CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

Before their contact with foreign culture and religious practices, African people lived in a world of traditional practices and beliefs that have been passed down from their ancestors. These traditional beliefs and practices manifested in their cultural, social and political lifestyles. The richest part of the African traditional beliefs and practices is the African traditional religion. This is so because the African traditional religion permeates all the departments of life of the African people. However, the African traditional beliefs and practices have been stripped of their fundamental roles in the lives of Africans as they have been subjected to foreign cultures and traditions. These foreign cultures have lasting influences on the African worldview as the African traditional beliefs and practices have experienced drastic changes in all ramifications. This study intends to critically assess these modern day practices and their effects on the African mentality. It also attempts to analyse the place of African traditional beliefs and practices in the modern day setting.

Keywords: Traditional Beliefs and Practices, African Traditional Religion, Modern Practices

Introduction

Africa, as it is today, is a conflux of varying cultural beliefs and religious practices. This is owed to many reasons, one of which is colonialism. Other reasons given for the presence of different and varying cultural practices in Africa also include trade with Arabs from the Middle East which necessitated the incursion of Arab culture and religion into Africa and the growth of science and technology which have turned the world into a sort of small community i.e. a global village.

Prior to the time of their contact with foreign cultural practices and religious beliefs, Africans had their own ways of life which have been in existence for ages. The African people have their own unique ways of life which informed their worldview, social life and sustenance. In J. S. Mbiti’s words:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all departments of life. (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2)

Mbiti’s contention is that the lives of Africans are wrapped around their religiosity. This is to mean that every aspect of the African peoples’ lives has religious underpinnings to it. Although, many scholars have faulted J. S. Mbiti for making a hasty generalization on the whole of the African people and that there are African societies that had no religious system, it can still be legitimately said that a great number of African people (tribes) has all the departments of their lives embedded in their religious system. Thus, in most pre-colonial African societies, the traditional beliefs and practices cannot be discussed outside the religious setting they are embedded in. Given the centrality of religious beliefs and practices in African societies and cultures, the study of Africa indigenous religious is important in building a better understanding of the African traditional beliefs and practices in relation to the modern day status of these beliefs and practices.

There was no monolithic form of religious practices in pre-colonial African societies but there were categories of religious beliefs which were common in most societies’ religious settings. According to Bolaji Idowu (1973), the structure of most African societies’ indigenous religious system include the belief in a Supreme Being (God), belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, the practices of magic and medicine. These are evident in the conduct of their lives which are always attached to some religious phenomena.

In the pre-colonial settings of African societies, bounty or slim harvests in agricultural products are attributed to the mercy or wrath of the gods, a person’s success or otherwise is attributed to some divinities, a woman’s fertility or barrenness is attributed to the destiny apportioned to her by the gods or God, rainfall, famine, intelligence, power, authority, etc all have religious connotations attached to
However, as said earlier, all of these have changed with the incursion of different foreign cultural practices and religious beliefs into Africa. There has been a steady change in the African traditional beliefs and practices especially with their subjugation by foreign cultural practices. In order to get a better understanding of the thesis of this essay, it is important to engage in a comparative analysis of the status of African traditional beliefs and practices in pre-colonial times and their status in contemporary time. This would take us through examining different departments of the African life such as education, political setting, religion, agricultural system, family setting, festivals, social life etc as they were then and what obtains in the present day Africa.

**Religion in Traditional and Contemporary African Societies**

The richest part of the African culture i.e. traditional beliefs and practices is said to be the African indigenous religions. The African people have been described as a highly religious people although with exception of some few African tribes. The African indigenous religion is the most organized and systematized part of the African culture and it permeates other cultural practices. Mbiti states that there are different tribes with different religions in Africa, despite this, there still remain overlapping religious practices among these different tribes.

It is important to point out that some African societies are atheistic, some are henotheistic while some are monotheistic. In those societies with organized religious settings, there are deities, religious ceremonies and rituals, and as well human representatives of the gods. Taking the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, for example, their indigenous religious deities include Sango, Ogun, Oya, Osun etc and each deity has its arrays of followership that see these deities as the intermediaries between humans and the supreme being (God). Each deity also has human representatives among its followers (the priests and priestesses) who communicate the deities’ command to the followers. There are also specific shrines designed for the worship of each deity and it is in these shrines where ritual ceremonies are performed to the deities. The deities are consulted for the solution to knotty issues and blessings are sought from them by their followers. Religious ceremonies are usually annual festivities.

However, with the contact of Africans with European and Arabs, the religious practices of these foreigners begin to creep in and form part of the religious systems of the African people. Christianity and Islam are the leading foreign religions introduced into Africa and they have come to take a central place in the African’s religious life. These are now the choice religions of many Africans thereby relegating the practice of African indigenous religious into a ‘relatively oblivion’ background. These foreign religious practices condemn everything associated with the African traditional as paganistic, primitive and negative. Dare Arowolo captures the general influence of foreign religious and cultural practices when he states thus:

> With Africa subjugated and dominated, the Western culture and European mode of civilization began to thrive and outgrow African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things. (Arowolo, 2010, p. 2)

This actually is the situation with the religious system of African societies. Christian and Islamic scriptures are now used as the model of spiritual and moral guidance, their places of worship are choice destinations and their priests are held in high esteem. All of these have resulted in a decrease in followership and practice of African indigenous religions. It is, however, important to note that side by side with their commitment to Christianity, Islam and other foreign religious practices, most African people still retain beliefs and rituals that are characteristic of the African indigenous religions. Although, a few number of people still completely identifies themselves with the indigenous religions, majority hold traditional beliefs and practices as a “second-fiddle”. It is, thus not a surprise that most African people only practise foreign religion for different reasons, (e.g. social and economic reasons), they still resort to the protective power inherent in the indigenous religions which they believe for its potency.

Even with its condemnation by the foreign religions, the influence of African indigenous religion is continually evident in some aspects of daily life until the present time, though in a reduced manner. Many African people still consult with indigenous religion’s priests for one spiritual help or the other. African people dare not swear a false oath in the name of any of the indigenous religions’ deities,
for they dread that these deities set to work immediately in punishing evil deeds and rewarding good deeds. Unlike in foreign religious practices, especially Islam and Christianity, where punishment and rewards are reserved for the after-life, African indigenous religions hold that one gets one's reward or punishment here on earth. Thus, in modern day Africa, indigenous religion do not play the frontline role they used to in the lives of Africans during the pre-colonial times, they are now held as alternative religions which are only relevant where the foreign religious practices fail. The positions of rainmakers, traditional healers and priests/priestesses no longer enjoy the high esteem attached to them as it was before.

**Traditional African Family System, Naming and Identity in Contemporary Africa**

Other aspects of the traditional African life where religion manifests are the family system, names and the objects of identity. In the African traditional practice, family setting is mostly an extended, communal setting. In most African societies, the family setting includes the convergence of a large group of people related by blood in one location. This is a setting which includes the grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, and children. These people see themselves as one. More so, religious identity is also instrumental to the setting of a family. For example, a family worshipping Ogun, the god of iron, in the Yoruba society of Western Nigeria, sees another family that also worships Ogun as their kin. Respect for the elderly ones is also one of the characteristics of the traditional African family setting. The naming tradition shows the indigenous religion that an African belongs to. In most traditional African societies, the name of the deity that a family worships reflects in the names they bear. Taking the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria as an example again, families that worship Ogun bear names such as Ogunyemi, Ogunmoede, Ogunwale, families that worship the river goddess Osun, bear names such as Osungbemi, Osuntomi, Osunleke etc. Even among the Igbo tribe of Eastern Nigeria, we have names like Chukwuemeka, Chukwudi, Chigozie etc which all reflect the religious beliefs in gods or the Supreme Being (God).

Tribal mark is another form of identity in the traditional African society. Most tribes in Africa, have ways of identifying themselves such that when one sees a person, one can easily say which tribe such person belongs to. Tribal marks come in different forms. In some tribes, these marks are designed on the checks, some on the forehead, some at the back of the palm, while others are placed on the belly or other parts of the body. It is also important to note that aside the identification purpose of tribal marks, they are also used for fashion purpose. This is particularly common among African women who have these marks on in order to look more beautiful and attract men.

However, a careful examination of these practices in modern day Africa will show that they have been subjected to underestimation and basic stigmatization which began with the introduction of foreign religious practices and have continued to be reserved till the present time (Mezzana, 2002). The era of communal and extended family setting has given way for individualistic and nuclear family setup. The practice of living in a large family is now frowned at as old-fashioned. Raising a large family is also campaigned against for economic reasons of the adverse effects of overpopulation. Thus, the practices of polygamy and extended family are gradually giving way for monogamy and nuclear family. Also, the practice of tribal marks is now regarded as archaic and backward. There is even a cliché as to having tribal marks: “You fight lion?” is the expression used to deride those who have tribal marks on them. In the place of tribal marks, tattoo is now being used not as a form of identity but as a fashion trend which is, even in foreign religious practices, frowned at as a sign of moral decadence.

Names that reflect religious affiliation and traditional ancestral lineage are also neglected for foreign names. Africans now prefer to be called by adopted foreign names such as Coker, Harrison, John, Mohammed etc. These are names that are alien to the African traditional setting unlike the indigenous names which represent the common religious and spiritual rooting for all who belong to the same ethnic group. This is not to say that indigenous naming is no longer in vogue in contemporary Africa, but it is no longer a general or common phenomenon. It is only practised, widely, in remote areas among people who still hold the African traditional values in high esteem, it is no longer a common practice among the elites in most African cities.

It is, therefore, important to note that foreign religious practices of Christianity and Islam (and some other religions too) and the cultural practices of the West and the Arab have had a great effect on the traditional African family setting, naming practices and forms of identity amongst ethnic group.
Morality Status in Contemporary Africa

To a large extent, morality in traditional African setting is also a case of religious orientation. In denying the suggestion that morality derives from society's need for self-preservation or that morality is a product of common-sense, Idowu asserts that the African view “is that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent upon it. Man’s concept of deity is taken to be the norm of morality” (Idowu, 1962, p. 145). This is to say that in traditional Africa, religion and morality are held as inseparable. This conception of morality is similar to the Divine Command theory. To this conception of morality, some African scholars nay philosophers have argued that religion and morality are separable and that Africans do not seek the rationale of morality in the decrees of gods or God but in the exigencies of social existence. Segun Gbadegesin, for instance, holds that Africans “are very pragmatic in their approach to morality, and although religion may serve them as a motivating force, it is not the ultimate appeal in moral matters” (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 82)

Considering this debate on the relationship of morality and religion in Africa, it can be said that the conduct of traditional African people are decisively influenced by considerations as to the likes and dislikes of the ancestors. There are, however, two sides to the belief that the ancestors or gods reward rectitude and punish its opposite. One is that people of weak moral standing are lured into action or forbearance by the promise of ancestral rewards or reprisals and secondly those of solid moral aptitude adjust their conduct by a direct cognizance of the principles of morality. Thus, it is to be seen that religion has its own purpose in the moral setting of the traditional African society. Chastity, hard work, honesty are all hallmark of high moral standards in the traditional African setting.

There is now a new face to the practice of morality in Africa. Given the advancement in science and technology, and the introduction of Christianity and religion, morality in contemporary African societies has taken a new meaning. Although, these foreign religious try to instill their own moral principles into the society, moral decadence is now the order of the day. Phenomena that are unknown to the pre-colonial African societies are now introduced. These include homosexualism, corruption, internet scam, orgy etc. Virginity is no longer a symbol of pride. These are all as a result of the exposure caused by the inventions of science and technology. The decadent moral practices in modern day Africa have, thus, subdued the African traditional moral beliefs and practices.

Effects of Science and Technology on African Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Colonialism is the precursor of modern science and technology in Africa. This is no to say that African people do not have an idea of science prior to their contact with the Europeans. As Makinde argues,

In every society, there exists a strong desire to know about causes and effects, more especially, about the future. If in any society as different from Western societies there exists a method of knowing or means by which causes are discovered and reliable predictions are made, we shall call it a science irrespective of whether or not such a science is open to empirical investigation. (Makinde, 2010, p. 441)

Thus, it can be said that pre-colonial African people have an idea of science. However, the theoretical and practical knowledge of modern science and technology is introduced by the West through colonialism and this has had great effects on the African traditional beliefs and practices.

In the first place, science and technology have drastically reduced the significance of African indigenous religion. This is, especially, noticed in the cases of traditional rainmakers, magician, fortune tellers and religious priests. Traditional rainmakers were usually sought whenever there was a drought but meteorology, the scientific study of the earth’s atmosphere, especially its patterns of climate and weather, has reduced the societal importance of rainmakers by giving a more practical explanation to climatic issues such as rainfall, drought, sunshine etc. The practice of magic has also been affected as science has proved the impossibility of previously held unempirical phenomena.

Secondly, in the area of health (medicine), the use of herbs was a common practice for treating illness in pre-colonial African societies. There were also witch doctors or traditional herbalists who specialise in the diagnosis and treatment of illness for they are knowledgeable in the kinds and dosage of herbs for different cases of ailments. In modern day Africa, what we now have are medical doctors in the stead of traditional herbalists and pills, syrup and injections in the place of local herbs.
Advancements in science and technology have changed the medical practices of African societies. Spiritual explanations for the cause of ailments have given way to scientific practical explanations. More practical empirical explanations are now given to the outbreak of an epidemic rather than the traditional belief that such epidemic is as a result of spiritual attack or the deities’ wrath.

The effects of science and technology have also been felt in the agricultural practices of African societies. It is important to note that ownership of land in most traditional African societies is a communal matter. No individual has the right to own land but people did own land by virtue of belonging to the community. More so, farming in traditional African societies is carried out with crude tools such as hoes, cutlass and cudgel and it was usually at a subsistence level of growing food crops with the surplus harvest put to sale at times. Colonialism and its “brainchild”, science and technology, has inhibited the growth of indigenous technology in Africa to a large extent (Emeagwali, 1998). In contemporary African societies, land can now be owned by individuals. Mechanized farming has been made possible with the invention of tractors, bulldozer, mower, harvesters and other scientific instruments for agricultural practices. People now farm on a large scale basis and with a shift from food crop production to cash crop production. Thus, the traditional practice of communal ownership of farmland has been neglected for the individual form of mechanized farming.

**Law And Rights in Contemporary African Societies**

In social and political philosophy parlance, the terms law and rights have no consensual definitions. But for our purpose here, we shall stick by their ordinary meanings as they relate to the African society. Rights can be defined as the valid or legal claims that a person has to do or not to do something or to a thing while law is the enforceable rule protecting these rights.

In traditional African societies, the concept of right is different and opposite in orientation to the Western conception. This is because in traditional African societies, the concepts of right emphasizes community rights over individual right and freedom (Abdulraheem, 2011). The law that governed traditional African societies sees the community as one. This does not mean that individuals are not singled out for punishment when they break the law but that every right that an individual enjoy in pre-colonial African societies is as a result of belonging to a larger group in a community. It would however, be tantamount to injustice if it is not stated here that the laws of traditional African societies were patriarchal. The position of women in pre-colonial Africa was a reflection of the belief in their subordinate status. Formulation of the law gave premiums to men (Njoku, 1980). This is not to say that women have no rights. They do have some rights but only within the confines of their subordination to men.

These practices are no longer in vogue with the influence of Western civilization and enlightened. Women in Africa are now accorded more individual rights as men and there are even sections of most African constitutions which give leniency to cases of women. In the pre-colonial African society, a woman has no legal right to seek divorce from her husband for any reason. This is no longer the case these days as the law no allows for women to file for divorce if the need arise. The Western conception of law have therefore, suppressed the traditional conception and practical application of law.

**Contemporary Status of African Indigenous Political Systems**

Pre-colonial Africa is populated by several hundreds of ethnic groups with varied political institutions. But, with these variations, there are overlapping features in most African political institutions such as patriarchal monarchy and centralized power. Pre-colonial African political institutions are also communalistic and the leaders are, most times, chosen by consulting with the oracles. Colonial powers have, however, superimposed new state organizations borrowed from Western historical experience on these pre-colonial institution and these have continued to be identified with today’s African countries (Gennaioli & Rainer, 2007).

Democratic election of leader has taken the place of divine (oracular) selection of leaders in modern day African societies. The systems of government are now modeled after those of the western societies. Thus, there is a debate on the policy of remaking Africa. Some have argued for “a return to ‘African roots’ and indigenous cultures of Africans for new social and political theories and practices to solve Africa’s problems” (Oke, 2006, p. 332). Some other scholars have also rejected this call for the return to ‘African roots’ in the search for social and political theories to solve the problems of Africa. As this debate persists, one fact about the contemporary Africa political system is that it is now a
complexities of varying political systems, both those that are foreign and those that are indigenous to Africa.

Conclusion

In discussing the contemporary status of African traditional beliefs and practices, it is necessary to discuss all the aspects of the African life in which changes have occurred. This paper does not claim an exhaustive discussion of all of these aspects of life, but it has tried to critically examine some of the traditional beliefs and practices of Africans which have changed as a result of contact with foreign religious beliefs and cultural practices. It has been discussed that most African traditional beliefs and practices have gone into extinction, some are been practised at a minimal rate (e.g. religious festivals), while other traditional practices are been revived for their relevance to modern day necessity (e.g. resorting to the protective powers of indigenous religion’s deities).

However, Africa cannot completely strip itself of the cultural and religious complexity it has found itself. I would, thus, submit that in tackling the challenges that face contemporary African societies, there is the need to utilize the rich cultural heritages, both foreign and indigenous, that can be of great relevance. There is no need for a total return to ‘African roots’, but to merge the parts of African traditional beliefs and practices that are relevant in tackling the modern day challenges of Africa with those that are imported by foreign cultural practices and religious beliefs.

References


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