



Lagos: the melting pot of African Traditional Religion and other Foreign Religions in Nigeria

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Abstract

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the religion that was practised throughout Africa before the arrival of Western missionaries. The core premise of ATR is the maintenance of African culture and its main feature is loyalty to the ancestors and accompanying rituals that express this loyalty. With the introduction of two foreign religions into the mega city of Lagos, the interest has shifted from traditional religion to the two other religions. This study adopted the sociological theory of Emile Durkheim, which argues that Stability and cohesion shared in religion binds people closely together and contribute to the growth of the society. Various authors have written on the question of monotheism versus polytheism and the nature and position of revelation in religion and in order to understand the place of African Religion in light of contemporary religions, the exegesis approach is applied in the discussion of Africans belief in the worship of one Supreme Being and veneration of ancestors as intermediaries to the one Supreme Being. The paper explores the question of religious tolerance within the megacity of Lagos. Finally, the study reveals how Lagosian adherents of the traditional religion interface with members of the other religions. Finally the paper concluded that Lagosian Christians or Muslims continue their veneration and practice of indigenous religion whilst upholding their foreign religious identity.

Key words: Lagos, African religion, foreign religions, the melting pot of Nigerian Society.

Introduction:

Lagos: Nigeria’s former capital city and commercial nerve centre of Nigeria, means different things to different people. To some, it is a land of opportunities, to others, it is home away from home, No man’s land, yet others see it as a city of all possibilities. Several others see Lagos as Nigeria’s path finder especially within the economic space. With Gross Domestic Product (GPD) of over \$100 billion, Lagos in the world of business and commerce stands heads and shoulders above its peers, contributing 30 percent to the country’s overall GDP. The state also accounts for 65 percent of the country’s manufacturing activity and about 90 percent of its foreign trade flow.

In politics and governance, Lagos has recorded giant strides especially since the return to democracy in 1999. Asides investment in infrastructure development; the state has attracted some of the most expansive and affluent private investments in property, one of which is the \$6 billion ‘Eko Atlantic City’ rising out of the reclaimed Atlantic Ocean, in Victoria Island. Since its creation in 1967, the state has been administered by military and civilian administrators. Perhaps the most unique element of the Lagos’ politics is the capacity to accommodate tongues and tribes. In its fifty years of existence, persons other than indigenes have held political positions in Lagos and represented constituents in the state House of Assembly as well as in the Senate and House of Representatives, contributing their ideas towards the continued development of the state. This unique political ingredient speaks to the sophistication of Lagos. Lagos is not just national in outlook. It is international. The Americans are here; the British are here; South Africans are in their thousands; the Chinese are not in short supply; and the Indians even have a community in Lagos. “With all sense of modesty, there is no other State like Lagos in Nigeria.” Hence the then Governor of Lagos State, Akinwunmi Ambode observed:

“Our greatness is in our ability to be the melting pot for all cultures and as at today, there is no tribe in Nigeria that is not represented in Lagos. From the Hausa/Fulani to the Igbo to the Kanuri to the Ibibio, the Nupe, the Berom, the Igala, the Urhobo and so

on and so forth all have spaces to live and live well in our dear State. (2017)

Geographically, the Lagos state is located in the South-Western geopolitical zone. On the North and East it is bounded by Ogun State. In the West, Lagos shares boundaries with the Republic of Benin. Behind its southern borders lies the Atlantic Ocean, with 22 percent of its 3,577 square kilometre being lagoons and creeks, earning it the status of state of 'aquatic splendour'. In 2003, many of the existing 20 local government areas of Lagos were split for administrative purposes into Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs) by Bola Ahmed Tinubu amid controversy which further worsened the relationship between Lagos and the then federal authorities presided over by former President Olusegun Obasanjo, leading to the withholding of statutory allocations to the local governments in Lagos for several months.. According the 2006 census, the population of Lagos is about 12 million peoples comprises of the aborigine called Aworis, other are Yoruba indigenes, other Nigerian tribes and foreigners.

Religiously, Lagos remains a force. It is perhaps the only state where 12 to 15 religious worship centres- churches and mosques are found on the same street. Amid the expansive influence of Christianity and Islam, traditional religious practices still find a space. Notwithstanding the state's rapid urbanisation and modernisation, it does not require a long search to see in the street corners, signs of recognition of the African indigenous religious practice. A good example is a ride in any of the commercial buses within Lagos environment with its various forms of evangelisation.

In actual fact, Lagos is reputed for religious tolerance among and between believers and practitioners of the various faiths. This is unlike in some states where lives and unquantifiable properties are intermittently destroyed in religious conflicts. This special attributes of co-existence and peaceful religious ambience to the 'accommodating spirit' of Lagos is dated back centuries when the early settlers came into the place.

Definition of religion: Religion, like any other philosophical concept does not have a universally accepted definition. That does not mean that scholars have

not come out with their subjective definitions. According to William James (1902), “religion is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider to be the divine”. The inclusion of the word divine in this definition presupposes that the subject (man) has that understanding of a Supreme Being higher than him that must be revered. But to extend the concept of the divinity to include any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or no, according to William James (1902), opens up the idea of religion to anything and everything. It is a definition like this that makes every individual to come out with every big and small object, whether tree, stone, bird or animal to be worshipped as deity. As Omoregbe (1999) rightly observed, religion as a dialogical relationship is not such that is between equals, but the one an individual feels he is engaged in a relationship with a being superior to him. On his part, Omoregbe (1999) defines religion as —interpersonal relationship between a man and a transcendent personal being believed to exist. Just like any other definition of religion, the word belief remains essential core element a believer of religion cannot do without.

That does not make a belief in —communism, socialism, humanism, money, pleasure, etc (Omoregbe, 1999) is religious. Etymologically, religion, as expressed in an Anglo-French word religiun, is a —state of life bound by monastic vows, conduct indicating a belief in a divine power (Harper, online). Cicero equally derived the meaning of religion from releger’e which means to go through again. I wish therefore to conclude with Nabofa’s (2015) definition of religion as “man's effort or desire to be at peace with the spiritual powers on one hand and with his fellow man on the other”. It is man's effort at bringing about harmony between the mundane and the spiritual spheres of life. Man believes that failure to establish such harmony would spell doom for him; therefore, man, in all his sacred duties, is always trying to reach for spiritual unity with the divine. It would not be easy to attain such harmony unless the wishes of the divine were correctly determined or interpreted. Basically there are two elements necessary in religion the experience and the expression of man.

African ReligionIn the beginning it was religion, and in the end it should be all religion. As a matter of fact, man took off from religion, march along with religion and arrive at religion in their daily engagement.

The clumsy religious practices called the African traditional religion is nothing but a deliberate attempt to ridicule the people of Africa as if they were not created by God like any other race. In fact, the continuous derogatory reference of African religion as a traditional religion should henceforth be seen as racism. Whosoever must have come out with that name must have been hasty in his generalization. On the basis of the above, scholars of African Religion have to re-conceptualize the African traditional religion and come out with African religions based on the following. Firstly, religion is an aspect of people's identity. Hence, borrowed cultural practices that are inimical which may be abandoned later should not be included as part of the religious life of the people. For instance, human sacrifice in the name of religion is not generally accepted even within a given culture. A lot of people may not want to be identified with such evil practice. Secondly, religion serves as a vehicle of social mobilization. And the goal for the mobilization defers as per culture. It becomes a problem in annexing the entire continent together. This is what gave birth to multi-cultural practices but the universal understanding of the concept of God remains central. A given cultural society enhances enculturation. That is why —our ideas are shaped by what we see around us...our concepts of time, space, and religion are all tinted by our ecological glasses (Sarpong, online). Thirdly, religion ordered a society through its moral laws. African moral laws forbid murder, immoral affair with somebody else wife, stealing, disregard to parents, and disrespect to elders, biased judgement, etc. This goes to show that irrespective of diverse cultural practices, yet their religious world-view remains the same. Fourthly, religion can equally be used to incite people to war against the perceived enemies. Many cultures condemn war as a means of settling conflict. Fifthly, religion serves as a means of maintaining values in a given society. Though what a society values is purely relative but when it comes to divinely enjoins values like the sacredness of human life such is uniformed. Sixthly, religion transmits heritage from generation to generation. Irrespective of changes in the language of the time the idea transmitted remains. Seventhly, religion is the expression of the people's world-view. It is true that world-view changes and grows hence the infiltrating influences and modernization of the society; this notwithstanding, the religious truth about God's existence remains.

From the above, it becomes obvious that what is called African traditional religion does not befit Africa as an entity hence the need for replacement with African Religion. In Defence of African religions, there are concepts, ideas, values and world-views that are common to every component units of all religions. That is the concept of **God** which is the basis and source of religion. This is a universal concept. There is a general awareness among the people that —religion is the virtue by which men pay to God the worship and reverence which they owe Him as the first’ principle of the creation and government of things’ (Copleston, 2010). It is believed that the natural laws that govern human beings in the society are revealed by God. Just as scientific laws being discovered laws as enshrined into the system, so also moral laws that enable man to be virtuous. On this note, the Africans see religion as ground of —man’s relationship to God, as creature to Creator, as subject to Lord (Copleston, 2010). The African man sees religion as a vehicle or the medium through which God can be worshipped or related to and be appreciated. In that respect there is no single uniformed image agreed by the Africans to represent God, who is the Absolute Creator, owner and ruler of all things and the Father of all mankind (Omoregbe, 1993). For instance, the Yorubas do not have plural name for God (**Olodumare**), Efik people do not have plural name for God (Abasi Ibom), neither do Igbo people have plural name for God (**Chineke**) or the Urhobo for **Oghene**. This concept runs throughout Africa. Apart from that, Africans believe that the government of the people, monarchical or democratic is ordained by God. Hence, the honour is usually ascribed to Him, as He that gives power. The divinities and human agents (rulers) are God’s representatives. There are not to be deified or worship but to be respected as ones standing for God.

Again some biased Western researchers as quoted by Mezzana, (2013) described African traditional religion —as being the most primitive stage of the spiritual evolution of peoples, featuring practices it terms derogatively as animist, fetishist, pagan, totemic, idolatrous etc. In fact, it was the non-understanding of the traditional African religious symbols and ideas that partly contributed to the ways in which some of the early Western and Arab Scholars, investigating African thought forms looked at the indigenous Africans as having no religion or belief in God. In consonance with the above reason Omijeh says:

Nowhere did early missionaries and Western writers misunderstand African culture and societies as in the rituals and symbolism” (Omijeh 1973:105)

This shows that every given society has its primitive stage in its development or a founding father they can make reference to. So, primitivism affects entire humanity hence it should not be attached to Africans in such a derogatory manner. If the Africans worship anything they put in place to signify the presence of the Supreme Being, as the Ark of God signified the presence of God among the Jews, such should be condemned because that is a deviation from the known African practice. It is academically ridiculous that a culture that has trained all the known ancient western philosophers from Thales to Aristotle and even beyond to still be referred to primitive is not fair. African religion should not also be seen and interpreted from —local or specific practices which are generalized without reason (Mezzana, online). A certain practice within a cultural domain should not change the definition or the outlook of African Religion. In Christianity, we see a lot of infiltrated practices which the Holy Bible even condemned yet Christianity remains with its definition, likewise Islamic religion. Many different practices from splinter groups are coming up, yet Islam remains with the original definition. As Mezzana rightly observes, —no one for example, would define the essence of Christianity by the excessive devotional practices towards a given saint...There are a lot of things that influence cultural practices. It could be the dynamic nature of the culture itself, where some mores infiltrates into another culture imperceptibly through interactions. Equally some bad cultural practices and customs have been done away with as stated earlier but African religion cannot be done away with. Neither can the concept nor the idea of God be removed from the religious perception of the Africans. That is why is hard to hear of African atheism.

THREE MAJOR RELIGIONS IN LAGOS

Lagos as a town or state in Nigeria is a host to several religions but three major religious groups dominate its religious landscape, namely, the adherents of African traditional religion (ATR), Muslims and Christians. Religion in Lagos plays a major role in the life of the people, to some it is their candle light, it gives

them insight, wisdom, knowledge, etc, and faith is increased through the study of scripture, books and prayer. Others, religion helps them remain in line and stay focused while some see it as a forum for socialisation. A religious leader is feared, respected and loved. He could mediate in a situation which defies several means. **Christianity as a religion** Christianity is the most popular and most advertised religion in Lagos. It was introduced in Nigeria in the middle of the nineteenth century by devoted missionaries from Britain. Christianity was one of the things introduced into Nigeria by the British among many other things. The missionaries came preaching the message of Christ, ministering to the people and also healing the sick, this was what actually pulled the crowd to them in the first place. They started from the eastern part of the country which is populated by the Igbos, they infiltrated the village councils and chiefs, who gave them lands to build local churches. Before the 80s the Christian religion had spread to the southern part of the country, to the Yoruba and the middle belt (Benin). As at the year 2005, there are over 50 million Christians in Nigeria, we have the Protestant which strongly believe in the power of the Holy Ghost as well as the Catholic, Baptist and Anglican churches. Christianity did a great work eliminating this kind of worship while building more churches, however, they are still secretly practiced in Nigeria, there is freedom of worship, except the kind that poses a threat to human existence, and those weird and bazaar kind of worship. The advent of religion could be dated back as far as the advent of man in Nigeria. Initially, everybody worshiped whatever they want until the introduction of Islam to the northern part of the country in as early as the eleventh century. The Islamic religion in Nigeria has been well established in the northern state, with central mosques in most state capitals as at the 16th century. Before it spread to Lagos, it grew popular to even the middle belt and several parts of Nigeria. At some point, Usman Dan Fodio had to establish a government based on Islamic Religion before the advent of colonialism when the government was infiltrated by the British.

The Traditional religion Finally we have the traditional religion in Nigeria, as much as the message of Islam and Christianity have taken over the major part of the country, the previous indigenous worship could not be properly annihilated. These indigenous religions are simply the worship of inanimate objects, the worship of rocks, trees, or some mysterious animals like lions or a huge python which they believe to be their source of strength or spiritual

guide. Before the advent of The modern religions (Christianity and Islam) This gods (as they are called) were seen as a guide and the sovereign authority, in any village or town they speak to the people through a mediator (Priest), they go by so many names Amadioha, Iku, Urashi, Ogwugwu, Ikuku and one thing so mind wrenching about These gods is the facts they can't go without blood sacrifice.

Relationship between these Religions in Lagos

Etymologically, religion, as expressed in an Anglo-French word *religiun*, is a —state of life bound by monastic vows, conduct indicating a belief in a divine power^l (Harper, online). Cicero equally derived the meaning of religion from *relegere* which means to go through again, read again^l (Harper, online). This definition gives us an insight that a religious life and vows are made to a Being who has divine power beyond human control. And that this Being has a condition over His creatures, and there is a special conduct of life expected from them. Here man needs to read and practice a given set of instructions. Even in our cultural settings, we know that to obey instruction from the superior authority, it requires personal discipline from the subject. It is these divine instructions that are mostly referred to as moral laws in religion. This divine Being who reveals Himself either through a general sense or specific sense to His creature (man) through which a personal worship relationship is established? In Christianity this Being is called God, the Creator of all that is. —He loves and is approachable. In Islam He is called Allah. The few names for God in the different ethnic groups are a proof that Africa practices monotheism. For every ethnic group in Lagos, God is one and has no equal. He is known as the most perfect being above everything He has created. This implies that polytheism is an imposition on Africans religion. If the concept of God is expressed in all the African cultures, it means that religion forms parts of African culture but not all African cultural practices are religious. This misconception is borne out of prejudice or probably out of impatience of the researchers to look at the universal meaning of the terms they used to describe the religious life of the African people. Omoregbe (1993) has painstakingly explained the root meanings of those words used to describe African's religious world view.

Another aspect is on divinities. This is where African religious practice is misunderstood. The divinities have historical meaning and most of them have

played significant part in their salvation story. They are not demons or evil spirits and are distinctly different from demons and evil spirits in the bible and Quran. These divinities are point of contact between them and their God, a careful study of names of street and quarters that make up the Lagos municipality shows their connectivity with these divine beings. They adore most street such as Olu –elegba, Ipodo in Ikeja. Within Lagos, research shows that there every quarter is associated with one divinity or the other and this is also revealed from the names we bear, such as Ogunyemi, Ogulesi, Oguntayo and etc. With coming of other religions such names are changed to reflect their new status. Oluyemi, Olutayo or Islamic equivalent etc. **Ancestors.** But the truth is when an African —prays before a statue, he is not talking to or worshipping the statue in question but the Supernatural Being symbolically represented by that statue (Omoregbe, 1993). This is equally the Roman Catholic practice – praying before Virgin Mary’s statue, dead saint statues, etc. Will Roman Catholics accept that they are worshipping idols? We do not think so. According to Jebadu (2006), there are three reasons why African ancestral veneration should not be seen as idolatrous: (i) African ancestral veneration does not consist of the worshipping of lifeless images or eidōlon or idols of emptiness. Instead, it primarily consists of venerating, honouring and loving human life (Jebadu, 2006). (ii) —African ancestral veneration is not of worshipping demons hiding in images – statues, paintings or sculptures – as often claimed by the early fathers of the Church when talking about the danger of idolatry. Instead, it is of veneration of the living spirits of the dead. According to Jebadu (2006), an ancestral carved image conveys the basic character of the ancestor the image is made to represent. This should not be difficult for us to understand having known the method of African philosophy. (iii) —African ancestral veneration is not of the worshipping of creatures in place of God, since the living souls of the dead are never viewed, approached or treated as God. Instead they are viewed as special human beings, having achieved a higher status, a status of being closer to God, and from this status of advantage, accordingly, they are believed to be able to play an intermediary role between God and the living – a belief which is also very central in the Judeo-Christian faith, especially in the Catholic Church and Orthodox Church (Jebadu, 2006). This practice today has found its root into the church or the Mosque in the guise of memorial or remembrance service, (turning of our death father or mother, 8 or 40 days prayer etc) with its fanfare of thanksgiving and entertainment of guests

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The point of disagreement here among religions is the Problem of Establishing the Africanness through African Traditional Religion. The problem of the so-called African traditional religion lays in an attempt to establish African identity or the *Africanness* through their religious practices. It is this effort to establish the —*Africanness* that brought about the inclusion of the adjective

How has Mega city of Lagos served as a melting pot for ATR and other Religion?

Human beings are spiritual animals. Indeed, there is a case for arguing that Homo Sapiens is also *Homo religiousus*. Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the time they created works of art; These early faith expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning, peace and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh endeavoured.

Imagine a meeting of three different religions, two superior and the other inferior and their point of encounter was within the halo culture of the inferior one. Imagine that the object of their encounter was faith and religion. This historic meeting spurred both religions into trading trips and opinions about whose beliefs systems are or whose worship are idol, pagan and fetish. The encounter spurred the alien faiths to claim their superiority while the host faith was persuaded to accept inferior cultural and religious status because of limited evidence to justify its claims. The three religions were discussing their basic belief systems emphasizing extensively that there is only one God, who watches over everything and cares for his people; that Jesus Christ was the son of God, who died to save humanity from sin; that his death on the cross and resurrection made eternal life possible for God redemptive children. Second belief is that Mohammed is the last prophet of Allah. The third says, we believe in the same one God that you believe in, because he loves and protects our people through the pouring of libation and through liberal and communal libation. We appease gods and our ancestors who have gone before us; and who holds the living accountable for their sins and their shortcomings. At another scene in the dialogue, they started to laugh at each

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other stories on creation, on meaning of human life and death, on reincarnation and on respect for ancestors. And you were right hearing every argument they put forward on the discussion table are correct.

However, these three religions see themselves as the distinct entities that have nothing to share in common yet they are accommodated within the cultural setting of the inferior one. But Islam and Christianity see each other as something to be treated with contempt. Hence Alana (2012) asserts that “one of the greatest virtues of Africa religion is its religious tolerance. There is hardly any religion in the world that teaches religious tolerance as African religion. It teaches it not so much by precept as by practice that is by example”. The Africans are very hospitable both to themselves and foreigners. They willingly give and accommodate others. Hence then the foreign religions came they welcome them with open hands.

Another way of showing this, is through the establishment of community leaders which help a great deal to management conflict within their domain. These community leaders such as the traditional rulers, Oba, chief priest, chiefs and clan heads give and teach the youth of any given community the moral and human values as enshrined in the religion and African culture.

In Lagos today, peace is not an abstract, poetic concept but rather a practical concept and it is embedded in the traditional religion. Peace is conceived in relation to order, harmony and equilibrium. Thus Lagos is believed to be divinely established and the obligation to maintain them is religious. The effort of traditional rulers such as the Oba of Lagos in conflict resolution and crisis management in Lagos from time to time show them as leaders worthy of preserving the culture was described by Malmi (1998) when he said; “over the years whether under the British colonial rule, civilian rule after independence, or even under military rule, with the strongest weapon of coercion at its disposal, traditional rulers have been called upon and used to stabilise crisis situations.”

Another area of peaceful coexistence could viewed from the various festival celebration within the Lagos municipality which is now been adopted as state festivals such as the Eyo festival, Oro, the carnival and so on. These festivals were originally aspect of their traditional belief system, which is

now been embraced and accepted as secular festival with Christians and Muslims participating fully. Likewise adherent of traditional religion celebrate with their Christians and Muslims counterpart during Christmas, Easter or Ilaya festivals and part taking in eating of the ram meant for the believers. This brings about the opportunity of peaceful co-existence and tolerance within Lagos.

Lagos is adorned with various icons which has meaning to their primordial ancestors and founding fathers. These icons remind them of their origin and belief system. Most Lagosian still respect and venerate these icons as part of their cultural heritage. Lagosian still prefer to bear their traditional names such as Bemipe, Iyabo or Taye instead of Victoria, Philomina etc, which has no meaning to their culture and origin. Such names tagged traditional names are now being allowed by the Orthodox Church during baptism.

Conclusion

From all our discussion above, we rely solely on irony than religious experience in one of the determinant factors in the expository discourse in Lagos megacity. Therefore, if Africans are Homo religious as Armstrong would sound, we would be right to conclude then that irrespective of what we say about the nature of other people's worship or the medium through which they come to know about God or worship him makes them spiritual and religious people. If all men and women at one time worshiped a supreme being, we would be right to say that Africans as well as early missionaries lack the locus standi (moral justification) to call any particular religion pagan. In Lagos today, the peaceful coexistence among tribes, meaning and value of life is within the realm of religion. Everybody still express awe, wonder and decorum at divine essence and majesty. It is the inability to demonstrate a sufficient connection or proves among the three religions on personal issues that leads to lame or illogical arguments and killings. Therefore the claim that Western missionaries make in categorizing African traditional religion as centred solely on the worship of divinities and paganism is wrong. These queries would help break the iceberg and offer practical instructions on how to look at the other and their faith. It would help confront issues that challenge African traditional culture and worship. In doing so, I will carefully try not to hide behind religious inferences, moral imperatives or spiritual indirection, so that obscurity would not attempt to

swallow logic and judgment. These thoughts would lead us to a better understanding of the topic at hand. Again, my widest imaginations and glimpses would be supported by what Dedalus teaches on how to track the very core of religious labyrinth. This study would help us nourished African religious history before the coming of the missionaries. Over and above these, for megacity to grow, it has to keep religion off governance.

The analyses that make some religious traditions fall into super-group in comparative religious study arranged by historical origin or mutual influence should be discouraged. Every religious believers (traditional African religion) with the feeling of God's presence as proof of their genius and existence should be encouraged. Some Christian folks today hold cling fingers why making claim that some Africans lack feelings of the presence of Christ as proof of God's existence and manifestations but still cling to their ancestral heritage. However, honest people have continued to praise African courage and determination in persevering their culture and religion despite severe moral doubt or spiritual blackout.

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