Denominationalism and African Christian Identity

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ABSTRACT

African culture was affected by the propagation of the gospel. Pre-colonial Africans easily identified as Africans as informed by their highly religious cultures but the coming of Christianity and the subsequent notion of conversion together with denominationalism affected this obvious identification. Based on available literature, this paper has two main purposes; to highlight the role of culture and to locate the position of denominationalism in the affirmation of 'African' identity among African Christians. It suggests that denominations have a role to play in dislodging dual identity among African Christians. It recommends further investigation on the contribution of African Initiated Churches (AICs) to improving African Christian identity.

Keywords: Denomination, Identity, Christian, Culture

INTRODUCTION

The significance of the knowledge of 'who we are' is one not to be underrated. In search for meaning, mankind has always thought of 'identity' as a starting point. Identity plays a significant role in self-definition of an individual or a group. (Togarasei, 2016) says that identity shapes the individual's self-understanding and behavioral patterns. Taylor (1994:134-135) defines personal identity as 'the capability of consciousness of subjects to remain identical with themselves despite changes that affect the structure of their personality; It is the unity and continuity of self-consciousness.' It is attached to who we are and to a larger extent where we are coming from (Sann, 2016). Unfortunately, this vitality of identity in Africa, especially for Christian coverts is under considerable attack due to a number of factors ranging from the far past to present. The Kenyan prominent environmentalist Wangari Maathai observed that Africa ought to deal with its past in order to build for the future. She singled out colonialism as a key player in dismantling African identity and solidarity whose effects are felt to date (Maathai, 2009).

The Report on Reconciliation Conference Africa – Europe that took place in Ambilly – France in October 29-31 2002 also concluded the same of colonialism (Kochalumchuvattil, 2010). However, it is not sufficient in itself in explaining the loss of identity in Africa more so among African Christians. The missionary activity had a great contribution to the equation. Decades back, Terence Ranger in (Petersen, 1987) acknowledged that among the great realities of the 20th century of the African continent is the Christian missionary movement and its impact on the aspect of 'African identity' (Bediako, 2000). In this paper, we concur with other African scholars that African identity was distorted by the Christian notion of conversion that created a problem of dual identity. The result was a decline of pride in African culture despite its important role in the propagation of the gospel and the formation of people's identity.

This article acknowledges that religion is here to stay, denominationalism is a present reality and indeed, African culture and so identity is deteriorating. Africa is projected to be the center of Christianity in the near future. According to Emmanuel Katongole, a Ugandan Catholic priest and writer, the Catholic population exploded from 1.9 million to 130 million in sub-Saharan Africa, that is an overwhelmingly a 6708 percent increase. He suggested that a similar shift is underway in other Christian denominations. In his words, "That Africa is an overwhelmingly a Christian continent requires no elaborate argument" (Katongole, 2011). The

Pew Research center (PRC) projects that the Christian population in Africa will double by 2050 growing from 517 million in 2010 to 1.9 billion by that year (PRC, 2015). With this reality, what will happen to African identity and culture given the religiosity of African people?

The central argument of this paper is that specific denominations can play a vital role in reaffirming cultural identity among African Christians. The first section of this paper highlights a historical background to the identity problem in Africa, highlighting how the contact between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) or African culture contributed to this problem. The second talks about the suggested theoretical solutions to the problem of African Christian identity including an African Christianity, one distinct from Christianity and ATR. Here we also expound on the vitality of culture in affirming African identity. Finally, we argue that denominationalism is vital in affirming African identity among African Christian converts.

BACKGROUND

The late 19th and the early 20th century will remain vividly remembered in the history of Africa. The continent witnessed an influx of Missionaries whose activity impacted almost all aspects of African life. Many of these impacts endure to date. In several ways, Africans benefitted from the coming of Christianity on the one hand for example in terms of education and health but on the other, missionaries either consciously or unconsciously advanced the interests of colonial powers who subdued the propagation of the gospel to cultural and political imperialism *(Manala, 2013)*. On this reality, Horton (1971:96) wrote that "with the advent of the twentieth century …Europeans came to be seen as symbols of power, and Christianity itself came to be seen as part of the larger order, comprising western education, colonial administration, commerce and industry, with which everyone had henceforth to reckon. These changes created a much more favorable climate for conversion". This conversion to Christianity had an impact on subsequent cultural evolution and identity in Africa.

The missionaries' attitude towards African religious cultural heritage denied African identity by rejecting and suppressing African ways of life, thoughts, languages, cultures, and traditional religious customs. Indigenous practices like initiation rites, ancestral veneration, polygamy, and alike were highly prohibited (Onuzulike, 2008). This implies that African traditional ways of life were undermined if not totally demonized. By doing so, Tienou (1984:31) observed that "wittingly or unwittingly, missions in Africa contributed to the making of the Black man into a White man. …" (Tarus, 2019). Religious beliefs, for example were indirectly altered and they persist as they are passed on from parents to children. Consequently, an empirical study showed that those ethnic groups that had frequent contact with missionaries are likely to self-identify as Christians (Nunn, 2010). This cannot leave 'African identity' among African Christians converts unaffected. Their religious identities were challenged as they struggled with being authentic Christians and at the same time proud Africans. Indeed, they were compelled to choose between denominational belonging and cultural identity. The missionaries failed to understand that ATR is by large intertwined with African culture; that it is hard for an African to fully and only practice Christianity without yielding to ATR practices as echoed by Kwame Gyekye. He stated that being born in an African society means being born into an intensely and pervasively religious culture which calls for full participation in the religious beliefs and rituals of that community (Gyekye, 1996). Mbiti attested to the same when he stated that "To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious" (Mbiti, 1991:30).

The ignorance of this reality on the part of the missionaries resulted according to Mtuze (2003:8) into a serious identity crisis that led to African self-hatred and self-degeneration. (Aya, 2000) observed that in search for self-determination and self-assertion, the modern African (Christian) finds himself in a situation where his or her culture is at crossroads with alien cultures. He added that many are so brainwashed that they end up disowning their own cultures and embrace foreign cultures and values, some of which they do

not claim to understand at least entirely. In an interview with *The Harvard Gazette,* Jacob Olupona decried today's 'exclusive-minded' types of Christianity, where most Christian devotees view African cultural practices and ATR in particular as devilish and so worth no respect (Olupona, National and World Affairs, 2015). African Christian converts are driven to take Christianity to be a new culture altogether that has no connection with their past. They forget that it is a 'faith' and not a 'religion' as such and since "any meeting of two different realities incurs the risk of conflict" (Mulagu, 1991), there has been a conflict between the two realities (Christianity and ATR) since the 19th Century (Onuzulike, 2008).

Therefore, the confrontation between Christianity and African culture has developed a sense that Christianity in Africa is practiced in conjunction with ATR Jebadu (2007:246). Research in this area shows that African Christianity is a dichotomous kind of Christianity, that is, it is a combination of both Christianity and ATR (Amanze, 2003:43). The Southern African Catholic Bishops attested to the same in their pastoral statement; they said that there are Catholic Christians who search for healing from Sangomas (traditional healers). This could arguably be the case with other Christians as Ntombana (2015:105) suggests. Many Christians secretly or freely consult traditional healers for several reasons (Makhoathi, 2017).

A number of reasons can explain this but majorly, it is because ATR is inextricably inclusive of African culture as a whole which makes it difficult to adhere to Christianity per se for African converts. Many feel that ATR and Christianity are incompatible while others find no problems in enjoying services from both. There has been up to date no criteria set to determine what aspects of African culture are worth upholding and which ones need to be discarded. This varies from one denomination to another. Some aspects are allowed in some denominations while in others are seen to be pre-Christian and devilish. This often results in mistrust among believers as some Christians view others as nominal when compared to others for example Pentecostals in Uganda do not allow adherents to attend funeral rites while among the Catholics, it is non-problematic. In this case, the latter are viewed by the former as weak Christians. They are seen to be living below standards of authentic Christian faith.

Also, the problem of African identity among African Christians has been worsened by increased denominationalism where being a 'Christian' today is seemingly not enough, one may want to be identified with a particular denomination to qualify his or her Christianity. Some proselyte would be okay to be identified with both aspects of Christianity and African religious culture while others would prefer to be identified with only Christianity (Ferdinando, 2007). Reasons for this include the denominational teachings in relation to indigenous culture. This has resulted into identity problems hence the need to neutralize the missionary teaching of the colonial era, finding ways how Christian beliefs can be integrated into African culture without compromising African identity, dignity, self-worth and esteem.

Suggested solutions

The notion of Christian conversion in Africa and its impact on African identity has not gone unnoticed. There is, however, a feeling that we have misplaced the source of our identity as Africans by elevating religion to be a chief determinant. (Rosemann 2007:171) wrote that Africans have assumed the idea that religion is typically essentialist in nature and in most cases not subject to revision. This seems true especially when it comes to Christianity and the Bible as an authoritative book. Early missionaries taught in such a way that Christian converts needed to choose between denominational belonging and cultural identity. This is still evident today. In the article to differentiate between "identity as origin" and "identity as religion", (Sann, 2016) proposed that since religion has endangered African identity, there is need to deviate away from the understanding that religion is the basis of identity. To him, we have given much power to religion. He argued that shared experiences "should and must" be the basis of our identity. It is easy to concur with him to some degree but religion is doubtlessly here to stay.

The late John Mbiti described Africans to be notoriously religious. This creates the need for a religious-based solution.

Contemporary African theologians have declared 'African Christianity' as a new religion distinct from both African Religion and Christianity. This is because Christianity is viewed to have been part of western civilization and so equated to western culture. This according to Maluleke (2010:370) would be a combination of both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In this, Africans are thought of as mature enough to determine the flow of their lives, thinking independently on transforming their lives by cultivating self-definition which entails retrieval of African culture that defines who they are in such a way that African identity and integrity is protected, maintained and ensured (Makhoathi, 2017).

However, some theologians like (DeGruchy, 1990:46) feel that the attempt to come up with an 'African Christianity' is hypocrisy while others like (Ray, 1976:3) view it as ignorance since African indigenous converts were left with no option except juxtaposing the two belief systems (Mbiti, 1969:223). Mugambi (2002:519-520) described the problem this way; "on the one hand they accepted the norms introduced by missionaries who saw nothing valuable in African culture and on the other hand, the converts could not deny their own cultural identity." They were indirectly forced to choose between denominational belonging and their African cultural heritage that was giving them full identity. On this dilemma, he noted that "they could not substitute their denominational belonging for their cultural and religious heritage. Yet they could not become Europeans or American merely by adopting some aspects of the missionaries' outward norms of conduct" Mugambi (2002:519-520). Consequently, they resorted to incorporating the two, which required them to live by double religious standards; professing Christianity during the day and privately practicing ATR (Ntombana 2015:110). This was because they were forbidden from indulging in any African cultural rite and practice (Afeke & Verster 2004:50). A few who dared to resist were harshly and publicly disciplined (Mills 1995:153ff). It is unfortunate that their own, ATR was the one to be practiced in private. Where does this leave their self-esteem as proud Africans?

Also, the extent to which the formation of this 'African Christianity' is possible also presents another challenge. Do these two religions really have a point of intersection? According to Mndende (2009:8), there is a general consensus that the two are a paradox and so cannot be reconciled. Nevertheless, there are also nominalists who view these two systems of religion as compatible, Mlisa (2009:8). (Mokhoathi, 2020), however, argues that a critical analysis of the above interpretations tends to be absolute in that they undermine the insider view, that is, that of the practitioners. On the one hand they see a clear divide between Christianity and ATR and on the other hand, nominal Christians go for the grey area where Christianity and ATR are viewed as two systems of related thought and practice (Hirst, 2005:4).

The latter has also not gone unchallenged. Adamo (2011:16) reported that many Christian theologians view the attempt of an African Christianity as described above as leading to pure syncretism; which according to Shaw and Stewart (1994:26) is "a process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given point". It is in other words a mixture of two or more religions. Adamo (2011) argues that if Christianity is amalgamated with any other religion, it is corrupted; any form of inculturation or Africanizing of Christianity is corruption of the Christian faith because it must be Christocentric. In addition, Bediako (1994:14) argues that adherence to both is problematic because it dilutes the uniqueness of both of each one of them (Makhoathi, 2017). This then implies that one cannot experience the extreme uniqueness of any of the two since he or she only partly participates in each. Furthermore, one is confronted with various religious ideas or beliefs which sometimes conflict with each other and in the process, one gradually loses his or her religious identity. From a historical perspective, it can be seen that early Christian converts endured hardships in being authentic Christians as well proud Africans because their culture was deemed irrelevant in their 'new' faith yet significant in the understanding and propagation of the gospel.

It is from this point that we turn to the role of culture in African Christian identity.

The role of culture

Culture has been defined severally. In this paper, we adopt a definition by (Idanga, 2015). He says that culture is a patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim belonging to a given origin. It embraces issues like beliefs, norms, manners, morals, and so on. It is "that totality of customs, techniques and values that distinguish a social group, a tribe, a people, a nation". Quoting E B. Taylor, he adds that it is the mode of living proper to a society (Mondin, 2004). Culture is therefore not natural but a human construction; it's a product of man's activity and cultivation which helps him in realizing his personality. Also, culture defines an individual or a group. Odimwegu (2004) had this to say; 'if an individual is identified by his community, the community is identified by culture, for culture gives community both a sense of reality and dignity, integrity and continuity, security and social cohesion …and by his or her culture, he or she is identified' (Nwafor, 2016). Culture, therefore, gives identity to a person.

This affirms the idea that for Africans, a person is a person through other persons (Ramose, 1999). Additionally, Okolo portrays that *self* in Africa is only meaningful to the extent it acknowledges and accepts to echo: *Cognatus Ergo Sum* ("I am related to others, therefore I exist") (Okolo, 1993). This means that even if a person converts to Christianity, he or she remains part and parcel of the community; one identifies as a Christian but an African. Although conversion is an intimate process, it can only be understood in context. Hervieu-Leger (1999) stated that 'the logic of conversion depends as much on the individual dispositions of converts as on their social and family relations which generate social effect' (Langewiesche, 2020). This is true especially in Africa where communal belonging is a reality.

From the above, the question by Galgalo (2012) whether African Christians are in the first place Africans and then Christians or they are just Christians who also happen to be Africans finds an answer. The position of culture cannot be undermined when it comes to identity. To the question, we agree with Okot p'Bitek in Mugambi (1992:81) who responded that saying that people are first what their heritage has made them to be, and secondly, they are what they choose to be. On the other hand, F B. Welbourn is of the opinion that a committed Christian's relationship to his or her cultural heritage comes second for he or she is first a Christian and only secondly an African (Ofula, 2019).

According to Nwanfor (2016), Christianity is not anathema to any culture, instead, like the incarnate savior, it simply identifies with all cultures in order to rescue its anomalies without self-losing of its prime nature. Sarpong (1990) stressed this when he stated that "Christianity's claim to universality is validated, only when it can be expressed in any (cultural) form". He qualified this saying, "Christ became man, in order to make man God" and not the other way round. This implies that Christianity must become Africanized before daring to influence Africans. In a more practical but stern accentuation, Dorr (2000) points out that the whole project of evangelization-inculturation can easily lose track in case of any failure to acknowledge which elements in the cultural patrimony are unchangeable and which are worth adopting or dropping. Mugambi (2002:517) believes that Christianity cannot realize full potential unless it is communicated through a cultural medium. What is important to note here is that although Christian identity has become an integral part of almost all western cultures, this does not make them Christian cultures as such because no particular cultural patterns and social structures is in itself specifically Christian (Eugene, 1973). Advocates for radical conversion forget this thereby contributing to religio-cultural dualism among African Christians and hence an identity crisis. Conversion does not occur in a vacuum (Masondo 2015:93) and therefore, culture is very significant in African Christian identity. There is need to investigate how African Christians can relate to their religious and cultural heritage without self-degeneration that was caused by the missionaries' attitude towards African cultural practices.

Also, important to note is that unlike during the missionary era, today, there seems to be more than one form of conversion. (Mokhoathi, 2020) discusses two forms of conversion; consolidation and radical conversion. The former involves consolidating the existing 'identity' and its meaning systems with another similar religious system for example one changing from Anglicanism to Catholicism. In this case there is no much trouble associated with conversion as the new actually reinforces the old. The latter, on the other hand demands a total break away from the past and submersion into the new religious system. This, as highlighted above is the commonest on the African continent. This conversion questions self-perception and belonging within the society. He argues that this is too simplistic and so suggests that 'hybridization' paradigm offers clearer ways for Africans to practice their Christianity while remaining authentically Africans without fear for public criticism that comes with perceived syncretism.

Syncretism is understood to suggest "blending of foreign, non-Christian elements with ('putatively' pure 'authentic') Christian beliefs and practices" McGuire (2008:189) whereas hybridity is perceived as a two-way process of blending and borrowing from one religious system to another Spielmann (2006:1). By nature, it is seen to be intentional and unapologetic as both ATR and Christianity roughly contribute equally to the end product Muller (2008:1).

For Cieslik & Verkuyten (2006:78), hybridity refers "to the different lifestyles, behaviors, practices and orientations that result in multiple identities". Mokhoathi (2020), however, expressed preference for Sielmann's description (2006:1) that hybridity is "a term commonly used in cultural studies to describe conditions in contact zones where different cultures connect, merge, intersect and eventually transform". He argued that a meeting of two religious systems does not automatically imply emergence of multiple identities. To him, hybridity can "denote consolidation of identity by incorporating or supplementing certain external components of culture which do not fully find adequate expression within the immediate cultural tradition". Most Africans to Mokhoathi (2020) fall in this category. They tend to adopt some African beliefs or practices in supplement to their Christian beliefs for example sometimes prayer is perceived as insufficient to safeguard them against witchcraft attacks and so the need for hybridization. It dispels the histories of its constituent two religious systems which creates what Bhabha (1994:291) termed a "third space'. This means that some elements of African traditional cosmology are paramount for African Christians.

The question that arises regards whether this space can be easily comprehended by everyone. How practical is it for the common African if African Christians already engage ATR practices in secret? We argue that denominational doctrines and beliefs become relevant in this. For Christians that are after radical conversion like Pentecostals who according to Jadu, (2005) emphasizes the role of the holy spirit, exorcism and the direct experience with God, hybridity may not be satisfactory in solving the problem of dual identity among African Christians. How long will this so called 'third place' take to mature such that one's identity as an African Christian is not questioned by both the self and society? We are of the opinion that if we talk of hybridity to a group as this, they may view us as agents intending to drive them back where they came from. This is because conversion is perceived as a "form of liberation from a state of absolute awfulness [...]." Hastings (1967:60). Given that radical conversion takes the lion's share among African Christian converts as postulated by (Mokhoathi, 2020), we are of the view that whether one totally denounces his or her cultural identity for a new one is today highly dependent on the faith of the individual culminating from the denominational teaching received at and after conversion.

The place of denominations

There seems to be a consensus among theologians that conversion to Christianity necessarily involves a measure of discontinuity of the pre-Christian past, but this has been thought of as problematic. Perhaps what to leave and uphold has contributed much to the problem of religious dual identity among African

Christians. Which criteria can be used, and who is authorized to come up with one? Under whose authority should this be done, anyway? Also, ecumenical movements are not after merging denominations for doctrinal uniformity but according to Smyth (2008: 120), it is an 'invitation to allow the churches to be transformed through the grace of exchange and shared life' (Spencer, 2012). Are we not left with denominational authority? Mokhoathi (2020) thus emphasizes the importance of 'solid biblical hermeneutics' as the standard critique of culture and its traditional practices. Scripture should be used to filter out cultural practices seemingly contradictive to the voice of the Scripture. However, still denominations do the hermeneutics differently. Denominations in the evangelical family for example are known to be traditional Biblicists who view Scripture as final while Catholics incorporate tradition and Church decrees. Consequently, how a Pentecostal for example is viewed or feels when he uses traditional medicine is parallel to a Catholic. It seems that there shall always be that denominational divide on how African Christians relate to African religio-cultural heritage especially with the current exponential growth of Pentecostalism on the continent. Particular denominations can then try to be clear about how they relate with distinct African cultural practices and ATR in particular. This would help African Christians to stop undermining their cultural heritage as barbaric and satanic and on top of this, making use of it in secret which undermines their self-esteem and identity as African Christians.

Much as missionaries ministered based on respective denominational standards, we argue that today, one's identity as a Christian is highly aggregated in reference to his or her denomination more than ever. If one asks if you are a Christian or not, it is likely that this question will be followed by another question concerning which particular denomination one subscribes to. In addition, it may be practically easy today for somebody to visit a place where there is no his or her denominational church and decides not to go to any other until he or she returns where he or she came from to attend church. We are thus convinced that beliefs of distinct denominations can assist in determining what African traditional practices can be consolidated or at least under what circumstances that a believer can refer to ATR without fear of public criticism and syncretism. In this, we believe people will be freer as Africans practicing the Christian faith.

CONCLUSION

The question of identity is not a new one but has durably featured in discussions on African Christians. Many scholars have always blamed western Missionaries who misinterpreted African religio-cultural practices in favor of conversion to 'western Christianity' which created what many like Kwame Bediako refer to as an 'identity crisis.' we think its high time we carry the cross ourselves at all levels and we stop blaming early missionaries. Thomas Oden observed that not only western scholars but also African scholars have forgotten the contribution of the African ancestors to the Christian world view. "Some have been so intent on condemning nineteenth-century colonialist missionary history that they have hardly glimpsed their own momentous premodern patristic African intellectual heritage" (Oden, 2007: 11).

There is evidence that before it got clothed in western cultures, Christian dogma had a great deal of input from the motherland, Africa. Thomas Oden argued that "The global Christian mind has been formed out of a specific history, not out of bare bones theoretical ideas. Much of that history occurred in Africa. Cut Africa out of the Bible and Christian memory, and you have misplaced many pivotal scenes of the salvation history. It is the story of the children of Abraham in Africa; Joseph in Africa; Moses in Africa; Mary, Joseph and Jesus in Africa; and shortly there-after Mark and Perpetua and Athanasius and Augustine in Africa" (Oden, 2007:14). He discusses seven ways in which Africa shaped Christianity and intellectual formation. These include: the birth of the European university for example following the great library of Alexandria; African thinkers such as Augustine contributed to core Christian Dogma; how Africa mothered the world wide monastic life among others (Oden, 2007). If this is the case, then it is all upon us to through our various undeniable denominations to reaffirm our origins as we worship the Lord God Almighty.

Our African history in relation to Christianity and conversion in particular is an inerasable reality. However, much as we need to look at our history, as Maathai Wangari proposed, we ought not to be held up in the past to the extent of forgetting what we can do to build a better Africa. African cultural heritage is worth preservation because it is relevant in formation and preservation of an African identity. Given the fact that the Christian message is well propagated in respect to culture, the role of culture in the formation of African Christian identity is irreplaceable too. Being or becoming a Christian does not dispel the Africanism in a person or even rendering it useless to any degree either instantly or gradually, whatsoever one's denomination maybe. A Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Nketiah (1992:14-15) wrote that it is not only scholars that have this view, even preachers and evangelists in different churches have been heard deliberately promoting western cultural values and usage at the expense of African cultural practices (Atiemo, 2002). If African preachers have been doing this, then they can still be useful in deconstructing that long term stereotype of misbranding African religio-practices that leads to the identity crisis. This also implies that the training African pastors and theologians has to geared towards such efforts. Since many of our theological institutions are denominational based, it can enhance efforts against dual identity among African Christian converts.

RECOMMENDATION

Further studies can be done on how different denominations specifically the African Initiated Churches (AICs) have contributed to improving African Christian identity.

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