

Contextualization and Christian Practices: A Study of Its Impacts and Challenges on Contemporary Mainline Churches in Nigeria

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Abstract

Culture is an intrinsic aspect of every human society and it plays a dominant role in shaping their orientation and influencing every strata of life, be it social, political, economic and religious. It is in this latter aspect that this study examines the influence of culture and tradition on the practices of the Mainline Churches in Nigeria. The church generally have refuted the cultural and traditional elements in its entirety and regarded them as superstitious and spurious. However, findings revealed that cultural elements form a part of the liturgical processes in these Churches. This presupposes that the doctrines recognize the tenets and culture of the African people and incorporates some aspects of this culture into its liturgy in order to remain relevant within the African milieu. In addition, there exists contextualization of African belief system into the fabric of the Church in order to remain relevant and not to be alien to the people. These cultural elements help to enliven the religious worship and to liberate them from the orthodox mode of worship which is dry and mechanical. This paper concludes that the use of cultural elements is a right step in the right direction. In this regard, contextualization helps in such a way that Christianity is being practiced within the cultural context of the host community by adopting the cultural elements into its worship. Therefore, the people are not alienated from their culture.

Keywords: Contextualization, Culture, Tradition, Christianity, Mainline Churches

Introduction

It is instructive to note that people cannot be separated from their culture. Culture according to Balogun (1997) is a general pattern or way of life. Tylor (1891) describes culture as that “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, moral law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. It is a set of rules and regulations for conduct. It is not an exaggeration to say that culture is the entire way of life of a people; culture is common among human societies, but it distinguishes man from the rest of the biological world. Culture of a people is expressed through music, dancing, dressing and religion. The inference that could be drawn from this is that culture and religion of a people are closely interwoven and could be inseparable. The culture of the Africans is not the same as that of the Western World.

It is important to note that prior to its emergence, Christianity has been practiced within the ambit of the Western culture. In other words, Christian ideals as practiced by the mainline churches rejected anything that has to do with African cultural practices in the church. Therefore, African cultural practices were rejected and abolished as demonic. This even led many people to African origin to change names and accept Western names. In addition, only marriages that are contracted in the church are regarded as acceptable. This means that the African method of marrying more than one wife was rejected. Also, singing in the church has been patterned after the Western-orientated songs which presuppose that native songs were rejected. In fact, the whole essence of “Africanness” was thrown into the waste bin of anachronism. This made the African people disillusioned as most of the doctrines preached by the church were alien to the African people who have now embraced Christianity. This led to spiritual decline among the people and so much, the need arose for a place where African desires would be realized and their spiritual favour guaranteed. Therefore, the birth of the African church is seen as a blessing to the African people who now have the avenue to express their spirituality without any fear or molestation.

Contextualization

It will be apposite to remark that the definitions of contextualization differ from people to people depending on the emphasis placed upon *scripture* and *the cultural setting* (Moreau, 2005: 335). Models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. Therefore, images, metaphors, rituals, and words that are current in the culture are used to make the message both understandable and impactful. This model “assigns control to Scripture but cherishes the ‘contextualization’ rubric because it reminds us that the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context” (Carson, 1987: 219-20).

In this context, when the cultural background is prioritized, God’s meaning is sought experientially within the cultural traditions using the Bible as a guide. In this situation, this model more fully “assigns control to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling lattice to determine the meaning of Scripture” (Carson, 1987: 219-20). The aspiration is to find what God is already doing in the culture rather than to communicate God’s eternal message within the cultural framework. For example, Donovan (2003) describes anthropological inquiry as a “treasure hunt that uses Scripture as map or guide to discover the treasures to be found in the culture” (Moreau, 2005: 336; Bevans, 1992: 49).

According to Hesselgrave, (1995) “acceptable contextualization is a direct result of ascertaining the meaning of the biblical text, consciously submitting to its authority, and applying or appropriating that meaning to a given situation. The results of this process may vary in form and intensity, but they will always remain within the scope of meaning approved by the biblical text”. In the same vein, Tiénou (1982) describes contextualization within the process of theology. He opines: “Contextualization is the inner dynamic of the theologizing process. It is not a matter of borrowing already existing forms or an established theology in order to fit them into various contexts. Rather contextualization is capturing the meaning of the gospel in such a way that a given society communicates with God. It is this perspective according to (Tiénou, 1982: 51) that “theology is born”.

As far as Wan (1999) is concerned, contextualization is derived from the dynamic relationship between gospel and culture, between “cultural relevancy” and “theological coherence.” Therefore, he describes contextualization as “the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency” (Wan, 1999: 13).

Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989: 200) delineate contextualization as “the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as put forth in the teaching of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts”. From this definition, two phases could be gleaned. The first aspect of this definition focuses on authentic understandings or faithfulness to scripture: “The adequacy of an attempted contextualization must be measured by the degree to which it faithfully reflects the meaning of the biblical text” (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989: 201). Consequently, contextualization involves three principal elements which are as follows: (1) *revelation* (God’s communication of eternal truth in human linguistic and cultural categories); (2) *interpretation* (“the reader’s or hearer’s perception of the intended meaning”); and (3) *application* (including how “the interpreter formulates the logical implications of his understanding of the biblical text” and how he “decides to accept the validity of the text’s implications” by totally accepting it, accepting some parts and rejecting others, or superimposing his own meanings upon the text (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989: 201-202).

The second phase of the definition infers “effectiveness”- that communicating the gospel “grows out of an understanding of our respondents in their particular context and out of the active ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and in them” (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989: 199-200). They gave a seven-dimension framework which is summed up as follows: 1. *Worldview* - ways of viewing the World; 2. *Cognitive processes* - ways of thinking; 3. *Linguistic forms* - ways of expressing ideas; 4. *Behavioral patterns* - ways of acting; 5. *Communication media* - ways of channeling the message; 6. *Social structures* - ways of interacting; and 7. *Motivation sources* - ways of deciding. These seven - dimension framework provides the tools for cultural analysis that equip the Christian missionary to effectively communicate the gospel. However, they assert that authentic contextualization must be measured by its “faithfulness” to the meanings of the scripture and its “effectiveness” or “relevance” in communicating Christ within the recipient culture (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989). These definitions establish the need for contextualization and illustrate that an overemphasis upon the cultural context can lead to syncretism.

Culture and Tradition

According to Omotoye (2002), culture is a total way of life, of a particular group of people which gives direction and complexion to the scheme of practices. It is clear that culture and tradition are interwoven and interrelated. They are inseparable; be it African, American, European or Australian culture. Culture is however, a wider umbrella under which we find marriage, naming, habit, music, dance and a host of other ways of looking at life generally. The term culture has been variously defined. It has been described as “the arts, customs, beliefs and all other products of human thought made by a people at a particular time”.

When we speak of African Tradition and Culture, we mean the indigenous practices of the African race. It is the practices that have been handed over from generation to generation by the forbearers of the present generation of Africans. The two are also seen in the religion of the Africans. They are practices that are observed within the indigenous religion. This is a practice that has no written literature, yet it is written everywhere for these who care to see and read (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 26).

However, when the European and Arabs came to Africa, they erroneously made believe that the culture, tradition and religion of the Africans are inferior to their own. Many obnoxious terminologies were used to describe the African Religion such as the withdrawn god, polytheism, fetishism, idolatry, heathenism, paganism, animism, primitive, juju and ancestor worship (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:25). All these terminologies are unacceptable and rejected by the scholars of African religion.

Jekayinfa (2002) appraises culture on the ground of the common characteristics of its various definitions, which include being dynamic and transmittable from generation to generation. It also includes factors that influence a particular society and how people come in contact with each other in the society. Culture according to Ekeh (1989) is a “construct (with diverse applications) used in an attempt to analyze and interpret events and ideas in a broad spectrum of areas of society”. In its broadest sense, culture and tradition embraces the total repertoire of human actions which are socially transmitted from generation to generation,

Foster (1962:56) defined culture as “common learned way of life shared by members of society, consisting of the totality of facts, techniques, social institutions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and systems of values known to a group”. However, the Comparative Education Study and Adaptation Centre (1979) simply defines culture and tradition as the way people live which consists of a system of ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge practices, and customs of a system of ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge practices, and customs transmitted from generation to generation within a social group.

This way of life includes arrangements and methods of obtaining food from the environment and adapting to it. It also includes beliefs, religion and moral behaviour. One of the common characteristics of the above definitions includes the fact that culture and tradition is learned, acquired, transmitted or diffused through contact or other media of communications from one generation to another and from one society to the other. Man learns culture and tradition through the process of socialization, enumeration, imitation, personal experience and through deliberate indoctrination or teaching. Aberle (1970) opines that the individual inculcates the requisite values which enable the society to survive and be perpetuated. Another notable common characteristic of culture is that it is dynamic and not static and so can be modified or changed as circumstances dictate. Culture has many aspects and can be categorized into two, namely, material and non material culture.

a. Material Culture: This consists of the products of man’s industry or works of art e.g. carving, food, dress, pots, paintings, weapons, cloths, houses etc. They are objects, which are peculiar to a society, and man has learned to make them using the available resources in the society and his knowledge. These objects are used to satisfy certain needs in the society.

b. Non-Material Culture: These are abstract things. Man cannot see or touch them because they are not concrete things but man has learned them as part of the way of life. Examples are: language, dance, religion, music, literature, morals and values such as freedom, justice, honesty, love, beauty etc. Every society has its own culture. In Nigeria, for example, there are several groups of people. These are Yoruba, Ibibio, Angas, Fulani, the Hausa, the Igbo, the Kanuri, the Tiv and the Urhobo just to mention a few. Each of these has its own culture.

Culture, Tradition and Christianity

Peel (1968: 48) opined that with the introduction of Christianity in Africa and particularly in Nigeria, the missionaries were mainly concerned with evangelization of the people without recourse to their cultural feelings. In this respect, Christianity has as it were alienated the consciousness of the people from that which they so tenaciously believe in by its Western oriented liturgy which did not take the people into consideration. As such, Christianity was practiced with its Western garb. This was the perspectives within which orthodox Christianity was established.

According to Adewale (1997), the adoption of Christianity rendered some superstitious beliefs meaningless, ridiculous and effectively introduced a new concept of belief in one God. Through Christianity, some elements of European civilization have found their ways into African lives, thus European languages, dresses, patterns of building and European mercantile systems were all borrowed and made use of and have influenced the traditions of the Africans and their way of worshipping one God and the belief of that God. He concluded that “religion, is an important part of African culture, it is interwoven with economy, politics, philosophy and sociology of the Africans”. Religion has been used effectively as a tool for promoting the moral and social well-being of the Africans regardless of age, sex, country and ethnic origin.

According to Odumuyiwa, (1997) when Christianity came into Africa, particularly, Nigeria, the missionaries condemned all traditional divinities and deities and made people to believe in only Jesus Christ. All forms of traditional worship, festival and religious culture were condemned. Polygamy was also condemned, at the beginning. Christian denominations claimed that it is only through Christ that salvation for mankind could be made. It also encouraged Western civilization through the introduction of formal education.

Civilization through religion in Nigeria has brought environmental pollution which in return formed the basis of some air and water-borne diseases in Nigeria and Africa. Some useful African culture and tradition such as respect for elders and people in authority, good dressing behaviour, respect for sexual morality and sense of industry, being-patient, honesty and trustworthiness are now being eroded among the Africans and in Nigeria. Many foreign cultures that are un-African such as monogamy, polyandry and the display of pornographic materials on Television screen which adversely affect the morals of Nigerian youths are now with us under the auspices of Westernization and Christian influence. In addition, the colonial mentality of hating anything that is African or indigenous and the mad rush for imported material are very much with us.

Impact of Culture and Tradition on the Liturgy of the Mainline Churches

It is apposite at this juncture to examine some of the areas that culture has impacted on the liturgy of the mainline churches. This becomes paramount in the sense that most if not all of the mainline churches adopt elements from the traditional culture in order to embellish their worldview, yet they still come out to condemn the practices of the people as absurd and nonsensical. However, here are some of the areas culture has impinged on the worldview of the mainline churches.

a. Burial Rites

Jesus was probably buried in a burial ground (John 19: 41) Abraham buried his wife, Sarah in a field (Gen 23: 19-20) like our modern day cemetery. Jacob also made a final request in this respect (Gen 49: 29-32). The church’s prevailing motive for our respect for the dead even for the place of burial is in the sense of decency, and our feelings of love for the person, often without regarding the fact that the real person has gone and that only his former ‘residence’ remains. “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return” (Gen 3: 19). Based on these facts, some mainline Churches allow the bereaved family to decide where corpse will be buried either in the house or a common public or Christian burial ground.

In case of a public or household tomb, the church’s priest is expected to dedicate and sanctify the tomb. Meanwhile, the church is not expected to conduct burial service in the church for anybody that died un-baptized, someone that has been excommunicated, or one who died in the act of committing any grievous crime. However, on a demand by the family of the deceased, communion can be included in the burial service.

b. Marriage

The Marriage regulation as they relate to marriages contracted under the customary law is not uniform. In spite of this, the church requires certain basic principles of social norms which intending families must observe.

For example, before a marriage contracted under the customary law can be recognized by the church, it must be ascertained that it does not contravene the marriage law of Nigeria. Secondly, parties to a marriage under customary law must have gained the consent of their individual parents and must have given their own assent as well.' The mainline Churches do not accept marriage under customary law for its ministers; neither does it permit polygamous individuals for the clerical status. The church does not encourage sex before marriage (Heb 13: 4) neither do they deny wedding service for pregnant women. Culturally, the traditional and social aspect of the marriage is recognized by the church and this involves the introduction and engagement services which hold before the solemnization of the marriage. In fact the introduction and engagement has assumed a dimension which has become so crucial before the wedding can take place. Consequently, the church is silent on this traditional aspect of the people's lives to the intent that it has received a tacit approval from the church.

c. Naming Ceremony

The church does not frown at the use of natural items (like honey, sugarcane, salt, dried fish etc) in blessing a child. The priest normally sanctifies the honey, sugarcane and salt. These sweet things mean the child's life will be full of happiness and joy. This does not in any form drive us away from Christianity since Christ himself refers to Christians as the salt of the earth (Matt 5: 13a). Other items used in praying for a child on the naming day are the Holy Bible, water and probably writing materials. It must be noted here that Clergy and parents are given free hands here to determine whether to use some, all or non-of these natural items. What features mainly is the use of the Holy Bible, and water.

d. Music (Native Airs)

Music is part and parcel of Africans, they sing while on a journey, in their place of work, in the market, in their homes, at their leisure. Africans like music, drumming, dancing and clapping during any festival from which they derive joy and satisfaction. Music therefore has an important place in African traditional culture. This native airs are composed to meet the demands of the time, place and desires of the people. But when the Europeans came, they banned dancing during worship; they condemned the use of native airs, and local drums to which the new converts were used. Hence foreign hymns were introduced and people had to strain their ears before they could hear and sing foreign hymns. The missionaries were so conservative and they thought of native airs and local musical instrument as essentially pagan or evil, but the foreign hymns are meaningless to the local converts. These native airs are very rich and melodious and they match with time, place occasion and season.

The Church had seized the opportunity of being the controller of native airs once they realized the limitation of foreign hymns which cannot kindle and provoke religious enthusiasm, so the members compose hymns for such occasions as harvest thanksgiving, installation of chiefs, house warming, naming, wedding, burial and outing ceremonies. The Church believes in originality. Tunes and songs depend on the frame of mind, the breath of soul, the experience of life, and the attitude of faith, and the attitude of love of the individual.

In fact, Africans were accustomed to drumming and dancing in the traditional set up before their conversion to Christianity, no wonder because Africans are born musician, and lovers of music. For all occasions of life, they compose original songs. They can play any instrument to produce melody, harmonious with their songs and they are always good dancers. The Mainline Churches did not waste time to introduce drumming, native airs and dancing into their mode of worship which distinguishes it from the mission oriented churches. These native airs are witty and appeals to the consciousness of the people lifting them before the creator whom they worship in their own language and expression. These songs are culturally generated and they appeal to the cultural sentiments of the people.

Nowadays Mainline Churches have introduced a new dimension into their worship and liturgy where by inspirational songs better called and known as praise and worship which is rendered immediately after the processional Hymn but preceded the worship *per se*. It is the type of songs that is used to invoke the spirit of God upon the congregation before the service. In fact it is very good innovation. Therefore, native airs have played and is still playing and will continue to play a prominent role in the Mainline Churches and even in the Pentecostal circles.

e. Chieftaincy Title

The Mainline Churches confer on their members chieftaincy titled which are not in the hierarchy of Christian ministerial order, but borrowed from African traditional religion because of Africans' love to hold titles.

They love to be called, known and addressed “chief” for the high positions the chiefs occupy in the society, and that they enjoy social and political respect, recognition and privileges which non-title bearers do not. Chieftaincy is also instituted in the church because the church does not want its members to be installed chiefs by the traditionalists hence they opted for Christian type which is a synonym of traditional ones. The dichotomy arose from the missionary objection to Christians being conferred with chieftaincy title which often involved traditional ceremonies, rituals, whereas separation is non-existent in some areas, Christians could not but take up titles and submit themselves for Christian ceremonies connected with it.

Furthermore, chieftaincy is instituted for easy administration of government and the church especially when Christians were made the highest chiefs, that is, being installed kings. For example in Abeokuta we have His Royal Highnesses Oba Lipede-The Alake of Egbaland who is a Christian from the Anglican Church, Abeokuta, Oba Dr. Adedapo Tejuoso – The Osile of Oke – Ona Egba, Oba Jacob Olufemi Omolade – The Olubara of Ibara, Oba Dr. Olawale Adisa Odeleye – The Olowu of Owu kingdom (Now late) are Christians from the African Church, Abeokuta. Oba Dr. Olawale Adisa Odeleye was installed Olowu of Owu on 30th October, 1993 after he has been subjected or submitted himself to all sorts of traditional rituals.

These Christian kings have influenced their subjects greatly both Muslims and the traditionalists. They live together, attend socio-religious ceremonies like naming and wedding ceremonies and they work together. Whenever any member of the church is in position of power or leadership, both the adherents of traditional religion and Islam co-operate with them and obey their commands.

Some Christian organizations oppose traditional chieftaincy titles for the reason already enumerated earlier, but they opt for Christian chieftaincy titles with Christian ceremonies. Some condemn the idea of chieftaincy titles in its entirety be it traditional or Christian while some see nothing wrong in taking titles and in submitting oneself to Christian rites. The Mainline Churches belong to this group because their constitution is silent about chieftaincy; members are not forbidden from taking any chieftaincy titles.

Members of these Churches accept titles both from the traditional rulers and religious leaders. They often come to the church with the emblems, symbols, and regalia of their titles. They often wear beaded necklace and bangles. They are accorded positions of leadership and pre-eminence in the church. Chieftaincy is an asset to the church financially and administratively. It is for gainful venture which has been commercialized. The chiefs want to measure up to the expectation of the congregation, hence they would do all within their reach and power to justify in words and deeds the confidence reposed in them regardless of their age.

Although, there had been a twist to the way and manner Christians accept chieftaincy titles in the church today, due to the spiritual involvement in the church. The Church however, frowns at traditional chieftaincy titles due to the rituals attached to such title which may involve the recipient having to swear an oath to the deities or to some occultic powers. As a result, the church now confers chieftaincy title on people so as to bring them in, and make them respond positively to the demands of the church.

The chieftaincy titles differ from one church to another. But the common ones in the Mainline denominations include the following: (1.) *Baba Ijo* – Male leader of the church. (2.) *Iya Ijo* – Female leader of the church; (3.) *Otun Baba Ijo* – Assistant male leader of the Church. (4.) *Otun Iya Ijo* – Assistant female leader of the church. (5) *Asiwaju Ijo* – Church elder; (6.) *Asiwaju okunrin ijo* – church male leader; (7.) *Asiwaju obirin ijo* – church female leader; (8.) *Baba Isale Ijo* – The eldest male of the church; (9.) *Alatunse Okunrin* – Church male adviser; (10.) *Alatunse Obirin* – Church female adviser; (11.) *Baba Ewe* – Patron of the youth; (12.) *Iya Ewe* – Matron of the youth; (13.) *Alaje Ijo* – Female financial adviser and so on.

It is the prerogative of the Diocesan Bishop to confer these titles on the selected distinguished members of the church on a special day appointed by him with the following symbolic elements present at the service:

(i) **Anointing oil:** On the appointed day when it gets to the award of titles in the programme, the Bishop will be seated at the entrance of the chancel, he shall call on the Diocesan secretary to announce the award of the titles (*Ikede ifinijoye*) while candidates shall be called respectively for the rites which starts with the anointing oil. This is poured on the forehead of the recipient while kneeling before the Bishop who anoints him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..

(ii) **The Holy Bible (*Bibeli Mimo*):** The Bishop shall present the Bible to the candidate with the following statements “Take this Holy Bible; it is a sign that your installation is not of this world. Read and meditate on it to show yourself worthy as good servant of God in the office you have been appointed. May the Lord be with you. Amen”

(iii) **Palm frond (*Mariwo ope*):** The use of this element is at the discretion of the Diocesan Bishop presiding at a time. It takes the place of the tree of life (*Ewe Akoko*) used in traditional chieftaincy installations. The palm frond is placed on the candidate’s palm with the following statement: “May you be victorious over your enemies as Christ was victorious over death. And as a sign of peace, may your installation usher in peace for you and the church. Amen”.

(iv) **Issuance of Certificate (*Gbigba Iwe Eri*):** While presenting the certificate, the Bishop shall say “Take your installation of your office. It is a sign that your installation is authorized by the church. May God bless you”. Amen.

(v) **Investiture (*Wiwo ewu oye*):** This is the investing of the recipient with the title which is written on a ready-made fabric which will be worn across from the right hand to the left hand. The Bishop then say the following: “I decorate you with this emblem, a symbol of your conferment. Wear it as occasion demands as an Ambassador of Christ. May the Lord be with you in your going out, and in your coming in. Amen”.

The service of conferment of chieftaincy titles will be concluded after the rites as enumerated have been performed. The Bishop while rising from the throne will hold his staff and present the recipients to the congregation jointly with the names of the Trinity while the church will say a loud “Amen”. This is followed with a general thanksgiving which concludes the service.

Conclusion

It is instructive to note that culture has made and is still making an indelible mark on Christianity in Nigeria. This presupposes that culture has impacted seriously on the practice of Christianity particularly in Nigeria. This could be understood from the point of view of contextualization. This is because orthodox Christianity could still find some aspects of African culture relevant to its liturgy and in so doing, help in perpetuating the cultural ethos of the people. It is in this regard that Babalola (2001: 161) citing Lasebikan (2000) remarked thus:

The church in Nigeria must come to face the realities of the moment. Our liturgies must spring from cultic needs and must meet our spiritual temperament. The gospel must be made to lean on issues which our imaginations are capable of grasping. Then and only then can the Bible be relevant to our needs and Christianity properly contextualized. The implication of this is that there are challenging and daunting tasks before the Church in Nigeria in harmonizing cultural ethos within its liturgical order thereby paving the way for a wholistic interpretation, understanding and appreciation of African world view. This accounts for why Lasebikan (2000) remarked that:

The church must come to realize that she cannot continue to neglect the people’s culture, but must Endeavour to find a meaningful harmony between the religion and culture. This implies that the Mainline Churches cannot be oblivious of the cultural lives of the people within which the religion is practiced. To do this will be a great disservice to the people and their culture.

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