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Shrinking Shrines and Expanding Altars: A Critical Study of Contemporary Trends in Religious Practices in Nigeria

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Abstract: In this study, we examine the two terms shrine and altar in their denotative meaning and in their contradictive nature. A conceptual clarification is given to establish the view we intend to pass across to our numerous readers. A literature review on similar subjects were used to clarify the justification of the research topic and to point out that Christian evangelisms were intimately part of those factors that led to the shrinking shrines and the expanding altars in our global society today as most people especially our youth consider it a mark of civilization and enlightenment when they embrace Christianity at the expense of the traditional religions. To make the research a holistic set up, we gave some factors responsible for shrinking shrines and expanding altars in our communities and in the world at large. To protect and preserve our shrinking shrines, we conclude that the excesses of our expanding altars should be checked by those in authorities at all levels.

Keywords: Shrines, Altars, Religious Practices, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Let us begin this paper by acknowledging the contradiction that the title appears to present. This contradiction arises mainly from the fact that the two main concepts in focus- shrine and altar- appear to be synonymous, and are indeed sometimes inter-changeably deployed. Against this backdrop, a conceptual clarification is necessitated, particularly in the context that these concepts are popularly understood in contemporary colloquial discourses. A shrine is defined by Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (2015) as a holy or sacred place, which is dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint, daemon or similar figure of awe and respect, at which they are venerated or worshipped. Shrines often contain idols, relics, or other such objects associated with the figure being venerated, and are synonymous with a place set aside for the worship and veneration of, and identification with of spirit beings. The point here is that shrines are not canal places but are spiritual environment, places that usually have spiritual attraction because the people to whom they belong believe that it is a means to accomplish their desired wishes. But there is a divergence of opinions regarding the exact one-size-fits-all definition for shrine. For instance, Chan (2013) talking about Shrines and Relics in Buddhism seems to contradict the point raised earlier by Sarfraz and Mirza. He says:

A shrine is a place or an object to remind them of the Buddha and by which they remember to observe their religious obligations through the taking of the Three Refuges and Five Precepts on a regular basis. In Buddhism, unlike other religions, the shrine is not the place to ask for favors or appease the Buddha but to renew our pledge to follow his instructions to train ourselves-—not to do any evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind.‖ It is a sanctuary, far from the maddening crowd, where the ordinary lay follower can still connect in a symbolic sense, with the Omniscient Buddha in order to gain the inspiration to practice the Dhamma.

So in Buddhism, shrine is not a place to ask for

favour or seek to accomplished their wishes but it is a place or an object that remind them to observe their religious obligation. This nomenclature has grown in recent times that, since the advent of the Christian Religion, most people now refer to the shrine as a term usually used for the traditional (pagan) religious and the formal (altar) as a term commonly used in the Christian religion. An altar, essentially, is a sub-set of the shrine, particularly the part of the shrine where ‗votive offerings' are made. A votive offering is one or more (material) objects displayed or deposited, without the intention of recovery or use, in a sacred place for broadly religious purposes. Such items are a feature of modern and ancient societies and are generally made in order to gain favor with supernatural forces. Wikipedia (2015) defines an altar as ―any structure upon which offerings such as sacrifices and worship are made for religious purposes‖. Altars are usually found at shrines, and they can be located in temples, churches and other places of worship. Viewed from this perspective, we can safely conclude that the raison d'etre of the altar is to encourage and facilitate the material contribution of worshippers to the religious institution. But as earlier stated, in most contemporary religio-cultural landscapes, the term altar is usually used in relation to the Christian religion. Thus, in this paper, the concept is deployed not in its denotative sense, but rather connotatively as a metaphor for the Christian place of worship. It is also in this sense that we capture our topic: Shrinking Shrines and Expanding Altars. The focus of this discourse is to highlight the increasing rate at which the traditional religious places of worship are disappearing and the alarming rate in which the Christian religious places of worship are expanding.

Long before the societies and nationalities that constitute Nigeria had any contact with Western and other foreign religious influences, they had their distinctive religious and philosophical worldviews which dictated their choices of gods and deities, vis a vis their modes and places of worship. These practices constituted a crucial part of their cultural identity. Affirming this view, Elochukwu and Matthias (2015: 2), quoting (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004) and (Nwankwo, 2013) write that ―in a typical traditional African society, belief system and other socio-religious values are amongst the make ups of historical identity of a people. This has made belief system an integral part of the African culture and tradition‖. Ugwu and Ugwueye, (2004) add that great respect and reverence were given to God or gods as the case may be in a traditional African society. Africa has always been known, from inception, as a people and worshippers of traditional gods and goddesses in the study of our traditional religious. They, like the Greeko Roman Empire, have so many gods and goddesses which they deified in their sacred places. These gods had temples where altars were engraved for players and sacrifices. These altars are often referred to as shrines. Sarfraz and Mirza (2011: 2), say that shrines are considered as spiritually attracted places, where spiritually attached people visit to accommodate their wishes.

Shrines and sacred groves are integral part of the African traditional religion. They are seen in many traditional African societies with some form of veneration attached to some of them. Shrines/sacred groves play socio-religious and socio- cultural roles in the most traditional societies. Regardless of these antecedents shrines/sacred groves have passed and are still passing difficult times with respect to their existence. Africa's contact with the outside world exposed the continent to a myriad of politico-religious influences resulting in a significant relegation of the indigenous modes of worship. These influences include Islam, slave trade, colonialism, Christianity and Western education. In southern Nigeria in particular, the emergence of Christianity as the dominant region has and is still negatively impacting on the traditional religion represented by the shrines. Save for a few remote areas in the rural communities, the traditional shrines that once dotted all nooks and crannies of the societies are now a rare spectacle. On the other hand, Christian churches, metaphorically referred to in this study as altars, are springing up in unprecedented numbers. In this paper, we examine critically the factors responsible the shrinking of the traditional shrines and the expansion of the Christian altars, highlighting their implications for the traditional cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Africa is the world's second-largest and second most-populous continent, after Asia. According to Sayre (2009), at about 30.2 million km² (11.7 million sq mi) including adjacent islands, it covers 6% of the Earth's total surface area and 20.4% of the total land area. Sayre adds that with a billion people (as of 2009), in 61 territories, it accounts for about 14.72% of the world's human population. Africa is home to various ethnic and tribal nationalities, each with its unique traditional cultural heritage. Perhaps, nowhere else is Africa's cultural plurality more pronounced than in Nigeria, which boasts an estimated over 250 ethnic nationalities (Awodiya, 2006).

The historical context of Westernization in Africa is the contact with Europe through Atlantic slave trade, missionary and imperialism. The forced acculturation of the black populations in the New World, already in full swing by the mid- eighteenth century, represents the first sustained assimilation of Western culture by Africans (Standage, 2005). The impact of Christianity has to be considered, for this has been the most important single factor in the process of Westernization in Africa

(Arowolo, 2010). Comaroff and Comaroff (1986) noted that:

Christian evangelists were intimately involved in the colonial process in southern Africa. The Portuguese sent missions into Africa. In the mid-19th century, Protestant missions were engaged in active missionary work on the Guinea coast, in South Africa and in the Zanzibar dominions. Missionaries visited little-known regions and peoples, and in many instances became explorers and pioneers of trade and empire. Western education, involving literacy and the mastery of a European language, became the condition for entry into the modern sector. Arowolo's (2010) analysis of the impact of Western civilization on African societies is quite instructive:

Western civilisation and culture began to creep into African socio-cultural milieu, first, with the contact of Europeans with Africa, a consequence of Berlin conference in the quest for imperial pilfering of African resources and, later, consolidated by the unstoppable wave of globalisation. It is important to stress that colonialism distorted and retarded the pace and tempo of cultural growth and trend of civilisation in Africa. One of the most profound consequences of colonization has been how the political and economic rape of the colonies has also led to what sometimes seem to be an unbridgeable cultural gap between the nations that were the beneficiaries of colonization and those that were the victims of the colonial assault... With Africa subjugated and dominated, the Western culture and European mode of civilisation began to thrive and outgrow African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things as Africans became fully ‗westernised'. Western culture now is regarded as frontline civilisation. African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain.

Furthermore, for most of the colonial period, education was in the hands of the Christian missions, who sought not only to convert Africans but also to inculcate Western values. Christianity challenged traditional belief systems and promoted the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life; in particular, it sought to impose monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm, as opposed traditional African polygamy and extended family traditions.

Arowolo (2010) argues further that the cultural alteration provoked by the pressures of colonial rule and missionary in all spheres of life are pervasive enough to qualify as the signs of a new cultural coup in Africa. In Francophone Africa under the Assimilation policy, Africans were recognized and accorded French citizenship only when they abandoned their traditional cultural heritage in preference for European culture. In the aftermath of this religio-cultural onslaught, such previously thriving shrines as the ‗Ayelala' and ‗Olokun' shrines of the Binis, the ‗Igbe' of the Urhobos, ‗Ifa' and ‗Orunmila' shrines of the Yorubas, among several others are now seen mainly as mere religious relics devoid of any serious religious and cultural significance in the modern Nigerian state.

Factors Responsible for Shrinking Shrines and Expanding Altars

The traditional religious institution is one of the sectors most adversely affected by Western cultural influences. In

Nigeria, which is the focus of this paper, it is considered a misnomer in polite and ‗civilized' to identify with any of the surviving traditional religions. The main reason for this is the consistent stigmatization of the traditional religion through colonialism, Christianization and technology. Olmi and Mezzana (2002) states that for centuries, African traditional religions have been subjected to the same misrepresentation, underestimation and basic stigmatization which have been reserved - and continue to be reserved - for the societies, cultures and actors of Sub-Saharan Africa in general.

This stigmatization involves a structured process which occurs at various levels. The first and most evident of these levels involves the kind of widespread representations of Africa which are based on the so-called 'common sense' of western countries, that is, those cognitive contents which are triggered, so to speak, 'automatically', every time a given subject is brought up or a given question is approached. Western media-movies, books, television narratives, etc., are awash with these images. In the case in point, when speaking of Africa, it is usually the image of a society plagued by natural and human catastrophes - floods, famines, wars, coups, etc., and largely characterized by fetish practices and even cannibalism. This representation - which has repeatedly been addressed in African Societies, has remote origins and is continually reinforced and updated by the convergence of the mechanisms specific to the mass media and the lack of professionalism of many media operators - who are always on the lookout for easy and convenient stereotypes - as well as by geopolitical strategies at a transnational level, and by the everyday conduct of teachers, politicians, researchers, university lecturers, essayists, religious persons, tourist agencies and even - at times - solidarity NGOs and many other actors who - often involuntarily - contribute to furthering an image of Africa as a country perpetually in trouble and unable to cope without external help (Olmi and Mezzana, 2002).

The representation of Africa as a country devoid of its own profound spiritual dimension or of a religion worthy of its name goes to complete, and in some measure to justify, this picture made of unfounded generalizations and distorted or omitted information; a

picture which describes a continent whose inhabitants and communities - mostly considered to be rural - would be entwined in an inextricable tangle of often cruel and bloody ancestral rites, superstitions, absurd and childish beliefs and atavistic fears which block their personal capacities, initiative and development possibilities. Western media texts are replete with such representations, where Christian practices are projected as the norm and the ideal culture. In Nigeria, in particular, the traditional religion is seriously disparaged and denigrated by Christian televangelists in their programmes. The state does nothing to discourage this, whereas any similar attacks on any of the two dominant foreign faiths-Islam and Christianity is immediately labeled as blasphemous and seditious. In addition, the state annually sponsors Christian and Islamic pilgrimages while nothing is done to promote the traditional religion. Tacitly, therefore, the state refuses the traditional religious institutions the same support it gives to Christianity and Islam.

At the educational level, the story is not different. As early as the primary and secondary levels, Christian and Islamic religious studies are integrated into the educational curriculum, whereas the Nigerian student only gets the chance to study the traditional religions at the tertiary levels of education.

Another level at which a real stigmatization of Africa occurs, in particular with regard to its spiritual tradition, is that of scientific research, specifically with reference to human and social sciences. The history of research on African peoples - as Basil Davidson (cited in Olmi and Mezzana, 2002) , among others, has demonstrated - is indeed rife with incomprehension, theoretical and methodological errors, and forced and inert interpretations which have taken on different forms. One of these is Evolutionism, which defines African traditional religions as being the most 'primitive' stage of the spiritual evolution of peoples, featuring practices it terms derogatively as 'animist', 'fetishist', 'pagan', 'totemic', 'idolatrous', etc. This without even considering the clamorous blunder whereby Africans were considered for centuries to be polytheists, while in actual fact the spirits or other entities which their religions refer to are considered to act as intermediaries between a single supreme being - who has various names - and human beings. In many ways, all this has actually resulted in African religions simply not being considered to be religions at all.

Another one of such interpretative approaches involves a single disciplinary view, in this case the exclusive, and moreover often purely descriptive, use of ethnology and cultural anthropology. This has resulted in African religious phenomena often being viewed as if they existed in a historical void or, at best, as an expression of spirituality which, although 'authentic', limits itself to wearily surviving in today's world (Olmi and Mezzana, 2002). In addition, there has always been a widespread tendency to interpret and assess African traditional religions starting from 'local', or specific, practices, which are then generalized without a valid reason. This is the case with certain magical rites - which, incidentally, many such religions are opposed to. Something no one would dream of doing with other religions; no one, for example, would define the essence of Christianity by the excessive devotional practices towards a given saint found in rural areas or of Europe. Nevertheless, this is what has happened, and continues to happen, with regard to African traditional religions.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing positions, most Nigerians, particularly the youth consider it a mark of civilization and enlightenment when they embrace Christianity at the expense of the traditional religions. The inevitable result is the progressive decline in the number of existing shrines and the population of the adherents of the traditional religion and a corresponding rise in the number of Christian and Islamic altars of worship.

CONCLUSION

The trend of cultural imperialism and the ―westernization‖ of Nigerian and indeed of African societies has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilisation and religious practices have practically displaced African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. The media, globalization (and its tendency to foster a Western-oriented universal culture) and even the educational systems in place in Nigeria, have contributed significantly to the erosion of the traditional shrines. As with other societies and cultures in the so-called Third World, the impact of Western civilization and culture on Africa has occasioned a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent. This has led to a cultural dualism that often presents itself as a real dilemma in concrete, real-life situations. The traditional religious institution has unfortunately being the biggest victim of the Western cultural imperialism. In other words, identifying with and promoting Christian values and its altars are fashionable and officially encouraged, while beatification of the traditional religious orders and their shrines of worship is mocked and considered barbaric. The post independence Nigeria and Africa at large is confronted with how to have a true identity, a new culture that is indigenously theirs. It is on this basis that the paper argued that Nigeria must begin to re-evaluate and realign with its roots and traditional cultural heritage if it is to assert itself in the emergent global village. One way to revive this is to protect and preserve our shrinking shrines while checking the excesses of our expanding altars.

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