

# Syncretism In Relation To African Tradition Religion: Why The Uproar?

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*Abstract: Syncretism is the reconciliation of fusion of different systems or the attempt at such fusion. By implication, not having a particular religion you worship. Worshipping as a Christian and also a traditionalist. African Traditional Religion has been accused of being backdrop, African Traditional Religion does not worship two religions. They worship the supreme-being through the minor deities or intermediaries. The work set out to explain in clear terms what syncretism is all about and to categorically without mincing word assert that African Traditional Religion is a pure religion that has no business with syncretism. The work made salient points and concluded that even though African Traditional Religion adherents worship the supreme-sbeing through minor deities that, that does not mean that it is a religion of syncretism. It therefore warned those who are not conversant with what the religion is all about to learn more about it before going into conclusion. It employed socio-cultural method approach.*

**Keywords: Sncretism, Relation, A.T.R, Uproar.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The religious system of the African people could be said to be as old as their history as a people. This has often made them to be described as “notoriously religious” (Mbiti, 1969 p.24), since religion colors all aspect of their lives which they practice in accordance with their cultural beliefs and practices. With the advent of the Christian missionaries, uniform Christian missions were implanted across Africa. This new religion seemed to have reflected a western culture which approached the indigenous religion of the African people with so much prejudice, this undermined the worldview of the African people to a great extent. As time went on, investigation into study of the religion of the African people progressed. This was an attempt by Africans to give their religious beliefs a definition, and it yielded much fruit. The side effect of this however was a form of syncretism which accompanied the new discovery. One of the results of this return is the founding of the African Independent Churches we have today. (Mbiti 1992, p.15) argues that “many African people today have a ‘mixed’ religious heritage to try to

reconcile traditional religion with Abrahamic faiths.” Most of these Churches, trying to create a balance, mix up the practices of Christianity and African Traditional Religion and so we talk about syncretism. However, do we accuse ATR completely of syncretism or rather Christianity? This is the center of discussion in this work. Attempt will also be made to look at what syncretism is, the prejudice of the early missionaries against ATR, syncretism in Christianity and then an evaluation of syncretic practices in ATR.

## II. CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

### RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The English Word “syncretism” comes from the Greek word *synkretismos*, a verb which means “to combine.” In this sense, religious syncretism is the blending of two or more religious thoughts or belief systems into a new system. Tippet (cited by Yamamori, 1975) defines syncretism as” the union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the

united form is a new thing, neither one nor the other.” This agrees with the view of Schreiter (1994), who defines syncretism as “the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both the systems lose basic structure and identity.” It is a borrowing of the practice(s) of one religion into another.

The Harper’s Bible Dictionary defines syncretism as “A conscious combining of two or more religions over a short period of time, or a process of absorption by one religion of elements of another over a long period of time.” In this case, the absorbed elements usually derive a new meaning by the fresh context.

### III. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The central place of religion in the lives and activities of the African people which is evident in all ramifications; social, political and even economical, gives credence to Mbiti’s statement that the African people are “notoriously religious.” Consequently, Africans have evolved and sustained religiously conscious communities, either as people who practice ATR, or converts to Islam and Christianity.

Ekwunife, J. (1990, p. 29) defines African Traditional Religion as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africa which are the result of traditional Africans’ response to their revealing superhuman ultimate, and which are rooted from time to time immemorial in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears.

The traditional religion of the African people described above is transmitted through oral traditions (myths, folklores and songs, dances, liturgies, rituals and proverbs, sayings and oaths), from generation to generation.

Religion in Africa is multi-faceted as a result of the multiplicity of culture and philosophy. The African continent’s population practice three major religions; Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. Kanu, A. argues that a recent statistic shows that the adherents of African Traditional Religion are about 20% of the total population of Africa, which is estimated to be around 760million. According to him, this percentage has been declining since the arrival of Islam and especially Christianity, and has deepened since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (2015, p.7). In the midst of the other two major religions in Africa, ATR suffers suppression and so its growth is stagnated. Some of these prejudices against ATR which contributed to the hindering of its growth are discussed below.

### IV. PREJUDICES BY THE EUROPEANS AGAINST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

There is no religion that has been misconceived, misunderstood and misinterpreted as African Traditional Religion. The arrival of the early missionaries was accompanied by colonialism, the introduction of western education and government into Africa. Prior to this period, the indigenous Africans lived their lives and piloted their societal

affairs based on their cultural laws and values. The early colonial masters who first came into Africa, as a result of poor knowledge of the African people and culture, analyzed and approached Africans with so much bias and prejudices which undermined African way of life and their religion in general because they lacked real contact with the African people. A comprehensible study of African Traditional Religion has been difficult especially because this study was first begun by the westerners and Europeans who made their study out of bias and had serious misconceptions about Africans and their practices. These group of people never understood the culture, neither did they possess the language of the African people. Hence, they studied the religion out of context as (Kanu, 2015, p.27) rightly says that “their perspectives were guided to a greater extent by ignorance and prejudice. Thus, a lot of Westerners believed that Africans had no religion at all, and in fact, could not conceive God.” In the same vein, Achebe (1958, p.53) said that “the white man does not understand our language nor culture, but he says our customs are bad; and our own who have taken up the religion (Christian converts) also condemn our customs.”

This is because the religion has been understood and studied even by Africans themselves out of prejudice and ignorance of what the African culture is actually all about. Some of them saw the African culture as the very stronghold of Satan. Some of the terminologies used in the description of African Traditional Religion are discussed below.

**PRIMITIVE:** The word primitive is derived from the Latin ‘*primus*’, meaning ancient, old fashioned or crude. *The Miriam Webster’s Dictionary* describes primitive as old-fashioned, crude or primary. This terminology describes the African culture and religion by the Europeans as something not up to standard and that does not measure up to their own cultural pattern. A religion that is crude and backward. It is unreasonable and unfair to speak of ATR using such terminology.

**PAGANISM:** ATR is also referred to as pagan religion. This term according to *Quarcoopome*, (1987, p. 16) is of a Latin derivative meaning originally a village dweller or a countryman, a person who lives far away from the civilized community. Paganism is a mark of sociological distinction between polished, civilized, enlightened and unsophisticated religion.

**IDOLATRY:** From the Greek word *eidolon* meaning ‘image’ or ‘shape’ usually copied from the original. Idolatry therefore refers to what is false as compared to the real thing. In terms of African Traditional Religion, “it refers to the worship of false gods (Kanu 2015, p13). The early missionaries believed that Africans worshipped false and empty gods,” and so their primary aim was to convert them into the worship of the true God.

**HEATHENISM:** Just like the terms described above, the use of the term “heathenism” on African Traditional Religion is based on religious pride and superiority with which the Europeans approached ATR. This term describes a religion that is unexposed and backward.

**FETISHISM:** This is derived from the Portuguese word *fetico*. It is related to the use of charms and amulets used by the Portuguese. The early missionaries described African Traditional Religion as a religion which operates with charms

and amulets (Quarcoopome 1987, p18). Truly, there may be elements of the use of charms and amulets especially for protection in ATR, but in reality, the religion is not all about that. Hence, it is inappropriate to use such terminology in the description of the religion of the traditional African people.

## V. CHRISTIANITY AND SYNCRETISM

The awakening of African cultural renaissance, has led to the zeal of Africans to think of African cultural rebirth. This zeal according to (Kanu 2005, p25) “is geared towards bringing about a revival of the African culture, which has been subdued, devalued, and bastardized by the European culture. A search for originality which would involve governments, educationists, and the wider society.” In other words, it is a search for meaning and identity in the African culture. This search sometimes leads the African people into taking some Christian practices back to ATR, thus, bringing about syncretism.

The correlation and coexistence of Christianity with other cultures and religion is dated back to the Apostolic age. At the time Christianity emerged, other religions were already in existence. Jesus had instructed his disciples to take the gospel message to the ends of the earth (Mt. 28:18). As Christianity continued to spread to all parts of the world, the Church saw the need to identify with the cultural practices of other religions which are not sinful but sacred, and so the call for inculturation especially as cried out in the Second Vatican Council. The importance of inculturation is echoed by Crollius (1986, p56) in the following word

The honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his gospel of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It is the reformation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people... it is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly feel at home in the cultures of each people.

Although the Church encourages inculturation in her missionary activities, it is evident that from the early Church, the tendency of syncretism has always been guarded against. The early Church has always tried to reject syncretic approaches to religion. One of the earliest expressions of this rejection is the amalgamation of incompatible beliefs as in St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians (2,8), where Paul makes it clear that the Christian belief is based on the risen Lord, and not from the synthesis of various religious practices. Hence, Paul warned Christians not to be carried away by an empty, seductive philosophy according to human traditions rather than that of Christ.

Also in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 15, we see a critic of syncretism, where it was concluded after the long debate at the Jerusalem council, concerning the criteria of admission into the Christian community. The gentile converts did not need to be circumcised and observe some Jewish laws before they become Christians. Simply put, they do not need to be Jews before they become Christians. In spite of all these however, we cannot conclude that Christianity is immune to syncretic practices. Hence, we look at other inlets of syncretism in Christianity.

Being a Mother, the Church seeks to give birth to new children and new ideas. She learns from her interactions with other religions and culture. She does not undermine the elements of other religions that is good and holy but enters into cultures that she may preach the message of salvation to all people and cultures. Interreligious Dialogue is one of the inlets through which syncretism enters Christianity. Because the world is becoming one politically, technically and economically, there is a felt need to be drawn together in a universal brotherhood, and Christianity is the major proponent of this. This is irrespective of one’s religious and cultural beliefs. In most cases, the disadvantage of this universal brotherhood is syncretism, as there is the tendency of influence of one religion on another and the adoption of one religious practice into another in the name of universal brotherhood.

Syncretism is also found in the African independent churches which are sometimes called “ATR Churches.” These churches arose as a reaction against the early missionary and colonial control. The aim is to reclaim some of the traditional beliefs and practices which have been rejected by the early Christian missionaries out of ignorance and prejudice against the African Traditional Religion. These churches mix-up Christianity and ATR, and these are expressed in songs, art works, rites and rituals. These practices are sometimes placed side by side with the Christian practices and even exalted higher than some practices in Christianity. According to Gehman, 2001, “when traditional beliefs and practices which are not compatible with Christian beliefs are brought into the Christian faith, the result is syncretism.”

Furthermore, most of the religious objects used in the Church today were borrowed from ATR. The incense we use at Mass for instance was first used by ATR adherents. Even the Israelites who offered incense to God in sacrifice borrowed from the Canaanite world. There are many other practices brought into Christianity from other religions but this is not the major aim of discussion in this work. Hence, we move now to the evaluation of syncretic practices in ATR which is our major aim of discussion in this study.

## VI. SYNCRETISM IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The Advent of Christianity and Islam into Africa led to the suppression of African Traditional Religion. Although, this religion is very conservative and more orthodox in their practices when compared to Christianity and Islam, one could see traces of syncretism in ATR. According to Kanu (2015, p380), “The encounter between European and African cultures is better described as a forced acculturation.” A word that describes a situation in which a highly developed society imposes certain elements of its culture on the other, forcing the other to derail from its unique track of cultural civilization. In spite of the cry by Christians to ATR adherents to become converted in the embrace of the new religion, many ATR adherents kept to their way of life. The first strategy employed by the white masters was that of disassemblage, concealed in the exploitative colonial ideology of benevolent paternalism. An ideology of condemnation which identified everything

good to be white, and everything bad to be black, (Ekwuru, 1999).

With the arrival of Christianity which came with great force and so many enticements such as western education, government, technology, civilization, among others. ATR was subdued and many embraced the new religion. And so with Christianity and Islam possessing a higher power, they influenced ATR and so we can talk about syncretism in ATR. This is because most of its adherents had to struggle to meet up with the status quo of these new religions as it lost its esteem with the force of the prejudices held against it. They began to incorporate some of the practices of Christianity as will be seen shortly.

However, in spite of the evident success of missionaries in Africa in the conversion of many into Christianity, there is an evident lack of depth in the faith and commitment of converts which has made a good number to return to ATR even though most of them do so under the guise of Christianity and Afro-Christian indigenous churches. Traditionally, one would not talk of a serious direct syncretism in ATR, but rather that syncretism came up as a result of Christian converts who, though have become Christians from ATR, have for various reasons returned to the Traditional practices of the African people known as ATR. Usually, this return is accompanied with influences of the new religion borrowed back to ATR. (Mugambi 1992) claims that Christianity taught to Africans by the missionaries had a fear of syncretism which was carried by current African Christian leadership in an attempt to keep Christianity 'pure.' Syncretism in ATR is said to be overstated, it is due to a misunderstanding of the abilities of local populations to form their own orthodoxies and also the confusion over what is culture and what is religion. (Mugambi, 1962 p. 60). ATR has practices similar to those of Abrahamic religions and so these do not fall under the umbrella of syncretism (Baldick, 1998).

Certainly, it is pointless arguing that positive advancement of ATR with the latest scientific and technological feats that have left no aspects of human civilization behind is a core syncretic imitation. The modernized places of worship in ATR, the decent attire worn by ATR ministers and the advertisement of ATR offers on billboards and media are only encouraging development on the part of ATR as a religion that exists amidst modernity rather than core syncretism or departure from its tenets. However, even though we think of ATR as a conservative religion, there are still traces of syncretism as a result of influences from Christianity and Islam. Since ATR and African culture cannot be completely separated from each other, some aspects of African culture may have experienced change due to response wave of religious syncretism.

One of these is from the perspective of the names we bear as Africans. In some core African societies today, Christian names are given to children whose parents are not Christians. Among the *Bassa* speaking people of Kogi State for instance, *Gwatana* is the appellation of the Christian God. Today among the *Bassa* people, the Traditional Religious practitioners also add *Gwatana* to their names which is purely a name of the Christian God. People are now given name like *Gwatana-Gondu* meaning 'God is at work.' Initially, only Christians bore that name. Now, the deity of the *Bassa* people

is called *Tuwa*. Most of the ATR people of *Bassa*, instead of naming their children *Tuwa-Gondu*, they rather name them *Gwatana-Gondu* which is a strong influence of Christianity on them and can be seen as syncretic.

Also, one can find traces of syncretism in ATR in the aspect of some substances which some of their priests and priestesses apply that can help them levitate. This is an aspect of Hinduism. For instance, among the Margi people of Adamawa state, in 2019, native diviners make use of such substances such as ointments and chinks which leads them into some religious experience such as being in trance. This practice is said to have been borrowed from the Indians. It is not original to African Traditional Religion.

More so, in ATR, traces of syncretic practices could also be found in the kind of modern shrines that are being built today. In the past, shrines used to be located in forests or places far from the habitats of people. There were also no standard structures where divinations and worship take place. It is not the case today. Typical ATR shrines are now found in clean and well-furnished buildings. And in these shrines, the diviners make use of items like Holy Water, and in some cases, one finds crucifixes and some other sacramental in such shrines. This could be said to be a direct borrowing from Christianity.

Because of the romance between ATR, Islam and Christianity, ATR has also turned into having missionaries like Christianity and Islam. Today, some people call themselves missionaries of ATR, bringing the good news of blessings, fore-telling the future, divining and seeing visions and selling of charms and other forms of amulets to those who want them. This is the missionary aspect of ATR which is not original to them.

Another instance is that some ATR seers now dress like some Pentecostal pastors. Many of them no longer dress the traditional way typical of Chief Priests and Priestesses of shrines. This is said to have been influenced not only by the wide growth in civilization but with its accompanying influence of Christian religion.

Finally, the response to prayers after presenting the petitions. Usually, in Christianity, after making petitions we respond 'Amen.' Now, in typical African setting, Igbo culture as an example, usually after making petitions the people respond '*Isee!*' But today is in Igbo language, instead of saying *Isee*, they respond *Aamen* or *Aami*, which is a baptized form of saying Amen. This is an influence gotten from Christianity.

## VII. EVALUATION

It is only religionists who are not confident in their religion or who feel that their life challenges cannot be addressed by their religion that seek for assistance from the other religions whose ideology and source of power stands opposed to theirs. It is unthinkable that an ATR practitioner can go to a Catholic priest or any other Christian minister to inquire what is wrong with his family but it has been recorded to the shame of Christians and other religions that they frequent various ATR worship centers in search of solutions, and some pastors go to shrines to seek for power with which they perform configured miracles, and even offer sacrifices of



animals and sometimes human beings in the name of Jesus. Hence, it is evident that though there are traces of syncretism in ATR, it is more in Christianity. We cannot play the ostrich to some decadence found among modern ministers of ATR; for instance, many herbalists and native doctors who now collect huge amount of money from their clients before they can administer their services to them, this is an aberration. But this corruption no matter how unacceptable it may seem in ATR may not be called syncretism because it was not borrowed from any religion that has charging huge amount of money as a tenet or acceptable practice. In fact, in Christianity people were commanded to give without charge since they received without charge (Mt.10:8). Simply put, the charging of money by these ATR ministers is due to their greediness rather than syncretistic corruption from an existing religion.

The issue of those who are disturbed by the spirit of *agwu* (spirit of divination) trying to transfer their response to the deity calling them into a Church or Christian vocation where they now open a ministry where they see visions after offering some recommended animal sacrifices is a serious syncretism. But it is not a traditionalist syncretism, rather a practicing Christian syncretism.

Generally, authentic ATR cannot be said to have pure syncretic practices because the gods have high sense of purity and therefore they repulse every contamination and syncretic desecration with formidable jealousy, it is formidable jealousy because they visit anyone that introduces objects which they do not recommend with instant drastic punishment. For instance, in a core traditional shrine of ATR, no chief priest can dare bring any sacramental into his shrine who will not be disciplined accordingly by the deity of the shrine. But lapse Christians boldly mix up their religious practices with the items they get from ATR practitioners.

Also, Christians take the title of *Ozo uka* (one who is an *ozo* in a Christian way) and this is a sign that they still have the nostalgia for traditional title; this they do so as to satisfy their craving for recognition and not so much because of the moral implications of that title. An ATR member on the other hand cannot desire to be a knight in ATR way for this will be a doctrinal absurdity to them.

Hence, we must now concede that ATR has some problems, it has problems of self-acceptance; its peculiar problems are akin to inferiority complex in human personality. At times, we observe some traditionalists trying to compare what they do to what Christians do, they become apologetic and defensive trying to show that what they do is not out of place. It is this comparison that devalues the purity and uniqueness of the religion. When one hears an ATR member telling a Christian that he should accept his religion (ATR) as correct practice because the bible says "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mk. 12:17) one immediately sees a religionist who is seeking for the validation of his religion from external body, this is a failure on the part of such a one.

Though ATR makes honest effort to be conservative in their practices but it cannot be allowed to go free for imitating and observing some Christian practices and feasts. Christmas and Easter are completely alien to ATR yet we see some members of the religion avoiding going to work and their business on such days in observation of those days as holy

days of obligation. Who made them days of obligation for them? Is it not an evidence of confusion and mark of loss of identity for them to celebrate and observe feasts which their gods never decreed for them? It is meaningless keeping the prescriptions of a deity (Christian God) whom you do not profess faith in.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Syncretism leads to the delusion of the doctrines of many religions; it is the killer of any religion that has ever fizzled into extinction. Studies in syncretism have proven, as we have seen previously, that it always has to do with the fusion of two or more disagreeable religious tenets to produce another that cannot be classed as any of them since the fused religions often have at least one fundamental doctrinal opposition to each other. From the foregoing also, it is also evident that syncretism is not inculturation, and inculturation in itself aids evangelization. There is need to appreciate the tenets of other religions and cultures in so far as they are not in themselves sinful or contrary to one's faith. This however should be done with discretion. It is insatiability that moves people to seek for different options to solve their problems and insatiability itself is born out of hunger for interminable pleasure and problems-free life but pleasure, in itself is insatiable. The solution to syncretism is acceptance and appreciation of where one finds oneself. The mix-up of doctrines of other religions or the complete borrowing of one religious practice into another should as much as possible be avoided. Every religion and acceptance of the solution his/her religion offers; for religious harlotry leads both the religionist and his/her religion to irresuscitatable death.

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