THE INTER-PLAY OF IDENTITIES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY IN NKEMNGONG NKENGASONG'S "GOD WAS AFRICAN"

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Africans articulate their religious convictions by practicing Western religion alongside their African traditional religio- cultural heritage. The modern African is caught in a dilemma on how to practice a single religion authentically. He is betwixt and feels lost on where his religious allegiance lies; whether he can only worship his ancestors and gods, only the Christian God or merge if it is possible to merge both worship and belief systems. In such a perplexed situation he either becomes devoted to one religion or resolves to double-deal because it is difficult and almost impossible to break away from either of the religious "entanglements". From a postcolonial perspective, we investigate how possible it is to harmonize the traditional African religion and Christianity without abrogating especially the African traditional belief systems. We highlight the possibility of a cultural compromise which can preserve identity while merging the positive aspects of each belief system.

Keywords: Culture , Chiefs, rituals, identity, Christinity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization, where boundaries have become increasingly porous, the convergence of cultures and religions has become inevitable. As religious communities with diverse beliefs and practices encounter one another, harmonizing these identities has gained prominence on the academic and societal agenda. The concept of divinity has been central to human societies across the globe, manifesting in various forms and expressions. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in exploring and celebrating the diverse perspectives on divinity that exist beyond the dominant Western narratives.

In this paper, we discuss contemporary understandings of African divinity; shedding light on the diverse and complex ways in which the people of Lewoh grapple with their traditional and Christian traditions to reach a compromise admist conflicts caused by these religions. This paper is inspired by the complexities of religious identities between the Western world and Africa. We intend to examine the manner in which Nkemngong Nkengasong in his novel entitled *God was African* (hereafter GWA) explores the importance of, and challenges involved in harmonising Christianity and African religious beliefs; resolving conflicts which emanate from their differences. In the contemporary era, African spirituality continues to thrive and evolve, adapting to changing social, political, and economic landscapes. Despite the influence of colonialism, the spread of Christianity and Islam in Africa, many indigenous African religious practices have persisted and even experienced a revival in recent years. This resurgence is driven by a desire to

reclaim and celebrate African cultural heritage and to challenge the marginalization of African spiritual beliefs in global discourses on religion and spirituality.

The problematics in this study raise worries to how the Africans articulate their religious convictions and practices alongside the western religion which is appropriating theirs. We question whether, just like the destiny of Ken's brother (Tony) is bleak because he abandoned his roots, if the ancestors play a great role in blessing their generations in and out of their fatherland. If yes, can the Almighty God play the role of the ancestors if an African denounces his ancestors and look up only to Him? Whose roots or religious deity is stronger in Lewoh? The Jewish God or the gods of Lewoh who watches over each household?

Hypothetically, this paper stipulates that the African would hardly ever cut off from his ancestors and traditional religion no matter how immerged he is into Christianity; the call of the ancestors will always be implanted and echoing in his subconsciousness and even consciousness. The African can only be complete if he maintains and practices his traditional religion alongside embracing other religions.

The Significance of this paper lies in the fact that Nkengasong's *God was African* addresses a topic that is often overlooked in African literature. Religion plays a crucial role in African societies, and this novel sheds light on the complexities of religious identities in Africa. It encourages readers to think critically about their own religious beliefs, practices and how they can contribute to religious harmony. *God Was African* is a thought-provoking novel that explores the complexities of religious identities in Africa while highlighting the need for religious harmony and encouraging readers to embrace their own religious heritage while being open to learning about other religions.

Using the postcolonial theory as a critical tool, we intend to use the tennet of hybridity in our analysis. This theory which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s explores the cultural, social, and political effects of colonialism and imperialism. One of the key theoretical aspects used in discussing religion in postcolonial studies is the concept of hybridity. Hybridity is a term used to describe the blending of different cultures, traditions, and beliefs. In the context of postcolonial studies, hybridity refers to the mixing of Western and non-Western cultural elements that has occurred because of colonialism and globalization. Hybridity challenges the idea that cultures are pure and static, and instead highlights the dynamic, ever-changing nature of cultural identity.

In the study of religion, hybridity is used to explore the ways in which colonialism and globalization have impacted religious beliefs and practices. Hybridity has also been used to explore the ways in which religion has been used to resist colonialism and imperialism. For example, in many postcolonial contexts, religious beliefs and practices have been used as a means of asserting cultural identity and resisting the imposition of Western norms and values. It highlights the complex and dynamic nature of cultural identity and provides a framework for understanding the ways in which colonialism and globalization have impacted religious beliefs and practices.

There are several prominent critics who have used the concept of hybridity to discuss religion in Africa; Homi Bhabha has written extensively on the concept of hybridity. In his book entitled *The Location of Culture*, he argues that hybridity is a key feature of postcolonial societies, and that it can be used as a means of resistance and cultural expression. Bhabha has used the concept of hybridity to explore the ways in which colonialism and globalization have impacted African religions, and how these religions have been used to assert cultural identity and resist dominant power structures.

Kwame Anthony Appiah: Appiah is a Ghanaian-British philosopher who has written extensively on African identity and culture. In his book entitled *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, he uses the concept of hybridity to explore the ways in which African religions have been impacted by colonialism. He argues that religions have been able to survive and adapt to circumstances by incorporating elements of Western culture, while still maintaining their distinct cultural identities. John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian has written extensively on African religions. In *African Religions and Philosophy,* he argues that African religions are inherently hybrid, incorporating elements of traditional beliefs and practices as well as elements of Christianity and Islam. Mbiti has used the concept of hybridity to challenge the idea that African religions are static and unchanging by highlighting their dynamic and adaptive nature.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff are South African anthropologists who have written extensively on the impact of colonialism on African religions. In their book entitled *Of Revelation and Revolution*, they use the concept of hybridity to explore the ways in which African Christians have adapted and transformed the teachings of Christianity to assert their cultural identities and resist colonial domination. They argue that hybridity is a key feature of African Christianity, and that it has enabled African Christians to create new forms of religious expressions that challenge dominant power structures. In this study, hybridity will be used to discuss Nkengasong's *God was African* to show how conflict emanates because of divergence in Christianity and traditional opinions, how a society strives to reach a compromise where each aspect is incorporated into their daily lives and how a convergence of both belief systems brings joy, peace and harmony.

Published in 2015, *God Was African* has received very little critical reviews therefore this paper aims to add in to the bank of reviews to this novel. We'll however present a brief plot to the novel before delving into the main discussion. The novel narrates the story of a young University lecturer, (His name is originally Nkue-ndem which means "God's message"; but it was wrongly registered in school as Kendem so he is called Ken) Ken who returns to his homeland (Lewoh) to visit his sick mother after studying in the United States of America (USA). The main plot and sub plots of the story discuss Ken's trip to the USA thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship and how he struggles to challenge other scholars on the stereotypical impressions they have and express about Africa. When asked by one of the scholars, Dos Santos if roads exist in Ken's country (Cameroon) and how people in his country move around, Ken's response is "…we skip from tree to tree. Bigger trees than these. And your country's ambassador is an excellent tree climber. A good skipper too. In fact, he occupies one of the biggest trees in the capital city." (GWA, 93). While battling with the academic and stereotypical challenges, Ken is on an "impossible mission" to find his brother (Tony) who travelled to the USA many years ago and has never returned to his roots despite being the first son and his father's successor.

Ken returns to his fatherland Lewoh at the peak of conflict between the family of the chief (traditional leader) who has "disappeared" (died). The children of the deceased chief insist on giving their father a Christian burial while the villagers insist that the chief must join his ancestors as custom demands through a traditional funeral. Ken also struggles to keep the secret about the deplorable way he found his brother in the USA; he resists going to the family shrine to pour libation of his ancestors and "greet his father" as his mother urged. At the chief's funeral, the strongest masquerade of the land snatches the corpse during the burial procession and vanishes with it in the secret shrine of the palace where they burry him as tradition demands and

his successor is "caught" and initiated. However, the day after the burial ceremony, the villagers including all the paramount chief, sub chiefs and traditional elders gather in church with the villagers for a requiem mass after which they return to the chief's compound for dancing and celebration.

The novel closes with Ken's mother still asking him if he has visited his father's resting place and cautions him to ensure he talks to his father before his departure to the city. She still enquires about her first son Tony and warns Ken that he cannot "hold burning charcoal in his hands" (GWA, 287). Ken finally unfolds the truth to his mother; on hearing his narrative, "I sat with my mother looking towards the ancestral shrine". (ibid)

This paper is divided in to two parts; the first part entitled "The Conundrum of Harmonizing African Traditional beliefs and Christianity" discusses the encounter between these two religions, challenges and how their differences have left lasting impacts on the religious identities of many Africans thereby leading to a complex interplay of beliefs and practices that blend elements of both traditions as presented in Nkengasong's *God was African*. The second section of this paper entitled "Cultural Compromise and Preservation of Identity" highlights the need for cultural understanding and spiritual enrichment between the West and African societies. It encourages the importance of dialogue that transcends religious boundaries and can foster mutual respect, empathy and cooperation. This approach to encourage religious pluralism as seen in Nkengasong's novel promotes unity in diversity, celebrates the richness of human experience and interconnectedness of all spiritual paths.

The Conundrum of Harmonizing African Traditional beliefs and Christianity

Africans had their world turned upside down when the white man arrived, and particularly so when they started to install ministries in the late 19th and 20th centuries. They were faced not only with direct and indirect colonial rule, but also with the rule of an external God which threatened to break down the cosmology of the Africans and replace it with an individualistic one that would isolate the African from his ancestors and gods. This, besides the era of slavery and slave trade brought an ideological change to the African; it was a time when Africans began to lose a sense of their own identity. It was to plant the seeds for much future conflict between traditional and Christian Africans.

Most African societies operate not on the individual or private level, but in a corporate community where the individual simply cannot thrive. The communal nature of the African is seen in Nkengasong's novel when Ken travels back to Lewoh and almost all the members of the community come to visit him bringing food and blessings to welcome him home. The supreme good is the welfare of the community as opposed to personal salvation. Therefore, traditional religions reflect this. They are religions of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. The concern is to maintain an integral community through the appeasement of the ancestors and spiritual forces which affect the worldly events and conditions, and thereby to achieve a stable and prosperous society. The complex web of life is divided into sacred and profane spheres and governed by the relationship between the living, the dead, and the unborn. It is believed that disruption of this relationship through moral transgression, ritual neglect, or other means will result in retribution in the form of illness, misfortune, or death for the offender and/or his community. This is why we see the conflict between the late chief's children and the elders. The elders of the land are convinced that if in death the chief is not ferried to his ancestors the traditional way, calamity may

befall his family and the land. The children on the other hand who are Christians are of the opinion that if their father is buried traditionally instead of as a Christian, he will not attain eternal life.

A search for a common ground between Christianity and traditional African religion seems an unlikely venture to some. The two religions are so vastly different in many ways, even contradictory, with Christianity adopting the belief in one God, who is a Spirit, and a singular way to attain salvation, and African religion being concerned with maintaining harmony in the community, environment and ushering in the fruition of it on this earthly plane. Also, the impression that Christianity has left on Africa has been stained from its inception with the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the subsequent influences of postmodernity and Westernization. All these forces have not only tried to eliminate African religion and culture but have strongly denigrated it, creating a deep-seated doubt, alienation and displeasure with one's own religion and culture.

In a continent as diverse and complex as Africa, it is difficult to summarise the religious practices and beliefs of a vast range of people. Africa is a large continent, with a great variety of nations and tribes, each with their own distinctive culture and religion, developed and refined over many generations. Each religion is an integral part of life and cannot be separated from everyday living. Traditional African religious beliefs, though varying greatly, share many similar concepts. The concept of God and deities (gods) are a major problem area because Christianity unequivocally states that there is only one God. Failure to distinguish between the Old Testament God and the lesser divinities leads many Africans to equate the Christian God with the lesser divinities of the traditional religions. In Nigeria, for example, the Yoruba translation of 'God' is Olorun, the name of the most powerful of the Yoruba pantheon. Due to the multiplicity of spirits and ancestors, the Christian concept of the "communion of saints" is equated with polytheism in traditional religion. The result is syncretism, an attempted fusion of both religions into one, with a loss of the essential monotheistic nature of Christianity.

For most Africans, it is the spirits of the departed, the forces of nature, and the ancestors who intervene in daily life. These spirits and ancestors do not form a clearly defined pantheon of lesser gods. They all represent varying degrees of the power of the one high God, and their individual influence is limited to specific activities. At the same time, their closeness to the concerns of living humans makes them more approachable objects of religious devotion and magical rites. This results in the worship of lesser gods and spirits. The African concept of God and deity is intrinsically opposed to the Christian understanding, leading to the suppression of one religion in favour of the other. In traditional African religion, God is experienced in many ways. He is seen as the unmoved mover, the first cause of all things. Although God is acknowledged as the supreme force in the universe, he is too distant and remote from the everyday activities of most Africans to warrant their direct worship or attention.

In most African Christian communities there is the performance of the traditional marriage before the Christian marriage. The couple often feels the need to conduct both in fear that the traditional rite will bring discontent from the parents and be perceived as a lack of respect for the tribal culture. This is why Ken's mother even though a Christian stays in the traditional polygamous home and carries out her duties as a wife. It is also common in some African Christian communities that when a child is sick, the parents will still resort to using a native doctor before seeking medical advice and prayer in church. This is due to the perception that the god is angry with them, or their child has committed a sin, and visible action must be taken to restore blessings and cleanse from sins. This situation can be likened to Ken's brother who is living in misery in the USA; he has

abandoned his ancestors and the gods of his land and therefore his bad luck can be likened to the fact that he has cut off from his ancestors. This contrasts greatly with Christian belief that prayer is the first action and God's grace is already present, and the sick should seek help from God, not deities.

During the time when Africans were met with missionaries, they were resistant to giving up their rituals that have been part of their cultures for centuries, as they believed that their rituals were the sources of blessings given by their gods. This caused a hindrance for Africans to accept Christian prayers, as they believed the power of Christian prayers was not enough to replace their rituals. This is because prayer in Christianity is an isolated spiritual event and lacks the ability to provide visible expressions of faith. Although such visible expressions are nowadays maintained in some Christian traditions, it is hard for African Christians to shy away from traditional rituals. Unlike Ken's mother who embraced Christianity while still practicing her traditional belief, his father didn't waver, "and so my father turned towards his ancestors. He had built the shrine in the backyard of the main house of the compound in which he displayed relics of his ancestors and offered sacrifices to them at different times of the year." (GWA, 29). Ken describes one of these ritual incidents which took place the year he graduated from primary school (he must have been about 12 or 13 years old).

Two days before the ritual was performed, his father, with the help of his five wives had to gather materials for the ceremony. Traditional items like "ndindie seeds" (alligator pepper), "nkeng branches" (peace plant), other traditional herbs and a healthy he-goat which was to be slaughtered for the event was provided. On the day of the ceremony, all his wives and children were invited alongside very close relatives. Inside the shrine were pieces of furniture, beads, cowries, and clay pots covering the earth. Each of these clay pots represents an ancestor. When the ritual begins, he salutes each ancestor calling his name and proceeds with prayers.

> "when there is pestilence in the land and our crops do not grow well, do we not come to you to complain and to ask for redemption? When we are strong enough to provide a goat or a chicken, do we not also come to thank you for giving us abundance?
>
> We, your children, the household of Mbe Tanju-Ngong whose umbilical cord stretches to the stool of Acha-ajong, have come to salute you and to thank you for the blessings you have given us. We beseech you to cover our heads with *Mbebueh* leaves, to continue to give us good health, children, and peace in our homes…" (GWA,117)

In many African traditional societies, rituals and ceremonies are enacted to maintain harmony within the community. They function as expressions of faith and bond in the family and the community. The capacity of the ritual determines what is being asked from the ancestors. Rituals involve an entire cultural event rather than an isolated event with no cultural connections. Rituals and rites at important times in life, involving birth, initiation, marriage, and death. In *God was African*, it is the death of a chief that is involved therefore, the burial ritual is of high significance to the tradition and gods of the land.

The clash of belief systems changed the Africans more than the religion. It is common knowledge and a common practice that most Africans who have converted to Christianity still hold on to their traditional religion; some do so out of fear of the repercussions from their ancestors if the completely forsake their traditions. People who hail from the Western Region of Cameroon generally known as the Bamileke keep the skulls of their ancestors in a family shrine (each family has a shrine). It is believed that they go to the village and pour libations on these skulls almost every weekend. This tribe is the most successful business tribe in Cameroon, and it is believed that

their worship of ancestors is the root of their success in business. However, those who do not go to pour libations on the skulls of the ancestors often encounter bad luck and setbacks in their businesses or careers.

The encounter of African traditional religions and Western religions brought about different levels of confusion and transformation in the indigenous African religions. With the coming of Christianity to Africa, the Christian missionaries learned that to make an effective difference in the mindset of the Africans, they would have to go about preaching their message in a way that would be more acceptable to the indigenous Africans. There is supposed to be a level of cultural understanding which will result in the enrichment of religion.

Cultural Compromise and Preservation of Identity

During the process of teaching Christianity in African communities, missionaries have often attacked the heart of traditional religion, aiming to shatter the people's faith in their own spiritual systems. This has caused some Africans to reject their religious beliefs as mere superstition, and led others to become defensive about their beliefs and untrusting of what the missionaries have to offer. However, some Africans have simply been converted without any direct confrontation between the two religious systems. Ken grows up as a Roman Catholic mass servant, happily embracing Christianity.

> "I worked in the sacristy, dusting the wardrobe, sunning the stale altar vestments. I loved the surplices… the loosely fitting garments extended to the knees, won over red cassocks. And when we the altar boys wore them, we could experience our souls welded firmly to Catholic faith in work and in deed, especially when we led the priest in the solemnity of the procession to the altar at the start of the liturgy" (GWA,25)

His unadulterated faith in the Christian God makes him refuse to visit the ancestral shrine when he returns to Lewoh. When asked what his opinion is in the heart of the conflict between the deceased chief's children against the other traditional rulers, Ken doesn't take sides, he stays neutral and cautiously avoids sharing his opinion on the issue. Ken symbolizes a system of replacement where the African has taken on the new religion but does not see his own religion as being in error.

There have been noticeable changes in African traditional rituals and ceremonies that have effectively shaped African religious culture amongst practitioners of Christianity. Generally, African cultures have viewed rituals and ceremonies as important fundamentals within the religious framework, representing in concrete form the beliefs of the religion. They are also, as expected, vehicles for good favour and warding off of evil from individuals or groups and are a way to secure blessings from spiritual beings to ensure the security of the family or community for the future.

In the African struggle to remain connected with their indigenous religions, there is the fundamental need to preserve their identity. Once the system has been undermined and the people have been alienated from their old traditions, it is impossible to turn back. Christianity is often seen as a formidable and alluring religion which stirs up images of Western prosperity and advances. However, Christianity can create a feeling of inadequacy among the less educated and the poor in Africa, who do not have the means to keep up with the fast-changing modern world. Amid an identity crisis, a dual religious identity may emerge in which the African may profess Christianity but still cling to the traditional religions in an attempt to maintain some cultural

identity. However, it is not accepted by conventional Christian standards and the African will be regarded as "ignorant, weak, and tempted by the devil" for still holding to the old ways. This split identity will create a feeling of inner tension and guilt and may even lead to psychological disorders. Such a situation is hardly an advancement in church and society, and it serves to isolate the African from the church and turn him away from the faith.

Interfaith dialogue must therefore be built on respect for the other partner's identity and the intention to learn from each other to build a common understanding and a cooperative relationship is necessary. When debating about the type of burial the chief should receive, a villager has this to say:

> "Things have long changed. The church and tradition today are one. Do we not sing the same ritual songs in church today which the church forbade our fathers from singing in their ancestral shrines a long time ago? Did they not say the songs were pagan songs and that it was the work of Satan singing those songs and dancing? The church refused eating the crab when it first arrived. Today it is eating its sauce and licking its fingers." (GWA, 9-10)

It is true that there has been a level of compromise between Christianity and traditional religion, but the process of merging is far from being over as misunderstandings still exist. The importance of dialogue has even reached the United Nations, which has prescribed an annual World Interfaith Harmony Week. However, some problems still arise as African traditional healers, or witchdoctors, have been stigmatized as practicing in dark and evil arts, even though their role within the community was often that of a mediator with the spiritual realm. In 2000, during an attempt to promote dialogue between African Initiated Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in South Africa, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference made a statement that being able to contact the benevolent or malevolent spiritual realm is, in fact, a negative view of the African traditional worldview. This caused the dialogue to come to a halt as the African initiated churches felt they were being asked to give up something that was intrinsic to their belief. This demonstrates that there is still a level of misunderstanding of African traditional religion therefore, the process of blending these religions is a continuous struggle because only certain aspects of the African tradition will be accepted in to Christianity. An example is seen during the offertory procession at the requiem mass when the dancers are putting on traditional regalia and dancing with "nkeng leaves" (peace plant) while taking their gifts to the altar. Despite the setback, interfaith dialogue is still the best opportunity for Christian denominations and African traditional religionists to come to a mutual understanding and eventually find common ground.

2. CONCLUSION

Christianity is still widely perceived as a foreign and alien religion, and "true religiosity" as something to be found in existing African religions rather than in a Christian synthesis. Furthermore, the ways in which aspects of Christianity are assimilated or rejected often occur at a popular level which is syncretic and unsystematic, rather than in the more self-conscious and reflective way the educated elite might suppose or desire. The net result is often a double disharmony. On the one hand, African theologians and church leaders are finding that the Africanization of Christianity is leading it further away from the older Christian traditions. On the other hand, those who attempt to remain loyal to these older traditions are finding that Africans with more syncretic beliefs are moving away from them. The result is that it is not simply African traditional religion and Christianity which are becoming distanced from each other, but different

forms of Africanised Christianity. This raises the question of whether an African Christianity which is in harmony with traditional African religiosity is, in fact, a historic impossibility, in view of the rate of social change in Africa and the contact with modernity which is part and parcel of it. The process of harmonizing Christianity with African religious beliefs, whether for individuals or whole congregations, is not simply a question of replacing old beliefs and practices with new ones or of distilling a purer "African" form of Christianity. It involves a continuous process of negotiation and reinterpretation of both religious traditions. Those elements of Christianity which can be seen to complement African beliefs and the African worldview will increasingly be assimilated, while those perceived to contradict or challenge them will be reinterpreted or even ignored. By the same token, African religiosity will seek affirmation in those aspects of the Christian tradition which are consonant with its own ethos and deny or ignore those which challenge it. It is in this process that the real shape of a harmonized form of the two religiosities will emerge.

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