

**THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON AFRICAN INDIGENOUS
RELIGION**

BY

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ABSTRACT

African Indigenous Religion (AIR) according to recent historical evidence is the oldest religion in the world. It has been the foundation of African civilization which dominated the world and a source of world religions before the European distortions of the authentic history of mankind. A systematic study of AIR is fairly new despite the fact that it is the oldest religion and the origin of other world religions. It is against this backdrop that this paper re-examines the impact of colonialism on the study and practice of AIR with new insights from the early contacts with European explorers, travelers, missionaries and colonial administrators to modern trends in the context of Nigeria. The paper proposes disentangling Nigerian frameworks of thought from colonial and neo-colonial impositions.

INTRODUCTION

African Indigenous Religion (AIR) has been given a lot of nomenclatures in scholarship such as African Religion, African Traditional Religion, and Traditional African Religion among others. These have often been used either in the singular or the plural forms (e.g African Religion/Religions). There are two schools of thought on the use of the singular and the plural in describing the AIR. The former perceive the religion as having common features, religious philosophy and thought forms. The latter pinpoints Africa as having multiple cultures, different ethnic nationalities, and varying practices. In the context of this work, AIR refers to those living institutionalized religious beliefs and practices which are rooted in the past religious culture; a religion that was transmitted to the present generation or votaries by successive forebears mainly through oral traditions, sacred institutions, and religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new religious experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities (Ekwunife, 1990:1).

When we speak of African indigenous religion, Africa in this context; we refer to Africa South of the Sahara desert. It should be noted that the north belongs more to the Mediterranean world and the region of Islam is well established in that part of Africa. AIR refers to the religious, cultural or spiritual manifestations indigenous to the continent of Africa. AIR serves as the structure around which all other activities, such as cultural, economic, political and social organizations are built.

AIR has its own distinct features and character of the people who practice it. They believe in a Supreme Being or creator, which is referred to by a myriad of names in various languages. The religion has no written scripture as holy texts are oral – myths, folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs,

pithy sayings and names. Other belief systems include divination, magic, witchcraft, medicine, libation, spirits, and life after death (Gbenda, 2010:41).

The most recent historical evidence has shown that African Indigenous Religion or African Religion is the oldest religion in the world and it is the origin or the foundation of other world religions like Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. African Religion has been the foundation of African civilization which dominated the world before the European distortions of the authentic history of mankind. Kwabena Faheem Ashanti, for instance indicated in his research in 1997 that ‘African Religion is the oldest religion on the planet’ (www.Ashantitone.com). Again, recent work of Femi Biko entitled “African foundations of world Religions” tends to prove that African Religion is the oldest. This is based on recent archaeological studies which revealed that African Religion is the oldest religion in the world and that its scriptures precede those of all the other religions of the world. Indeed, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Christian scriptures borrowed from the ancient Egyptian sacred text (Biko, 2001:157).

In the same vein, Naiwu Osahon’s work on African origin of religions tends to shed more light that Traditional African Religion is the oldest religion in the world. Well, this is obvious since Africans are the oldest humans on earth. African traditional religions led to the system of alchemy founded some fifteen thousand years ago by the first human genius whom Africans described as the ‘thrice greatest’ the greatest of all philosophers, the greatest of all priests and the greatest of all kings. His African names included, Thoth, Tehuti and Theuth. The west knows him as Hermes Trismegistus.

Egypt is the cradle of African religio-cultural heritage and civilization. According to Osahon, Africa totally dominated the world technically, intellectually, politically, economically, culturally and religiously for 15 thousand years from the era of great Thoth (Hermes), until about 600BC.

African domination of the world reached the greatest height during the reign of Ausar (Osiris) around 4100BC. From the Osirian reign, Africans began to civilize the rest of the world by teaching them agriculture, commerce, industrialization, religion and politics as well nation building. Mesopotamia was first to benefit from African civilizing mission abroad as the Chaldeans who were a group of African astronomers – priests from Egypt invaded them. There is evidence that the founders of Zoroastrianism were the Egyptians. In the same fashion, Hinduism was founded by the Dravidians, as large population of Ethiopians known in India as the Dravidians invaded the area and established a civilization in the Indus valley. In fact, the sacred river Ganges in India is named after an Ethiopian king called Emperor Ganges who conquered Asia as far as India. Other religious founders like Buddha and Confucius were of African ancestry. Christianity and Islam are said to have borrowed a great deal of their doctrines from ancient Egypt. Moses adopted the 10 commandments from the ancient 147 Egyptian laws, the rite of circumcision, not eating pig, the Passover feast, among others. Christianity and Islam took their dogmas from the Old Testament of the Jews e.g. the Trinity, Yahweh, Heaven and Hell, good and evil among other (www.zulunation.com/RELIGIONS.html).

African Religion is therefore the oldest continually observed religious traditions. Very little has changed of African Religion as it is continually practiced not only by those in rural areas but also in modern urban centers. Oyewole (2003:370) says “African cultural beliefs and practices still remain separate and strong inspite of the interaction with western culture”. A lot of scholars have recognized African Religion as part and parcel of the whole fabric of African cultural life (Ray, 1976:16). African religion has spread beyond the continent to virtually all parts of the globe, especially, where Africans are found and has influenced the lives of even non-Africans. Susanne Wenger, an Austrian woman for example, became the worshiper and later the priestess and custodian

of *Osun* goddess before she died and was buried in full Yoruba burial rites. She equally promoted the worship of *Osun* goddess, with highly skillful sculpture portraying the various manifestations of the divine and it is now an international tourist centre. In 2005, UNESCO named the sacred *Osun* grove a World Heritage.

African Religion is found in the Americas especially, the Caribbean islands, Jamaica, Haiti Trinidad, Cuba, and Brazil among others (Barrett, 1979:183-213). In the above areas African deities or gods are worshipped and ancestors venerated. Priests, priestesses and sorcerers are found. African conception of life as a pragmatic reality finds expression in folklore and proverbs. Beliefs in ancestral cults, witchcraft, spirit, possession, sacred music and dancing, sacrifices, rituals, traditional medicines are common and most of the beliefs and practices are infused into Christian practices. All these are a conglomeration of beliefs and rites of African origin that are found and embraced by Africans and non-Africans alike.

According to Sturm (1979:217) “it is in Brazil, perhaps, more than any other part of the Americas, that African influence has played its profoundest role in the formation of modern culture. The African presence is discernible throughout the total fabric of Brazilian society; and it is especially evident in the religious dimension of Brazilian society.” The Brazilian society is noted for its complexity and is characterized by much syncretism.

Edozie Udeze visited Brazil recently (2009) and observed a rich religious cultural heritage of the Afro-Brazilians. Iya Orisa Railda de Osun, a virgin at 81 years old, a priestess, presides over the *Osun* and *Orisa* shrines in Brasilia, capital of Brazil. Over the years, Railda had built the shrines and altars that house the spirits of *Orisa*, *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Obatala* and *Esu*. Surrounded by thick forests on both sides, the *Orisa* house of worship has become one of the most important tourist centers in Brazil. (Udeze, 2009:17).

Early Studies on AIR

It is important to note that the earliest published observations about African Indigenous Religion (AIR) are found in the reports of European travelers, explorers, missionaries and colonial agents who came in contact with the Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their writings were not scholarly or systematic studies but casual observations and superficial accounts designed to appeal to western mentality and audience. They revealed the cultural bias and prejudice. They denied Africans of having a culture, history and a belief in a Supreme God. R. F. Burton, for example cast aspersion on the religion of the Negroes he met in the course of his consular work in 1863. He denied them of any belief in God and any sense of morality (Onunwa, 2006:60).

Most of them did not stay long enough to get acquainted with the people. The accounts they published were aimed at showing the mental inferiority of Africans, which required their being held in labour, “if not in slavery, of their own improvement (Ray 1976:4).

The popular imagery of Africa is that of a “Dark continent”. The early travelers and missionaries to Africa supported the erroneous conception of the continent. This image carries the connotation of a primitive, remote and unscientific people.

The emergence of the study of religion proper was motivated by Charles Darwin’s theory of Evolution published in 1859. According to him, “evolution is a process in which all the living things are direct descendants of earlier rather different living things. These living things in turn descended from still earlier forms of life; and so on, all the way back to the very first, simplest and most

primitive organism” Chepkwony, 2003:152). Charles Darwin’s theory was a contradiction to the biblical teaching and the supremacy of God. However, the theory prompted the study of African Indigenous Religion and that of other cultures outside Europe. AIR was perceived as still in the early stages of evolution and thus underdeveloped and with no value. The Africans then culturally degraded a lower state of civilization and western society at the highest level.

The evolutionalist approaches that later followed, were influenced by the doctrine of evolutionism. The study of religion was concerned itself with the search for the most primitive form of religion and the stages of its development to the highest. This they assumed was monotheism found in Europe. AIR was very much the focus because it was thought to be the most primitive forms of religion that survived in Africa. (Metuh 1987:xvii – xviii).

Using scientific theories, the 19th century scholars concluded that European culture and religion (Christianity) were at the top of the evolutionary ladder and those of Africa at the bottom of it.

It is with this in mind that scholars advanced theories of the origins of religion that described African Religion as fetish, animism, ancestor worship and magic among others (Chepkwony, 2003:152).

The 19th century evolutionary theories were responsible for a variety of wrong nomenclature that has created negative images of AIR.

In the late 19th century, there were more field studies by trained anthropologists. They were motivated by growing publications of missionaries and travelers. There was a new interest in the origin and evolution of human culture. Charles de Brosses proposed the theory that religion originated in the “fetish” phenomenon observed on the West African Coast by Portuguese

sectors. Auguste Comte modified De Brosses theory that fetishism is the first stage of a three-fold scheme of religious evolution: Fetishism, polytheism and monotheism. We also have Edward Tylor's theory of animism – belief in souls was based in part on African situation. In Sir James Frazer's evolutionary theory of Divine Kingship, AIR also played a prominent role.

On the whole, the evolutionist scholars collected derogatory concepts supposed to designate primitive forms of religion which include paganism, fetishism, animism, totemism, polytheism, the high gods, the withdrawn god, idolatory, heathenism, juju, primitive, and ancestor worship.

Some missionaries who had stayed longer enough were able to learn the language and made more positive comments. T. J. Bowen, for example wrote a Dictionary of the Yoruba language, and acknowledged that the people had notion of God. Some of them became more knowledgeable and sympathetic but yet they used derogatory concepts in describing AIR.

The early and later Christian missionaries wrote to fight the traditional religion primarily to destroy it as an enemy which hindered the way to total evangelization of the Africans. When this failed, the later missionaries devised a new strategy by baptizing the salient features of the religion as a form of evangelization of the pagans.

The colonial officers too, had carried out some field works. Some of the amateur ethnographers, and anthropologists among the colonial military and civil administrators included Sir Alfred B. Ellis. He served both in Nigeria and Ghana. The officers too wrote under the inspiration of their armchair researchers at home and tried to elucidate the native's idea about religion and magic. Ellis, for example wrote that the Akan Supreme Being is a recent introduction by Europeans. The idea was introduced by European missionaries (Onunma, 2006:7).

RECENT SCHOLARSHIPS ON AIR

The study of African culture and Religion has suffered a lot of setback for the past four or five hundred years or so. The studies by foreign scholars and Africans especially those influenced by the colonial mentality, were never from within approach but suffered from presuppositions, ignorance, biases, and linguistic difficulties as well as social misgivings. The early studies pioneered by the European merchants, travelers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and anthropologists, among others, were a misrepresentation or unintended misinterpretation of the entire religious system.

Some indigenous West African Scholars who joined the European Scholars and writers at a later period, either turned to be too polemical or apologetic. Some other reacted in their defense of what they thought to have been misinterpreted or misrepresented.

One of the legacies left by the evolutionists, who dominated the study of AIR was the assumption that any higher forms of beliefs, concepts, institutions, art, or any item of culture found in Africa, must have been imported from outside Africa. Consequently, all kinds of theories and explanations were put forward on how different religions traits had reached Africa societies usually from Egypt, the Middle East or Europe. One of such theories is the so-called Hamitic theory to which higher elements of civilization like iron working, sacred kingship, the notion of Supreme Being were brought in by the Hamites – a branch of the European race.

In the beginning of the 20th century, evolutionism, together with its premise about the inferiority of the primitive mind was successfully challenged and finally over turned. Father Wilhelm Schmidt proved that monotheism, NOT Fetishism or animism was the earliest form to religion. He argued that the earliest survival of this primitive monotheistic belief has to be found among the hunting gathering, forest pygmies of central Africa, who according to him

represented the oldest surviving culture on earth. He also claimed that the Supreme Beings or the pastoral Nilotes of East Africa represented the fullest survival of the original monotheisms concept.

In this era too, systematic field work studies began to be made of African societies. Unfortunately they were divided along British and French Schools of thought, and thus imposed a colonialist structure upon the interpretation of African social and religious systems. Under the British school, we have Malisnowski, and Radcliffe Brown among others. In the functionalist theory, myth, ritual, and symbolism were investigated more as functional components in the social machinery than on their own terms as intellectual phenomena. Evans – Pritchard's, work was a shift from function to meaning. e.g. His accounts of Zande witchcraft and Nuer Religion. On the whole British school of thought was concerned with the social order.

French school focused upon the symbolic, philosophical order, regarding this as the determinant of the social structure. They studied African cosmological systems and implicit philosophies, e.g. Griaule mission among the Dogon of Mali.

The historical dimension of AIR was neglected by the above approaches. This stems partly from the enormous errors and prejudices of earlier culture – historians of Africa. Fundamental to the culture – historical view was the Hamitic theory to which the “higher” elements of civilization were conferred upon the indigenous Negro races of Africa by the so-called Hamitic race. The Hamites were alleged to be a branch of the Caucasian race which had entered Africa and become indigenized there. The incoming Hamites, wrote Seligman “were pastoral Europeans”. This theory, fitted comfortably with European notions of racial superiority. Recent studies especially in East and central Africa – Historical study of African Religion have shed much light on the situation in the region.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIAL LEGACIES

Traditional Africa did not fold her arms to allow disarray of their indigenous institutions and religious culture. In southern Nigeria, the missionaries and colonial agents met highly organized religious institutions. Some of their members played an important role in the colonial administration in Igboland e.g the Warrant chiefs. There are recorded clashes between the colonial government/missionaries and the traditionalists between 1900 and 1910. Okigwe in 1910 had clashes with them, the same goes to Obgunorie cult at Ezumoha, Mbano, Ekpe society among others. This gave birth to secret societies in Africa.

The *maji maji* (sacred water) revolt of 1905 – 1907, was a mass resistance movement against German colonial rule and policies in Southern Tanzania especially as cotton-growing scheme had been forced upon the local people among others. The revolt was precipitated by a diviner named Kinjikitile, who was possessed by powerful spirits. It began at Ngarambe during a theopany. He called on the people to fight against the oppressive colonial rule. People came to Ngarambe to obtain *maji* which is sacred water, which would make them invulnerable to white man's bullets. It later became a pilgrimage centre for sacred water, war medicine, amulets and military training. Rays(1976:14) says:

Kinjikitile... utilized traditional religious ideas and institutions to mobilize action across ethnic boundaries in an area without political unity. He drew upon the widely known water cult of Mokero, ancestor and possession cults, hunting and warfare magic.

In the same way, the *mau mau* uprising in Kenya during 1952 – 1956 helped to speed up the political processes leading towards independence, which was achieved in 1963. To the colonial government

... *mau mau* movement was nothing more than a “subversive movement based on the lethal mixture of pseudo-religion, nationalism and the evil forms of black magic aimed at turning Kenya into a land of magic and murder (Macphee, 1968:108).

The nationalist struggles and movements towards independence of many African territories in the 1950s and 1960s gave birth to African theology. The Africans were uncomfortable that while African nations were becoming independence politically, the church in Africa should remain controlled by European missionaries. The idea of African church was born. The problem of nominalism provided a fertile group for embracement of African values and norms in the Christian church.

In Africa, there has been the impact of Westernism expressed through art, science, technology, learning and social contact. Christianity was part of the European’s civilizing mission cloth in European culture and philosophy. The rediscovery of the value of traditional African culture, made many scholars to appreciate AIR. This coupled with the desire of Africans to be free from colonial mentality led to the emergence from 1900 onward of increasing number of New African Churches. These churches have embraced a lot of African culture and spirituality. According to Appiah-Kubi (1997:65) the Africa Independent Churches are closer to African culture than those founded by the European missions. The African instituted churches also pose a serious threat to the indigenous religion. The Apostolic church, the church of the Lord, the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Celestial Church of Christ have taken over the functions of the indigenous religion as many of the traditional practices and customs are seen in them. They include spirit possession, the functions of magicians, medicine men, diviners. The African instituted churches also preach and teach salvation from sorcery, witchcraft, misfortune, ill-luck, evils, and so

on (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1987:281-283). The result is that African theologians are advocating for mutual borrowing of African Religion and Christianity.

It goes without saying that the African has much to learn from the Christian Faith about how to purify and complete his beliefs about God. But it is also true that the Christian has something to learn from the traditional African, not in the sense of new doctrines, but in the sense of new insights and new ways of understanding God (Nyamiti, 1997:57).

Besides, the desire of Africans to understand the New Testament message in the context of African culture and religion has produced many theories of Christology. Bujo presented Jesus – Christ as proto-ancestor. He further argued that it is the model of African morality and the starting point for a new ecclesiology (Bujo, 1978: 92).

Many theologians and scholars are convinced that Jesus Christ challenges each culture, ethnic group, nation, community among others with the words of Mk. 8:29 “who do you (Africans) say that I am? In answering these vital questions, some theologians have looked at Jesus as the chief diviner – Healer and Eldest brother intercessor, among others (Healey & Sybertz, 1996:62- 87).

Some educated Africans, especially those “drowned” in Euro-American ways of life still have negative attitude towards the indigenous religion in this twenty-first century. The religion is looked upon as outmoded; full of barbaric acts and practices. In the same vein, traditional ethical and moral values are no longer highly appreciated. Traditional regulations and taboos, chastity, among others are no longer given serious attention. Christianity and Islam have forced certain customs to natural death, while many traditional practices have crumbled, disappeared, or modified. In some cases, some aspect of the religion are taken over by the forces of Christianity e.g. the indigenous names and attributes of God.

SIGNS OF CONTINUITY

In our contemporary times, African cultural studies including religion, inclusive have been given serious attention in the Americas, Europe, and Africa among others. The global interests in AIR and culture have been instrumental for the establishment of separate institutes in Africa, Europe and American universities for its study.

In Nigeria, just like other West African countries, traditional religious practices still persist. It is difficult, if not impossible for the African to completely sever connection with it. Many highly educated Christians and Moslems owe allegiance to Christianity, Islam and the Africa Indigenous Religion. Many people still resort to AIR in times of crises. The indigenous healing rituals and rites could treat cases of ill-health arising from mystical causes; those that completely defy western medicine.

There are indications that some traditional practices still persist among the Africans, even at this twenty-first century. They include, puberty rites, marriage rituals, funeral ceremonies, witchcraft, divination, and traditional medicine; libation to ancestors, ancestral veneration, priesthood, and chieftaincy. Some of these belief systems and practices have assimilated new values and changes. It is a normal process for religious change as the religio-cultural institutions are dynamic and are not static. It is not possible for people's culture to be completely destroyed and replaced by another. The core values especially those embedded in the religious heritage are the hardest to change despite foreign influences.

CONCLUSION

From our general survey on the impact of colonialism on AIR, we uncovered that despite several interactions by the ethnic nationalities with

forces of colonialism, it is not easy to totally re-create the vision and perception of the people. While some elements of their cultural heritage have changed due to contacts with westernization, some other elements that sum up into the people's culture have remained largely pristine, native and unchanged. However, colonial mentality, and initial prejudices and negativism have hindered meaningful research and utilization for sustainable development. This work is, therefore, a clarion call for deep reflection that religio-cultural heritage has the capacity for institutionalizing scientific development locally. Culture is fundamental to societal development. There is underdevelopment in most countries in Africa because the institutions are built on colonial structures.

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