

# “African Crossroads: Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity”

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*Abstract: This paper focuses on the conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Although there are other religions in Africa such as Islam and Judaism, this study concentrates on African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Religion is the strongest element in traditional African culture and exerts great influence upon the conduct of the African people. Religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life; therefore, religion has shaped the lives of Africans, at the same time life has shaped religion as well. Whenever two or three cultures meet, there is potential conflict. Spiritual conflicts exist between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. It is difficult to separate African culture from African Traditional Religion because religion is embedded in African culture. African Traditional religion is part of the African's ethos and an understanding of it should go hand in hand with Christian evangelization. Ignoring these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices may lead to a lack of understanding of African behavior and problems. This paper work uses Nollywood, the Nigerian movie industry, to showcase the clash between African Traditional Religion and Christianity.*

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Nigerian Movies, Nollywood, Juju

## Introduction

**T**HIS PAPER ANALYZES the conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. These conflicts come in various forms such as spiritual, cultural, doctrinal, and practical. African Traditional Religion was the primary African religion before the advent of Christianity and other religions. Many Africans have been converted from African Traditional Religion to other foreign religions. For example, in Nigeria, which is the most populous country in Africa, according to Falola (1999), Muslims constitute about 50 percent of the population, and Christians make up about 40 percent of the population. The rest practices one form of African Traditional Religion (religious beliefs and practices of the Africans) or another. Although one can find a mosque or a church in almost every village and town today, African Traditional Religion continues to play a role in African society.

In his book *African Traditional Religion*, Mbiti (1991) notes, “African Religion is very pragmatic and realistic” (p.2). He elaborates that African Traditional Religion is applied to a situation as the need arises. He adds that in each African society, religion is embedded in the local language, so that to understand the religious life of the people properly, one needs to know their language. He asserts, “To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious” (p.30).

He states that religion can be seen in five aspects of culture, namely: (1) beliefs, (2) practices, ceremonies and festivals, (3) religious objects and places, (4)

values and morals, and (5) religious officials and leaders. He defines African Traditional Religion as:

The product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community. (pp. 13-14)

Mbiti notes, “The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, and the Qur’an is the book of Islam. African Religion has no scriptures or holy books. It is written in the history, the hearts and experiences of the people” (p.14). African Traditional Religion can be found in rituals, ceremonies and festivals; shrines, sacred places and religious objects; art and symbols; music and dance; proverbs, riddles and wise sayings; names of people and places; myths and legends; beliefs and customs. In fact, African religion is found in all aspects of life.

## Misconception of African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion is intertwined with African culture. It may be difficult for some Christians to maintain some African traditional culture because of their Christian faith, which is contrary to African Traditional Religion. This has created confusion among many African Christians who want to maintain some of their traditions.

Sarpong (2006) says that unfortunately, African traditional religion, which should be employed for its potentially salutary effect, has been misunderstood and is still misrepresented. He notes:

The misconception is amply evident from the many wrong names by which traditional religion has been described. It is difficult to understand the tenacity with which African traditional religion has been termed a primal religion. Evidently the use of the term is to distinguish it from the so-called great or world religions. A primal religion is supposed to have no founders. It is without a literary source. (p.1)

African Traditional Religion is misrepresented more than other religions. According to Quarcoopome (1987), possibly there is no religion that has been misconceived, misrepresented and misunderstood more than African Traditional Religion. He says that educated Africans have been known to refer to the Traditional Religion as animism, paganism, and fetishism amongst others and also refer to the traditional priest as fetish priest. He concludes:

But it appears that in this regard such educated Africans are merely echoing the ignorance and prejudice of some West investigators and Christian missionaries, who is in abject ignorance and false sense of academic security callously used derogatory terminologies to designate the Traditional Religion. (pp.12-13)

He says that all things considered, paganism is a term which had been derogatory and imposed on Africans from the outside and as such is "obnoxious":

With particular reference to West African Traditional Religion, any time the word pagan is used it has the undertone of racial or social discrimination. Even though the discrimination is loaded with religious overtones the basic implication is sociological. (p.17)

This may have consequences because Christians may reject some African traditions that go against their Christian faith. Wisdom should be applied to separate African traditions that go against Christian beliefs. Otherwise, Africans may rapidly lose some of their cultural heritage.

However, according to Kwabena-Esem, "African religions had their biggest boost two years ago [February, 1982] when Pope John Paul II, on a visit to Benin, apologized for centuries of ridiculing African cultural beliefs by the Western world" (p.1).

## Crossroads of the Africans

Wherever two or three cultures meet, there is potential conflict. Spiritual conflicts exist between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. It is difficult to separate African culture from African Traditional Religion because religion is embedded in African culture. Mulagu (1991) states, "Any meeting of two different realities incurs the risk of conflict. We do, in fact, observe at times conflict between the cultural heritage of black Africans and Christianity" (p.128). Aya (2000) notes, "The modern African in search of self-determination and self-assertion finds himself in a situation where his or her culture is at crossroads with alien cultures" (p.12). He also states, "A modern African has been brain-washed into disowning his own culture and embracing alien cultures and values, some of which he does not claim to understand" (p.12). Africans have been enculturated to at least two cultures, which are African and Western; as a result, they lose the richness of their culture and casually pass it on to next generation.

This resonates in his paper, where Ogundele (2002) states that Duro Ladipo, who was a church choirmaster in the town's Anglican Church and also taught in its primary school, was very much appreciated as a choirmaster until he composed a Christmas cantata in which introduced *bata* and *dundun* drums. The church was scandalized: how could their choirmaster bring "pagan" elements into the celebration of the birth of Christ? Indeed, *bata* is the beloved music of *Sango* (the Nigerian tribe Yoruba god of lightning and thunder) while the *dundun* ensemble belongs to the masquerade cults. The profanity led to Duro Ladipo leaving the church and his teaching position to become a full-time actor, composer of plays and songs, director, and producer. This is an example of the conflict between the two cultures.

Knitter (1988) notes that presently many African Christian theologians - Catholic and Protestant, male and female, indigenous and expatriate - have played a significant role, not only in creative Christian theologizing but also in giving written expression to African Traditional Religions and in re-affirming religious beliefs, values, symbols, and rites that have been at the heart of African culture for centuries before the coming of other religions. He acknowledged that many theologians are passionate in their desire to recover the profound traditional integration of religion and life, and the meaningful ancient beliefs, symbols, and rites of their peoples which they feel were needlessly, sometimes ruthlessly, suppressed by the missionaries of the last century and a quarter.

For example, the poem "Piano and Drums" by Gabriel Okara (1966) explains the conflict people face when they are confronted with two different cultures. The poem shows that those Africans who learn about the Western ways of life (school, church,

music, language, dress, etc.) behave in two different ways. Sometimes they act as true Africans, and sometimes like Westerners. For example, the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, etc. tribes in Nigeria do not know which music to absorb. In order to describe the crossroads some Africans face, I employed the poem "Piano and Drums" to show the significance of cultural confusion:

When at break of day at a riverside  
 I hear jungle drums telegraphing  
 The mystic rhythm, urgent, raw  
 Like bleeding flesh, speaking of  
 Primal youth and the beginning...  
 Then I hear a wailing piano  
 Solo speaking of complex ways  
 In tear-furrowed concerto,  
 Of far away lands...  
 And I lost in the morning mist  
 Of and age at a riverside keep  
 Wandering in the mystic rhythm  
 Of jungle drums and the concerto. (p.36, 37)

An analysis of this poem reveals the piano as a representation of the European way of life and the drums as a representation of the African way of life. Oni (1997) in his analysis of this poem writes that the piano is a musical instrument that is made by Europeans and so supplies European music to the Europeans. The jungle drums like *bata* or *ekwe* are home-made musical instruments to supply African melody to Africans. The African in this poem first hears the vibrant sounds of the jungle drums, which move him from head to toe. Then the sound of the piano comes faintly, narrowly and sadly from a very distant place. Now, the speaker has to stand between these two different types of music. The piano enters the right ear; jungle music enters the left. The situation is not clear to him. He only looks on, unable to sing or dance to either of the two. The speaker finds himself in a cultural dilemma of a contact between the African culture and the European or Western culture. The two cultures meet and clash inside him. This poem highlights the clash of faith of African Traditional Religion and Christianity.

### **Integration of African Traditional Religion and Christianity**

In his book *Pluralism and Oppression*, Knitter (1988) says that Zulu Sofola calls for more depth to the indigenization process, saying that there has been a misdirected desire of African churches to dress Christ in African clothes, without giving thought to the European soul with which Christ came to Africa. Sofola says that unless Christ is presented to Africans in a manner acceptable to the African mentality,

Christianity will remain alien and irrelevant and he notes:

Christ must have an African soul, a soul that understands the realities of the African cosmos before he can respond to our lyrics, dances and customs, He must first be liberated from the grip of Europeanism before he can be embraced by Africans in their quest for self-realization and liberation. (p.33)

The authors who express these sentiments come from the mainline Christian churches, but they are being prodded constantly by the large, steadily increasing number of independent Christian churches all over the continent of Africa (p.33).

These churches have never lost touch with the integration of religion with African traditional life. Knitter states that according to the Holy Bible, the first commandment is not to have any other god besides God. "Therefore, using other channels other than Christ is idolatry." All idols and sacrifices should be abolished because the big brother and our dearest ancestor, Christ, has paid the price on the cross.

Oha (2000) notes that many Christian narratives forefront the conflict between God's forces and the devil's in the affairs of human beings. He says that secular human experiences are seen as reflections as well as aftermaths of spiritual warfare. He goes on to say that "the prominence of this logic in contemporary Christian evangelism in Nigeria is very significant, especially given that early Christian ministries in Nigeria tried to dismiss the idea of the intervention of evil spirits in human affairs as mere superstition" (p.192). Contemporary Christianity in Nigeria, especially its Pentecostal brands, appears to have a point of intersection with indigenous religious systems in the idea of the potency and operation of evil spiritual forces, even though Christianity still regards the African Traditional Religion as the site and domain of demonic operations.

Commenting on the blending of African Traditional Religion and Christianity, Meyer (1998) notes that determined Christian members positively incorporate tradition boiled down to the invitation of Satan himself into the church. In this conflict, Pentecostalization was opposed to Africanization (p.319). Kwabena-Essem (2006) claims that people do not understand and appreciate the complex interplay of religion, medicine and psychology in African beliefs. He says that the facts that Africans have largely reduced religious thought and practice to everyday life and that African religions seek to link the supernatural with the natural and the mundane continue to baffle the Western world.

In this contemporary time, many Africans in the Diaspora as well as in Africa are acquiring know-

ledge and a college education, just as Parrinder (1954) earlier noted that many Africans are reaching a high level of education, millions have become Christian or Muslim, and religious loyalties change with other customs. However, not only do the majority of Africans still hold to the traditional religion of their fathers, but also behind the veneer of the new beliefs of most educated people lie older ideas that will not disappear for a long time yet. He states, "To Africans, the spiritual world is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that, whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to mortal sight" (p.4). Questions about integration and separation of African Traditional Religion and Christianity always arise, even as African Traditional Religion and Christianity values can and do co-exist in Africa. These aspects of African culture and the conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity are evident in Nigerian movies.

### Analysis of Nigerian Movies

Nollywood is the name given to the Nigerian film industry, which is the highest grossing movie making industry behind Hollywood of the United States and Bollywood of India. Nollywood is saturated with supernatural and religious overtones that are embedded in Africa cultures. Nigerian movies are deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life that other Africans can relate to. Nigerian film stories are told using African idioms, proverbs, costumes, artifacts, imagery and cultural display (Onuzulike, 2007a, 2007b). The common Nigerian film genres include horror, comedy, urban legend, mythic, love and romance, juju/witchcraft, melodrama, and historical epic. Religious overtones are evident in most Nigerian movies. In his work, Flesher (2000) summarizes:

What is interesting about Nigerian films is that one of the most popular plot lines features the clash of religions, old and new. The key characters are villains who use aspects of traditional African religions, often characterized as witchcraft or voodoo, to work their wicked ways. In the end, however, Christianity triumphs by redeeming the victims and vanquishing the evil-doers, although they may be forgiven upon conversion to Christianity. Make no mistake, this plotline may be camp and hackneyed, but it usually is played down and dirty for all it is worth. (p.1)

There are several Nigerian movies that deal with conflicts of religions such as *The Holocaust Part 1 & 2* (2008); *40 Days in the Wilderness Part 1, 2 & 3*; (2005); *Battle of Liberation Part 1 & 2* (2008);

*The Great Mistake* (2003). The two films analyzed in this paper have religious connotations. *Persecution Parts 1 & 2* (2007) and *Evil Doers Parts 1 & 2* (2002) depict conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. *Persecution* not only displays the conflicts between the two faiths, it also shows the conflicts between African Traditional Religion and African traditions. *Evil Doers* shows Africans who partake in both faiths, in this case for a reason.

### Summary of Persecution

*Persecution* (2007) is about a son of a fearful native doctor, Ijiji, who terrorizes his community especially the Christians because of their faith. The *Igwe* (the village chief) decides to give his son, Okwudili, a government official, the *Oye* title, which is given to the bravest man in the community. Ijiji, the protagonist, together with the youth in the community are against the idea since Okwudili doesn't live in the community and does not participate in the cultural activities such as masquerade ceremonies. The *Igwe's* reason for making his son the *Oye* is for the community to gain favors from the government. Not only does Ijiji fight the *Igwe's* decision he but also fights the Christians in the community.

In *Persecution*, faith conflicts are evident; for example, Ijiji and his friend are hired to clear the bush for installing electrical polls in his village. When he finds out that the road will run through the *Uke* shrine he objects. Ijiji suggests that they should divert the road. The supervisor says that the God he serves is higher than the *Uke* shrine. When Ijiji asks him what God he serves, the supervisor says the Living God. Ijiji asks the supervisor if he wants him to commit abomination by destroying a deity. A conflict of faith has come into play. The supervisor, a Christian, believes in the Living God while Ijiji believes in preserving *Uke* shrine that is not a Living God.

In another family of the village, Emmanuel goes to Ijiji's father, Nkume, and reports that his brother, Christopher, wants to demolish the *Agwu* deity in his father's compound. Emmanuel claims that *Agwu* deity has been the root of all his problems. Emmanuel tells Nkume that Christopher brought people from warehouse churches and maps the shrine for destruction. Ijiji says that the church is bringing trouble to the community. Ijiji, Emmanuel, and a number of other men storm bible study session and beat up Christopher because he burnt his father's *Agwu* deity. Christopher laments, "Father, I know your children will suffer more persecution..." This kind of tension is common among families who have deities in their compounds and a family member converts to Christianity, so they devise a plan to destroy the deity.

In another development, Ijiji and his gang set a road block and ambush the van that is carrying a

church group. The gang assaults the church group before vanishing into the woods. A church leader says that the best defense is to attack. He says that stubborn faith is for stubborn situations and that they will carry the battle to the enemy territory. During evangelizing crusade by a group church member, Ijiji and some youths along with a masquerade harass the church crusaders and disperse them. In another incident, when Ijiji realizes that the church bought a piece of land to build a church, he goes to that land at night and buries a charm in an effort to prevent them from building a church on that land. This is evidence of the conflicts that arise between African Traditional Religion and Christianity.

Finally, Ijiji has a motorcycle accident. He is left on the side of the road until a passer-by who is a doctor sees him and takes him to the hospital. The movie ends. The epilogue of this movie says, "Ijiji was rescued by the doctor who treated him, and later converted him, Ijiji became a very strong Christian he stopped persecuting the saints."

### **Summary of Evil Doers**

*Evil Doers* (2002) is about a Christian woman, Eunice, who disputes with her husband, Simon, and her in-laws over some family matters. When Simon tells Eunice, his plan to make his two brothers caretakers of a new business so they can travel around the world, she becomes upset. The only thing he needs from her is to bear children for him. She frowns and leaves her husband alone at the table. Apparently, the husband falls sick with a stroke. When the Simon's brothers hear about their brother's illness, they come to see their brother. Eunice refuses to let them see Simon at first. She consults a native doctor, who prepares charm for her and gives her a ring of fire. She terrorizes her in-laws, the Christians and her community. Eventually, she is defeated by the power of God and she gives her life to Christ.

*Evil Doers* showcases conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. After a confrontation between Eunice and her brothers-in-law, she consults a native doctor in order to do away them. She receives a charm, which she secretly buries in the in-laws' compound. This charm affects the brothers' families. This shows the inconsistency of some African Christians who consult native doctors.

In another incident, Rev. Fr. Damian is praying for Monica, a member of the Catholic Women's Organization (CWO), to be delivered from her illness. During the prayer Eunice uses a charm to counter the prayers of Rev. Fr. Damian. When she rubs the ring on her finger, it releases a smoke-like power that counters the prayer of Rev. Fr. Damian. The church council petitions the bishop's secretary and Rev. Fr. Damien is removed from the church.

Eventually, the Bishop sends a new powerful Rev. Fr. Joshua. On his way to the village to assume his role, the native doctor invokes a fire before Rev. Fr. Joshua's car in order to cause a car accident. With the power of the Lord, the Rev. Fr. Joshua sees the fire and says, "Satan is about to start his battle, but the Lord is my strength." He overcomes the challenges confronted on his way to the village.

While Rev. Fr. Joshua is conducting a healing crusade, Eunice continues to attack him. A spiritual battle ensues. At the end, Rev. Fr. Joshua wins the spiritual confrontation though the power of the true Living God. Eunice falls on the ground but the native doctor appears and restores her. The Rev. Fr. Joshua falls on the ground and cries, "God, why have thou forsaken me?" Jesus appears and strikes the spirit of the native doctor. Suddenly everyone Eunice harmed was healed. The Rev. Fr. Joshua pulls Eunice up and she declares that Jesus is Lord. Finally, Rev. Fr. Joshua and the church members go to Simon and Eunice's compound where she confesses in the presence of many. The Rev. Fr. Joshua digs out the charms Eunice has buried in the compound. She gives her life to Christ.

*Evil Doers* portrays conflicts of faiths and a need for spiritual powers, which causes Eunice, a Christian, to secretly consult a native doctor to get some juju in order to influence and control her husband. A key phrase in the movie is "*Ofu Aka n'uka, Ofu aka n'ogwu*," which means on one hand in Christianity and on the other in juju. Juju is a cult that is consulted for one reason or another when in need. This movie resonates with Kwabena-Essen (2006), who notes that the commitment to the Christian God does not deter some Africans from the need to seek the help of minor deities to solve pressing everyday problems. He says that this explains the paradox of many otherwise devout followers of other religions like Christianity and Islam also concurrently consulting diviners, fetishes and other cults. And it answers one very important point that people find a puzzlement: one goes to church, tabernacle or mosque for worship but one goes to a fetish priest or to a secret cult to seek medical care, psychological cure or religious comfort.

Nollywood serves as an avenue to portray African culture. Since Nigerian movies contain many of religious overtones, they depict the encounters of the African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Nollywood movies may help Africans and those in the Diaspora to reconstruct the past in order to understand the present and effectively plan the future.

### **Conclusion**

Africans are notoriously religious and each group has its own religious system of life so fully that it is

not easy or possible always to isolate it. As a result, clashes of faiths occur. During the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), Sarpong (2006) said that Africans recognize as well the challenge of inculturation of Christianity in Africa, an evangelization in depth of the African Christian, which respects and affirms his specific cultural identity and seeks to bridge the gap between faith and culture.

Sarpong states clearly that "religion permeates the ideal African from cradle to grave" (p.12). African Traditional Religion, therefore, is integral in the shaping of the African's future. He concludes, "We have to know the past in order to understand the present and be better equipped to plan the future. We cannot know the past of the African if we neglect his or her religion" (p.12). Traditional Religion is part of the African's philosophy; therefore, spiritual or cultural conflicts are eminent when African Traditional Religion and Christianity meet. One cannot understand the African heritage without understanding its religious part. Africa's different cultures have

been influenced very strongly by religion as it is found in each group. Up to this contemporary time, Africans who live based on traditional ways of life are also regarded to be very religious.

Finally, the spiritual, cultural, doctrinal, and practical conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity are obvious due to several factors, most importantly, that Africans are very religious. The misconception of African Traditional Religion has led it to be called derogatory names such as animism, paganism, and fetish amongst others. Africans are at a crossroads. Due to the fact that religion is embedded in African culture, it is difficult for Africans to be fully devoted to Christianity without partaking in some African Traditional Religion activities. Devoted to African Christians oppose the integration of the two faiths because they believed that African Traditional Religion is a Satan-driven faith. Nigeria's Nollywood movies dramatize the conflicts such as the spiritual warfare that exist between African Traditional Religion and Christianity.

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