African Traditional Religion: Misconceptions and Its Implications in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the misconceptions about African traditional religion and the implications these will have especially in this 21st Century era otherwise called computer age. The paper argues that African traditional religion has no reformers, preachers or missionaries who bring about change in the religion from time to time as we have in other word religions. The paper contends that the implication this will have especially in this 21st Century era is that the two imported religions (Christianity and Islam) will overshadow African traditional religion in the nearest future. Data for this study were collected from two major sources; researchers personal experiences and secondary sources. The study adopts historical approach. It enables the researchers to ascertain the origin and causative factors for these misconceptions. Findings from the study reveal that African traditional religion is not mere polytheism as conceived. Rather the believe in the Supreme Being is

real and unshaken. The paper recommends that the present generation should acknowledge African traditional religion as an essential aspect of their rich cultural heritage from their forebears.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, African Indigenous Religion, Misconception, Implication, 21tn Century,

Introduction

Prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, the African Traditional Religion had been in existence. It had its own dos and don'ts. The concepts of right and wrong of human acts; rewards and punishments were clearly defined in the ethical system of the primal society. This has helped to maintain the relationship between man and the supersensible world on one hand and between man and his fellow human beings on the other hand. Then the missionaries came and preached the message of one God and subsequently gradually began to denounce the custodians of traditional morality. With this strategy, they planted seed of discord and indoctrinated the people with the wrong notions about the African traditional religion.

For instance, in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria guaranteed the three major religions, African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam equal constitutional rights. But in practice the African traditional religion has being at large in the schemes of national affairs whereas that of Christianity and Islam continuously takes the air.

Nowadays, Christianity and Islam are the much talked about on the news; two major religions as it is often said. Often, religious leaders from these two religions are invited to conduct opening prayers during important National Celebrations like Independence Day, on every 1st October, Inagural Cum Democracy Day, on every 29th May and June 12th, etc. Often, these religious leaders are called upon to contribute their own quota to

urgent National issues according to their own religious backgrounds and perspectives.
Therefore, the thrust of this paper is to examine the misconceptions about African traditional religion and its implications in the 21st Century.

Statement of the Problem
African traditional religion, like other world religions believe in the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is the cohesive unifying factor that holds the religion together. In spite of this, there are negative conceptions that African traditional religion is mere polytheism. Apart from this, African traditional religion has no reformers, preachers, and missionaries who bring about change in the religion from time to time as we have in other world religions.

Based on this, it goes without being said that if no work is done to examine the implications these misconceptions will have in this 21st Century it is likely that these other world religions will overshadow African traditional religion in no distant future.

Aim of the Study
The aim of this study is:
To examine the implications these misconceptions will have especially in this 21st Century era where values are on a fast decline.

Methodology
Data for this study were collected from the researchers personal experiences and secondary sources. The study adopts historical approach. It enables the researchers to ascertain the origin and causative elements for these misconceptions.

Conceptual Clarification

African Traditional Religion

Ekwunife (1990:1) defines African traditional religion as:

> Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religions of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy-sayings and names), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space and objects which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities .

Furthermore, it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the fore bears of the present generation of Africans (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:26). It is a religion that originated from the people's environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported from outside to them. It evolved from their ecosystem. Africans are not converted into it; they are born into it. Thus, the word traditional serves the purpose of distinguishing African religion from any other religion that has been brought to African through Missionary and Islamic propagation (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:27).

African traditional religion is dependent on oral traditions for its transmission. That is to say that all we know of the religion came to us through oral traditions-myths, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy-sayings and names), etc. Some of these oral traditions appear in work of arts and crafts, symbols and emblems, appellations for God, names of people and places, shines and sacred places (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:7).

The fact that the religion is traditional does not in any way suggest that it is old fashioned. To expatiate further on this, Anyacho, E.O. (1994:243) observes:

> To all the religion 'traditional' is not to refer to it as something of the past; it is only to indicate that it is undergirded by a fundamentally indigenous value system and that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past.

In other words, it is an indigenous religion which evolved from the life and culture of the Africans and has been in transmission from generation to generation. African traditional religion was not borrowed from any of the world religions. Rather it is a distinct religion with distinct features which evolved gradually through the years from the practices and experiences of their forebears (Anyacho, E.O. 1994:243)

Misconception

Misconception is a terminology used to refer to a belief, an idea that is not based on correction that is not understood by people; a false mental conception of something or an idea (Hornby 2010:945). The notions that African traditional religion is mere polytheism cannot be fundamentally true. Polytheism in a real sense of it, is a term used to describe a religion with a plurality of deities lacking an overall transcending Ultimate reality (George Tasie, 2012:6). In a polytheistic religion, the believe in the existence of the Supreme Being is not only absence but also completely lacking. Whereas in African traditional religion, believe in the existence of the Supreme Being is real and remains unshaken. In fact, the Supreme Being is the cohesive unifying factor that holds the religion together (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:17). Furthermore, He is known or associated with attributes such as creator, king, judge, immortal, compassionate, etcetera, a mark which sets Him apart from every other beings (Peters Chimaobi Peters, 2009:49-50).

In African religious thought, the Supreme Being is believed to be so big and so majestic that He is not approached Him directly. Rather He is approached or worshipped through the pantheon of divinities. The divinities are derivatives from the Supreme Being often described as gods with small letter 'g' believed to be in charge of one aspect of life or the other in the Supreme Being's theocratic government of the universal. Unpleasant terms such as Juju worshippers, Juju priest, native doctor, cruel, savagery, etcetera used to describe African traditional religion does not exist and have no meaning in the study of African traditional religion. The proper terms rather should be traditional worshipper, traditional priest and traditional medicine man which are real and make sense in the study of African traditional religion (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:2).

Furthermore, to describe African traditional religion as cruel savagery, etc is to denial the place of values and ethos in African traditional religion. African traditional religion is tolerant, hospitable and accommodating. It has respect for sanctity of life, communal spirit is highly emphasized which make each a brother's keeper. These values among others form the very foundation of the religion. A telling example here is that before the emergence of Christianity and Islam, African traditional religion has been in existence. When these two religions came, it accommodates them and co-exists, side by side with them in the same environment without friction. Here, African traditional religion became the shock absorber of these new forces of social change (Ekwunife, 1992:19). African traditional religion does not have any holy scripture yet the traditional moral values and agencies for moral control are enough to make the people morally good (Anyacho, E.O 1994:244).

Implication

This term can be used to refer to: a possible effect or result of an action or a decision. In other words, it is an aftermath or consequences of an action, activities and events (internet source retrieved 10th May, 2019).

21st Century

It could be multi-dimensional. It could be used to refer to the following: a modern era where values are on a fast decline due to proclivity in alien cultures and lifestyles, an era where everybody now think and behave like a modern man in all ramifications; an era in which advancement in science and technology have simplify virtually every facets of human endeavor by making the world a global village. Above all, it is a computer age era (internet source retrieved 10th June, 2019).

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Now, the looming question at this point is that of what implications will these have in the 21st Century? The implication here is that the two imported religions, Christianity and Islam will overshadow African traditional religion in no distant future. One other ugly implication this will have in the 21st Century is that posterity will have no heritage (A.T.R) they could call religion from their forebears. Another remarkable implication is that it will retrogress interest in the study of African traditional religion in the institutions of learning in the future. Thus, it will erode away traditional ethos and values which emphasized on group morality to a new morality which stresses individualism and selfishness as a virtue.

Recommendations

1. There are three major religions in Nigeria, African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. In a pluralistic society like ours, no religion is constitutionally superior to the other. Therefore, African traditional religion should be giving equal space in the schemes of National affairs like Christianity and Islam.

2. The study of African traditional religion should be incorporated in the primary and secondary school curriculum in Nigeria.

3. Traditional religious leaders should be invited to contribute their own quota to urgent National issues according to their religious thought and perspectives like their counterparts in other world religions.

4. They should also be called upon to conduct opening prayers during important National celebrations like Independence Day, on every October 1st, Inaugural cum Democracy Day, on every 29th May, and June 12th, etc.

5. Traditional religious leaders as a matter of urgency should swiftly embark on orientation exercise to conscientize the present generation to acknowledge African traditional religion as an essential aspect of their rich cultural heritage from their forebears.

6. African traditional religious association (ATRA) should be constituted to boost the discipline in the comity of other disciplines.

Conclusion

African traditional religion is neither polytheism nor savagery. It is hospitable, tolerant, and accommodating. These values and many others are the very foundation that form the religion. Also, believe in the Supreme Being is real and unshaken in African traditional religion. The Supreme Being is the cohesive unifying factor that holds the religion together. Terms such as Juju worshippers, Juju priest, native doctor, etc, does not exist and have no meaning in African religious thought. Nigeria is a pluralistic society, in such a heterogeneous society, no religion is giving a constitutional preference. Therefore, African traditional religions like the other world religions should be allowed to function freely in practice.

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