



Culture and Belief Systems: A Christian Experience in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Culture, which is manifested in symbols, heroes, rituals, values and practices, refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religions, concepts of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving; it is the sum total of the learned behavior of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of that people and are transmitted from generation to generation. The aim of this paper is an evaluation of the relationship between culture and belief systems on the one hand and between African religion and Christianity on the other. Are they partners or rivals? The emphases here are on conflicts, challenges and solutions for a peaceful co-existence in the 21st century Nigerian society and beyond. The paper ends with far-reaching recommendations and a list of activities for a better understanding and appreciation of the relationship between Christian and Nigerian culture and belief systems. The work is a contribution to the ongoing debate on cultural revival.

INTRODUCTION

One of the unresolved issues today concerns the relationship between culture and belief systems on the one hand and African Religion and Christianity on the other. Are they partners or rivals? Since religion in general and Christianity in particular is an essential ingredient of culture, this paper is an evaluation of the relationship between culture and Christian belief systems in the 21st century with a view to appreciating the challenges, conflicts and solutions. This is important because culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements. The existence and use of culture, like belief systems or religion depends upon an ability possessed

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by humans alone. This ability has been called variously the capacity for rational or abstract thought, but a good case has been made for rational behaviour.¹

Again, this work is crucial because culture is stronger than life and stronger than death. This is so because among the subhuman animals, death is merely the cessation of the vital processes of metabolism, respiration and so on. In the human species, however, death is also a concept; only humanity knows death. But culture triumphs over death and offers humanity eternal life. Thus, culture may deny satisfaction on the one hand while it fulfils desires on the other.²

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to understand key terms in the theme: culture, belief systems, world view, ideology, Christianity, challenges and conflicts.

Understanding Key Terms

Culture: The English term “culture” actually came into use during the middle Ages or Dark Ages or Medieval Period (5th to 15th centuries A.D.). It derived from the Latin word for cultivation, as in the practice of nurturing domesticated plants in gardens. Thus, the word “culture” originally referred to peoples’ role in controlling nature.³ Behaviour peculiar to *Homo Sapiens*, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behaviour is “culture”. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, custom, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals and ceremonies, among other elements.

There are three broad categories of culture material, social and ideological. A fourth category, the arts, has characteristics of both material and ideological culture. Material culture includes products of human manufacture, such as technology. Social culture pertains to people’s forms of social organization – how people interact and organize themselves in groups. Ideological culture relates to what people think, value, believe and hold as ideals. The arts include such activities and areas of interest as music, sculpture, painting, pottery, theatre, cooking, writing and fashion. Anthropologists often study how these categories of culture differ across different types of societies, that vary in scale (size and complexity).⁴

What has been termed the classic definition of culture was presented by Edward Burnett Tylor, the 19th century English anthropologist in the first paragraph of his *Primitive Culture* (1971):

Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society.⁵

In *Anthropology* (1981), Tylor made it clear that culture, so defined, is possessed by humanity alone. This conception of culture served anthropologists well for some fifty years. With the increasing maturity of anthropological science, further reflections upon the nature of their subject

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matter and concepts to a multiplication and diversification of definition of culture⁶

A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, US anthropologists cited definition of culture ranging from “learned behaviour” to “ideas in mind”, “a logical concept”, “a statistical fiction”, “a psychic defense mechanism”, and so on. Its “an abstraction from behaviour”⁷

People living together in a society share culture. For example, almost all people living in the United States of America share the English Language, dress in similar styles, eat many of the same foods, and celebrate many of the same holidays. All the people of a society collectively create and maintain culture. Societies preserve culture for much longer than the life of any one person. They preserve it in the form of knowledge, such as scientific discoveries, subjects, such as works of arts and traditions, such as the observance of holidays like Good Friday, Easter, Christmas and Boxing Day. There is equally a strong relationship between culture and personality – behaviour – because attitudes, values, ideals, beliefs and overt motor activity – is powerfully influenced by the culture that surrounds the individual on all sides. Culture is powerful enough to hold the sex urge in check and achieve premarital chastity and even voluntary vows of celibacy for life.

In these characteristics, culture is symbolic, learned, shared and adaptive. It is the totality of a person.

Belief System: It is an organized way of trying to explain the world around us. It is something that distinguishes human beings and becomes an integral part of culture. Religions like African Religion, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, and even concepts like humanism and capitalism have belief systems.⁸ The source of all belief systems, whether religious or art, is an attempt to describe the world in some way. Whether it is “where did we all come from?” “why are we here?” or “what happens when we die?”; belief systems help people to understand their environment. The environment is a key concept in understanding the variety of belief systems in the world. Indigenous Nigerians and Africans before European occupation used their natural environment to explain the world and their place in it. Science and rationality have contributed to the emergence of more contemporary belief systems that have to make sense of economic systems, technology and a complex social environment. Thus, the environment of the person who stands at the entrance of the 21st century will experience a totally different environment than the person who stood in the same place in the 19th or 20th centuries. Many of the questions they would ask of their existence could be the same, but the differing environments would lead to different explanations and belief systems.

Worldview: There is a subtle difference between Belief Systems and Worldview. Where a belief system will attempt to provide understanding of larger issues of philosophy and fundamental beliefs and ways of doing things, a worldview essentially tries to explain and interpret world history or

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civilization⁹. You may find, as I have done, that the two terms are very similar.

Ideology: This refers to the unified set of ideas that link together beliefs. Thus you can refer to the capitalistic ideology that combines the ideas that underpin the belief system of capitalism.

The Range of Belief Systems: One way of trying to chart the extent of belief systems within and outside Nigeria in particular and Africa in general is through statistical analysis. You could consult census material from Nigeria or Africa census offices or bureau of statistics, which collects and publishes information based on National Population Census returns to ascertain the population of Muslims, Christians and others¹⁰.

Religious and Non-Religious Belief Systems: All belief systems offer an explanation of something. The difference between secular (non-religious) and religious belief systems is that religious systems normally deal “with the whole of human life and death”¹¹. They take on a transcendent dimension that encompasses more than a mere human dimension. In other words, they believe in a supreme being or god. Secular belief systems often tend to try and explain specific aspects of life rather than all of life. For instance, feminism is a belief system that attempts to explain gender equality and capitalism explains economic organization and life. However, it should be remembered that some non-religious belief systems like Wicca or Scientology often refer to very similar ideas to traditional religious belief systems¹².

Personal Responses: To fully understand the nature and variety of belief systems, one needs to engage in a degree of personal reflection. One must determine what one’s beliefs are, and where they may have originated. One needs to try and determine the influence of socializing agents upon him/her, and compare one’s belief with those of family and friends, as well as people of other times and places. Such processes involve issues of continuity and change and specific examples, areas of commonality and contrast in beliefs across times.¹³

“Christianity” is the religion, belief, Church, etc based on the teaching of Christ. While “Challenges” are the invitation or call to play a game, run a race, have a fight, and so on, to see who is better. “Conflict” on the other hand is a fight, struggle, quarrel, opposition and difference.

The Beginnings, Growth and Challenges of Christianity in Africa

Three major attempts have been made to plant Christianity in Africa: the first century A.D. efforts, which ended in the 7th century A.D. due to the threat of Islam; the fifteenth century attempt in West Africa (including Benin and Warri in Nigeria) which ended about the middle of the 18th century and the nineteenth century missionary efforts. From Egypt, Ethiopia, Cyrenaica,

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Nubia and Carthage, the gospel spread to other parts of North Africa. Unfortunately, Christianity at this time was mainly elites, as a result, it was mainly restricted to the courts. The gospel message could not as well spread outside North Africa to other parts of the continent. With time, however, North African earliest Christianity was almost displaced by Islam. It is unfortunate that the Church in this period lost its position in a serious competition with Islam in the seventh century A.D. The reason for this was that, the Church was not united and was not also serving as a witness. This was a tragic event for the early African Church. Nigerian Christians in the 21st century do not seem to have learnt from this great mistake of the past.¹⁴

With the failure of the first attempt to spread Christianity to all parts of Africa, the second attempt was made in the fifteenth century to propagate Christianity in Africa through the initiative of Prince Henry the navigator of Portugal, who attempted to reach India through the coast of West Africa, for a century and a half (1570 – 1733), the Warm rulers became well known as professing Christians, but Christianity did not spread beyond the court, even at the court it was shaky. After 1733, Christianity in Benin (1575) and Warm of Nigeria declined. At the beginning of the 19th century, Christianity had completely disappeared in Warri because of the following reasons: the early missionaries confirmed Christianity, almost entirely, to the royal family; lack of regular supply of clergy to administer the sacraments; failure of Christianity to displace the traditional religion, high mortality rate among the missionaries who came to West Africa owing to unaccustomed tropical diseases such as malaria and sleeping sickness; difficulties of language and transportation problems, the missionaries under-estimated the magnitude of their task; the method of evangelization was poor, financial constraint; and divided loyalties among the Christian missionaries.¹⁵

There was a revival of missionary efforts in West Africa during the nineteenth century. This grew out of two main factors. First, humanitarian movement to abolish slave trade. Second, increased missionary activities in Europe itself and America to evangelize West Africa.¹⁶ With the enactment and enforcement of the Abolition Act of 1907, the liberated slaves were repatriated to West Africa where they were settled in Freetown (Sierra Leone), Liberia and Gambia. Nigerian ex-slaves settled in Freetown (nursery of infant Church in Africa. It was through the freed slaves and the role of African independent Church, that the Christian message reached most parts of Africa.

Conflicts between African Culture and Christianity

There are lots of contradictions between African religion and Christianity in areas of belief, worship and practices. However, it must be noted that the conflict in belief was not as regards the belief in the Supreme Being but in channels of communication. The conflict also extended to institutions and local authorities. A typical incidence is reported by F. K. Ekechi, thus:

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The impact of the teaching in the schools became evident in the day-to-day lives of the children. Not only did they regard themselves as a separate class, but some of them became irritatingly disrespectful. The behaviour of the grandson of the King of Onitsha in 1863 is a case in point. During one of the regular school processions through the town, the King and his son (the prince) were among the spectators. As the prince's son, Oditia, came to the area where his father and grandfather sat, he refused to accord his King the traditional greeting which involved kneeling down and bowing the head. Instead, he stood upright and merely bowed his head.¹⁷

The explanation for this behaviour was that he had been told that kneeling was proper only when one was praying. In Taylor's words, "the King was surprised beyond measure as well as the Prince,"¹⁸ at Oditia's behaviour. It is clear from the records and from the actions of the converts that the kind of Christianity which was introduced into the continent tended to make the Christians profoundly un-African and the school became, in essence, the most important mechanism for "detaching the young from their root, from the whole complex of conventions and beliefs in which they were brought up..."¹⁹

In the area of local customs and practices the missionaries were delighted that through their influence some of the traditional orgies were reduced. Samuel U. Eriwo rightly observed that:

The advent of Christianity to a particular culture usually generates persecutions, since, in the process of christianisation, the old culture is inevitably judged in the light of the presence and principles of Christ.²⁰ In the first instance, it creates prejudices and attitudes of disregard toward opponents, oppression of non-adherents, where the religion is a state affair – willful destruction of human life and property and others which have embittered human life on earth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the relationship between culture and belief systems and supports the calls for a cordial relationship between cultural and belief systems – religious and secular. Essentially, all religions protect and promote their belief systems and culture while believers control their own minds and reform their personalities, in accordance with their belief system. Culture on its part is stronger than life and death and exists beyond both. The basis of a person's free will is their belief system and worldview. People make their choices and decisions, based on their belief, values and attitudes. Religious belief systems can be effectively placed within a wider cultural and social context.

In order to avoid religious conflicts between Christianity and African culture, the adherents of both religions should be thoroughly educated on the doctrine, teachings and practices of each other's religion. There should be Africanisation of Christianity. For instance, for purposes of matrimonial

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unity, the Church should work out an acceptable form of marriage within the context of the African culture.²¹

Christians should be permitted to study some secret societies, join them and reform them. For instance, traditional priests of secret cults should be recognized since most of them are pious according to the demands and nature of their duties. Traditional leaders and mid-wives should be recognized and equipped with modern techniques.

Furthermore, it is essential that sociological research be conducted into history, doctrine, practices and the lives of the early Christian missions and missionaries in Africa and the various aspects of the traditional culture to enable the necessary adaptations so that Christ may become for the African a reality.

We require a theology of incarnation not just of adoption. Christianity must be born into African societies, to make the gospel message part of our very selves. It is not enough to translate Latin or English texts to African languages or introduce the drum and a few melodies of worship or to make vestments with traditional cloth. Such action only scratches the surface of the problem. We need to be bold and original.

There is a need for continuous dialogue through discussions between the priests and other religious functionaries in the continent to make room for mutual understanding of adherents. Such dialogues if properly organized, will also eliminate likely areas of conflict.

Efforts should be made to introduce inter-faith worship between adherents of various religions to reduce the fear of extermination and misunderstanding.

Again, common projects like agricultural or farm settlements, maternity homes, and others of like nature should be encouraged and executed by members of different faiths.

ACTIVITIES

- A. Draw up a list of your own most important beliefs, both religious and non-religious, and trace their origins. Do they fit into an accepted belief system? Which one?
- B. Try and compile a cross-generational flowchart of beliefs within your family line and cover at least three generations. Use the flow chart to determine continuities and changes within the belief systems of your own family.
- C. Find an example of a belief system from an earlier period of history. How can it be linked to its environment? Compare it with your own experiences.

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