The Position of African Traditional Religion (ATR) In the Contemporary Society.
By

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Abstract

African traditional religion has suffered terribly and is still suffering today. The Africans have rejected their religion saying that it has no position. They did this because they have been brainwashed by the westerners with the idea that our religion has no position in the African man's life. The work clearly states that African traditional religion has a position. The work looked at different areas of human life like politics, economy etc. It is discovered that African traditional religion has contributed immensely to the life of an African traditional religion has contributed in the nation building, restructuring etc. The work concludes by advising all Africans to hold tenaciously to what they have as Africans such as values etc.

Introduction

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the indigenous religion of the African people before the introduction of any other religion in the continent. It is the aggregate of indigenous belief systems and practices which existed in Africa prior to the coming of new religions such as Christianity and Islam, and to which millions of Africans still adhere covertly or overtly. The term "traditional" is used to refer to the technique of cultural transmission, that is, oral – stories, legends, myths, riddles and proverbs – that are used in passing this religion from generation to generation. Beliefs are passed on to posterity through songs, folktales,

dances, shrines and festivals. K. A. Opoku, an African scholar explains that the term "traditional" indicates a fundamentally indigenous value system that has its own pattern with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past (1978/9). J. S Mbiti asserts that ATR is found in all aspects of the African people including social, political and economic, at it has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of the Africans throughout the centuries (1991:29-30).

In Africa, South of Sahara, ATR is the religion followed by the majority of the African people. Although new religions like Christianity, Islam and others seem to be doing well in Africa where they claim to have many followers, Africans always resort to ATR in times of crisis. For instance, a survey by Pew Forum on Religion and Public life in 2010 in 19 African countries shows that while Africans overwhelmingly practice either Christianity or Islam, they extensively incorporate elements of ATR into their daily lives, a clear indication that Africans are followers of ATR before they are followers of other religions (Nkonge 2014: 49). Vincent Mulago is therefore right to observe that, a superficial observer might make a mistake of believing that ATR is disappearing, but for anyone who lives in real contact with the Africans, the question does not arise…… The future of African Traditional Religions is not at all problematic for our generation. They have their place and play their role at every level of our societies (1991:128). Idowu (1967) makes this even clearer by his assertion that "ATR is a living religion…. It is a contemporary living reality'. Although this observation was made more than four decades ago it would be erroneous to think it is not applicable today. ATR remains a vital force in Africa where it greatly influences and continues to influence the lives of the African people.

Generally speaking, religion provides an encompassing world view to its followers and serves as a rationale for their activities. It then seems to be wide-ragingly considered as a way of life as well as a 'society' which aims at a spiritual end upon which the greater society places roles and responsibilities. ATR thus plays a similar role in Africa. Africa has her own

culture and beliefs which are deeply depicted in its very strong traditions. The African culture is part of the African indigenous Religion. The African scholars such as J.S Mbiti argue that in Africa there is 'no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular' (1969:2). The whole community faithfully carries out all rites and rituals connected with rites of passage such as birth, naming, initiation, marriage and death. The ceremonies bind and form religious values which govern the family and society. Therefore, traditionally, religion guides all activities of the African life, be it social, political or even economic. Thus, in the political sphere, traditional societies have rulers who hold all powers and authorities, assisted by family heads and a council of elders. These rulers, who ascend to their positions mainly by inheritance, derive their power and authority from God, ancestors or even the spirits. In this regard, Africans believe that their leaders come from God and whatever they do reflect the divine will. It is because of this conviction that the Ameru of Kenya said that 'Munene aumaga iguru kiri Murungu'. (A leader comes from God), In this paper, we want to show that since ATR is a living religion in Africa where it influences numerous aspects of life, it can be quite instrumental in designing policies in civil and political leadership. Nkonge (2012:229) cites leadership as one of the major challenges facing the African society today. In this, Dickson Nkonge is so critical.

The twenty-first century as anticipated has come with numerous challenges, whereby Africa just like the rest of the world is undergoing rapid socio-economic and political changes, yet the leaders (both in the church and political spheres) are not able to adjust to these changes. Nkonge's views can be interpreted to mean that African leaders in the political, civil and even religious spheres are unable to formulate policies to effectively address the needs of the rapidly changing African society today. As such there is too much suffering with all kinds of vices including corruption, tribalism, nepotism, poverty, unemployment, ethnic, tensions, refugees, insecurity, diseases, illiteracy, hunger, and many more invading every part of the African continent. Archbishop Desmond Tutu laments

that the picture is so bleak that it is as 'if the entire continent was groaning under the curse of Ham and was indeed in all respects the Dark Continent of antiquity'(Ngara 2004: 5). We suggest in this paper that ATR can provide a solution to this desperate situation in Africa.

The relationship between politics and religion is not just in ATR alone but the Bible (Christian' sacred book) also provides guidance on political issues that a believer ought to master. It records that, every person should be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resists will incur judgement. For rulers are not terrors to good conduct but to bad. Would you have fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." (Romans 13:1-7)ESV).

Religion and specifically, ATR is the glue that binds and unifies a society, nation or a group of people. This paper attempts to discuss the role of ATR in civil and political leadership by examining the various traditional systems as well as the impact that ATR in civil and political matters.

Role of ATR in Civil and Political Leadership

According to Magesa, a man's religious commitment and identity are certainly communicated by his/her public profession to observe certain laws and perform certain rites and norms. Morality or ethics is the nature of religion. The morality of the African people demands and enforces their emotional and behavioural commitment and so gives direction to their lives and worldview (1997: 10-14). African religious systems are a complete system. There is no section of African life which is not touched by religion. People practice it differently in different places, but there is enough commonality to call it singular J.S Mbiti captures the life of African person

when he says that 'Africans are notoriously religious' (1969:1). These opening words of Professor Mbiti's classic work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, are just as notorious as the African religiosity they purport to describe and they still correspond to most people's idea of the African reality. The words paint a picture of a holistic life in which the religious is inseparable from the other spheres of life for an African. As such civil and political leadership are part and parcel of the African's religious life. Since politics is generally supposed to be concerned with the distribution of power in the society and regulates them.

ATR and Politics
ATR is very holistic since it impacts every area of the African traditional life, whether in the city or village, in the office or in the farm, in the building of a structure or in marriage. Professor Mbiti while talking about the African religious heritage denotes that, 'Religion is part of the cultural heritage. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, social life, political organizations and economic activities (1969:10). This implies that no aspect of the African life remains untouched by religion. Opoku (1978:1), explains this more explicitly by remarking that, Religion therefore becomes the root of the African culture and it is the determining principle of the African life. It is no exaggeration, therefore to say that in traditional Africa, religion is life and life, religion. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do whether farming, fishing or hunting, or simply eating, drinking or travelling. Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next.

According to Ellis and Haar (2007:385), politics in Africa cannot be fully understood without reference to religious ideas that are widely shared in societies south of the Sahara. They observe that the religious ideas held by so many Africans – hundreds of millions of people – need to be taken seriously, and should be considered in their own terms in the first instance. African ideas about religion and its relation to politics are important not

only for understanding Africa, but also may have potential to inform our understanding of religions and politics are more generally in a world that is presently characterized by new alignment of these two fundamental elements. G.A. Theodorson defines politics as 'the process of creating public policy through influencing or controlling powers of authority,' (1969:303). This that politics is about power and authority (Pobee, 1986: 25), but in the African situation, this power and authority cannot be exercised in absence of religion which direct all aspects of life. Mbiti (1969:177-8), informs that in Africa, ruler are not simply political heads: they are mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. They are divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. As such, Africans highly regard them. In some communities, they are given highly elevated positons and titles such as 'saviour', 'protector', 'child of God', 'Lord of earth and life' etc. This shows the close correlation that exists between religion and politics in the African mind.

All evidence points to the fact that most Africans understand and interpret the world mainly through the prism of religion. In other words, religion, whatever else it may be, is a mode of apprehending reality (Elis and Haar, 2007: 387). Religion remains a prism through which many people views the world, those who believe in religion, spiritual power constitutes real and effective power. Thus, religion and politics become two facets of power that are in constant interaction (Elis and Haar, 2007:390).

Religion and politics have been linked throughout African history. In all known pre-colonial African political systems and states, public religion performance played an important role. In many societies of pre-colonial Africa, rulers were endowed with sacred duties such as causing rain to fall and crops to grow, and charged with upholding the cosmic order generally. In such societies any major disorder in the invisible sphere was held to have a probable or even an inevitable effect on the physical fortunes of the community of believers. By the same token, any major event, such as war, a famine or an untimely death, was believed to have its root cause in the invisible world. Even in the so-called societies of old Africa, where village

chiefs or councils of elders were responsible for the routine administration of government, real public authority actually lay with ritual experts who meditated between the visible and invisible worlds (Ellis and Haar, 1998: 187).

There is nothing peculiar to Africa about politicians seeking to make political capital out of displays of religious allegiance or respect. Politicians in almost every part of the world sometimes visit places of worship, especially during election campaigns, for the purpose of winning votes. This does not mean that they are necessarily believers themselves. In Africa, however, unlike in Europe or North America, there is reason to believe that political elites do not use religion solely as a means of increasing their base of popular support but that in many cases they believe that access to the spiritual world is a vital resource in the constant struggle to secure advantage over their rivals in political in-fighting. This can be done by conventional technique of communication with the spirit world, including the use of sacrifices and protective objects or through divination (Ellis and Haar, 1998:188).

Religion and politics are both system of ordering the power inherent in human society, in the process of which elements of authority and hierarchy tend to emerge. As such, religion and politics are closely related. Thus policies in political spheres can be formulated using religious ideologies. In this we suggest that ATR, which has remained a 'living religion' of the African people, can play a significant role in saving the African nations and organizations, some of which are at the verge of collapsing due to lack of clear-cut policies. The Overview of Economic and Social Conditions in Africa in 2012 reported that due to poor policy making in Africa, there are considerable downslide risks, including political instability, social unrest in some countries, weal global economic performance and high uncertainly. Nico Riley bewails that in Africa today, poverty is a reality, corruption exists and people continue to suffer from countless ills and diseases. One of the cause for the worsening conditions in the African nations is the poor social and economic status brought about by poor planning and lack of

good policies. For instance, it is clear that these nations continue to get worse due to corruption, yet many of them lack robust policies to fight the vice (2006). What possible lessons can we learn from the traditional African setting? What can we learn from ATR as we make policies in civil and political leadership in Africa today?

ATR and Development

ATR is a holistic religion since it embraces all aspects of human life. Henry Okullu defines development as transformation of one thing into another. It means to multiply, to create many out of few (1984:98). The very nature of human culture presupposes development. J.N.K Mugambi defines culture as the visible achievement of human beings in their past experience. The activities associated with culture involve the modification of the natural and social environment (1996:28). Generally speaking, all cultures are involved in development. The nineteenth century Christian missionaries had a negative attitude towards African culture and religion. Most of them believed that the African cultural and religious backgrounds had nothing to contribute to the development of Africa. They therefore strived to spread their culture and religion to the African countries (Mugambi, 2002: 142). As they did this, they totally disregarded ATR which Nkonge (2014: 49) refers to as the foundation of African religiosity. Since ATR is part of the African culture, and as we have said culture presupposes development, then ATR is a religion of development. There is no way we can ignore it if we are thinking of developing Africa. Any policies we may make of developing Africa should put into consideration ATR which greatly influences the thinking and lives of the African people.

Ellis and Haar (2007:396), give us an important advice to consider as we look at the relationship between religion and development in Africa. They say that, in investigating the connection between religion and development, the first requirement should be to understand what religious believers are saying and thinking about the nature of society and its defects, and what ideas they have about its possible improvement. It is sometimes argued that

the emphasis on deliverance found in neo-Pentecostalism diminishes individuals' sense of personal responsibility for their own financial circumstances, as does the rhetoric of miracles. The religious view of charismatic-the argument goes- do nothing to encourage productivity or work ethos. The spiritualization of politics can thus play into the hands of the worst dictators, who are able to use religion as a channel of political support. The realization that development has an inescapable cultural dimension has, over time, helped to mellow some of the rigid and even dogmatic theories of modernization that were active in the middle of the last century. This is not to suggest the existence of fixed, development-friendly or development-unfriendly cultures, but only to underline that political choices affecting development contain a cultural dimension, (Ellis and Haar, 2007: 396).

ATR play a significant role here in that the indigenous institutions and epistemologies can potentially adapt themselves to a wide variety of purposes, and that development is indeed most likely where the fundamental technical skills or qualities required have been incorporated local social patterns. It is undeniable that Africa is indeed threatened by some massively destructive forces that can be quite precisely identified, including disease, debt and underinvestment. At the same time, however, many Africans also consider these conditions in a spirit idiom, seeing themselves as beset by evil forces that have a known material cause but that also has a spiritual dimension. The roots of this conviction that economic and political powers have a dangerous spiritual aspect, which Africans can no longer control, can be located in the continent's history. Ultimately, this perceived lack of control dates from the colonization and evangelization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that regarded indigenous spiritual forces as harmful, backward or demonic. But as we have already said, development of Africa will not be possible without giving prominence to Africa's religious cosmology.

The future of African traditional religion.

Trying to look at the future of African traditional religion, one would look at it from Kanu's point of view. Kanu (2015) viewed it from two sides namely as a discipline and as a practice. Many people have posited that this religion will pass away or go into extinction with time. The positions which Africans take at times anchor on selfishness, inferiority complex etc. Kanu (2015).

The present trend as regards the influence of globalization, western education and medicine. The wake of urbanization and industrialization, the huge movement of the young from village life to urban areas in search for survival. All these give vent to those perspective S.P. (394).

For him the above reasons gave rise to the thinking would soon go into extinction. However, one would ask really whether the above reason suffices. The answer would be no. African traditional religion surviving as a disciple has come to stay, thus we have it as course in the curriculum of all the universities, other tertiary institutions have it also in their curriculum and that shows that the religion as a disciple has future and has come to say, its adherents are also increasing in their numbers everyday.

Consequently, African traditional religion as a practice has also serious future, granted that our people have this complex of upholding what they have. Hence, indirectly a lot of the African Christians and Islams alike are practicing this religion indirectly and it is being practiced in the following ways.

a.   **Medicine:**
        Even with the advent of Christianity, African traditional religion still has her footprints on the African life. Idowu (1973) maintains that on the issues regarding Providence, healing and in general well being of the African, they look up to their religions for a way out. Mbiti (1969) in his regard writes:

> *The medicine man is one of the specialist whose profession is likely to continue in Africa for several generations especially since people's*

needs continue to increase through modern change, and he is moving his practice into the urban centres where these needs are more concentrated. Leading politicians in a number of African countries are known to consult medicine men. (P.171).

For Mbiti, he argues that African traditional religion practices has come to say especially in the area of medicine. The traditional medicine has been the hope of the African man since the inception of the 19th century.

Many people are going back to it more especially the Christians and Moslems.

b. **Trust:**

Most Africans have more trust in the gods of the Africans. Thus, they refer to Christians God as a toothless God, according to them the Christian God delays so much in acting unlike the African gods that acts immediately. Kanu (2015) summarily pointed out different places and ways where the practice of African traditional religion have opportunities of not going into extinction. Namely:

1. Over emphasis on the power of occult and paranormal practice of family cleansing, exhumation of mystically buried poisonous objects, extraction of poisonous objects from human body.

2. Attribution of sickness, barrenness, misfortunates of all sorts and poverty to be demonic or humanly manipulated or as wrath of God due to sin.

3. Attaching demonic presence in every meal and household items.

4. Leballing school children as agents of demons that initiate others by sharing drinks or snacks with them.

5. Attributing the manufacturing of goods especially weave-on, wigs and cosmetics of all kinds to mermaid spirits.

6. Claims that placentas and umbilical cords sold by some hospital workers who are agents to occult members for manufacturing of cosmetics. P. (396)

The above assertion of Kanu expatiates the future of African traditional religion, thus the future of African traditional religion.

Conclusion

Leadership remains the biggest challenge facing the African continent today. The African society has grown tremendously and continues to experience rapid changes in all realms be it be political, social, economics, religious and many others. With all these, the post-independence Africa has not been able to produce effective civil and political leader who are able to devise good policies to enhance them address the rapidly emerging needs of the African people. As a result the entire continent is groaning in pain and despair with all kinds of evil having made Africa their home. What is however encouraging is the fact that in spite of all these challenges, Africans have maintained their solid religious stance. All religions even the very new ones seem to be flourishing in Africa. What we are suggesting in this paper is that African leadership should take advantage of the African religiosity to address the challenges facing the continent   today. As they formulate various policies in both civil and political spheres they should make use of ATR which is the dominant religion Africa and which continues to influence the life of many Africans till date. The paper has demonstrated the great role that ATR has played and will continue to play in the civil and political leadership of the society. ATR has defined moral value in the society and created benchmark for ethics and in so doing it has become the light and salt to the civil and political leadership in the African society. Religion has for a long time shown direction in the society and added value to the lives of in the society. The State (charged with political responsibility) is part of the larger society to which religions, ATR included have responsibility.

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