



The Dilemma Of Syncretism in The Church Of Uganda Christian Faith Development from 1877 to 2019

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Abstract: *The Anglican Church of Uganda has been impacted by the increased syncretism brought on by the continuance of African Traditional Practices (ATPs) by her faithful members today. Its against this context that this study set out to perform a thorough analysis of secondary data to investigate why syncretism has persisted in the Church of Uganda despite the large proportion of Christian identities present in the organization today. The main objective of the study was to find out why although Christianity has been present in Uganda for a long time ATPs have continued to co-exist in Christian practices, posing a barrier to the growth of the Anglican Church of Uganda's faith. The study was guided by qualitative research methodology that involved a review of secondary literature of textbooks and journal articles on the research problem. The findings were that the overall uneasiness within the Christian community led to animosity and hatred that drove Christians to witchcraft tendencies, was one of the factors contributing to the continuance of ATR practices by Christians. It was further established in the review of literature that existing studies have not taken keen interest to identify ATR values that align with or complement Christian values which could be a major source of the problem. It is recommended that the Church should research non-conflicting values from ATR that could be incorporated into Christianity to avoid overlaps. The church should further open more spaces for dialogue with lead spiritual figures of ATR to strike a win-win outcome.*

Keywords: *Syncretism practices, Anglican church, African Traditional Practices, Christian values, Christian faith development*

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1. Introduction

Religion is a fundamental, perhaps the most important, influence in the life of most Africans (McDougall, 2023 & Smith, 2017). However, foreigners were frequently unaware of its fundamental tenets, making them perpetually susceptible to misinterpreting African worldviews and beliefs (Kwabena et al, 2015). When one speaks of ATPs, it refers to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans (Awolalu, 1976). This was a true indication that Africans were indeed religious. Mbiti asserted that because religion permeated all cultures and people's ways of life from an African perspective, Africans who adhered to their traditional ways were considered to be very religious (Mbiti, 1991). In light of this, he goes on

to say that from an African perspective, there was no formal separation between the holy and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, or between the spiritual and the material aspects of existence (Mbiti, 1992). Arthur Leonard, who described Africans as genuinely religious people who washed, dressed, and sometimes sinned religiously, furthered this remark by saying that their religion was their existence and their existence was their religion (Masol, 1995). This showed how sophisticated African traditional practices were understood and intensely practised within the context of ceremonial elements, which possibly early Anglican European missionaries did not take into account at the beginning of their evangelizing campaign in Uganda in 1877.

From the very beginning of missionary evangelization, the two brands of failure to understand African practices and culture were a reality of African early Anglican Christian evangelism in Uganda (Bediako, 1992). Due to the persistence of African traditional practices being practised alongside Christianity in Uganda (a practice known as syncretism), some members of the faithful split off in protest and established independent churches that were somehow accepting of accepting traditional practices alongside Christianity to correct what was perceived as forced foreignness in the Anglican Church. Religious syncretism is the blending of various religious beliefs and practices. An example of syncretism was gnosticism a religious dualistic system that incorporated elements from Oriental mystery religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Greek religious philosophical concepts (Hoeller, 2012) that was prevalent during the Hellenistic period (c. 300 BCE-c. 300 CE). Therefore, from the Ugandan context Christian converts wanted worship dimensions to reflect African culture. These felt that any religious institution, which did not meet the African daily life experience, would create spiritual hunger (Bediako, 1992). As a result, the liturgy in these churches was more African since it included elements of African cultural expression including singing, drumming and dancing some of which were ingredients of African cultural manifestation. But this presented a dilemma because those who left the mainline church frequently identified with the exceptional Christian values they had already embraced, while those who stayed in the church also continued to covertly practice what they believed to be the best aspects of traditional religion.

From this context, the early Christian missionaries and current church leaders have tried to put an end to TAPs such as the use of African traditional medicine equating it to evil practice rituals against the Christian faith and morals. This extended to discouraging converts from taking part in African traditional religious rituals and from consulting traditional healers who they described as heathens (Bediako, 1992). This was indeed the greatest negative impact of Western Missionary work on society attempting to uproot and destroy the entire cultural fabric and our religion that was dubbed pagan to impose indiscriminately Western religion. One wonders whether all that was in African traditional religion was contrary to Christian values that were introduced.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have been done at various levels on the issue of syncretism in Christianity. This section examines the literature that is pertinent to the subject at hand.

Global perspective on interplay between Christianity and African Traditional Religion

Scholars such as Mbiti have researched on the spread of Anglican church Christianity in African societies. However, the literature review findings indicate that although much attention has been given to giving detailed structural belief patterns of African Traditional practices, there is a gap in the factors that influence modern Africans to continue with ATPs. Pobe, and Ositelu, in *African Initiatives in Christianity* (1998) observed that there had been challenges of witchcraft among African Christians. Whereas, the early missionaries denied the reality of witches and dismissed belief in witchcraft as a remnant of heathenism and superstition, Africans' hearts and psychology were fully trusting in the same. This increasingly became a challenge to the Christian church by producing divisions amongst believers necessitating great efforts needed in religion to redeem humanity in Africa from the tyranny of these evil forces (Pobe, 1998). But this could be perhaps achieved from the African point of view contextual approach to remain meaningful in the lives of converted Africans to Christianity. African believers appear to have been perplexed about the decision to renounce what was African in favour of Christianity due to the neglect of this component. Mbiti contended that while syncretism was the biggest obstacle to the implementation of Christianity in Africa, it was still a significant religion. He claimed that for example most Kenyan Christians practiced only a small percentage of Christianity and a larger percentage of African religion, referring to most Kenyans as Christians by day and Africans by night, using Kenya as an example of an African nation (Pobe, 1998).

This notion is collaborated by Richard Magoola who posits that African Christianity is a mixture of African Traditional Religion practices and Christian doctrine. This he observed sprung from a lack of faith in Christ's saving power and works as well as a tool of Satan to water down revelation and separate God from his people by the accretion of symbols, liturgies, art forms and theologies which he equated to a loss of moral and spiritual authority (Magoola, 2013). And because Africans live their lives holistically rather than in compartments, all religious practices are therefore matters of life to them.

The practice of Traditional Beliefs alongside Christianity (syncretism) in Uganda

Uganda just like the rest of Africa has been a place where African Traditional Religious Practices have continued to either covertly or overtly practised alongside Christianity. This was due to a complex conundrum of important variables that contributed to Ugandan believers' dual parallel perspectives yet complementary religious principles and doctrinal lifestyle. One of the key contributing factors to this dilemma is the acquiescence of Ugandans which has led them to passive acceptance or submission to both

religious doctrines leading to the practice of syncretism in Christianity. The central question has been what happens when ATR followers become Christians. Do they undergo a radical change and sever ties completely with the ATR God or do they carry the old image into Christianity? According to scholars like John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and Anne Wasike-Nasimiyu, African converts retain their former identities and are unable to reconcile the two, leading to their becoming superficial Christians (Bediako, 2004). Mbiti specifically accuses the church of failing to convert fully partly because it has largely been unable to present to Africa more than a Western image of the faith (Mbiti, 1969). In fact, from the very beginning of Anglican missionary evangelization in Uganda, the two brands have been a reality of the existing Christianity (Bediako, 1992). This has become a serious determining factor for persistent syncretism in Ugandan Anglican Churches.

Another factor established was the mentality of believers that is deeply rooted in cultural ways of life. What ultimately makes culture in any system is the mentality of the people because it is the starting point of people's reasoning, reactions, and motivation. Mentality is more or less consistent and organized thus the persistence of ATR. Even in biblical terms, it is revealed that it was people's mentality that forced Israelites to worship idols because they believed in a physical and seen god (Exod. 32:1ff). The existing literature on the practice of Christianity in Ugandan Anglican Churches reveals the fear of adherents to face consequences by not performing traditional rituals such as rituals for twins, dead bodies or say inheritance rituals to mention but a few (Quinn, 2010). This fear mentality of the unknown consequences has ultimately created a foundation for syncretism by Christians in Uganda.

Further still, people's worldview was highlighted as one of the factors leading to syncretism. Our every thought and action is influenced by our worldview, which is a collection of attitudes, values, stories, and expectations about the world around us (Buck, 2005). The persistence of ATR by Ugandan Anglican Christians was established to be driven by their view of the world in a sense that their cognitive is mastered by immediate answers to the why questions. Most people have always thought that there is no incident without cause thus perhaps a licence to seek immediate spiritual solutions say from diviners or witch doctors. This is not different from some recorded biblical passages. For instance, when King Saul sought help from the medium woman (1 Sam. 28:3ff), he knew God but in his world view, he expected an immediate answer because of his worldview. Therefore held world views had been instrumental in leading Uganda Anglican Christians to practice syncretism.

Functionality was also established as an aspect behind persistent syncretism by Ugandan Christians. One of religion's main roles is to offer solutions to issues that are outside the realm of human experience, to justify the social structure, to foster and maintain group identification and solidarity, and to offer support to the individual and the society, particularly during times of difficulty, crisis, and tragedy (Luzbetak, 1988). ATR is one religion that provides a proper and immediate way of responding to the sacred and eternal. It appears to function effectively and immediately in correspondence to the exact required answers compared to Christianity and thus has won the hearts and minds of Christian converts in Uganda. This is similar to a biblical incident in the Old Testament when King Pharaoh trusted most in the Wiseman and the magicians than God by seeking a miraculous sign from them (Exod. 7:11ff) (GNB). Therefore this situation has bonded Christians to keep practising syncretism.

Further still ATR has provided truth to Ugandan Christians that have been a source of its second choice. Studies on traditional knowledge reveal that there is a lot of divine truth in ATR revealed by God through nature and conscience. The truth in ATR can be significantly identified in a number of their belief and worship practices such as the naming of God as supreme; supreme over the sun, life, sky, knowledge and creation. Hence people's expression about God, knowledge of creation, knowledge of the original state of man, knowledge of the spiritual nature of man, and worship practices in ATR declare all the truth about divine worship in ATR (Gehman, 2005). Thus the failure of the Christian church to relate the gospel to African traditional religiosity yet these aspects make life very meaningful to Ugandans is indeed a source of syncretism.

Biblical Reflection on Syncretism

Although the Bible acknowledges the persistence of cultural beliefs and practices in various families, societies, tribes, and individuals, the majority of its teachings were anti-syncretistic. The man was pleased with the creation of the lady from the beginning of the creation myth. At least this is one of a kind—a bone plucked from my bone and fresh from my fresh—the man replied. (Gen. 2:23-24) GNB. This demonstrated the happiness of man and his sense of unity, which forbade polygamy, contrary to what was promoted by traditional religious rituals in Africa. According to the Bible, a man and his wife become one when they were united, making it impossible for them to engage in traditional religious acts of polygamy because they were now one. Biblically speaking, the oneness in marriage illustrated in the aforementioned passage implies that the Bible forbade polygamy as well as African traditional religious doctrines and practices.

Furthermore, the Israelites were forbidden from worshipping idols after God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4-5)RSV. They didn't make a show of it or kneel before any statues. Therefore, the Bible forbade any act of African Traditional Religion(ATR) that involved worshipping a god or creating an image of him. In Deuteronomy, it is discussed how obedience and disobedience bring about blessings and curses, respectively. The main focus of chapter 28 is the advantages of abiding by God's commandments as well as the effects of disobeying them. Joshua warns people in Joshua 24:14–15(GNB) not to worship anything other than the one true and living God, and he commits to serve the Lord with his family. This further affirms the purity of Christian living contrary to practising syncretism. The biblical prophets were all against worshipping idols. In particular, Hosea recited a confessional prayer condemning idolatry and pledging that we would never refer to idols as our God. NIV, Hosea 14:3ff. Since there is no one else to turn to but God, he prayed on behalf of others that God would have mercy on them. Thus this indicates that ATR should be used with caution by picking values that focus on the notion of the common good, peacebuilding and sustainability of life to develop excellent Christian values.

The New Testament in particular stresses the aspect of living a pure Christian life. It affirms that Jesus is the path to eternity, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6 NIV). As the redeemer of humanity, believers are advised not to let their hearts be burdened NIV, John 14:1-2 So, we must place all of our trust in him. A person who belongs to Christ is a brand-new creature; the old has vanished, and the new has arisen. Some African Traditional Religious practices involve offering huge sacrifices that are a burden.Paddy Musana, “The Judeo-Christian Concept of ‘Sacrifice’ and Interpretation of Human Sacrifice in Uganda,” *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 41 (2014),39 Yet in Christianity, Christ is the already slain sacrifice that gives believers the freedom to live Christianly.

The dilemma of Syncretism world view in Church of Uganda faith development

Uganda, mainline conservative Christians always regard syncretism as a practice that contaminates or dilutes Christian faith with aspects that are incompatible with the gospel. However, there is no such thing as a pure religion that has not been influenced by traditional cultures in its ritual components. This challenges the widely accepted belief that western faiths were founded only on sacred tradition, resulting in a universal kind of pure sacred culture that has become part of what defines present Christian ideals(Nwosu,2021 & Olatoyan,2023). One of the primary goals of western missionaries was to plant the seed of the Christian message into a specific local historical

past while retaining the integrity of the gospel traditions.However, Christian churches first failed to remove components of Western culture that impeded desired absorption in indigenous soil or to incorporate aspects of indigenous qualities that are critical to its existence (Ezenweke,2012).

Like Ezenweke opined, from the beginning of the Church Missionary Society in Uganda, little attempt was made to accept a significant number of local rituals that never compromised Christian values. One example was the incorporation of traditional musical instruments into church music. This gap at the start of missionary work was a missed opportunity to reassure converts that Christianity was distinct from features of colonialism that attempted to turn Ugandans into English men. Furthermore, the Missionaries in Uganda collaborated with British colonialists in the imposition of indirect rule in Uganda. The role of the church missionary organization in persuading the Baganda to sign the 1900 Buganda Accord, which provided the basis for all societies losing their independence through the founding of the republic of Uganda, is a case in point. This history may provide understanding on why resisters adhered to African traditions with their Christian conversion in order to survive.

3. Methodology

This study was guided by qualitative research methodology. John Tosh has defined qualitative research techniques in history as a non-numerical descriptive empirical investigation into a social phenomenon or human issue(Tosh ,2003). This definition is further collaborated by Norman K. Denzin who opines that qualitative methodology is ideal in research on religion because it involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as text to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences to gather in-depth insights into the research problem(Denzin, 2000), to generate new ideas for the study. The study was guided by textual analysis qualitative data collection methodology (Gill,2008) which involved review of secondary data from textbooks and scholarly journals in order to investigate why syncretism has persisted in the Church of Uganda despite the large proportion of Christian identities present in the organization today .Data was chosen with care, taking into account authors who have made substantial contributions to the area under consideration. The review findings were collaborated to identify the remaining gaps, areas of agreement (similarities) and areas of departure(differences) allowing the researcher to review the research problem in line with what what other authorities have guided about determining validity of reviewed data in qualitative studies(Creswell, 2000).Qualitative methodology suited

the study since it dealt with descriptive non-numerical data in addressing the main arguments in the article.

4. Results and Discussion

The main objective of the study was to find out why syncretism has remained a dilemma in church of Uganda christian faith development taking into account the period from 1877 to 2019. From the review of extant literature, numerous authors confirmed the existence of syncretism by the Anglican Church of Uganda Christians. The common aspects of syncretism by Christians noted in reviewed literature included; Witchcraft tendencies, divinations, worship of spirits, veneration of the dead, polygamy, worship of small gods, ancestor worship, idolatry, child sacrifice, twin ceremonies ;and funeral rite rituals.

Some scholars observed that the overall uneasiness within the Christian community, such as unsolved disagreements between Christians led to animosity and hatred that drove Christians to witchcraft tendencies, was one of the factors contributing to the continuance of ATR practices by Christians. All authors opined that the church has indeed consistently denounced ATR practices like child sacrifice. What was latent in analysed data was that no study has been done to identify ATR values that align with or complement Christian values. Perhaps this is an interesting subject that need additional investigation.

It was also observed that there is scanty literature on the significant of sencretism yet it allows for the exchange of beliefs, values, and customs from one cultural tradition with those of other cultural traditions achieved only when both traditions resonate. Most of reviewed literature tended top focus on viewing sencretism as purely a negative aspect in society.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the study findings as discussed above, syncretism in the Church of Uganda's Christian faith development remains a key dilemma that needs serious attention. As noted in the above discussion, it is practically impossible to stop Church of Uganda Christian converts from totally abandoning all traditional practices formerly inherited from ATR. Besides some are always found to complement Christian values which put Christians in a further dilemma. Equally, there are indeed bad practices that are contrary to Christian values and the national laws of Uganda whose basis is common law. These need to be condemned in the strongest terms. However, striking a balance between the two aspects by documenting commonalities and making them pointers of dialogue would practically reduce

syncretism as a covert practice by some Anglican faithfully today.

5.2 Recommendations

Against this conclusion and findings, this study recommends that the Church should research on non-conflicting values from ATR that could be incorporated into Christianity to avoid overlaps to provide a win-win situation between traditional cultural practices and Christian culture. These should be practically incorporated into the daily preaching messages to build further confidence in Christian adherents and avoid biases of being branded sinful by conservative radicle christians. In addition, the church should open more space for dialogue with lead spiritual figures of ATR to strike a mutual respect position that would result in a win-win outcome in exchanging ideas for the common good of all. Even though the Church offers avenues for spiritual healing, more needs to be done to aid Christians not sliding into fallback positions for spiritual healing from Traditional Religion. Besides, more needs to be done to actively involve Christians in economic activities that would enable the reduction of poverty that turns back the poor to aspects like witchcraft that are used as a weapon of the weak against the rich.

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