Church and Cultural Conflict in Nigeria, 1870-1930:
A Factor for Religio-Cultural Renaissance

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Abstract

This paper presents the conflict between missionaries and Nigeria people's religion and culture. Some theologians and religious scholars do not offer any practical recipes in dealing with the major pressing problems of human relations that face us today in respect of mission and culture. Fundamentally, it is that social anthropologists have added significantly to our understanding of the basic social and cultural institutions which, everywhere, bind human beings into living communities (Beattie, 1980). And many of the citizens of Nigeria including that of highly advanced modern states today think of people of other beliefs, races, nations or cultures in ways, which are not very different from these, especially if their skin is differently pigmented, or if they hold other religions or political faiths. The proper examination of these problems engages the aim of this paper. The method of approach is historical with the review of relevant literature.

Introduction

In respect of religious influence, Agbroko (1990) said,

> The 18th century King of Poland Stanislaus Leszcynski should know that the ruler of the predominantly Catholic Poland had cause to observe in 1763 that where religion speaks reason has only a right to hear (p.10).

Religious issues are not matters of frivolity. One has to be knowledgeable enough to understand the intricacies of one's faith encountering another one's faith. Ikenga – Metuh is quoted as saying that religious bigotry and spiritual arrogance are the key causes of conflicts. The illusion among some religionists, he continues, is that they uphold the truth and others have a lesser form of God's revelation. At times, he said, religious conflicts are often caused by the use of religion to further non – religious interest (Olupana, 1992). The problem is that the missionaries who came to Nigeria collaborated with the colonialists and traders to dominate and influence our political, economic, cultural and ecclesiastical aspects of our national interest.

This paper is aimed at unraveling the issues involved in the mission encounter with Nigerian beliefs and practices that resulted to religio – cultural conflicts.

This research is x–rayed based on literature as considered by some scholars and it recommends the way forward in reconciling the church and the Nigerian traditional belief and cultural values. Nigeria and Africa will be used interchangeably in the course of this research work.

Definition of terms

The church is a community of saints, a "communio sanctorum" (Uka, 1995). It is the holy presence of Christ in the world, whose fundamental task is to build communities of holy character. The church is not a building, steeple, resting place, but a people. The church is the called– out–people of God who constitute the holy presence of Christ in the world. Nowhere is the church referred to as a building except as a metaphor, which denotes God's people.

In the African context, historical experience has incited a quest for the recovery of the concept of the Church as people – the people of God as Luke would say. The biblical roots are in two pairs of Hebrew and Greek words. *Edah* (Hebrew) and *kuriakon* (Greek) refer to the institution as an assembly of people, any people. But *qahal* (Hebrew) and *Ekklesia* (Greek) covenant terms, move beyond to the people of God who have assembled. Indeed "*ecclesia*" (in theological parlance) refers to those who have been called out from among the people, out of the miry clay, out of Egypt or out of the *Kosmos* (world order) with her embellishments and allure (*Kosmetikos*) into the kingdom of God (Uka, 1995). Those are chosen, called and redeemed people, in the process of sanctification; a pilgrim people moving to the great banquet in the *eschaton*. Their warmest relationship with Christ is ultimate and constitutes the raison d' etre of their existence.

To most of us, the Church refers to our denomination or the congregation where we worship on Sundays. But the Church universal is the vast invisible cloud of witnesses passing across the ages. It is universal since God calls men and women from all races, colours, cultures and corners of the globe. For this reason Christians, from the earliest creed have confessed being part of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. This is the body of Christ in the world, the body whose mission is to gather believers into confessing communities, to administer the sacraments, preach the word and make disciples (Mtt.28: 19-20), The Church is one foundation, one Lord , one faith and One baptism (Eph. 5:23; A & M 255). Jesus described also the kingdom of God in the world – the church, as a dragnet (Mtt13:47-50).The idea that the church in the world is a mixed bag, tends to partly account for the tensions, rivalries, and the variety of expressions which the church has taken in its visible manifestation in the world. There is, however, some richness in the diversity of expressions that strengthen the overall witness of the church and enables it to get to people who might not otherwise hear the

gospel. Different confessions, because of their peculiar emphasis often as a result of culture, make different aspects of the spiritual reality visible.

The church is characterized by apostolic message (apostolic *kerygma*, the proclamation of the resurrected Christ himself), the apostolic *didache*, the teaching (Jesus' *didache*, the New Torah, centered in mercy, forgiveness and kindness), the apostolic experience, worship, and life, and community life (Schmitt, 1987). The definition that stated that the church is called –out – people of God who constitute the holy presence of Christ in the world and its most fundamental task is to build communities of holy character will serve as our working definition.

Culture is fundamental to human existence and human civilization. It is dynamic and it embodies the totality of a people's response to the challenges of life and living. It offers meaning, purpose, and value to the socio-economic, religious, political and aesthetic ethos of society (Obafemi, 2011). According to Taylor (1871) culture subsumes the whole of capabilities and habits of man as a part of society. This would mean the things which are part of man's life, and are concrete (material) and the ones which are abstract (non-material). Culture has cognitive and normative aspects. With regard to the cognitive aspect of culture, education has definite roles to play. Culture persuades everything a human being does, plans to do and not do (Evwierhoma, 2007). It is mainly earned or acquired through instruction, interaction and others means of cultural transmission. Sagarin (1978) defines culture as the complex whole that consists of all the ways people think and do everything they were as members of society. According to Scupin (2000), the human capacity for culture is based on our linguistic and cognitive ability to symbolize. Culture in the words of Shark (1996) means, "The sum total of human creation-intellectual, technical, artistic, physical and moral" (p.43). According to Nmah (2004), culture denotes the sum of all that have spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life-all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and science. The definitions given by Nmah (2004) and Sagarin (1978) on culture will form our operational definitions. As regards religion, many scholars have given different definition from their areas of study. Nmah (2004) citing Durkheim defines religion as a social fact par excellence. Nmah defines also religion as duty to God which involves obeying God. But to the traditionalist in Africa, religion means maintaining cordial relationship with the supreme deities and one's fellowship with human being. Nmah (2004) citing Hans Moi sees religion as that which defines man and his place in the universe. Taylor (1871) defines religion as belief in spiritual being, whereas Paul Tillich stated that religion is the ultimate concern. Nmah (2004) and Taylor (1871) definitions of religion will serve as our working definition.

With regard to conflict, as people with different backgrounds, points of view, values, needs,, religions, and personalities interact, a variety of conflicts often develop (Nmah, 2004). Organizational change also contributes to conflict, because it realigns relationship among people. There are about four types of conflicts namely functional conflicts, dysfunctional conflicts, a person versus person conflict, and person versus group conflict. Dysfunctional conflicts are destructive conflicts characterized by cold wars. Functional conflicts are constructive conflicts. Conflict in any organization is an event, issue, occurrence or situation that could be described as a turning point for better or worse (Nmah, 2009). It is a process that begins when a person, tribe or race sees that another person, tribe or race has damaged or about to damage something that the other person, tribe or race cares about.

Douglas (1976) defined revival or renaissance to mean come back to life, to return to consciousness, to return to vigor from a state of langour or neglect. Renaissance (French for rebirth) or revival of learning (about 1500), which for Europe opens the modern age (Forter, 1974). There is a difference between evangelism and revival. A sinner needs evangelism to bring him to the Lord. Revival is a new beginning of obedience to Almighty God.

Missionary encounter with religio-cultural values of Nigeria
The history of Christianity in the emergence of Nigerian religio – cultural renaissance is the history of events precipitated by colonial conquest, ecclesiastical imperialism, economic exploitation and cultural dominance by the European powers. The effect of the mission and of the indigenous church on the structure of the Nigerian tribes and the families was at first in the nature of a disturbance and of disintegration, especially through the Synods, evangelism, workshops, seminars, conferences, and schools. By attacking what the missionaries described as pagan, fetish, primitive and crude religion, they removed valuable forces holding the social organization together, and the more valuable religious elements were lost. And what remained was magic and fear of spirits and witches.

According to Debrunner (1965), the effect of the mission and of the indigenous church initially seemed to be disturbing the general pattern of life of the people by disorganizing their religio – cultural values thereby causing disunity among the people of Nigeria. But later the Christian missionary positive and negative teachings were used to mobilize the people to challenge the ecclesiastical and colonial powers as could be seen in the next subheading. Isichei (1983) sated that the colonialists punished and oppressed us and sent us away from our homes and country, but we still have the conviction that we should not give up our faith.

During the First World War and in an address prepared in 1925 by the British government, it was said that Nigeria has only one duty and that is loyalty to the throne and person of the king – Emperor. This shows the extent of British colonial policy against Nigerians. Religio – cultural nationalism at this era took the form of protesting against the mentioned specific abuses above. Sequels to this, there were negative aspects of missionary activities that evoked nationalism in Nigeria such as their attitudes on the local cultures and religion, their support of the colonial invasion and aggression, their monopoly of the education delivery, their missionary historiography, their monopoly of the economy and genocide on African tradition religion.

African church and religio-cultural renaissance
Nwosu (1994) averted that nationalist protest against religio-cultural genocide which the missionaries perpetrated against Africa took various forms such as the rise of African independent churches, the introduction of some indigenous cultural practices into some mission churches, the rejection of European names by some church leaders and laity. Independency in this situation became a social reaction to mission arising out of a tribal zeitgeist or climate of opinion in which Christian missions were believed to be illegitimately mounting an attack against African traditional society and in particular its basic unit, the family .

Other three important traditional factors which represent traditional religion and society which the missions also inflicted injuries include polygamy, the ancestral cult, and the earth goddess (Barrett, 1970). These traditional factors, as part of these views, have been rejected by Western missionaries, but they have found recognition in some of the independent churches, while many African members of Order churches also adhere to traditional beliefs and rituals relating to the ancestors, and polygamy. As regards African traditional religion, Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (1990) affirming with Nwosu (1994) stated that African traditional religion and its philosophy is "the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans which were handed down from generation to generation. The missionaries who did not understand it made it to appear a morass of bizarre beliefs and practices" (p.3).

The missionaries gave the African religion and culture derogatory names such as primitive, paganus, heathen, fetish, magic, polytheistic, animistic, idol worship and other unprintable words. Consequently, the rise of nationalist religio-cultural oriented movement agitations in the church was a direct result of missionary attitude towards the indigenous cultures and peoples. In the evangelical campaigns, in their sermons, in their utterances during meetings with the indigenous agents, the missionaries and their converts condemned everything

African, including in particular the religion of the various people of Africa (Nwosu, 1993). Using Igboland as his case study, Nwosu stated that the refusal of the early missionaries to allow the Igbo converts to seek initiation into the various cults and societies in Igbo traditional society greatly embarrassed the Igbo evangelists and led them to employ every force of argument to convince their European counterparts that these social customs, including naming ceremonies, second burials, traditional festivals, polygamy, ancestral cults among others which were fabrics of Igbo society, Africa inclusive, did not conflict with Christian belief. For the Igbo converts, preventing them from getting initiated into these cultural societies, they were being automatically excluded from political participation and denied the right of citizenship and invariably lost their identity in the society. This evoked religio–cultural nationalism in Nigeria. Citing Ayandele, Babalola (1988) averred that Christianity seemed a much greater disturber of the African society especially its denunciation of polygamy and other important African customs and institutions that could be tolerated with the impression that Africans could not became Christians unless they become Europeanized.

Iwe (1985) suggested that the church should institute research into the nature, motives and circumstances of the case of polygamous tendencies among its members instead of condemning it outright. Specifically, he wants the church to examine African cultural background where polygamy as an institution is irrevocably, absolutely and irreconcilably opposed to the biblical data of the New Testament, and also what is the essential nature of the unity of a true Christian marriage? To expatiate his point, he mentioned the factors of childlessness, economic ability and social acceptability to be taken into consideration examining polygamy in the context of African traditional values. To him, the church should concern itself with promoting human conscience which is the pivot of personality development and political maturity. It must champion the cause for human dignity and values. The Nigerian Christians must be imbued with the tradition of religious harmony within the community. In their mission schools, the missionaries intended to produce a group of people who were Nigerians only in blood, but European in culture, thought, habit and religion. To become a Christian, the proselyte had to abandon his old ways mostly his culture and religion to become a European in every way including abandoning his wives as a polygamist and renouncing his indigenous name for a European name obviously at baptism a reminiscence of the behaviour of the Jewish Christians towards the gentile proselytes. This European attitude of condemnation of the entire gamut of innocent African religio–cultural and social practices evoked nationalism.

At the period under review, many African cultural nationalists and including some African church catechists and pastors especially in Igboland tried to

convince their European counterparts that most of their customs such as naming ceremonies, second burials, new yam festivals, initiation rituals, title taking, polygamous marriage, traditional music, African style of dressing among others which they condemned are not in their entirety bad nor do they conflict with Christian values and practices the missionaries propagate even by the time most of them are in consonance with European and Old Testament customs and values. Idowu (1965) affirming this statement questioned whether the church's purpose in Nigeria is not to serve as an effective tool of imperialism, a veritable means of softening up Nigerians for the purpose of convenient exploitation by Europeans. To Idowu, while accepting Christianity, Nigerians do not need to throw that which is good and valuable in their own culture. And so, for the gospel to have impact on the lives of Nigerians, it must take cognizance of the cultural background of the society and preach in clear accents rather than commending their Saviour to Nigerians in strange tongues.

The nationalists, especially the African church leaders formulated African theology and liturgy that have cultural nationalistic dimension. That is to say that the Africans who are Christians can now interpret the gospel within the context of their culture such as in music, art and dance. Idowu (1965) opined that Christ will be real to Nigerians when the church in the country develops a distinctive theology in consequence of their own personal knowledge of God and a personal appropriation of the Lordship of Christ. King Jaja of Opobo was one of the resistants who forbade missionaries from entering his kingdom in order not to distort his culture. He described the advent of the missionaries as British factor for cultural, political, religious and economic imperialism. Determined on preserving indigenous religion and institutions at all cost, even when it began to show that he was resisting the irresistible, he spared no effort to oppose the Christianization of the Niger Delta (Ayandele, 1966). Obi Okonkwo in the "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe (1984) spent much of his efforts in tackling the new faith aggression on his religio-cultural institution in Umuofia more especially when one of the converts killed a royal python that was most revered animal in Mbanta. He did not mince words against the attitude of the missionaries toward his people's culture.

The culture awakening among the Africans does not owe its origins to any external influence, but is spontaneous and consequent on the factors aforementioned. The first African voices against the denationalizing methods of Christian missions in West Africa were those of James Johnson and Edward Blyden. Though James Johnson advocated cultural nationalism during his life time, but the most prolific apostle of cultural nationalism was Edward Blyden. His contribution to African nationalism did not lie in the distinctly political, but in the cultural sphere. To him, no greater calamity could befall a race than the lost

of its culture; for culture is the soul and identity of every race, and to exterminate it is to commit a terrible homicide.

In order to create high–sounding or polysyllable names, the educated African nationalists discarded their foreign names such as Rev. J. H. Samuel, Secretary of Lagos Institute founded in 1901, became Adegboye Edum; Joseph Pythagoras Haastrup became Ademyiwa Haastrup; while George Willian Johnson of the Egba Board of Management became Oshokala Tejumade John among others.

This freedom of expression of faith manifested itself in African festivities, cultural hymns and lyrics composed and sung in indigenous idiom and music, with indigenous musical instruments which consisted of drums and gongs, augmented with clapping. Naturally, such hymns and lyrics struck the right note in the heart; they spread easily and widely and became sources of moment–to– moment encouragement and inspiration. In that atmosphere, Nigerians felt at home at worship, deeply stirred and attracted. Here at last was something that touched those emotional depths which foreign liturgies could not reach. Secondly, these movements were led by Nigerian leaders who spoke in a language which at the time held unmistakable appeal for the mass. Their words were backed by strong conviction. There was something genuine, unaffected, and compelling about them. Those who followed them saw a marked difference between their attitude and those of European leaders, or African leaders who had been brought up in European methods. Thirdly, the movements supplied a felt need for Nigerians. Christianity as introduced by the missionaries and practiced in Nigeria appears to Nigerians as incomplete religion. It seems to be something which begins and ends in church buildings, made up of hymns, read or recited prayers, lessons, a sermon, and collection (or collections). It does not seem to be something that is efficacious for them in every moment and every area of their lives, and under all circumstances.

Summary and Conclusion
In summary, this research work, "Church and cultural conflict in Nigeria, 1870-1930: A factor for religio-cultural renaissance" has tried to examine missionary encounter with Nigeria that gave rise to religio-cultural revival among tribes and societies in Nigeria. In this context, we studied the religio-cultural subjugation and its consequences during the missionary enterprise in Nigeria. We identified the issues involved in the encounter namely African beliefs and practices. The abuses of African culture and religion by the European missionaries provided the religio-cultural nationalists with a cause.

In Nigeria, with the experience of colonialism and imperialism, there is a need for a conscious project of civilization – retrieval, re– orientation and re–positioning

through cultural rebirth or renaissance. Our religio– cultural history and consciousness need to be re–learnt. One of the key aspects of Babangida military government cultural policy of 1983 is the establishment of ten (now shrunk in eight) parastatals, with decrees and objectives namely:

1. National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM).
2. National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC).
3. Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC).
4. National Gallery for Arts (NGA).
5. National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO).
6. Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC).
7. National Troupe and National Theatre of Nigeria (NT/NTN).
8. National Institute for Hospitality and Tourism (NIHO TOUR).
9. National Film Corporation (NFC), and
10. National Copyrights Commission (NCC).

The latter two have been excised to the Federal Ministry of Information and Communications. One of the objectives of the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) is the promotion of the nation's cultural heritage and the continuous movement of Nigeria's cultural policy in line with globalization. It is often claimed that Nigeria has over 250 different languages and cultures in contemporary times, the count has reached 350 and if we have to be true, just and fair to every culture, the census may well be over the 350 that we claimed. Each culture has its own way of life, which manifests in language/dialect, dress, costumes, body adornments, song music, games, cuisine, and dance. Other manifestations like the visual arts, rituals, festivals, ceremonies at birth, marriage; (matrilineal and patrilineal) chieftaincy, planting, harvest and celebrations of death are also culturally distinct (Evwierhoma, 2007).

One of the processes through which Christ of the church will be meaningful to Nigerians in a matter relating to traditional belief and culture is through what may be described as "African incarnation theology" depicting what is considered essential in the message of Christ which penetrates and takes flesh in a culture (Nmah, 2009). It is interesting to observe that New Testament passage speaks of Christ as reconciling God to man. It is man's sin that has had to be dealt with (Eph. 2:16, 2 Cor. 5:18 -21).

What are incarnated are not just exegete teachings from the Bible, but also the teaching and believing traditions of the people of God. Contextualization in this case necessarily involves two poles; the external, non–negotiable, universal divine aspect which is the word of God on the one hand and the temporary contextual, contingent reality, which is the context on the other. Or simply put, it involves the divine universal and the human local (Ikenga – Metuh, 1996). God

has always been incarnated in human cultures (cf. Acts 14:17). For "at various times in the past, and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but in our own time, the last days, God had spoken to us through his son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Divine revelation reached its climax in Christ. Thus, historically, Christ the word of God incarnated himself in the Judeo-Hellenic culture, and he illuminated, judged and elevated it. Hitherto, African incarnation theology seeks to incarnate the word of God in African cultures. When incarnation is fully and effectively accomplished, the light of the gospel would radically transform different levels of Nigerian life, laws, customs, values and worldviews. It must address also Nigerian experience in terms of situation of hunger, poverty, disease, unemployment, sick, oppressed and the poor, corruption, maladministration, election rigging, terrorism, piracy, infidelity, kidnapping, militancy, environmental degradation, neo-political colonialism and economic oppression, ecclesiastical imperialism and cultural dominance are contexts fertile enough for this contextual theology.

In conclusion, the unity between the church values and African religio-cultural values can further made the Nigerians obtain social and cultural recognition worldwide with a company of different ethnics, or nations with cultural and creed variations of believers with whom they can share common experience and problem. The church should emphasize the integration of religion and culture in order to find all life situations in the Bible. One needs to mention African traditional religion, for the encounter is in fact between two systems of religious beliefs and faith commitments, each of which is normative to those who accept it.

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