

AFRICAN RELIGIONS, CULTURE AND THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

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Abstract

The interconnectivity which underpins human relations in the world today is operating at a light speed. In today's world, time and distance are no longer a barrier. Individuals, groups and organizations reach out or connect within a twinkle of an eye. Similarly, cultural practices, ideas, opinions, and issues now cross international borders without passing through the ordinary checks which humans go through in their international travels. This paper critically examined the prospect of African religion, culture and the global community in a dynamic world of change. The research adopted the world culture theory of Robertson as the framework for this study. It employed the phenomenological approach in data collection, presentation and analyses. The work observed that African religion and culture have migrated to different parts of the world and are making waves. The practitioners are so devoted that one wonders if their counterparts in Africa are so committed given the in-road of foreign religions. It concluded that African religions had become a world religion as a result of globalization.

Keywords: African Traditional religion, Culture, Global Community

Introduction

The visibility of African religion and culture in the global scene introduced another dimension to the religio-cultural pattern of thought in the global community. Before this in-road, the impression of Africans in the Western world was that Africa had no form of religion, nor could they think for themselves, as can be versed by Leo Frobenius, as cited by Obodoegbulam (2021), who quoted Idowu (1973). As it were, those who brought Christianity and Islam to Africa with the impression of bringing civilization to their perceived dark continent ended up taking African religion and culture to Europe and America. However, these cultural imports and exports took weeks and months as shipping was the major means of transportation.

Given the above scenario, science and technological success have bridged the gap which existed between the West and the rest parts of the world. The interconnectivity which underpins human relations in the world today is operating at a light speed. In today's world, time and distance are no longer a barrier. Individuals, groups and organizations reach out or connect at light speed. Similarly, cultural practices, ideas, opinions, and issues now cross international borders without the checks which humans go through in their international travels.

The presence of African religion and culture in Europe, America and the far east has not only changed the perception of these people about Africa, but it has also influenced their cultural lifestyle. Scholars of Anthropology, history, sociology, culture, music, and allied disciplines have integrated African religion and culture into the global patterns of thought. Similarly, some universities outside Africa have departments of African and Oriental studies. African cuisine, dress patterns, festivals, health and healing process, communalism, traditional administration and gender roles form parts of the world culture.

This paper critically examined the prospect of African religion, culture and the global community in a dynamic world of change. The research adopted the world culture theory of Robertson (1992,1997) as the framework for this study. It employed the phenomenological approach in data collection, presentation and analyses. The work observed that African religion and culture have migrated to different parts of the world and are making waves. The practitioners are so devoted that one wonders if their counterparts in Africa are so committed given the in-road of foreign religions. It concluded that African religions had become a world religion as a result of globalization.

The theoretical framework

The world culture theory of Robertson (1992, 1997) forms the lens of this discourse. The theory provides the framework for the interpretation of globalization, which focuses on the way participants in the process become conscious of and give meaning to living in the world as a global community. Here, globalization "refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992). In another respect, it speeds up the process of global interdependence and enhances the growing awareness of the concept of the world being a global village (Robertson 1997). This involves the crystallization of four main components of society viz: socialization, internationalization, individuation, and generalization of consciousness about humankind (Robertson,1992).

Taking cognizance of the above argument, globalization blends or coagulates the contents of the cultures of the world into one uniform pattern. This invariably is driven by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Union and the World Trade Organization at the expense of the United Nations and its specialized agencies like

UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, FAO and UNDP (Robertson, 1992, 1997). Before this era of globalization, each state composed an integral cultural pattern. It adopted one or more official languages, sometimes established official religions, and introduced uniform educational systems for its people. As a result, cultures boast of their unique characteristics based on the comparative advantages of the society in question. However, the impacts of globalization are challenging this situation.

In Robertson's assessment, the globalization process poses a challenge to the diverse ethnic cultures within each nation. He argued that this development frequently invades and transforms the forms of indigenous culture which were established by ethnic groups and nations. Unfortunately, Robertson (1992, 1997) contends that the process of globalization appears incompatible with the maintenance of indigenous cultures. He asserts that cultural globalization will share certain characteristics of other globalization processes, namely the weakening or disappearance of borders between nations, societies, and ethnic groups and a simultaneous unfolding of events on a global scale.

The relevance of this theory to the subject of African religion, culture and the global community in a world of change can be appreciated, given the fact that African religion is now counted among the major world religions. It has, over the years, made a significant impact on the global community in many ways. Religion commands considerable followership from almost all regions of the world, as the succeeding discussion shall show.

The tenets of African religions and culture

African religion is one of the indigenous religions of the world. It originated in Africa, where it has its root. However, as of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the religious tradition has numerous Followers who are not Africans, as is the case with other world religious traditions. African indigenous religious tradition is not a religion of the books. Mbiti (1969, Ikenga-Metuh 1991), among others, submit that its tenets are not contained in any one document. Its doctrines, principles, values, ethics, and precepts are preserved in symbols, songs, myths, folk tales, legends, rituals, proverbs and riddles. This suggests that to study the religious tradition; one has to master the cultural traditions of the African. According to Mbiti, African traditional religion permeates all aspects of African culture. Similarly, A. G. Leonard, as cited by Ejizu (1986), puts it thus: "The Africans eat religiously, dress religiously, dance religiously and die religiously". In this way, their religion is their existence, and their existence is their religion.

The spirit of Africanness encourages communalism. What belongs to one belongs to all, and vice versa. Premised on this position, every individual is bound by a filial responsibility. As Mbiti (1969, Ikenga-Metuh, 1991) argued-- In a typical African society, no one asks a young person his father's name. Rather, the question is usually, "Which family do you come from, and which community is it". This position among Africans is based on the

understanding that while spouses give birth to an individual, the child's upbringing and socialization are the responsibility of the entire community. While parents give the child the name he bears, society inculcates morals, values, and precepts to him (Mbiti, 1969).

Communalism is the main thrust of African religion and culture. Ejike and Mmoneke (2022) assert that Communalism is widely held as the specific and intrinsic nature of traditional African society. In Africa, everyone is his brother's keeper. From Cape of good hope to Cairo, Somalia to Darkar, every African holds each other in high esteem.

In the spirit of communalism, it is a common practice to see two, three or more Africans eat the same dish. Among them, the cultural practice of caring and sharing is the watchword. No African lacks what his brother has. The wealth or property of any individual is usually placed at the disposal of the rest members of the kin group. This practice is responsible for the absence of extremely poor or very vulnerable groups in Africa. Though some may not afford three square meals daily, no African goes to bed on an empty stomach.

Whether dead or alive, there exists a synergy of Africaness among the people. As noted earlier, the birth of a child in any African society is usually welcomed generally in the community. Opoku (1978), corroborating Mbiti (1969), writes that among the Mende tribe, everyone in the community rejoices at the birth of an infant because a new member of the society has just been introduced, and in Ogbu Obowu (1972) argued that this calls for a big ceremony among kinsfolk. Here, it is perceived that the absence of the young is an eventual notice that such a society is threatened by extinction.

In Africa, communities go to extra mile to ensure that their young wives give birth. They also take care to prevent the death of infants (Awolalu and Dopamu, (1979). Supporting the above, Obodoegbulam, Joel and Amadi (2021) stressed that in Ogbu, Enginnie and Ikwere, elaborate rituals are performed to welcome and guide the birth of children.

Communal labour and common participation in communal activities were considered a virtue. Failure was regarded as deviant behaviour. Parents encouraged their children to learn the habit of working with other members of the community. This was regarded as a way of fostering the spirit of brotherliness. From a very young age, a typical African is made to identify his age grade. This is because communal services were conducted based on the age grade to which an individual belongs.

At the passing of an African, an elaborate funeral which often stretches into days, weeks, months or years depending on the age and socio-religious status, is conducted by the entire community and beyond. Sympathizers, Friends and well-wishers join the bereaved family in mourning the departed. It is considered a moral responsibility to participate in the funeral of a departed by way of paying him their last respect. At the funeral, Kinsfolks employ the

opportunity to send messages to their departed members. The fellow takes such a message to their forebears.

There exists a very strong tie between the living and the departed in Africa. Here, death does not mark the end of life. Almost in all parts of the continent, death is seen as a transition from this visible world to the world of the invisible. This explains the rationale behind the so much elaborate funeral which Africans call to play when their kin pass. In some instances, these ceremonies start long before the individual's last breath. Osifo (2021) contended that Africans spend so much time and resources burying their dead because they believe in life after life. This supports the earlier position that in Africa, no one dies but just transits from this visible, tangible world to the world of the spirits, which is the world of the invincible.

The ancestors occupy the fourth layer in the African pantheon. According to Mbiti (1969, Ikenga-Metuh 1991, Obodoegbulam 2013,2019). In the opinion of these scholars, the living shows so much respect for the departed because of the belief that whatever treatment one gives to them will be counted for both the departed and his survivors. Perhaps, that is why the survivors of diseased kin take extra care in burying their dead.

Any departed who was not given the proper funeral will not be accepted by the ancestors. Such an individual will continue to roam about in the spirit world without a final resting place. This category of spirits constitutes what appears to be evil spirits. They marline their survivors and often inflict harm on them.

The ancestors serve as the policemen of the African world. Ngbara (2018), commenting on what obtains in Gokana, held that among the people, the ancestors protect their living kinsfolks who uphold the precepts of morality. Anyone who turns out to be a deviant was severely punished. Such a fellow was visited with unprecedented sickness that can only be cured with rituals of purification. This check on the people serves as a guide for the survivors. Everyone was usually mindful of his conduct.

Otite and Ogionwo (2006), writing about marriage among the Urhobo, argued that in Urhobo marriage, the ancestors play such an important role that if they are not included in the relationship through a ritual, there is bound to be chaos in the union. The same obtains in Gokana, where a Nanny goat is required to be slaughtered and a ritual performed by way of informing the ancestors of the new relationship; such marriage will not be blessed with any child (Ngbara 2018). Owing to the above, marriage is usually a societal affair among Africans. This also informs some of their religio-cultural practices such as levirate marriage, ghost marriage or wife inheritance. The widow is not left uncared for. In the traditional African setting, these practices were instituted as a way of ensuring that the widow was included in the scheme of things. This inclusion will remain till any of her male children grows to fill the vacuum.

Traditional medicine: Africans have a good idea of health and healing (Owete 2005). Earlier, Mbiti (1969, Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, had stated that Africans make use of plants, roots, herbs, stagnant water, running water, animal furs, scale, paws, and bark of trees, among others, in the preparation of medicine.

Peter in Tasie (2009), as cited by Edum (2018), mentioned that one interesting feature of African religion is the practice of magic and medicine as a basic structure of the religion. The reason for this is that Africans believe that the universe is saturated with diverse capricious spiritual forces which man cannot adequately combat.

Opoku (1978) earlier asserted that although the practice of medicine is religious, there is also a scientific aspect to it. A vast knowledge of plants and roots and their medicinal properties has been acquired through close observation of nature and practical experience. Some medicines were discovered by watching animals treat each other with certain herbs or plants.

For instance, one of the most potent anti-snake bite medicines in Ghana was obtained by a hunter who watched two snakes fight till the stronger overpowered, the weaker, and it plucked a leaf and put it into the other's mouth to revive it. The hunter took some of the leaves home and began to use them in treating snake bites. Observation of pregnant goats about to deliver their kids showed the bark of a particular tree among the Ashanti. It was found that the bark had the property of checking bleeding after delivery, and this medicine is used by some herbalists to stop excessive bleeding after childbirth.

The concept of a global community

In the view of Joel, Oziezi and Jacob (2021), "The World history can be classified in different periodizations such as the ancient, modern, contemporary ", etc. As it were, a significant development in all these culminates in globalization which has impacted the narratives of the world. They hold that, over time and space, the world has passed through various civilizations characterized by major developments.

The concept of the world being a global community was first presented by those who conceived the idea of the League of Nations in 1919 and, later, the United Nations in 1945. These organizations saw the world as one united, indivisible entity. Here, strong and weak nations of the world were brought under one umbrella.

Perhaps, the idea behind the above, among others, maybe to redress the injustices done by the strong nations of the world to the weak. In this regard, it was obvious that peoples of Africa and some indigenous peoples of the Americas were inhumanly dealt with.

The main objectives of the global community were mainly to harness the potential of the different parts of the world to the fullest for the benefit of humanity. It is understood that different parts of the world are endowed differently. With the idea of the world being a global community, resources deposited in any part of the world will be made available to other parts. This invariably will reduce the challenges faced by the different peoples of the world.

The world is a simple human community that supports the movement of people, culture or cultural materials from place to place, from one country or continent to another, without restriction.

One of the blessings in disguise to Africa was its forceful exportation to Europe and from there to the Americas. While the perpetrators had the objective of emptying the continent of its cream of human and material resources, they, against their wish, popularized the African religion and culture by carrying the custodians of the religion to foreign lands.

Ijekeye (2022) contends that migration has been a constant and persistent feature in the history of humankind. The reasons why people migrate are varied and constantly changing. Moreover, the individuals who migrate are not easy to classify because they come under different circumstances, from different environments and with different individual characteristics.

Wairimu and Wachira (2022) avowed that the way forward for Africa is to embrace the concept of Afrocentricity. This philosophy lays heavy stress on the African person and African communities wherever they are found in the world as being in the best position to help Africa. This concept is projecting all matters of life, placing the African notion ahead, experience and ideas at the centre of the process of decision-making. Firmly focused on Africa and African interests, Afrocentricity posits that the means of protecting African interests is through harnessing African potential in a competitive global arena. This will enable Africans to define, assert and protect their identity, history, anthropology, theology and epistemology. Ejike and Mmoneke (2022) Communalism is widely held as the specific and intrinsic nature of traditional African society.

African Impact

The presence of African religion and culture in the global community is not without an impression. One of the contributions of African religion and culture is the evolution of Pentecostal Christianity. In Africa, spirit possession is an integral aspect of their religious life. In the celebration of candomblé and practice of Umbanda and cantimbo, elements of spirit possession are visibly exhibited. The blacks who found themselves outside the shores of Africa took along with them these religio-cultural practices.

At different times, an African will be possessed, and he will manifest different characteristics typical of the African spirit of mediumistic divination. Through this medium, an African will receive or deliver divine messages from the spirit world.

This is unlike what obtains in orthodox Christianity, where only hymns will be sung by the choir, and the officiating priest performs all major functions in every worship secession.

In arts and crafts, African works of art constitute the largest collection of archival materials in many European museums. Commenting on the Benin arts, Irabor (2019) contends that the arts of Benin are a significant part of the Benin culture as culture forms an important aspect of rituals and ceremonies. He quotes the British high commissioner Thorold Masefield who, during the Great Benin centenary, confessed that: "In the late twentieth century, there have been a number of art exhibitions featuring the wonderful creativities of Benin artists. The most recent and, in some ways, the most striking, was the exhibition at the Royal Academy assembled in London as part of Africa 95---The above confession does not only apply to Britain but to other European countries like Italy, Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium and Portugal.

Right from the early 1970s, when Afro-music first hit the world stage, African brands of music continue to make waves in the global music scene. Before this era, Reggae Music had demonstrated the uniqueness of African rhythm. This African brand of music is encapsulated in the music amplified and embodied by the Ras Tafari movement.

African music is clerical and more of the narrative of a life experience. African music is used to praise, censor, eulogies, mourn, deride or forewarn of impending danger in people's actions. Jamaican Rastas are descendants of African slaves who were converted to Christianity in Jamaica by missionaries using the text of the King James Version of the Bible.

In the area of communication, the world is now becoming a global village, making interconnectivity very simple. Without the traditional barriers associated with the traditional communication system, the Internet highway has limited, if not eliminated, those impediments. With the internet, it is now easy to connect with anyone outside one's place of residence with very little difficulty. According to Ojukaiye, Kooro and Oburunwoke (2021), the internet is now the world town crier.

In this regard, social media has now come to take the place of the traditional town crier. Messages that would have taken days, if not months, to get to their receiver are delivered in a matter of seconds.

Recommendations

Given the above arguments, this paper makes the following recommendations.

- (i) Africans should consolidate on the areas they have a comparative advantage in the religio-cultural activities of the world.
- (ii) Since the world is now a global village, Africans should explore any opportunity that may present itself to them.
- (iii) Indigenous African languages should be developed to be able to compete effectively in the global arena.
- (iv) Africans should watch their back in the international arena so that the world superpowers will not overrun the continent in the guise of the world becoming a global community.
- (v) Funding of education and other social services should be stepped up to keep pace with best global practices.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, African religion and culture have firmly entrenched itself on the world map of religious traditions. The impact of the religious-cultural tradition among the African diaspora and other devotees leaves no one in doubt that this religious tradition aptly possesses all the intricacies of a religious tradition.

Given the arguments espoused in this paper, the discussion aligns itself with the world culture theory of Robertson above. As canvassed by Robertson, globalization has invariably brought world culture under one broad umbrella. Unfortunately, despite the large size of the umbrella, it still manifests different colours, representing diverse interests from different parts of the world.

While globalization may promise many benefits, this article agrees with Robertson that it will dispossess the different ethnic groups, cultures and nations of their distinct identity and peculiarity.

Premised on this last position, this discourse holds that Afrocentricity is the way to go for Africa. The African-centered approach to the issue of globalization is, therefore, a clarion call. This should galvanize everyone, whether in Africa or the diaspora with African blood, to bear in mind that while we play along with the concept of globalization, every ethnic group, nation and continent will not lose sight of their comparative advantage.

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