

**RETURN TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AFTER
CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY OR ISLAM: PATRONAGE
OF CULTURE OR RELIGIOUS CONVERSION?**

AKIN-OTIKO, Akinmayowa

Institute of African and Diaspora Studies,

University of Lagos

pakin-otiko@unilag.edu.ng; +234 8030419667

&

ABBAS Aremu Rahman

Department of Arts and Social Science Education,

University of Lagos

arahman@unilag.edu.ng; +234 7035870572

Abstract

Scholars and individuals have repeatedly affirmed that many Africans frequently return to African Traditional Religion (ATR) after conversion to either Christianity or Islam. This frequent return to ATR has been attributed to different reasons that have not been substantiated with data. This paper examined the nature of interaction that Christians and Muslims have with ATR and cultural practices, and highlighted the reasons for the frequent patronage. The findings confirmed that the patronage of cultural practices does not imply conversion to ATR. Data were collected through randomly distributed questionnaires across four state capitals in the Western part of Nigeria. The state capitals were selected for the possibility of having converts from both Christianity and Islam respond to the questions. Findings were analysed qualitatively. The result showed that there is movement back to ATR and cultural practices for three fundamental reasons; first to seek solutions to physical problems, second to ward off spiritual attacks and third, many Africans still perceive ATR as part of normal custom of the Africans. The findings of this study show that the causes of the back and forth movements are not indications of crisis of faith among those that engage in the movement.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, Conversion, Islam,

Introduction

Over the decades, the religion of the Africans have been named or defined as African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR refers to the indigenous religious beliefs that Africans practised before the advents of Christianity and Islam to Africa. That is, the religion which resulted from

the sustained faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practised today in various forms, shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including some individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians.¹ Like every religion, ATR has some practices that it recommends as good and effective in resolving problems. Both Christianity and Islam rejected many of such practices; and began the different efforts to either convince (through miracles and promises of better chances to better life) or use force, such as through Jihadist wars, to convert to Christianity or Islam. According to Bailey: “The nineteenth century Christian missionaries became active in Africa and Oceania”, and the “Attempts by Christian missionaries to convert nonbelievers to Christianity took two main forms: forced conversions and proselytizing.”²

To further entice the Africans to leave ATR and their cultural practices, the missionaries engaged in medical care, pastoral visitation and vocational training for young men and women, and all these played effective part in disposing many adherents of ATR to abandoning both their religion and cultural practices. Most effective of these was the promotion of formal education, which proved to be the most viable and effective instrument of conversion, as it yielded and sustained more converts. It is reported that hundreds of thousands of young men and women who attended such schools also received instructions in the faith, accepted baptism (initiation) while in school and thereby broke the ancestral covenant with deities.³ It is of course questionable whether they had any formal covenant with any deity, but the activities led to massive conversion of Africans in the early 1950s upward. This mass conversion led to the negative pictures that were painted about ATR and African cultural practices. “The rate of conversion of millions of former adherents of African indigenous religions to one or the other of the two missionary religions now available in Africa is nothing short of a revolution.”⁴

Although huge numbers have been (and are being) converted from ATR, it has been noted that many African Christians and Muslims make a return to the practice of ATR or patronize it together with their newly found religions (Christianity and Islam). Previous studies have shown a back and forth movement between either Christianity or Islam and ATR, without clearly stating whether it is a movement to indicate conversion back to ATR or a mere patronage that is conditional. If it is a movement of conversion, then there will be a contradiction in the fact of one professing one religion and patronising another. Rodney and Finke write that:

Religious conversion is the adoption of a set of beliefs identified with one particular religious denomination to the exclusion of others. Thus 'religious conversion' would describe the abandoning of adherence to one denomination and affiliating with another. This might be from one to another denomination within the same religion, for example, from Baptist to Catholic Christianity or from Shi'a to Sunni Islam.⁵

Conversion generally involves a positive interior change in one's religious conviction, moral and spiritual fervour, from no belief at all to a change from one to another or a weak or lukewarm faith, to a more ardent religious life.⁶ Conversion therefore usually implies a change from one religious state (*a terminus a quo*) to another religious state (*a terminus ad quem*). This unusual back and forth movement created the need to investigate whether the claims that Africans move back to their religion is indeed a conversion, that is total change in belief and behaviour or just a temporary purposeful movement. How possible is it for one to be converted and still be going back to the former religion?

This paper embarked on a fact finding, first to examine if the experiences of the conversions where people who profess Christianity or Islam go back to ATR; and second, to shed light on the attitude and reasons for the back and forth movements in order to determine whether the frequent movement back to ATR is conversion or not. This work is not concerned about the morality of the movement, but to examine the claims that Africans convert from either Christianity or Islam to ATR and why this conversion occurs.

Research Method

The research was conducted in four South western states of Nigeria (Lagos, Ogun, Osun, and Oyo) with interest in the capital cities namely Ikeja, Abeokuta, Osogbo and Ibadan, respectively. These cities were selected because even though both Christianity and Islam wield influence on the culture of the towns, there is still the presence of the ATR which the people still fall back to. 400 questionnaires were randomly distributed, with 100 given to selected persons from each state capital. This was aimed at accessing persons who have been exposed to the influence of Christianity or Islam and ATR. Out of the 400 questionnaires that were distributed, 324 were returned. The data (responses gathered through questionnaire) helped to find out the level of patronage among converts

from Christianity and Islam. Data gathered from finding were presented using tables to represent percentages of findings and the data were further analysed using qualitative method.

Results

Table 1 (What is the reason for your patronage?)

STATE REASONS	OYO		OGUN		OSUN		LAGOS		TOTAL (F)	TOTAL (%)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Solution to problem	08	42.11	03	23.08	07	23.33	23	76.67	41	44.57
Spiritual Healing	05	26.32	02	15.38	10	33.33	04	13.33	21	22.83
Exploration	01	05.26	01	06.69	02	06.67	02	06.67	6	06.52
Family tradition	05	26.32	07	53.85	11	36.67	01	03.33	24	26.09
TOTAL	19	100.00	13	99.00	30	100.00	30	100.00	92	100.01

Table 1. above reveals that Christians and Muslims still patronise ATR. Most of those who patronize these religions do so, in search of solution to problems, while others see it as part of family tradition. Next to this group are those who seek spiritual healing. Very few return to ATR just for the sake of knowing and understanding the practices more.

Table 2. (If the patronage is solution to problem, what kind of problem?)

STATE PROBLEM	OYO		OGUN		OSUN		LAGOS		TOTAL (F)	TOTAL (%)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
CHILD	-	00	-	00	04	28.57	15	60.00	19	30.16
PROSPERITY	02	13.33	04	44.44	03	21.43	03	12.00	12	19.05
SAFETY	-	00	-	00	-	-	02	08.00	2	03.17
HEALING	08	53.33	02	22.22	-	-	03	12.00	13	20.63
PROTECTION	05	33.33	03	33.33	07	50.00	02	08.00	17	26.98
TOTAL	15	99.99	09	99.99	14	100.00	25	100.00	63	99.99

Table 2 specified the kinds of problems that make people to return to ATR. This table is important because it analyses the biggest reason why people return to ATR. First on the list, childlessness; next to it is

protection, and then people return to ATR for healing, then prosperity and very few return there for safety.

Table 3. (Was patronage productive?)

STATE RESPONSE	OYO		OGUN		OSUN		LAGOS		TOTAL (F)	TOTAL (%)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
YES	10	58.82	09	69.23	21	70.00	30	96.77	70	76.92
NO	07	41.18	04	30.77	09	30.00	01	03.23	21	23.08
TOTAL	17	100.00	13	100.00	30	100.00	31	100.00	91	100.00

Table 3.reveals that majority of the respondents applauded the efficacy of the African traditional practices. As a result of this, they were willing to continue with the patronage. 76.92 of the total population of respondents acknowledged the efficacy of the religions and culture of the Africans.Accordingly, majority justified their visit with cultural demand as indicated above, while those who had benefitted from the visitation saw it as a good decision that they will repeat if they have to.

Table 4. (Will you patronize African Traditional Practices again?)

STATE RESPONSE	OYO		OGUN		OSUN		LAGOS		TOTAL (F)	TOTAL (%)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
YES	07	41.18	09	69.23	12	40.00	03	10.00	31	34.44
NO	10	58.82	04	30.77	18	60.00	27	90.00	59	65.56
TOTAL	17	100.00	13	100.00	30	100.00	30	100.00	90	100.00

From table 4, it is clear that patronage of ATR is not about to ebb, even though more people, 65.56 percent of respondents say that they are willing to stop, 34.44 percent of the respondents wish to continue the patronage.

Table 5. (Do you plan on changing your religion to ATR?)

STATE RESPONSE	OYO		OGUN		OSUN		LAGOS		TOTAL (F)	TOTAL (%)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
YES	03	05.88	-	-	08	10.26	02	02.15	13	04.73
NO	48	94.12	53	100.00	70	87.74	91	97.85	262	95.27
TOTAL	51	100	53	100.00	78	100.00	93	100.00	275	100.00

Table 5 simply shows that 4.73 percent have the plans to change their religion to ATR. This implies that the patronage is utilitarian in nature; it is only to serve a need.

Discussion

Different reasons have been adduced for the clandestine return or patronage of ATR. One major reason is the way ATR is perceived by other religions. Magessa notes that:

Despite attempts at tolerance and Interreligious Dialogue, in many Christian churches there is still a belief that everything African is pagan, and many hold on to this view today in certain evangelical Pentecostal religious positions. The historical view that Africans had to become civilized by slavery, colonialism and Christian missionary activity likely contributed to the intolerance of traditional religions during the colonial period. These views culminated in some missionaries rejecting that traditional African faiths were proper religions.⁷

Although ATR is perceived as wrong, the findings of this study shows that African Christians and Muslims still patronize practices that are approved and allowed in ATR. The methods of engagement that the Christian and Muslim missionaries adopted did not prevent Africans from returning to their cultural practices. People still patronized ATR when faced with practical situations of ailments and life choices, even though the missionaries offered various humanitarian services including rehabilitation of slaves and socially disadvantaged people, they set up settlements where they kept many early converts.⁸The second obvious thing that this study shows is that, despite the efforts of the missionaries to totally transform the hearts of Africans from their traditional practices, the hearts of many Africanstruly remained with ATR and the traditional practices. In the words of Olupona:

I should add that without claiming to be full members of indigenous traditions, there are many professed Christians and Muslims who participate in one form of indigenous religious rituals and practices or another. That testifies to the enduring power of indigenous religion and its ability to domesticate Christianity and Islam in modern Africa.”⁹

The regular association with traditional practices in Africa made many to believe that the conversion to Christianity and Islam was for the most part external and not from the heart, such that the illiterate became literate, the rural dweller moved to the urban centres, etc. Mbiti argues that “When Africans are converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional

religion with the one to which they are converted. [And] in this way they think and feel that they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining something from both religious systems.”¹⁰That cannot be easily faulted.

Contrary to scholars that believe that conversion was external are those that believe that true conversion took place but they do not perceive any problem with Christians or Muslims returning to ATR because it developed together with all the other aspects of the heritage, and belongs to each people within which it has evolved.¹¹Fisher’s study of conversion of Africans from ATR to Islam and Christianity as quoted in *Introduction to Religion*, observed that people could pass through the stage of ‘adhesion’ during which they stood ‘with one foot on either side of the fence adopting their new worship as useful supplements’ to the old, just as there could be a lapse from the orthodoxy and religious ardour of the first converts to a mixing stage, and people could later regain their fervency after a reform movement.¹²

This study unveils the regular return from Christianity or Islam to ATR for three fundamental reasons: first, for those who do not have children to be able to conceive and bear children. Second, for protection against spiritual attacks and to resolve problems that individuals think are caused by the influences of witches or spiritual forces. Third, others patronize ATR because they see it as cultural practices. Olupona explains in respect of himself thus:

For myself, I negotiate between my Yoruba and Christian identity by affirming those aspects of African culture that promote good life and communal human welfare. For instance, in a few years time, I pray that I will be participating in an age-grade festival—for men around 70 years of age—called Ero in my native Nigerian community in Ute, in Ondo state. I won’t pray to an orisa, but I will affirm the importance of my connection with members of my age group.¹³

This is very different from what some scholars have referred to as lack of total conversion to either Christianity or Islam in the first instance. There are practices that ATR allows but are forbidden in both Christianity and Islam. Such practices include patronage of diviners and seeking solution to problem through means that are not prescribed in either the Bible or the Quran. When Christians or Muslims patronize these means that are forbidden in the Bible or the Quran, it can be construed as a conversion back to ATR from Christianity or Islam, as the case may be. This study

reveals that return to the ATR and or traditional practices is not a conversion back to the traditional religion, but more often than not purposeful visits for existential reasons. This is contrary to claims by scholars such as Mbiti¹⁴ that African Christians or Muslims convert back to ATR after a period of being Christians or Muslims.

It must also be noted that many Africans who after being converted cut off relationships with families have returned to traditional practices when they were faced with practical life situations. Their support dwindled as the activities of Christian and Islamic missionaries in the educational sectors gradually faded, and they lost the benefit they had enjoyed after Nigeria's independence. With the fading effect of the activities of the missionaries, and the pressure of urbanisation, Western culture, civilisation, science and technology, Africans shift back to ATR to find answers to their existential needs that proved difficult for the new realities. Africans who had been converted to either Christianity or Islam began to return when these new religions did not provide answers to their existential needs and questions.

Although the teachings and beliefs of Christians and Muslims discourage patronage of ATR, many converted members believed that they can return to their traditional religion, and ask for forgiveness from God afterwards. The return to African traditional practices is scarcely perceived as abandonment of Christianity or Islam. Many still perceive patronage of ATR as only solution seeking movement that is embarked upon just to resolve practical life problems.

The respondents hold that the need to resolve their health, social or spiritual problems must be attended to first, before returning to religion. Most visible among these needs are seeking to have children, prosperity, security, and healing. This finding has gone a long way to establish a shift from the views of earlier scholars such as Ejizu who noted that severe misfortune like sickness, death and spirit possession are significant developments that motivate religious conversion.¹⁵ The shift is not essentially a form of conversion but patronage while still holding onto the newly accepted faith. Africans have come to a better understanding of not abandoning their cultures even when they have changed their religion. One of the things that ATR testifies to is the beauty of engaging a devotee on many spiritual levels. As Olupona rightly notes, a follower of ATR has many choices in terms of seeking spiritual help or succour.¹⁶

Conclusion

The patronage and search for solution to problems through ATR is still as visible as it was several decades ago. Some scholars have linked this back and forth movement between religions to lack of total conversion to either Christianity or Islam, but the reality that this paper found among Africans is that the back and forth movements after conversion from ATR is not a conversion back to ATR as was presumed. The patronage of ATR and the traditional practices while still keeping the Christian or Islamic faith are more often than not solution-seeking movements, and or cultural attachment to the traditional practices. The findings of this study show that the causes of the back and forth movements are not a crisis of faith, except as regard the teachings of the new religions in the minds of some of those involved.

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