

MISCONCEPTION OF RITUALS AS BASIS FOR CONDEMNATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AMONG CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS: A CALL FOR RE-ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ritual observances across different cultures and religions. Presently, religious practitioners with different orientation and cultural backgrounds misconceive rituals. It is unbecoming that the concept is gaining attachment to evil minded acts. It is unfortunate that some religious practitioners believe that their religion or denomination has nothing to do with ritual meanwhile they indulge in ritual practices. Simply put, Christians condemn African traditional religion and culture for their devilish practices in form of rituals. Sometimes dead corpses are seen with victim's breast, penis, head cut. People's interpretation will always be that the ritualists have acted again. Such acts are done by sorcerers who could also use those victims for inhuman spiritual purposes that also contain rituals. But our day to day religious practices as Christians, Muslims, African traditional religious practitioners, Hinduist, etc are filled with rituals. Based on this, there is need for academic investigation into the matter, in order to unearth a sustainable recommendation so as to avert the looming danger emanating from unnecessary condemnation of any religion or culture. The research employed a phenomenological approach. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources and were analyzed with descriptive method of data analysis. The findings revealed if religious or cultural rituals are correctly comprehended, will elude and eradicate fanaticism and prigs among world religion and culture.

Keywords: Rituals, misconceptions, culture and religious practitioners.

Introduction:

The world has been developed with multifarious tribes, cultures, and religions. These religions include: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, African Traditional religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, to mention only but a few. These religions took their pace from different cultural backgrounds. Some of them are more missionary aggressive than others, promoting more than one religion struggling for converts in a particular cultural setting or group. These circumstances have created misconceptions of fundamental religious right in a religion to be evil, and the same to be benevolent in another religion because of religio-cultural sentiment.

Christianity for example, took its root from Jewish culture, Greek culture, and later to Roman culture. These cultural romances have made it confusing even when similar practices are

performed because they lose the same cultural outlook, condemnations will be the result. Truly speaking, western culture appears to be more refined than African culture but it should not change the meaning of a particular observant uniformly practiced among various religions. Kalu (1982:76) states thus:

But more crucial in the culture contact with Europeans, Africans felt greatly disadvantaged because they had no comparable art of writing for storage, development and propagation of their civilization. In Liberia an African employee of American Firestone Company was so distraught by such strictures in his race that he took God to task.

If Africans had comparable art of writing for storage, development and propagation of their civilization, before their contact with Europeans, certain words like rituals, reincarnation etc. would have gotten their real definitions in the minds of Africans and Europeans, thereby taking care of those misconceptions. Ilogu (1985:63) also adds thus:

... before the arrival of Christianity, Iboland was a place in which the traditional religion laid the basis of behavior. Social and cultural identification and the principles of socialization from the older to younger generation were clearly understood. With arrival of missionaries and traders from 1857 onwards the neat pattern became disturbed. Plurality of religious beliefs and value concepts appeared for the first time to start the rapid social change that had been going on in Iboland ever since then ...

Religion occupies a reasonable space in the life of the traditional African/Igbo people. When Christianity and Western civilization came and interacted with African culture and religion, misconception of beliefs, values, and terms developed.

In fact, we should not misunderstand the notoriety in some people's religious life, just like Africans as Mbiti (1969:1) has stated that: "Africans are notoriously religious". This notorious religious orientation inherited from our forebears necessitated numerous ritual observances. Having discovered this religious nature of African man, the missionary took advantage of it, and branded his religion to be heathen, paganism, primitive, idol, barbaric, etc. All these unpleasant names are introduced to captivate our psyche against our religion and culture. The Christians, have the crucifix, chaplet, alters, Bibles etc. which are manmade, but have gone as far as condemning *ofò*, *ikenga*, etc as manmade gods, therefore, are idols. The patheon of spirits which they see as mediators between man and Supreme God just as the Christians have saints, and angels are given derogatory name as animism. Frances M.D. a pioneer lady missionary in Onyeidu (2004:10) described the features and importance of Igbo *Ikenga* thus:

Ikenga is the god of victory and chief of the household gods (sic). Many houses have only *ikenga*. The right hand of a man is the hand of the *ikenga*, because it is strong. The idol is made to represent different creatures but it is always wild- looking and ugly for the spirit *ikenga* is supposed to be a wild strong spirit. It has a prominent position in the house, and every great blessing that

comes into a man's life is attributed to ikenga. He keeps away evil and brings all good luck.

There are certain rituals/observances are done with the presentation of ikenga as a symbol of strength and achievement, the Igbo for one day never took ikenga to be a God. It represents for the Igbo man's strength, and achievement which are believed to have been made possible by God. Because man acknowledges these blessings of God he creates the *ikenga* just to symbolize his appreciation of God's blessings. The idea of right hand that comes to ikenga is based on the Igbo believe that right connotes positivity while left connotes negativity. The Igbo reject giving someone something with left hand, greeting or shaking people with left hand, and even frown at doing anything with left hand. Frances might have seen ikenga as chief of the household because it is mostly the elders of various homes that keep ikenga in their houses and the elders are seen and respected as heads of their various households. An elder is seen as the chief of the household not ikenga. It is this type of misconception among early missionaries that is still affecting the understanding of ritual among present religious practitioners. Anigbo (personal conversation, November 11, 1996) said that the traditional religion is misunderstood because some of us Christians also misunderstand Christianity.

There are certain practices that are bad in traditional religion, at the same time, there are bad practices in other religions. I therefore have found out that the wrong impress and inferiority tag put on African man's neck by the colonial masters, Christian missionaries, and even Islamic crusaders is still digging against our cultural and religious relationship amongst ourselves and should be re-addressed. There had been researches of this nature which seem to have addressed issues relating to this, but I have discovered that misconception of rituals at a significant level contributes as one of the major salient factors that creates those misconceptions and need academically be addressed. The theoretical framework is built on phenomenological research approach with descriptive data analysis. This style is adopted to avoid prejudice and to allow data to present and speak for itself.

Clarification of Terms/Concepts

Ritual/Symbol: According to Summers (2001:1226) ritual is:

--- a ceremony that is always performed in the same way, in order to mark an important religious or social occasion..... The ritual of communion in the church—some that you do regularly and in the same way each time... done as part of a rite or ritual ; ritual dances; done in a fixed and expected way, but without real meaning or sincerity – the police issued the usual ritual apology.

Ritual according to Summers could be either social or religious in nature. It is a regular and the same way of doing something in form of rite. Ekeopara (2005:48) on the other hand, describes ritual thus:

--- a symbolic approach which embodies social relations, status or even the role of individuals within the society. It refers to the transcend numinous reality and to ultimate values of the community or the society in terms of values, the ultimate is the highest value. Ritual religiously helps man to move into the ultimate realm and establish a relationship with unknown.

The nature of ritual appears to portray as a symbolic act as stated by Ekeopara. Ifesieh(1989:125) in the same vein asserts that: "symbol, like ritual, as we have seen can be religious or not". Ifesieh agrees that ritual is symbolic. More so, it could be social or religious. Cohen in Ifesieh (1989:125) defines symbols as "...object, acts, concept, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of this desperate meaning, invoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action.... Namely: in stylized patterns of activities like ceremonies, ritual gift exchange, prescribed forms of joking, taking oats, eating and drinking together" ..

Ritual and symbols are joined together because rituals are mostly symbolic, and symbols are also ritualistic in both their social and religious practices. Cohen in Ifesieh has mentioned that symbols like rituals, can appear as an object, act, concept or linguistic formation that are prone to ambiguity and multiplicity, sentiment and emotions. These features no doubt must have introduced an adamant misunderstanding of ritual among present religious practitioners.

Sorcery:

Sorcery: for Summers (2001) sorcery is the magic that uses the power of evil spirits. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:246) Perceive sorcery thus:

.... Magic can be good or bad, licit or illicit, bad or illicit magic is known as sorcery. It is offensive and anti-social. It is much feared because it can be used to kill, to harm, to destroy life or property, to make a happy destiny an unhappy one, and to dismpt the well-being of the individual and the society. A person who uses bad magic is called a sorcerer. He is an evil person, feared and hated. He very often works in darkness because his deeds are evil.

From every indication, sorcery is evil, at the same time, it is condemned in African traditional religion because its purpose is to victimize people or the entire society. Network news commentary at 4:00pm read by Tokpe Ojeme of Radio Nigeria 92.9 FM on ritual on 9/12/2018; He described the killing of people and trafficking of children for ritual purposes by ritualists for power or money as against humanity and condemned by God. For me the culprits should better be called sorcery ritualists or sorcerers.

Conceptualization of Rituals

Ritual can be conceived by different societies or people in various ways, but the reality is that every religion or culture observes rituals of numerous forms and shapes in regular worships, special worships, festivals etc rituals are observed or practiced. Onuh (1991: 147) points thus:

A ritual is defined as a stereo-typed sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests. Rituals are staged events that follow a standard protocol whenever they are performed. They are social actions that require a group participation, through which transitions are structured and which provide markers for bringing an individual into a new status.

With what Onuh has said, rituals could be seen in work places, worship places, social arena, etc with varied intentions. In the Old Testament, the enactment and re-enactment of God's covenant with Israel surfaced some forms of rituals. The crucifix is the symbol the Christians use today in ritual of Holy Communion where we eat and drink the blood Christ sacrificed on the cross of Calvary for the redemption of man from sin, and we are advised to dine and wine/drink in His memory. By this, that object crucifix where He was crucified automatically remains symbol, and the act of observe ring it in Christian services or masses is equally a ritual observance. Okwueeze (1998:64) emphasizes on God's covenant with Israel when he states that;

Moses is ordered to come up to the Lord (i.e to the mountain) with Aaron. Nadah, Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel. Moses and those mentioned went up and they saw God, ate and drank (Ex. 24:9-11). From the story it is clear that the covenant between Yahweh and the people is made effective in a sacred meal right on top of the mountain and during this meal God was vividly present thus "they behold God, ate and drank.

God also established a covenant majorly by involving them in a sacred meal. Okwueze and Kanu (2003:96-97) have also identified a similar covenant in African traditional religion when they write that:

Another term of the covenant agreement between God and the Israel is was that if they did God's will, He would also provide for them. Perhaps, covenant making is more prominent in African Traditional Religion. It is a ceremony, which spells out some dose and don'ts' in order to bring sanity in a locality. Its spirit is kept to the letter because the gods are the arbitrators and would harm anybody that goes against it. This type of traditional covenant was recently made between the people of Aguleri, Umuleri and Umuoba Anam Communities meant to heal the wound inflicted by the fratricidal war, which took place among them.

The act of eating and drinking together even in Igbo world view is a covenant ritual. The covenant between these three communities in the Present Anamabra State is called *iko-mee*. In which both parties eat and drank together. The covenant lies purely a religious ritual done to tackle anti-social problems. Obeta (2000) adds that apart from the covenant God had with the Israelites at Sinai that God ha covenant with Noah and Abraham. The act of facing towards Mecca by Muslims whenever they are praying is a ritual observance. Alhaji Musa Yahaya Ndu (personal communication, 17 October, 2018) said that in Islam it is a ritual observance in the Mosque that marriage or wedding ritual is done on behalf of a man's wife once a relation to the present, and she must not appear in the Mosque for her wedding. This wedding ceremony for the Islam contained some ritual observances.

In African traditional Religion there are several rituals. There are rituals for health practitioners, farmers, etc. Adibe (2008: 64) elaborates *Iluwaonya* ritual among the Northern Igbo people thus: "To possess a second sight is a must for every traditional doctor without which he cannot commune with the spirit world, as the spirits are not seen with mere ordinary human conditioned eyes". A lot of rituals are observed in African traditional religion. Gennep in Ugwu (2004) maintains that life passes through four transitional ritual stages which include

birth rites, puberty, adulthood and death rites. These rituals are also observed in Christianity, Islam and other religions of the world though the manner of their observances differs. There are so many other rituals among Christians also practiced by the traditionalists. They are: confession, child dedication, wedding ceremonies, birth day, priestly ordination, title taking, Pentecost ascension, paying of tithe, sowing seed, offerings, etc. All saints, All Souls, Christians – animal birth ritual for Jesus' Christ and Eater. For Onwu (2002:251), the synoptic gospels are unanimous in the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. They however, vary in their accents of the event which reflect their diverse theological interest". This resurrection as contained in the synoptic gospels is celebrated today among Christians with immense ritual observance. Ezeme (2011) observes that the Roman Catholic has seven sacraments of which some of them have been reflected here, but in addition he discusses sacrament of confirmation as an endowment of Holy Spirit, Penance as Sacrament of forgiveness, and matrimony as sacrament for union of a man and a woman. All these sacramental observances are rituals.

In Christian baptism another form of ritual is observed. For Agha (1999: 3) he posits that: "through Christian baptism, new members are engrafted into the body of Christ. It is a symbolic guarantee that a person has become a member of the Christian church". From the definition of ritual and symbol, we can see that Agha has presented baptism as a ritual and at the same time a symbol. In a nutshell, ritual is a common phenomenon among world religions. Without rituals in any religion, that religion loses its locus. Ritual is that brand of paint that adds colour to man's social and religious activities. For these reasons ritual should be conceived as normal component of every religion.

Ritual and Sorcery: The Strata of the Misconception.

African traditional religion and culture have been attributed to so many bad names even when it is noticeable that those practices are not done any longer. They practiced human sacrifices, killing of twins, curtail slavery, and so on. But the Western world encouraged such inhuman practices with the introduction of slave trade, though the missionaries discouraged slave trade and slavery. Gaiya (2018): 134) avers thus: "They had a great concern over the abolition of the slave trade. With the abolition of the slave trade 19th century, they came re-awakening of humanitarian feelings for destitute Negroes". As the missionaries were against the slave trade, brothers were seriously running the business African traditional religion replaced human sacrifice with sacrifices with oxen, bulls, ram, etc., but the wicked ones who are in some religious leadership positions would always disagree with such alternative. Ezeko Okafor (personal communication, (6 October, 2018) said that some diviners and priests in those days objected the alternative sacrifice most of the time because of the wicked intentions. He continued that such wicked ones were punished by the gods. There are also some of these practices that the traditionalists willingly abolished when they understand their inhuman implications.

The inhumanities in all these practices are sorcery they also have their own rituals. The idea of killing or harming people or property is completely sorcery and should not be misunderstood as just ritual; rather, it should be noted as wicked ritual. Slave trade, killing of twins, etc., has been abolished, but people even among Christians still involve themselves in kidnapping, child trafficking, assassinations etc. The assassination cannot be proved beyond any reasonable doubt to be African traditional religious practitioners. Abutu (personal

communication, 14 March, 2012) stated that as a police officer, such suspected and perpetrators answer Christian names with evidence of baptism and birth.

It is on this background that we should be able to separate the goat from the sheep. Ritual as a term has been used in recent times to condemn African traditional religion. We should understand ritual as good ritual when it is applied religiously. On good magic and sorcery as bad ritual when it is practiced as bad magic or otherwise, no matter who does it, be him Christian, Muslim, traditionalist, Hinduist and so forth.

Recommendations

1. Religious bodies should examine the features of their belief system to avoid misinterpretation of their religious activities.
2. Fanaticism is the order of the day, therefore priests of various religions should qualify to officiate after indenting a special religious schools for academic upliftment.
3. A religion like African traditional religion should be encouraged even by government with some incentives to enable it to upgrade itself.
4. The constitution of Nigeria for example, grants freedom of worship for her citizens. Factors should be fortified against interruption of people's freedom of worship.
5. An ecumenical orientation of all religions is needed to suppress unnecessary condemnations of other people's religion and cultures.

Conclusion

People have run into Christianity as a shelter in which they can hide and execute their evil intentions. Ritual presently is what they always say; they would not involve themselves in, claiming that it is evil. Ritual as a religious observance for the well being of man promotes the total welfare of the society when everybody abides by the dos and don'ts. Based on this it is not evil, as far as the intention is not sorcery or not practiced by sorcerer. Among the Igbo contemporary religious practitioners the level at which the traditional religious practitioners are embarrassed is uncalled for. They are called "*ndi ogo muo*" - with the wrong perception that they worship evil as a sign of condemnation because they observe a lot of rituals. '*I go muo*' simply means to worship spirit not to worship evil. Therefore, every religion worships spirit(s). No religion worships man or human being. The traditionalists worship benevolent spirit. Within the south eastern Nigeria, traditional religious practitioners are called *Ndi-Ogo muo* and the Christians are called *Ndi-Uka*. The terminology is wrong because *Uka* in Igbo language means religion and the traditional religious are practicing a religion.

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Oral Interview

s/n	Name of interviewee	Profession	Approximate age	Date	Interviewer
1	Late Rev. Fr. Prof. O.A.C Anigbo	Priest/ Lecturer	71 years	11/11/1996	Okafor E.I
2	Alhaji Yahaya Musa	Business man	55 years	17/10/18	Okafor E.I
3	Ezeko Okafor	Farmer	82 years	6/10/2018	Okafor E.I
4	Abutu Cypril	Police officer	66 years	14/3/2012	Okafor E.I