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**Evolution of Nigerian Communities' Religious Beliefs and Practices**

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## Evolution of Nigerian Communities' Religious Beliefs and Practices

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to trace the evolution and development of religious beliefs and practices of Nigerian communities as occasioned by decades of encounter and interaction with Christianity.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Results:** The results revealed that there exist conceptual and contextual gaps relating to the evolution and development of religious beliefs and practices of Nigerian communities. Preliminary empirical review reveals that indigenous communities had developed social, economic and political organization in the pre-colonial period. They had well-established religious beliefs and practices based on ancestor veneration and the belief in the Supreme Being. The interaction between the communities and Christianity caused resistance from these communities who later accepted and blended Christian values with their indigenous culture and formed a new hybrid religion.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The theory of symbolic interactionism may be used to anchor the evolution and development of religious beliefs and practices of Nigerian communities. This study is important because it may provide a source of information for scholars who may wish to conduct research on similar fields as well as general readers who may be interested in reading about the culture of the indigenous communities in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Assimilation, Christian Mission, Evolution, Nigerian Communities, Religious Beliefs.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The term religion can be defined from different perspectives including anthropological, sociological, psychological and theological perspectives (Glock and Hammond 2015). Steyne sums up religion as a phenomenon associated with three categories of experience which include feeling, behaviour and belief. Beliefs motivate behaviour such as rites, rituals and customs (Steyne 2020). The essence of religious beliefs and practices has been a subject of numerous inquiries. Scholars have expended a great deal of intellectual energy pondering on the nature of belief and the role it plays in various human affairs. Earlier scholars such as Hagar (2019) held the view that belief system encompasses believes in life after death. For instance, the belief system among the Peruvians include belief in life after death as enshrined in funeral rituals. That the dead played the role of guidance among the living persons. This idea was maintained through burials which were done near the living house. The functioning of the ancestral spirits in their guidance role was induced by herbs.

From the historical analysis by Noss (2015), culture is seen evolving from simple to complex, from lower to higher, from irrational to rational and from magic to religion. These were features in the religious belief system of the ancient Romans. Several cultures all over the world have evolved from simple to complex resulting from processes of encounters and interactions among different cultures. Syncretized cultures are as a result of acquisition and absorption of suitable beliefs and practices from the encountering and interacting communities. Religious beliefs and practices in various forms are pervasive human features of societies past and present. Such beliefs and practices include worship of both God and divinities. For instance, the earliest Chinese believed in the highly honored Supreme Being, known as Halics. They also developed belief in ancestor veneration by second century B.C.E (Gehman 2019). Ancestor spirits serve as a gate-way between the world of the living and the supernatural. Religious beliefs and practices are based on the pneumatologically consciousness which posits a contradistinction between the living self and the transcendental spirits.

Among the communities in Africa, beliefs and practices are therefore, integral part of a human social-religious system. For instance, religious practices among the Nyoro of Uganda have a belief system rooted in the Supernatural Being (Beattie 2020). Sacrifices and supplication took center stage in appreciating the supernatural agents among the Nyoro. It is through understanding the underlying principle of organizing such systems of interpretation that can help to clarify the symbolic cultural systems encoded in beliefs and practices.

Researches on the history of religion have established that religious beliefs and practices are a universal and ubiquitous phenomenon in the life of human beings. Like any other life transforming event in human civilizations all over the world have established beliefs to facilitate activities in lives of people. Human cultures perform religious practices depending on the religious meaning they attach to rites of passage, and how the living beings are connected to the supernatural. For instance, the religious beliefs and practices among the Ashanti of Ghana included Supreme Being and other gods who represented various aspects of the environment. The sun and the moon

represented the Ashanti's Supreme Being bearing the male and female gender respectively (Parrinder 2021).

Historically, religious belief systems have been used to give direction for a long period among ancient societies. Both political and religious leadership have consulted religion to get ideas in solving different problems. The ancient Egyptian religious belief system has been widely used as a point of reference for various consultations in leadership. They believed in Supreme Being, *Neter*, together with multiple gods. *Neter* and other gods formed major consultants among the Egyptians. This Supreme Being was the main spirit believed to have existed before any creature came into being (Budge 2020)

As part of religious practices, rituals have been undertaken by different communities in Africa with main purpose being appeasing and appreciating the supernatural. Rituals are performed to meet demands of ancestors and the Supreme Being. Such practices are done to ensure presence of life and prosperity among the living human. Rituals may also be performed with purpose of maintaining good relation between the living human and the departed. Considering traditional beliefs among the Yoruba, rituals were done for purpose of appreciating *Olodumare*, "the almighty and eternal creator". Other divinities who formed the Yoruba belief system were also supplicated at different seasons depending on the needs of the people (Idowu 2022). The significance of religious beliefs and practices are also demonstrated among the communities in Tanzania who performed rituals with reverence to Supreme Being. This is an implication of how God is powerful among people of any given culture (Ranger and Kimambo 2022).

Historical studies on culture and religion have been done among communities in Nigeria. Several belief systems among the Nigerian communities possess the belief in ancestors and the Supreme Being. Among various purposes, ancestors play the role of mediating the living human and the Supreme Being. These ancestors therefore, connect the living world to the spiritual world which forms the supernatural. Beliefs and practices as components of religion enable human beings to relate to the supernatural. They reinforce the belief system and enable humans to connect to the sacred. They are important elements because they are carried out in religious solemnity and involve core religious beliefs of the people. Through religious practices, people act, conduct their religion and also communicate it to the new generation (Mbiti 2021). Beliefs and practices performed in human rites of passage are events full of religious significance. Religious practices such as rituals include, worship rites like sacraments, rites of passage, atonement and purification rites, oaths among others. For instance, death was a watershed and transformative moment in life. In almost all cultures, death is presented as a start of a very treacherous journey which after several obstacles ought to lead to a blessed rest in the company of the supernatural. Funeral rites are meant to process human being, upon his death, into a supernatural entity. Such practices serve as conveyor belt for the two orders of being, the living being and the spiritual realm (Mbiti 1989). Funeral rituals are therefore performed to appease the dead and ancestors.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Religion is a phenomenon that is found among all human societies. Indeed, for the longer part of human history, it is apparent that societies were basically theocracies which operated in service to

the gods. Practically all ancient civilizations such as the ancient Egypt to ancient China to ancient Maya civilization in Meso-America were founded on religion. Religion also gave direction to different communities all over the world. In African societies, there were prevalent belief in the Supernatural; gods, nature spirits, ancestral spirits and in some cases the High God. These beliefs kept mutating as different communities encountered one another. Such encounters were historical moments which witnessed both resilience of own ideas and adoption of features from beliefs of other people. In such a case there was no question of one belief system conquering and destroying another. This was the case until the coming of modern western Christianity to most parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This study is therefore, a historical analysis of the evolution and development of the religious beliefs and practices of the Nigerian communities. It is an attempt to present the impact of Christianity on the indigenous religious beliefs and practices. The study is about understanding the interaction between the different communities and Christianity. It attempted to demonstrate how Christianity was initially received with lack of enthusiasm for almost three decades before being accepted towards 1930. This study undertakes this research because there is inadequate research on the historical change in religious beliefs and practices among the Nigerian communities.

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Conflict Theory**

A theory is a set of suggestions that attempt to provide a reasonable consistent explanation for some phenomenon in a way that allows a prediction to be made with reasonable degree of reliability (Willis 2017). Theories help to give general thinking towards a given concept of study. Theories are also tools of study that help to analyze concepts which bring about understanding, explaining and making predictions about a given subject matter. Gimode (2015) submits that a theory is a set of assumptions that harmonizes relationship between a set of variables, in the process of providing a conceptual framework for a study.

This study resonates well with the theory of symbolic interactionism as provided in (Baldwin 2016) and (Petras 2018) who are the main proponents of this theory. It is a theory derived from the American philosophy of pragmatism work of George Herbert Mead, in the 1920s (Baldwin 2016). Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that develops from practical considerations and alludes to people's particular utilization of the dialectic to make images and normal implications for deduction and correspondence with others. The symbolic interaction perspective which is also known as symbolic interactionism is a major formulation of sociological theory. It is a perspective that relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction (Baldwin 2016). It shows how individuals interact with one another to create symbolic worlds, and how these worlds mold individual behaviours. This perspective emphasizes on the ways in which people interpret their religious experiences and symbols. Symbolic interactionism examines the role of religion in the life of people and how their experiences are interpreted. Ways through which people practice their faith and interact in worship areas is also interpreted by this theory.

Symbolic interaction theory also analyses society by looking at the subjective meanings that individuals relate with their immediate environment. Individuals always behave based on what they believe in and not what is objectively true. Petras (2018) observes that religious symbols significantly change the behaviour of people during cultural contact. Through cultural interactions, individuals interrogate and interpret one another's behavior before making social bonds (Baldwin 2016). The symbolic interactionism theory has helped in conceptualizing the process of interaction between different communities and their neighbors and later with Christianity. The evolutionary hybridization of the traditional religion existed from contact and interaction with their neighbors and later with Christianity.

With limitations that resulted from the first theory, this study adopted conflict theory which addressed the concept of conflicts that arise when two or more cultures interact. The Conflict theory is a natural outgrowth of the conflicts that naturally exist among encountering cultures. Religion plays a critical role in society by maintaining an unequal *status quo* in which certain groups of people have radically more resources and power than other groups of people as provided by (Emason, Monaham and Mirola 2021) who are the main proponents of conflict theory. The theory was founded in the 1950s when sociologists like Lewis Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf criticized the then dominant structural functionalism in sociology for over emphasizing the consensual, conflict-free nature of societies (Emason, Monaham and Mirola 2021). Conflict theory emphasizes on the fact that cultural beliefs and practices are not sacred unless individuals regard them as such to create special significance and meanings (Emason, et al 2021).

This study was therefore well accommodated under the symbolic interactionism theory and the conflict theory of religion. While symbolic interactionism theory insisted on socially acquired symbols functioning well in the interpretation and acquisition of new ideas by individuals, the conflict theory of religion based on cultural beliefs and practices not being sacred until people regard them as such.

### **Empirical Review**

Bowie (2021) carried out a study on anthropology of religion. The study of religion has been central to anthropology since its inception. As an inclusive, comparative study of human societies, anthropology has sought to describe, classify, and explain religious beliefs and practices. This study surveys historical approaches to the anthropological study of religion and various attempts to define the object of study. It then examines theories of the origins of religion from an evolutionary and neurological/developmental perspective. A central theme in the anthropological study of religion is the role of experience, seeing religion as less about doctrine and belief than about the ways in which persons individually and collectively relate to notions of the divine, to the cosmos, to Spirit and spirits, and to the spirit within communities. Religion is often personal encounters that give rise to and sustain formal religious practices. A long-standing debate in the study of religion is over the "psychic unity" of human beings, seeking to understand where and how neurological and biological systems interact with culture. Through these debates run methodological issues about the role of the observer. It has been argued that recent ontological

approaches and a renewed interest in animistic modes of thought have succeeded in expanding concepts of reality beyond a normative Western framework.

Norenzayan & Shariff (2018) investigated the origin and evolution of religious prosociality. The study examined empirical evidence for religious prosociality, the hypothesis that religions facilitate costly behaviors that benefit other people. Although sociological surveys reveal an association between self-reports of religiosity and prosociality, experiments measuring religiosity and actual prosocial behavior suggest that this association emerges primarily in contexts where reputational concerns are heightened. Experimentally induced religious thoughts reduce rates of cheating and increase altruistic behavior among anonymous strangers. Experiments demonstrate an association between apparent profession of religious devotion and greater trust. Cross-cultural evidence suggests an association between the cultural presence of morally concerned deities and large group size in humans. The study synthesized converging evidence from various fields for religious prosociality, address its specific boundary conditions, and point to unresolved questions and novel predictions.

Sosis & Alcorta (2015) investigated the evolution of religious behaviour. Anthropologists have repeatedly noted that there has been little theoretical progress in the anthropology of religion over the past fifty years.<sup>1-7</sup> By the 1960s, Geertz<sup>2</sup> had pronounced the field dead. Recently, however, evolutionary researchers have turned their attention toward understanding the selective pressures that have shaped the human capacity for religious thoughts and behaviors, and appear to be resurrecting this long-dormant but important area of research.<sup>8-19</sup> This work, which focuses on ultimate evolutionary explanations, is being complemented by advances in neuropsychology and a growing interest among neuroscientists in how ritual, trance, meditation, and other altered states affect brain functioning and development.<sup>20-26</sup> This latter research is providing critical insights into the evolution of the proximate mechanisms responsible for religious behavior. Here we review these literatures and examine both the proximate mechanisms and ultimate evolutionary processes essential for developing a comprehensive evolutionary explanation of religion.

Watts, Sheehan, Greenhill, Gomes-Ng, Atkinson, Bulbulia & Gray (2015) investigated the database of Austronesian supernatural belief practices. Scholars have debated naturalistic theories of religion for thousands of years, but only recently have scientists begun to test predictions empirically. The focus of Austronesian beliefs ranges from localised ancestral spirits to powerful creator gods. A wide range of practices also exist, such as headhunting, elaborate tattooing, and the construction of impressive monuments. *Pulotu* is freely available, currently contains 116 cultures, and has 80 variables describing supernatural beliefs and practices, as well as social and physical environments. One major advantage of *Pulotu* is that it has separate sections on the traditional states of cultures, the post-contact history of cultures, and the contemporary states of cultures. A second major advantage is that cultures are linked to a language-based family tree, enabling the use phylogenetic methods, which can be used to address Galton's Problem by accounting for common ancestry, to infer deep prehistory, and to model patterns of trait evolution over time. We illustrate the power of phylogenetic methods by performing an ancestral state reconstruction on the *Pulotu* variable "headhunting", finding evidence that headhunting was practiced in proto-Austronesian culture. Quantitative cross-cultural databases explicitly linking

cultures to a phylogeny have the potential to revolutionize the field of comparative religious studies in the same way that genetic databases have revolutionized the field of evolutionary biology.

Olupona (2015), carried out a study of Yoruba religious tradition in historical perspective. This study presents an overview of past and recent scholarship in Yoruba religion. The earliest studies of Yoruba religious traditions were carried out by missionaries, travelers and explorers who were concerned with writing about the so called "pagan" practices and "animist" beliefs of the African peoples. The paper also examines the contributions of scholars in the arts and the social sciences to the interpretation and analysis of Yoruba religion, especially those areas neglected in previous scholarship. This study further explores the study of Yoruba religion in the Americas, as a way of providing useful comparison with the Nigerian situation. It demonstrates the strong influence of Yoruba religion and culture on world religions among African diaspora. In the past ten years, significant works on the phenomenology and history of religions have been produced by indigenous scholars trained in philosophy and Religionswissenschaft in Europe and America and more recently in Nigeria. Lastly, the essay examines some neglected aspects of Yoruba religious studies and suggests that future research should focus on developing new theories and uncovering existing ones in indigenous Yoruba discourses.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## **RESULTS**

The results were grouped into various research gap categories namely as conceptual, contextual, and geographical.

### **Conceptual Gaps**

Studies done by Bowie (2021), Norenzayan & Shariff (2018), Sosis & Alcorta (2015), Watts, Sheehan, Greenhill, Gomes-Ng, Atkinson, Bulbulia & Gray (2015), Olupona (2015) had conceptual framework gap. In addition, all the mentioned studies did not establish the evolution of Nigerian communities religious beliefs and practices. The studies did not outline the evolution of religious beliefs and practices clearly. Therefore the current study seeks to address these conceptual gaps.

### **Contextual and Geographical Gap**

Studies done by Bowie (2021), Norenzayan & Shariff (2018), Sosis & Alcorta (2015), Watts, Sheehan, Greenhill, Gomes-Ng, Atkinson, Bulbulia & Gray (2015), had geographical gap because they were not conducted in Nigeria. This implies that the results may be inapplicable in Nigeria

since religious beliefs and practices in Nigeria and other countries differ. The current study seeks to address this gap.

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study was important because it would provide a source of information for scholars who may wish to conduct research on similar fields as well as general readers who may be interested in reading about the Nigerian culture. This study is a beneficiary to the history students since it gives knowledge on African heritage. This study is also a challenge to the African people to respect their heritage because no culture is better than the other, where we have to pick new strands, they should be on African terms rather than carrying out a scorched-earth policy to destroy our own heritage.

From the study findings, it is evidenced that different communities had social, economic and political structures during pre-colonial period. The study recommends that future scholars investigate on how these cultural systems worked among the indigenous Nigerian communities. Further research is also recommended on circumcision among the communities which doubles up as both social and political aspect of culture.

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