites were visionary and proactive enough to see the adverse effects of colonialism and missionary activities in Africa and proposed a 'modern African Religious Thought' which led to the establishment of the study of religion in Universities even before America and Europe. Much has happened to the study of African Traditional Religion since 1949. This is the date that can be recognized as the beginning of the in-depth study of Religion in tertiary institutions as this was when the Department of Religious Studies was set up in the then-new University College, Ibadan:

> ....Dr Geoffrey Parrinder was appointed to be the first lecturer in the new Department. That year he worked out Syllabus on the Indigenous Religious Beliefs in West Africa. For nine years that he taught that syllabus for a London University examination, his book titled West African Religion, was one of the major text-books. It was the first time such syllabus was taught in any university. Since then other tertiary institutions in different parts of the world have taken a cue from Ibadan by designing and teaching syllable in African Traditional Religion (Nabofa 1994: 1).

The earliest investigators and writers on African Traditional Religion were mostly European and American anthropologists, some missionaries and colonial administrators. These early writers were foreigners who had no passion nor deep knowledge and true experience of African spirituality, actual beliefs and practice of religion. Consequently, their expressions contained many exaggerations and reflected biases and a derogation of African religious objects, symbols and structures. Truly,

indigenous religion has no documented literature but this does not mean that it should suffer the humiliation and be shamed by Africans in the guise of practicing foreign religions.

Particularism of Belief, Worship and the Sociological System of Foreign Religions in Africa

Particularism here refers to an exclusive commitment to foreign religions in Africa especially when it is detrimental to the cultural interests and identity of Africa. Religious life is given distinctive form both by the power of a community's social bonds and its traditional objects of veneration, and by an individual's personal interaction with those objects (Paden 2016). Obviously, the champions of 'modern African religious thought' were mainly ordained Christian priests like Geoffrey Parrinder, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Newell S. Booth, Ayward Shorter and others who were under the services of the European missionaries but who deemed it necessary to rescue and resuscitate indigenous religion in spite of the challenges of the alien religions. The foreign religious actors have not delved deeply into the field of psychology and metaphysics of African Traditional Religion which influence much of the practical aspects of the religion. The metaphysics of any religion cannot be fully and adequately studied, grasped and appreciated without a fair knowledge of its symbolic forms and processes, which normally emerge out of the believer's inner religious experience and illumination (Nabofa 1994: 2).

Therefore, if an African can design a syllabus that was recognized and accepted all over the world for the study of religion why cannot the present African religious actors design Islamic and Christian syllabuses that will not destroy indigenous religion and identity? Christianity and Islam make their appeal in Africa in terms of new possibilities of power, humanity, wholeness, continuity, healing, and celebration (Booth, Jr, 1977). In a critical observation, he avers that:

> Islamic leaders in Africa appear to accept a sort of blend in cultures while Christian leaders have been more inclined to try to force a choice between the new and the old. Christianity has been appreciated as a new source of power, especially in the field of education and medicine; there has also been resentment of attempts to destroy the old ways. One reason for the growth of many independent churches would appear to be the desire to have the best (sic) of two worlds with new sources of power and at the same time, preservation of a sense of communal wholeness. …There is also a strong movement in churches originally founded by Western

missionaries toward the "Africanization" of worship, organization, and theology. In fact it has been suggested that African thought forms are closer to those of the Bible than are the thought forms of the contemporary West. Thus Christianity, as well as Islam, must be studied in its African context as an expression of the African way of being religious (Booth, Jr 1977: 9).

The early Portuguese could not identify anything "religious" in Africa because religion was integrated into all life endeavors. The pervasiveness of the religion provides a clue both to the method of study and to the nature of the religion. The modern student/actor of indigenous and Western religions seems to fall into the same pitfalls that the colonizers fell into. There is the quick seizing of the opportunity to clamp down on any religious phenomena without method, objectivity, rationality, moral values, and personal commitments necessary to the teaching and study of religion thereby applying reductionism to the study and teaching of religion.

The term reductionism refers to an analysis of religion in secular rather than religious terms (Segal 1994). Segal explains that the question of the origin, function, meaning, and even truth of religion are subject to reduction. It is consequently assumed that in reducing religion to something non-religious, it transforms it into something other than what it is (Segal: 1994); this can be seen in the teaching of Western religious actors in Africa. But these actors in their condemnation of African indigenous beliefs have (1) forced the latter to adapt to a new context 'Western' in an old content 'indigenous' beliefs. (2) Have lost their faith in a bid to interpret and prove that Western religions are superior to African indigenous beliefs as addressed hereunder:

> Likewise when we say we haven't lost anything as the result of the success or failure of a reduction: a scholar may lose time, a research grant, his reputation as a scholar, his research paradigm, his conviction that his cultural background is superior to others', his belief that the issues of his generation are important ones; he may even lose his faith (Edward 1994: 169).

It is this particularistic belief, worship and the sociological system of foreign religions in Africa that have placed the continent on the apex of world religious map. Africans have idealized Islam and Christianity more than the originators and missionaries did through a destructive radical approach that has made the indigenous religion inferior

to the foreign ones. Their writings as expressed in language and literature and; as contained in their interpretations have relegated African religion which does not have written literature to the backseat in its own communities.

Misinterpretation of Written Language and Literature of Foreign Religions and Culture in African Context

The inability of some emerging African Western religious actors to understand and interpret the Bible and Qur'an to buttress the religious, emotional, ethical, social and cultural needs and values of Africans has derogated African religious thought. Emil Ludwig is reported to have asked once when he was on a visit to Africa, "How can the untutored African perceive God?" (Parrinder 1974: 9). Ludwig may have knowledge of the religions of other continents, especially Asia, but the fact that Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are great faiths with a long history, considerable literature, and innumerable temples and priests which are not identical to that of Africa does not make Africans and their religion inferior. These Western religious actors made derogatory interpretations of African religious objects, doctrines and worship and through their interpretations of these religions' written language and literature i.e. the Bible and Qur'an, arrogated to Islam and Christianity a superior outlook over and above that of African Traditional Religion. Strength of character, by holding in check impulses excited by what is immediately present, allows the cognitive harvest of our reasoning powers to have an effect on what we do (Quinton: 1997: 565). In any event, doctrines come to play a significant part in all the major religions, partly because sooner or later a faith has to adapt to social reality and so to the fact that much of the leadership is well educated and seeks some kind of intellectual statement of the basis of the faith (Smart 1992: 12). It happens that histories of religion have tended to exaggerate the importance of scriptures and doctrines; and this is not too surprising since so much of our knowledge of past religions must come from the documents which have been passed on by the scholarly elite. It must be noted, especially in the case of Christianity, that doctrinal disputes have often been the overt expression of splits within the fabric of the community at large so that frequently histories of a faith concentrate upon these hot issues (Smart 1992: 12).

Christianity became known as the official Western religion while the native religions of the Western world became known as heathen - uncivilized and unenlightened (Lim: 1998) as is the case in Africa**.** Is it not time to stand up to defend the little that is left in African Religion before it is completely phased out of the universe?

The Church made a compromise to accept Rome and became the destroyer of her mother (Israel) who bore her and in the process, truth suffered (Lim: 1998). Biblical commandments that the Apostles taught were subordinated to pagan convenience. The Church entered into apostasy. This was fully realized in the 4th century when Emperor Constantine the Great declared himself a Christian, the first Pope and the ruler of the Church which he called the Roman Catholic Church and which exists to these days (Lim: 1998). Emperor Constantinople was proactive enough to preserve Roman Traditional Religion through Roman Catholic Church and exported it to any nation that was attracted to it. It may be said that Rome is the only nation that diplomatically eluded the destructive nature of Christianity.

Religious Xenophobia in Africa
Idealizing a particular religion or denomination over the other gives room for feelings of supremacy and inferiority complexes amongst people of different beliefs. In this regard, different types of conflicts erupt, some leading to xenophobic attacks on others. Hence,

> The role of personality clash in the web of humanism, religion and terrorism cannot be underrated, it is the signpost for guiding through the maze and mystery of human motives. Lies, killing, betrayal, deceit, harm, entrap, delude, dope, mock scoff, ridicule, and slander are actions which are likely to be guided by bad motives that violate categorical imperative. To avoid the consequences of the above real defects to apply Mill's recommendation that in the thick of life, we should use the accepted moral rules in order to be more efficient in estimating what sorts of effects we will have on general human welfare (Nwazonobi 2015: 72).

In other words, the product of religious intolerance is religious xenophobia. Religious actors ought to practice their religions without destroying each other. An adequate understanding of religion must take into account its distinctive qualities and patterns as a form of human experience, as well as the similarities and differences in religions across human cultures (Paden: 2016). Indeed, the core of religion is found in its symbols. It is in the process of decoding its symbolic forms and practices that we can meaningfully confront and understand its essence, metaphysics, esoteric and esoteric nature and other aspects of it (Nabofa 1994: 3). At this point in time African Religious Actors should be able to grasp the essence of Ayward Shorter's (1975: 38) ideology that, "Religion in Africa is a many-headed

giant and the unwary scholar can easily lose all sense of direction when he beholds all those heads and eyes and mouths". This development (Kalu 1978: 166) emphasizes that,

> It must, however, be pointed out that the failures of the church union ideal in Africa could not be merely explained by its foreign origin. Many change-agents in Africa are from external sources. The degree of their success as catalysts for change is a function of the feasibility in domesticating these change-agents. Could it be that the nature of the missionary enterprise in Africa made it impossible for the church union ideal to trigger off religious change, or is it that the church union question has been posed in a non-creative terms?

African humanism is not individualistic; it is a communal humanism. In Africa, man finds his fulfillment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community (Shorter 1975:7). Therefore, any religion that separates an individual from his kinsmen and community breeds troubles and breakdown in human relationships and also threatens African unity.

African Traditional priests are now attracted to the privileges attached to the position in Western religion and are thus tired of humiliation arising from a derogation of their religion. The imported religions, namely Christianity and Islam, do not have the same powerful hold on the people as the traditional religions, so their use as ethical instruments is not as effective (Amadi 1982: 6). Emphasis on doctrines, petty politics in churches and mosques and ethnic biases have caused rivalries among denominations.

Nexus between the Language and Religions

Africa is a continent with a very high linguistic diversity, there are about 1500-2000 African languages (One World - Nations Online: 2017). Each African country has numerous ethnic groups with different languages, customs, and beliefs. African Traditional Religion is as diverse as these ethnic groups. The languages of many African ethnic groups lack a term for religion which in the Western sense, is an activity or entity separate from everyday life (Grillo: 2017). Whereas Westerners conceive of religion as an independent system of beliefs or an organizational structure, in Africa, religion is a complete way of life. One thing that clearly emerges is the necessity of using more precise terms than in the past, and of abandoning some of the older words as absolutely devoid of any consistent

meaning (Parrinder 1974: 15). The erosion of language, however, is a symptom of erosion of common meanings, of which there is a great deal of evidence in our society. This takes the form, which is by now statistically well documented, of a decline of belief in all forms of obligation: to one's occupation, one's family, and one's country (Bellah 1975: x).

During the colonial era, France colonized 25 African countries (almost half of the continent). These countries are today known as Francophone Africa which includes Algeria, Côte, d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central *African* Republic, Benin, Togo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Burundi, Cameroon, Comoros, Rwanda, Gabon, Morocco, Mauritius, Mauritania, Seychelles, Tunisia, Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Chigozie: 2017). The common colonial experience of these countries has led to some parallel cultural developments as well as the use of French as opposed to indigenous languages in literature. The resentment of French colonialists to African languages led to the destruction of African religion, culture and philosophy; this has resulted in the loss of the African identity because language is the first and strongest identity and interpreter of all religions. The French colonial policy of assimilation has had repercussions in contemporary theater; performers and playwrights are frequently Paris-based, while the Festival Internationale des Francophones in Limoges provides a regular platform for world theater in French ("African Theater.": 2017).

English Speaking Countries in Africa were mostly colonized by the British Empire which operated the policy of association that allowed English language to exist alongside African indigenous languages. However, distortions came in through indigenous interpreters who had a shallow understanding of English language and who sometimes misinterpreted expressions. Botswana, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Saint Helena Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe... (Staff Desk: 2015) were the victims of such misinterpretations that contributed to the derogation of the African religion and the conception of alien religions as superior. The Arabic-speaking African countries are Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Guzzur Al Qummar, and Comoros.

English is the language of Christianity; Arabic is that of Islam; while all the ethnic languages in Africa are supposed to be the languages of their indigenous religion.

For any foreign religion in Africa to take root in African thought and understanding and to wield power and influence over the people, it must be preached not only in African languages but also in all the dialects. This simply means that one needs to have in-depth knowledge of the language in which the literature of the religion is written as well as that of the recipient cultures and values or else there would be distortions of both ideologies. But going by the activities of religious actors in Africa, the reverse seems to be the case in Africa as it seems they do not understand the languages of the Qur'an, Bible and African traditional religion.

As Western Religions, language, literature and interpretations of these texts developed, the literary tradition became even more complex. As a rule, the oldest texts are accepted by all believers, while different sects and denominations make their own selections out of the more recent literature and develop their own comments and interpretations as a particular literary tradition (Oosten 1995: 370). African Traditional religion has no written literature but manifests in all spheres of the lives of the people. Language and literature determine the strength and value of any religion in time and space. What matters most in any religion is its ability to satisfy the religious needs of the people.

Recommendations
As language and literature are the backbone of religion, religious actors and scholars in Africa should consider training in language and literature if they must succeed in their religious activities because the wrong use of language can disabuse people of their beliefs. There should be extensive rules to checkmate religious fanaticism, deceit and excesses for both foreign and indigenous religious adherents to avoid religious intolerance. The future of Modern African Religious Thought should be a priority for African political and religious leaders to avoid religious extremism. The leaders may begin this by enforcing adequate training of religious actors and scholars. Ethnocentrism must be shunned and discouraged in Africa to check religious intolerance and consequently, terrorism.

Religious actors in Africa should learn to respect African beliefs, religious groups, denominations and individuals and avoid divisive criticism of others in their writings and preaching. Every religious actor irrespective of the group or denomination to which she or he belongs, should adopt the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is primarily understood as a systematic and comparative classification of all religious phenomena whatever they are (King 1995: 50). In other

words, those utterances that will destroy other religions should be avoided at all cost.

Conclusion

Language and literature are the backbone of religion in emerging African contemporary society. World religions thrive under the power of language and literature therefore undocumented religions like African Traditional Religion are often thought of as inferior. Currently, the problem is not Western religious actors but indigenous African religious actors and scholars. Fluency in language is an advantage to religious actors and scholars in any part of Africa where they operate. Africa is a continent with a high linguistic diversity as there are about 1500-2000 African languages (One World - Nations Online: 2017). Each African country has numerous ethnic groups with different languages, customs, and beliefs, and African religions are as diverse as these ethnic groups. The interpretation of African religious beliefs was one of the problems of Colonial Missionaries in Africa.

African Western religious actors i.e. practitioners of Islam and Christianity in Africa also misinterpret these foreign religions so much so that sometimes one would wonder if these religions are the same as the ones being practiced in other cultures. Both have religious and mystic significance and as such have an overt effect on the development of African religious thinking, which runs contrary to Western Christian thoughts (Nwazonobi 2016: 325). What is required is language and literature to break the barriers of cultural difference in order to aid the interpretation of religious objects, symbols and rituals. Every interpreter/translator is a traitor because he cannot represent the idea and emotions of religious behaviours and match objects and actions with words in the original intent of the adherer without alterations.

Complexity, particularism, religious xenophobia in Africa, poorly trained Ministers, and misinterpretation of written literature are factors contributing to adverse judgement upon Religions in Africa. Ethnic groups in Africa enjoyed political autonomy in pre-colonial days as they were culturally and linguistically isolated from each other, and they made their own independent adaptations to different or similar environments. Every religious actor should understand that religion is like language. No religion or language is superior or inferior to the other. The first thing to put into consideration is the power of language. Similarly,

no continent can develop under religious intolerance and crises because it destroys the peace, unity and resources of the people.

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