


Chapter 10


Dejesusization and African Religion: Analyzing the Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Belief Systems

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the repercussions of colonialism on African Traditional Religion (ATR), particularly focusing on the phenomenon termed “Dejesusization” which is a philosophical process of reconstructing African religion. A critical examination reveals that the disparaging portrayal of ATR has rendered it unpalatable to many Africans, prompting a public disassociation from the practice while some maintain clandestine adherence. The study scrutinizes the historical origins of certain terminologies used to describe ATR, which inaccurately depict the religion and serve as a catalyst for resistance. Furthermore, the personal nature of religious experiences underscores the need to discourage racially biased depictions such as “juju,” “paganism,” “savagery,” “heathenism,” and “ancestral worship,” as they are inappropriate and perpetuate cultural stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism is defined as the direct and predominant control of one country by another through the exercise of state power, as demonstrated by European authority on Africans. Its major aims are political supremacy and the acceleration of economic exploitation within the colonized territory (Stephen, Basil & Nwankwo, 2012). Based on the circumstance surrounding Africa countries, colonialism ensued primarily between the 19th and 20th centuries and is tortuously linked with imperialism, serving as a direct manifestation thereof (Bulhan, 2015). The commencement of colonialism was stimulated by transformations

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in Europe's mode of production, mostly the beginning of the industrial revolution, which supplanted earlier slave-based economies. With the industrial revolution came the need for capital investment and access to raw materials, motivating the colonization of Africa (Ward, 2017).

Since the arrival of Christianity in Nigeria, it has been characterizing by tensions with African Traditional Religion (ATR), fueled by rivalry and supremacy battle. European merchants and missionaries aggravated these tensions, criticizing and occasionally destroying ATR practices to encourage the spread of Christianity. This led to derogatory labeling of ATR as inferior, mediocre and barbaric. Dialogue between the two religions was deficient, resulting in an unending conflict even into post-colonial Era. However, even as some Christians now acknowledged that both religions share a common goal of worshipping a Supreme Being and in search of salvation, although through different methods (Mbalisi, Obiakor & Okeke, 2015).

In the 20th century, European missionaries held persistently negative views towards African Traditional Religion (ATR) practices. Despite their attack, ATR practices have continued to exist even in the present era of globalization. ATR has continue to sustain a significant presence in public life in South Africa since the advent of democracy, and in Nigeria, it has become an integral part of indigenous knowledge systems post-independence. Efforts have been made by health workers and parliamentarians to acknowledge African indigenous healers (Mbalisi, Obiakor & Okeke, 2015).

The decolonization process in Africa necessitates a multifaceted approach to reclaiming and promoting indigenous cultural and religious practices (Corntassel, 2012). This effort, often termed “decoloniality,” seeks to dismantle the enduring remnants of colonial influence, including imposed religious frameworks (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In this context, it is imperative for Africans to embrace their indigenous religions unapologetically (Chamedes & Foster, 2015). Consequently, there is a need for “dejesusication,” a specific process that involves moving away from Christianity, which was extensively propagated during colonial rule. This term signifies a broader effort to rejuvenate indigenous spiritual and cultural identities and underscores a profound commitment to reclaiming and celebrating unique indigenous identities. By doing so, African societies can rebuild and reinforce their cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations.

EVALUATING DEROGATORY DESCRIPTION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African Traditional Religion (ATR) acquired its description as “African” owing to several unique features. Primarily, its indigenous nature underlines its foundational status within African societies, which has been passed down orally from generation to generation. It symbolizes a vital aspect of African cultural identity, having been established and preserved by African communities long before the introduction of Islam and Christianity to the continent. Also, its practice remains exclusive to African populations, reflecting the deep-rooted religious outlook of the African people, who are often described as fundamentally devout. While Africa comprises of many ethnic groups, each traditionally observing its distinct religious practices, some scholars advocate for discussing ATR in the plural form, acknowledging the diversity among these traditions. However, others contend that commonalities in beliefs and

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