

The Influence of African Traditional Spirituality on Christian Practices in Africa



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ABSTRACT: Human beings are religious by nature. In the discussion on African traditional spirituality, it provides the proofs on how Africans were and are notoriously religious even before the advent of Christianity. This article provides an overview of the influence of African traditional spirituality on Christian Practices in Africa. It is noted in this article that African traditional spirituality is a diverse and complex set of beliefs and practices that reflect the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people of Africa. It encompasses a wide range of practices, including ancestor veneration, divination, healing practices, music and dance, and community building. Christianity was introduced to Africa in the 1st century AD, but it was not until the arrival of European colonizers in the 16th century that Christianity began to spread more widely throughout Africa. Today, Christianity is one of the most widespread religions in Africa, with over 541 million adherents on the continent. Christianity in Africa is diverse and complex, encompassing a range of denominations, including Catholicism, Protestantism, and various indigenous African churches. This article explores the ways in which African spirituality has influenced Christianity in Africa, and how this has shaped the religious and cultural landscape of the continent.

KEY WORDS: African, Traditions, Spirituality, Divination, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Christianity arrived in Africa with the arrival of European missionaries in the 15th century (Bediako, 1995). However, as Africans embraced the Christian faith, they also brought their traditional beliefs and practices with them (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). This has led to the development of a unique form of Christianity that is distinctly African, influenced by African spirituality (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). African spirituality is a diverse set of beliefs and practices that have been passed down through generations (Olupona, 2000). It is deeply rooted in the connection between the spiritual and physical worlds and the idea that everything is interconnected (Olupona, 2000). African spirituality is not limited to any one religion and is found across the continent in various forms (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). The exploratory question here is to see whether the religion of the Africans can stand independent of Christianity or depends on foreign religion for its sustenance.

METHODS

The study has undergone descriptive methodology on understanding the concepts, the relations, the connections between concepts and the cause and effects. It is within the study where the Spirituality of the Africans dominate the life of its people and later interfeared by the coming of Christian religion into Africa and vivid examples are given.

The origin of African Independent Churches

During the colonial period, those dissatisfied with the socio- economic, political and religious structure of Europeans decided to institute their own churches where they were free to worship and teach without missionary interference. The religious changes introduced by Europeans included the establishment of mission stations. European missionaries came in a divided manner whereby each Christian missionary group maintained strong ties with their mother church organizations at home that gave them support financially and materially (Nyahela Caxton, 2015).

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A study of African Traditional Religion shows that people in African societies and cultures knew God even before Christianity was introduced to Africa by missionaries from the west. It is clear that God has been at work among the Africans ever since they came to receive Christianity, a fact that suggests that African Religion had been a preparation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some scholars who have done careful research into African Traditional Religion such as Mbiti, Walls, Bediako, Shoter, just to mention a few, have viewed African Religion as preparation for the Christian Gospel. They argue that just as Jewish religion was a preparation for Israelites to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ so is African Religion.

Mbiti (In et al. 2012) This article interrogates African Spirituality and its influence on Christianity in Africa.

African Traditional Spirituality

African spirituality refers to the spiritual beliefs and practices of the people of Africa (Olupona, 2000). It encompasses a wide range of beliefs and practices, including ancestor veneration, divination, healing practices, music and dance, and community building (Olupona, 2000). African spirituality is diverse and complex, and it varies from region to region and from tribe to tribe.

Ancestor veneration is a central component of African traditional spirituality (Magesa, 1998; Mbiti, 1970). In Africa, ancestors are believed to be able to influence the lives of their living descendants, and they are often invoked for guidance and protection (Mbiti, 1970). This stems from the fact that the African families consist of both, the living and the dead (Mbiti, 1970). One of the dead group members of the family include the ancestors (Magesa, 1998). Ancestors in Africa are treated with high respect as the Africans believe in the continuity of life even after death. This is in line with what Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) admits that ancestor veneration is an integral part of African spirituality because it reflects the African belief in the continuity of life beyond death.

Divination is another important aspect of African spirituality. Divination is a method of communicating with the spiritual world and seeking guidance and advice (Sobiecki, 2002). There are many forms of divination in African spirituality, including the use of bones, shells, and other objects (Parrinder 1961). According to Parrinder (1961) divination is an important part of African spirituality because it reflects the African belief in the interconnectedness of all things.

Healing practices are also a key aspect of African spirituality. Healing practices include the use of herbal remedies, prayer, and other forms of spiritual healing. According to Mbiti (1991), healing is an integral part of African spirituality because it reflects the African belief in the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds.

Music and dance are also important components of African spirituality. Music and dance are used as a means of expressing joy, gratitude, and faith. According to Nyamiti (2000) music and dance are an integral part of African spirituality because they reflect the African belief in the interconnectedness of all things.

Community building is another important aspect of African spirituality. African spirituality emphasizes the importance of building relationships and communities. According to Magesa (1997), community building is an integral part of African spirituality because it reflects the African belief in the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of social harmony.

African spirituality is a diverse and complex set of beliefs and practices that reflect the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people of Africa. It encompasses a wide range of practices, including ancestor veneration, divination, healing practices, music and dance, and community building. African spirituality continues to have a significant influence on the spiritual beliefs and practices of African people today.

Christianity in Africa

Christianity was first introduced to Africa in the 1st century AD, when the apostle Mark is said to have visited Egypt and founded the Coptic Church. However, it was not until the arrival of European colonizers in the 16th century that Christianity began to spread more widely throughout Africa.

Today, Christianity is one of the most widespread religions in Africa, with an estimated 541 million adherents on the continent (Pew Research Center, 2015). Christianity in Africa is diverse and complex, encompassing a range of denominations, including Catholicism, Protestantism, and various indigenous African churches.

Catholicism has a long history in Africa, dating back to the arrival of Portuguese explorers in the 15th century. Today, there are over 190 million Catholics in Africa, making it the largest Catholic population outside of the Americas (Pew Research Center, 2015). Catholicism in Africa has been shaped by local cultural and religious traditions, with African Catholicism often incorporating elements of African spirituality into its practices.

Protestantism was introduced to Africa in the 19th century by European missionaries, and has since grown to become a major religious force on the continent. Today, there are over 541 million Protestants in Africa, making it the largest Protestant population in the world (Pew Research Center, 2015). Protestantism in Africa is diverse, encompassing a range of denominations, including Anglicanism, Methodism, and Pentecostalism.

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Indigenous African churches are another important aspect of Christianity in Africa. These churches often combine elements of Christianity with traditional African religious beliefs and practices. According to Kalu (2006), indigenous African churches represent a form of resistance to European colonialism and the imposition of Western Christianity on African societies.

The growth of Christianity in Africa has had a significant impact on the continent. Christianity has been credited with promoting education, healthcare, and social justice in many African communities (Sanneh, 1996). However, Christianity in Africa has also been criticized for its role in promoting colonialism and for its failure to adequately address the social, economic, and political challenges facing the continent (Kalu, 2008).

Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are strongly based on a personal quest for understanding of questions about life and meaning. Most definitions of spirituality encompass the meaning of life, the integration of ultimate values and connectedness with the transcendent. Spirituality involves centrally important life orienting beliefs, values and practices that may be expressed in religious and non-religious ways. Spirituality may be considered private or it might be shared with others.

(Mabvurira 2016) argues that the definition of spirituality differs from person to person and across ethnic, gender, class, generational and cultural lines. He further argues that not all people express their spirituality through religion. (Mabvurira 2016) posits that religion and spirituality overlap in that both are concerned with the search for meaning. He further mentions that spirituality is expressed in religious forms in many people. He, however, notes that spirituality is broader than religion.

The Influence of African Spirituality on Christianity

The arrival of Christianity in Africa did not mean the end of African spirituality. Instead, it created a fusion of the two traditions, resulting in a unique form of Christianity that is distinctively African. Here are some ways in which African spirituality has influenced Christianity in Africa.

1. The Role of Ancestors

In many African societies, ancestors play a vital role in daily life. They are consulted for guidance and protection, and their wisdom is valued. When Africans embraced Christianity, they brought this belief in ancestors with them. As a result, many African Christians pray to their ancestors for help and guidance, alongside praying to God. This has led to the development of a unique form of Christian spirituality that incorporates ancestor veneration (Magesa, 1997).

According to Magesa (1997), ancestor veneration is an integral part of African traditional religion and has been incorporated into African Christianity. The role of ancestors in African Christian spirituality has been acknowledged by many theologians, including Kwame Bediako, who argued that the veneration of ancestors is not incompatible with Christian beliefs (Bediako, 1995).

2. Worship

African spirituality is often expressed through music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression. As a result, many African Christians incorporate these elements into their worship services. This can include drumming, dancing, and singing in African languages. In some cases, Christian hymns are set to traditional African melodies, creating a blend of European and African music styles (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2005), music and dance are important parts of African Christian worship because they allow worshippers to express their faith in a way that is culturally relevant to them. This has led to the development of a unique form of Christian worship that incorporates African cultural expressions.

3. Theology

African spirituality has also had an impact on Christian theology in Africa. One of the key areas in which this is evident is in the way Africans understand the concept of sin. In many African societies, sin is not just a personal failing but a violation of the social order. As a result, African Christians often see sin as something that not only affects the individual but also the wider community. This has led to a greater emphasis on social justice and community-building in African Christian theology (Nyamiti, 2000).

According to Nyamiti (2000), African Christian theology is characterized by a concern for the well-being of the community, including issues such as poverty, oppression, and injustice. This reflects the influence of African spirituality, which places a strong emphasis on social harmony and community-building.

4. Social Structures

African spirituality places a strong emphasis on community and social harmony. As a result, African Christians often have a different approach to social structures such as the family and the church. In many African societies, the family is seen as the foundation of society, and this belief has been carried over into African Christianity.

In African Christian communities, the family is often seen as an extended unit that includes not only immediate family members but also ancestors and the wider community. This has led to a different approach to family ministry and pastoral care in African Christianity, which often emphasizes the importance of the family unit and seeks to support and strengthen it (Olupona, 2000).

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Similarly, the church is seen as a community rather than an institution in African Christianity. African Christians often prioritize the building of relationships and community over strict adherence to organizational structures. This reflects the influence of African spirituality, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of community and social harmony (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

5. Healing and Deliverance

African spirituality places a strong emphasis on healing and deliverance. This is reflected in African Christian practices such as prayer for healing and deliverance, which have become an integral part of African Christian spirituality. In many African Christian communities, prayer for healing and deliverance is seen as a means of dealing with spiritual, physical, and emotional issues (Mbiti, 1991).

According to Mbiti (1991), healing and deliverance are an important part of African Christian spirituality because they reflect the African belief in the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds. African Christians often seek healing and deliverance from God and also through traditional African methods such as herbal remedies and divination.

Man and other animals have used herbal remedies and medicine from time immemorial (Mabvurira 2016). African traditional medicine is the oldest and perhaps the most assorted of all therapeutic systems. Sixty percent of the world's population uses herbal medicine for treating their sickness and up to 80% of people living in Africa depend on TM for some aspects of their health care (Mabvurira 2016)

Traditional medical practitioners include herbalists, traditional healers, diviners and religious healers. Most of these practitioners believe that the ability to diagnose illness is bestowed by God or the practitioner's ancestors on them. Traditional healers have an edge over biomedical doctors in that their healing involves medicine, spiritual, ritual, good luck charms and divination (Mabvurira 2016)

For Zimbabweans for example, the elders and ancestors are key to the continuing access and inheritance of traditional medical knowledge through special dreaming (kurotswa) and ritual divination (kusvikirwa) where this knowledge is revealed as a gift. Many Zimbabweans who are unable to afford expensive Western medicine, have turned to indigenous healing practices (Mabvurira 2016)

Traditional Healing Practices

African traditional healing skills are acquired through apprenticeship to an older healer, experience of certain techniques, conditions or by ancestral calling. The calling may come in the form of dreams or illnesses. A targeted person may become ill, consult a traditional healer where they are then told about the special calling. The gift of healing is bestowed by ancestors. Here the bestowing is different from that of prophetic where it may happen regardless of man at sleep.

Spirit mediums play an important part in the area of health. They are both religious leaders as well as health specialists. This strong connection between healing-land and religion is very broad, and it is part of the African theory of illness. This theory attempts to explain illness, relations between ancestors, God and the universe (Mabvurira 2016). Traditional healers are believed to have the esoteric knowledge about things beyond the comprehension of ordinary human beings.

Caring for the Sick in African Communities

Communities shape people's interpretations and responses to pain and suffering. In traditional African communities, a person relies on the community when faced with insurmountable problems such as illness. In the event of an illness, the community, being one with the individual has the responsibility of taking care of the sick individual and getting rid of the sickness. (Mabvurira 2016), states that the idea of doing well to other people as enshrined in the African kernel of ubuntu provides a helping hand in the HIV and AIDS prevention and care.

Caring entails giving love and providing for the needs of the person who is in need. Care can be physical, emotional, financial, psychological or any other form. Africans recognise the vitality of human life and any action which increases human life is promoted.

In African communities, the family plays an important role during one's illness. Among many African communities, it is assumed that an ill person deserves to be treated as a child and therefore, deserves protection. Importance to note is the fact that in African communities, accomplishments of individuals are attributed to the whole family. This also applies to shame and misfortune.

Belief on myths

Myths are stories concerning events, people's animals, places and they may be based on false perceptions or true historical occurrences. Myths deal with disturbing and difficult questions like the origins of things like the universe, life, death, communities, religions and nations. The authenticity of some myths may be scrutinized and proven by the scientific discipline of archaeology. This study is not concerned with the truthfulness or falsity of myths but acknowledges the significant roles that myths play to

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those who own them. For example, it provides them with a world view concerning the nature and purpose of existence, gives answers to difficult questions concerning the past, present and future, justifies the mode of existence and makes life more worthy and meaningful experience, helps humans to cope with challenges in life and to have a hope for the future. Communities which tend to evolve puritanical, domineering, warrior or superior traits may become dangerous to weaker groups. They may cause the extinction of weaker groups through improvisation of unfair practices such as slavery, dispossession, discrimination, insecurity or warfare. Myths are capable of causing both merits and demerits to humans in a diversity of ways.

There are numerous stories which are upheld by the African Israel Church Nineveh members. Among them are the Biblical myths of creation, the story of fall of humanity from God's grace, Abrahamic stories, the exodus, Davidic stories and the New Testament stories of the virgin birth, miracles and the resurrection of Jesus (Nyahela Caxton 2015)

CONCLUSION

African spirituality has had a significant impact on Christianity in Africa. It has led to the development of a unique form of Christianity that is distinctly African and reflects the cultural and spiritual beliefs of African people. African Christianity incorporates elements of African spirituality such as ancestor veneration, music and dance, a concern for social justice, a focus on community-building, and prayer for healing and deliverance.

While the influence of African spirituality on Christianity in Africa has been positive in many ways, it has also led to some challenges. For example, there is a risk of syncretism, where traditional African beliefs are mixed with Christian beliefs in a way that dilutes the central tenets of Christianity. Additionally, some elements of African spirituality such as divination and ancestor worship have been condemned by some Christian denominations.

Overall, the influence of African spirituality on Christianity in Africa has resulted in a rich and diverse form of Christian spirituality that reflects the cultural and spiritual beliefs of African people. As Christianity continues to grow and evolve in Africa, it will be important to maintain a balance between incorporating elements of African spirituality while remaining true to the central tenets of Christianity.

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