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DEMONISATION OF AFRICAN CULTURES BY EUROPEAN MISSIONARIES AND THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN AFRICA: A PASTORAL INTROSPECTION

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Abstract

This article highlights the general impact of the demonisation of African cultures by the early European Christian missionaries on the Christian mission in Africa. This is done against the backdrop of the prevalence of inauthenticity and religious syncretism among African Christians. The study believes that the early European Christian missionaries misconceived, misinterpreted, and humiliated African cultures on the course of their missionary activities among the people. And this could have been inspired, among other things, by the European bias and misconceptions against Africa and Africans as a dark continent and a people without civilisation, respectively, as popularized by some of their renowned thinkers and philosophers like Comte, Hegel, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Homer etc. Hence, it is only by unveiling and embracing the shameful truth of this negative approach of the Christian missionaries to African cultures, and making some appropriate adjustments in her missionary endeavours in this light, shall the Christian mission shall bear the desired fruit of authentic Christian life among Africans. This calls for some effective dialogue between Christianity and African cultures.

Keywords: Inauthenticity, Syncretism, Culture, African, Demonisation, European, Missionaries, Mission,

Introduction



The rate of inauthenticity and the rise in syncretic tendencies among African Christians have remained a daunting challenge to the pastoral efficiency and effectiveness of the Church. This calls for some sober reflection and a sincere, docile self-evaluation on the part of the Church and Christianity at large, in a search for the possible root causes of the anomaly and for some possible effective solutions to the problem. This study, therefore, looks at the problem of the demonisation of African cultures by the early European missionaries as a possible contributing factor to the menace of inauthenticity and religious syncretism among African Christians.

Furthermore, the study looks at culture in general, African culture, the advent of Christianity in Africa, the unhealthy attitudes of the early Christian missionaries towards African cultures on the course of evangelizing the people, and the aftermath of that attitude on the Christian mission in Africa.

Understanding Culture in General

The term “culture” simply means to develop or cultivate. From its etymological understanding, as postulated by Onebunne, culture is a derivative of the Latin word *colore*, which could be simply understood as to develop, cultivate, or acquire.¹ Similarly, according to Kendall and Wickham, from the noun form of *colore*, which is *cultura*, culture can, etymologically, mean to educate or refine.² Thus, in the final analysis, culture, from an etymological point of view, could be understood, among other ways, as acquired, cultivated, or developed characters, values, norms, or patterns of living or doing things.

Furthermore, culture, as a concept, is generally very complex and fluid, and, as such, devoid of any universally accepted definition. According to Belshek, “Culture is a complex concept, and no single definition of it has achieved consensus in the literature.”³ Thus, Kendall and Wickham avow that “Culture is the most elusive term in the vocabulary of the social sciences...”⁴ Therefore, in the view of Onwubiko, any attempt to define culture could be tantamount to adding to the many problems already introduced into the concept by definitions.⁵ Hence, given all this, Kendall and Wickham further advise that, rather than being preoccupied with the quest for a single best theoretical definition of culture, scholars should pay more ardent attention to giving a clear empirical operational understanding of the term whenever they employ it.⁶ Hence, culture, as employed here, simply means the way of life of a people: all that makes a people stand out among others as different and unique.

African Cultures In Perspective

According to B. Whorf, as cited by Onwubiko,

¹ Onebunne J. I., “Faith and Culture Dialogue: Implementing the *Ecclesia* in African for an Authentic Igbo (African) Church” In *Nnadiabube Journal of Religion, Culture and Society*, Vol. 1 (1), 2018, 66 – 82.

² Kendall G. and Wickham G., The Concept of Culture. www.sagepub.com. Assessed 12/04/024.

³ Belshek J. A., The Influence of Culture on the Negotiation Styles of British Students. www.ibset24.blogspot.com. Assessed: 12/04/024.

⁴ Kendall and Wickham.

⁵ Onwubiko O. A., The Christian Mission and Culture in Africa (Vol. 1): African Thought, Religion and Culture. Enugu: SNAPP Press, 1991, xviii.

⁶ Kendall and Wickham.



... different languages (sic) organise the world differently, and ... no individual is free to describe with absolute impartiality what he observes in other cultures because he must be constrained by certain modes of interpretation.⁷

Thus, apart from the difficulty arising from the complex and fluid nature of the concept of culture generally in trying to define it, African culture also has another unique challenge, arising from the attempt to define it with a foreign language. In other words, it might not be possible for one to give a true definition of African culture in a foreign language, like the English language that we use, as such a definition will surely be constrained and limited by the peculiar word meanings and categories of the foreign language. Thus, in such a situation, one can, at best, describe what African culture is. Therefore, African culture could be simply understood as the way of life of Africans. It entails all that distinguishes Africa as a place and Africans as a people, and makes the place and people stand out as unique and different from other places and peoples.

More so, it might be safer to talk of African culture in the plural rather than in the singular. That is, “African cultures” instead of “African culture”. This is because Africa is a people composed of many peoples. A continent of five (5) regions, made up of fifty-four (54) countries and four (4) dependent territories and areas of special sovereignty, according to United Nations official statistics.⁸ And, each of the countries and areas or territories is also made up of multi-ethnic groups and multi-ethnic sub-groups of different socio-cultural systems. So, talking of “African cultures” rather than “African culture” actually gives the people of each sub-culture and socio-cultural system their proper place of honour as a people among the people generally and collectively known as Africans. It stands for an acknowledgement of each sub-culture and socio-cultural system in its peculiarity as a unique part of the whole, without which the whole is never complete. Nevertheless, we still talk of African culture in the singular form basically to emphasise unity, and not uniformity. For the differences notwithstanding, the people also share many unifying factors, enhancing some moments of confluence among their different cultures.

The Advent of Christianity In Africa

As against what some people may think or believe, Africa was among the first parts of the world to welcome Christianity. This, according to Etherington, is evident from the gospels.⁹ Christianity arrived in Africa in the first century AD, having arrived in Egypt first around 50 AD.¹⁰ Hence, according to BBC World Service, Christianity arrived in Africa (Egypt) before or around the same time as Northern Europe.¹¹ Then, in the 4th century AD, before or around the same time as Emperor Constantine did in the Roman Empire, King Ezana of the Aksumite Kingdom, in modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, declared Christianity the official religion of the kingdom, after he was converted to Christianity by Frumentius. This made the Aksumite Empire one of the first regions of the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion.¹² And, although some authors hold the view that how Christianity spread across North Africa and into Aksum was much unknown, it is also believed that it came in through Mark, the Evangelist

⁷ Onwubiko O. A., 29.

⁸ www.worldometer.info. Assessed: 19/05/2025.

⁹ Etherington N., The History of Christian Missions to Africa. www.oxfordre.com. Assessed: 20/05/2025.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, Christianity in Africa. www.wikipedia.org. Assessed: 20/05/2025

¹¹ BBC World Service History of Africa: Christianity. www.bbc.co.uk. Assessed: 20/05/2025.

¹² Wikipedia.



and Apostle of Christ, who became the first Bishop of the Alexandrian Patriarchate around 43 AD.¹³

More so, the story of the initial advent of Christianity in Africa was not actually all glorious, as one may begin to think at this point. The religion suffered a lot of setbacks, beginning with the persecution of Christians in Egypt, under Emperor Decius, in the 3rd century AD, which saw many of the Christians flee into the desert. This later gave birth to Christian monasticism, as some of the Christians remained in the desert to pray, as hermits, after the persecution ended.¹⁴ Another setback that contributed to the decline of Christianity in Africa in its early history was the Muslim conquests of North Africa. Although Muslims remained the minority after the conquests, the economic pressure the Muslim leaders of the territory exerted on the Christians, especially through the poll tax (the *jizya*), as against the social incentives that their Muslim counterparts enjoyed from the same leaders, led many Christians to convert to Islam.¹⁵ These, in conjunction with some other possible factors, facilitated the decline of Christianity in Africa after its initial blossom in the Northern regions of the continent.

Furthermore, although Christianity suffered some retardation in North Africa, as noted earlier, it did not die completely in the region, and it also remained the chosen religion in the Ethiopian Empire. Then, in the 15th century AD, it arrived in Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa with the advent of the Portuguese and the Dutch into the regions, respectively.¹⁶ However, it was in the 19th century AD that Christianity saw a very accelerated spread across the continent. This period witnessed a marked increase in Christian missions to Africa, propelled by the crusade against the slave trade and Europe's interest in the colonisation of the continent.¹⁷ In this era, Christian evangelisation is seen to have worked much hand-in-hand with colonialism, as the European missionaries in this period greatly collaborated with their brother European colonial masters or the colonisation agenda. This also cast a dark spot on the Christian mission, which has persisted in some ways even to today. For, according to Onwubiko, the fact that the early European missionaries rode on the back of, and respected colonialists, also impacted negatively on their mission in Africa.¹⁸ In the same vein, Amaegwu asserts that the early Christian missionaries, in their collaboration with the colonialists, made the people perceive the bible as an object of deception.¹⁹ Thus, though Christianity spread in breadth from this period, one could not say, for sure, that it was the same in depth, as the advancement of the European colonial interests seemed to take the better part of the whole agenda of the time.

The Demonisation Of African Cultures by Early European Christian Missionaries

Perhaps, the interference of colonial interest in the missionary agenda in Africa, as well as, other possible factors, like European biases against Africa as “the Dark Continent with very primitive civilizations ...”²⁰, made the early European Christian missionaries fail to take African cultures into proper consideration in their missionary endeavours. This can be felt in

¹³ Wikipedia.

¹⁴ Wikipedia.

¹⁵ Wikipedia.

¹⁶ BBC World Service.

¹⁷ BBC World Service.

¹⁸ Onwubiko O. A.

¹⁹ Amaegwu J. O., *Dialogue with Culture: A New Method of Evangelization in Igbo Land*. Enugu, Claretian Publications, 2011, 15.

²⁰ WASSCE, *Christian Missionary Activities in West Africa*. www.wasscehistorytextbook.com. Assessed: 20/05/2025.



the thoughts of Amaegwu, when he asserts that “Missionary Christianity of the sixties and before never saw African culture as anything except as an object of ridicule and total extirpation; hence, it was their burden duty to implant the form and content of the Church and religiosity of their own”.²¹ Similarly, Imokhai holds that the early missionaries saw the people’s cultures as repugnant and must be suppressed to plant Christianity among them.²²

The above views by Amaegwu and Imokhai, one could say, immediately give a simple but clear picture of what could have played out in the encounter between the early European Christian missionaries and African cultures. The early Christian missionaries did not seem to have seen anything worthwhile in African cultures. Hence, they made it a duty to uproot whatever was traditional to the people to replace it with whatever they consider a better option. Hence, they were perceived as having come to root out African Traditional Religion and customs and plant Christianity.²³ This, according to Amaegwu, was because they simply perceived Africans as uncivilized and unable to conceive of anything worthwhile. Thus, the European missionaries never appreciated anything African, but rather interpreted their religious symbols and beliefs in terms of psychological and sociological theories, and whatever did not correspond with their theories, they discarded and invented another to replace it, filling the gap already existent in their minds.²⁴ In doing this, in Ezekwugo’s opinion, as cited by Amaegwu too, they simply made nonsense of the African culture and religion.²⁵ Hence, Nworie avows that it seems that the European missionaries were simply on a mission to impress on the consciousness of the Africans that their culture is inhuman and barbaric.²⁶ Therefore, given all the foregoing, one could simply see, from the attitudes of the early European Christian missionaries to Africa, an agenda to *Europeanise* rather than *Christianise* Africa.

More still, the European biases against Africa, like that expressed by Emile Ludwig, were very pronounced in the missionary activities of the early European missionaries. According to him, as cited by Nworie, it is unthinkable that the untutored African can conceive God.²⁷ Thus, perhaps, it is this kind of mindset and bias against Africans that could have possibly influenced the European Christian missionaries in their negative attitude towards African cultures and traditions. This is buttressed by Obiefuna and Kanu when they state that the European bias against Africans, as propagated by some of their renowned thinkers like Hegel, Hobbes, Rousseau, Comte, etc., could have contributed greatly to the early missionaries’ negative impressions of Africa and the African worldviews, resulting in their wrong approaches in their evangelisation of the people.²⁸ Therefore, because they were already biased against the people, the European missionaries never made enough efforts to study and understand the people’s cultures. As a result, according to Nworie, they never appreciated the African cultural values but, rather, branded them all as fetish and pagan.²⁹ This, obviously is a case of one criticising what he/she does not understand (Jude 1:10). Hence, because of these biases against Africans,

²¹ Amaegwu J. O

²² Imokhai C.A., “The Evolution of the Catholic Church in Nigeria” In *The History of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*. Edited by Makozi J. and Ojo G. Lagos: Macmillan, 1982, 1–14.

²³ Osunwokeh, Clement I. “African Traditional Values of Justice and Human Dignity: An Alternative Model for Africa Christianity” In *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 1, June 2015, 79-100.

²⁴ Amaegwu, 101 – 102.

²⁵ Amaegwu, 102.

²⁶ Nworie P. C., *The Response of the Igboman to the Eucharistic Injunction: “Do this in Memory of Me”*. Enugu, De-Envoy Media, 2012, 110.

²⁷ Nworie, 16

²⁸ Obiefuna and Kanu, 218.

²⁹ Nworie, 110.



they could not pay attention to understanding the African cultural values and worldviews, which would have been a veritable foundation on which to build the Christian faith. For, according to the Council for Culture, as cited by Nworie, positive values enshrined in traditional cultures are a solid basis for the inculturation of the Gospel.³⁰

The Demonisation Of African Cultures and Christian Mission In Africa

A critical pastoral evaluation of the Christian mission in Africa reveals that the mission was both successful and unsuccessful. It was successful in the sense that the missionaries really succeeded in planting the faith on the continent. Today, Christianity is, obviously, the most popular religion in Africa. A 2018 study by the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary holds that Africa boasts of more resident Christians than any other continent of the world, followed only by Latin America and Europe, respectively.³¹ These certainly show a record of tremendous success by those who brought the faith first to the continent, especially the early European missionaries. For, although one may not rightly say that, without them, Christianity would not have come to Africa, it could also, at least, be said that, without them, perhaps, it would not have happened the time it did, and the story would have, possibly, spanned differently, with different kind of results, too, from what we have today.

Nevertheless, the European Christian mission in Africa could also, at the same time, be said to have been unsuccessful in the sense that it could be difficult for one to say, for certain, that the faith they planted germinated and blossomed as would have been desired. This is never in any way meant to trivialise or cast a dark cloud on the labours and sacrifices of the European missionaries, which were great and, to a very large extent, born of sincere hearts. Rather, it is simply an honest assessment of the pastoral reality in Africa, even after many years of those labours and sacrifices. Thus, although the faith spread in breadth, the same cannot be emphatically said about the depth. According to Obiefuna and Kanu, there has been regular tremendous growth of Christianity in Africa in terms of the population of Christians and Christian churches, but a serious lack of depth of faith and commitment among African Christians.³² Similarly, according to Obiefuna's analysis of the situation among the Igbo Christians, as cited by Umoh,

Thousands come to our churches. Our cathedrals and chapels are filled every Sunday and during important celebrations like harvest and bazaars. A lot of people also make huge donations for the upkeep of the church. Still, many also avail themselves of the sacraments But often, some reports practicing Christians are equally idol worshipers. They swear on idols, erect hidden shrines in their homes. They hide fetishes in their shops in the market and their workshops.³³

These clearly explain the level of inauthenticity and religious syncretism among African Christians today. And the question that could immediately come to mind here would be why this level of inauthenticity and syncretism exists among the African Christians, despite the

³⁰ Nworie, 24

³¹ Wikipedia.

³² Obiefuna B.A.C and Kanu I.A." Inculturation as Reconciliation of Cultures: Implications from *Africae Munus*" In *The Church in Africa: Witness to Justice, Peace and Reconciliation*. Ed. Ijezie et al. Lagos: Clear Impact Services, 2013, 213-237.

³³ Umoh D., "Superstition and Syncretism: Setbacks to Authentic Christian Practice in Africa" In *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Inventions*. Vol. 2, Is.7, July 2013, 32-40. www.ijhssi.org. Assessed: 21/05/2025.



enormous sacrifices made by the missionaries to plant the Christian faith and the seemingly sincere acceptance of the faith by the people. The answer to this question, to a very reasonable extent, could be found in the manner the early missionaries treated the people's cultures in their bid to establish Christianity among them. According to Metuh, as cited by Obiefuna and Kanu, the lack of depth of faith among African Christians is due to the Christian missionaries' intolerance for the inculturation of the Christian faith in Africa and their failure to come to terms with the African traditional cosmology.³⁴ More still, because the European missionaries failed to pay adequate attention to the African in the context of his/her culture, worldview and environment, the missionaries, though with much labour and sacrifices, barely succeeded in making the African Christians to add foreign/Christian name to his/her traditional name and put on a foreign cloth on top of his/her local dress, without actually taking care of what lay beneath. Thus, according to W. Buehlmann, as cited by Onwubiko, "The children have grown up now, and the lives some of them lead as adults have revealed to us that their human nature has by no means been fully Christianized. How many of them are there who, in sickness, misfortune or hostility, react not in a Christian way, but in their ancient pre-Christian manner?".³⁵ Hence, Oborji asserts that African Traditional Religion still very much influences the philosophy of life of the African Christian.³⁶ And, this is never totally a thing of the past, as one might think, but still very much a pastoral reality of today, as could be seen in the surge in the call for a return to the African Traditional forms of worship, especially among the young ones.

Conclusion

The challenge of inauthenticity and syncretic tendencies among African Christians is a very palpable one. It is seen among the old and the young alike, and it cuts across all Christian denominations. And, from the foregoing, this has been largely engendered by the inappropriate missionary approaches of the early missionaries to the people's cultures in their evangelisation of the people, which succeeded in leaving most of their converts, who eventually also took over from them, hollow and shallow, leading to the spread of Christianity without depth in the continent.

Nevertheless, a popular dictum holds that "a problem is better solved when it is discovered". Therefore, this is no longer a time to look for who to blame or just lament the harm and damages done, but rather a time for a solution. And, the best way out now should be to hearken to the voice of the Magisterium of the Church, which has insistently called on Africans to look back to and look within their cultures and traditional roots for the healing that is so much needed in the continent. According to the *Lineamenta* on the Special Synod on Africa (1990), as cited by Onwubiko, to enhance effective Christian mission in Africa, there is an urgent need to pay adequate attention to the philosophy and cultures of the people to evaluate the people's cultures and the adequate comprehension of the Gospel message.³⁷

³⁴ Obiefuna and Kanu. Inculturation as Reconciliation of cultures. 214.

³⁵ Onwubiko, xx.

³⁶ Oborji, F. A. The Dialogue with Christianity in Africa: Beyond Proselytism. www.thecable.ng. Assessed: 22/05/2025.

³⁷ Onwubiko. 156.