

**AN ASSESSMENT OF RELEVANT THEOLOGICAL ISSUES WITH REGARD TO THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN
AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE METHODIST CHURCH,
MERU COUNTY**

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ABSTRACT

The Methodist church in Kenya (MCK) has been in Meru County since 1912 and there is evidence to suggest that African Methodist converts have continued to stick to some African traditional religious beliefs. The main objective of this study was to address the relevant theological issues following the encounter between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity in the Methodist Church. The study was informed by Emile Durkheim's functionalism theory which is a sociological view of religion emphasizing its usefulness to society. The theory posits that what has no function ceases to exist yet some aspects of ATR have been integrated in worship among MCK adherents thereby posing relevant theological issues. Six churches were purposively selected to participate in the study. The data was collected using questionnaires, structured interviews, checklist and church observation schedules and it was analyzed qualitatively. On the basis of the findings, the study recommended that Christian life and doctrines should be reformulated in the patterns of each and every culture in order to make Christianity durable. The modern Christian leaders should strive to make Christianity strong and permanent by allowing African and Christian culture to blend so as to meet the spiritual needs of Christians and give solutions to some of their problems. The findings of the study will contribute to the current academic concern for evolving an African Christian theology.

Key words: - Theological issues, African traditional Religion, Christianity, Indigenization, incarnation, enculturation.

Introduction

This paper is based on a study on integration of African traditional religion and culture in Christian worship in Africa with particular reference to the Methodist church in Kenya (MCK) in Meru County. The research was prompted by apparent divided loyalties between Christianity and African traditional religion (ATR) as evident in the religious beliefs and worship practices amongst most adherents of MCK. This trend has raised relevant theological issues which cannot be ignored. The data presented here was mainly collected through interview sessions with enlightened members of the clergy and the Laity. The questions were also translated into mother tongue to enable other church members and leaders to respond in their focus discussion groups. Theological issues are mainly indigenization, enculturation and

incarnation.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to share the findings of a study carried out in the MCK, Meru County. The church appears to have integrated aspects of ATR into its spiritual programs as a strategy to accommodate and integrate the Ameru MCK adherents fully. This blending of religious beliefs has raised theological issues that this study has attempted to discuss. The research findings also demonstrate that the Ameru converts are reluctant to abandon their African beliefs and practices in spite of accepting the Christian religion. This reluctance has necessitated an understanding of the theological issues therein so as to fully accommodate all believers.

Justification

First, the place of ATR in Africa in the context of rapid expansion of Christianity on the continent is unclear. This paper attempts to show apparent blending between ATR and Christianity within a conventional Christian church.

Secondly, religion is one of the strongest elements in the African traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thoughts and lives of the people concerned. It is therefore imperative to assess the possible theological implications of the encounter between the two religious beliefs mainly ATR and Christianity.

The Christian presence in Africa has not erased the deep rooted African traditional religion. On the basis of research findings, this paper argues that ATR is very much alive within conventional Christian establishments in Meru County.

Theory

This study was informed by the theory of social functionalism as understood by Durkheim (1915) and Merton (1957). The essence of this theory is that social institutions remain relevant to the society as long as they serve useful purposes such as maintenance and perpetuation of the social system. Those that no longer serve any purposes are discarded as dysfunctional. With regard to this paper, the argument is that the persistence of beliefs in ATR among Meru Methodist adherents has been conditioned by the functional significance of the former in the life and thought of the Ameru.

Methodology

The discussions in this article are based on a field study in which sixty respondents, mainly African members of MCK were purposively sampled to participate. Account was taken of their age, religious faith and leadership roles, both in the community and in the church as well as their level of formal education. Data for analysis and discussion was collected using questionnaires, interview question guides, checklists and church observation schedules. The main limitations were the distance between Egerton University and Meru County and the limited financial resources. However, these did not in any way compromise the credibility of the findings.

Literature review

There have been several studies on the question of interaction between ATR and Christianity especially after 1960 by a number of scholars, Mbiti (1969) has observed that the form of Christianity brought by the Western Missionaries made no attempts to incorporate the ancestors, medicine men, religious specialists, African music and dance into the Christian faith. He observed that worship in mission churches was boring for most Africans. The hymns were sung in foreign tunes with little rhythm and without bodily movements, like clapping the hands or twisting the Loins as a religious expression. According to Mbiti, the Christian missionaries did not allow Africans to relate their own cultural and religious heritage to Christianity. They made an African convert become a Christian by cleaving to the new order introduced by the missionaries rather than by working out his salvation within the traditional African set up.

Mbiti (1975) acknowledges that African religion is part of the Africans' heritage and it has influenced African cultures and given them their world view. Mbiti further observes that it is not possible for this African heritage to be completely wiped out even by modern changes. As long as there is trace of African culture, it will also have some aspects of African religion. Mbiti argues that the continuation of African rural life will ensure the survival of African religion. African religion will continue to exist among people whose life is still tied to the land and traditional culture. However, argues Mbiti, some aspects of African religion will die out partly through modern education and partly because of urban life. The gist of Mbiti's argument is that ATR is here to stay in spite of the onslaught by Christianity and western culture. This is the kind of argument that could trigger an assessment of theological issues with regard to the encounter between ATR and Christianity in MCK.

Shorter (1973) has observed that true religion is Man-centered. It does not alienate man from himself but fulfils him and directs him towards his right end. He says that true religion promotes brotherhood and cooperation. Advancing the argument that

African Religion directs man in the community and harmonizes with the aims of African Socialism, this scholar advocates for a stable and homogenous church structure which accommodates both Christian and traditional values. Shorter warns that unless and until there is a place for an African theology in the universal church, African rites and church structures of African Inspiration, an African Christianity will never be a reality. Shorter's conclusions are very important as they are relevant in as far as assessment of theological issues between ATR and Christianity in MCK is concerned.

Waliggo (1986) has argued that the incarnation of Jesus which made him become a perfect God will always remain the dearest guiding principle for enculturation. If the only begotten son of God saw it fit to enter the reality of humanity in full in order to save mankind from sin, it is the more reason for his church to do the same in every culture so as to continue with that saving mission. For Waliggo, the failure to incarnate the church in Africa means failure to make Christ appear African in his entire splendor. If Christ divinized humanity then Christianity should do the same to African cultural and religious beliefs. According to him, evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed. The author further argues that for the gospel to be effective, it must use the language, the signs and symbols of the people to whom it is addressed.

Waliggo contends that the gospel should be able to answer the questions that people ask and it should have an impact on their concept of life. The concept of enculturation as proposed by Waliggo is relevant to the present study in the sense it is perhaps what has not been addressed in the MCK in Meru County.

In their effort to introduce Christianity in Africa, the modern western missionary church has been unable to present to Africans more than a Western image of its faith. Mugambi (1989) faults the early western Christian missionaries for introducing Christianity to Africans alongside their western culture. He argues that a similar problem arose in the New Testament period

when the early church apostles, who were influenced by their Jewish culture on the issue of male circumcision as an outward sign for the descendants of Abraham wanted Gentile converts to be circumcised. This necessitated convening of the first ecumenical council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1 Galatians 2:3). The ecumenical councils agreed that faith in Jesus Christ was the qualifying factor and not circumcision.

Mugambi contends that one of the negative consequences of the above error in the theology of mission was that Christianity came to be viewed by most Africans as a European religion superimposed upon the African cultural and religious environment. Africans wanted to relate to Christianity within their cultural and religious milieu. If their Christian experience is to be meaningful and effective, they cannot afford to cut themselves off from their own cultural and religious past. Mugambi seems to be of the view that those converting Africans to Christianity should respect African culture and religious heritage. However this is yet another generalized study. Hence the current study focused specifically on the African traditional religious beliefs and practices which have persisted in the Methodist church and the theological issues therein.

At the beginning of the missionary era in Meru region, there was the wild assumption that the Ameru did not have a deeply rooted world view. However, it is now apparent that missionary Christianity in the region did not fall into a religious vacuum. It found the Ameru well and deeply equipped with their cultural and religious experience which shaped their world-view. Christianity to them was not the first but the second religious experience to which they were exposed and continue to be.

According to Onyancha (1989) the African and Christian world-views contrasts so much that the African world view has made it difficult for Christianity to penetrate fully and shape the African personality since the African world view is deeply rooted as the first experience prior to Christianity. Onyancha further says that African converts in mission churches have found difficulties in reconciling the previous experience with their new faith. The writer argues that while

the laws of science are universal, religious beliefs are not. He says that religion must take different forms in different world views. The author further points out that even the western society did not adopt all aspects of Jewish community. This is because the western world view was different from that in which Christianity was founded. Similarly, the western society could by no means expect the African Christians to accept Christianity together with the western world view since they had their own. Thus, at the Psychological level, it could be right to say that Christianity has remained peripheral to many Methodist converts in Meru. The current study was an attempt to understand the theological issues arising as a result of the encounter between the two world views.

There are a number of studies on Methodism in Meru region by various scholars. Nthamburi (1981) has concentrated on the history of the Methodist church in Kenya with particular references to Meru region, while Micheni (1988) has assessed the contribution of Methodist Missionaries to education in Meru region. Nki (2001) has examined the traditional and Christian inter-

pretations of suffering and healing among the contemporary Ameru of Kenya. However, no study has been carried out on the persistence of some aspects of ATR and its theological implications in the MCK in Meru County, hence the findings of this study are expected to fill a very important gap in knowledge. It was partly the aim of the current study to contribute to the contemporary concern for evolving an African Christian theology.

Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study based on its purpose and objective. The main objective was to assess the relevant theological issues with regard to the encounter between ATR and Christianity that need to be addressed. The data presented here was mainly collected through interview sessions with the enlightened members of the Clergy, Laity and church leaders. The question was also translated into mother tongue to enable even the illiterate and semi-illiterate respondents to respond in their focus group discussions. The analysis of their responses is presented in the table below.

Theological issues	No. of Respondents	%
Indigenization	45	78
Enculturation	20	34
Incarnation	235	60

NB: Respondents indicated more than one theological issue.

Indigenization

According to Reverend Gakii, failure to indigenize Christianity in Africa is like dressing the universal God in the western garment only. Reverend Gakii contends that all cultures need the gospel and are judged by it. Similarly, Reverend Mbae stated that the gospel has a universally relevant and applicable message which cannot be reduced to the demands and expectations of one culture. He added that each

culture should be allowed to bring into being a community of believers which is in tune with the demands and needs of that particular society. Reverend Mbae noted that the first Methodist missionaries were wrong in the understanding of the term conversion. He says that on the scale of conversion, the foreign missionaries gave themselves one hundred percent while the prospective convert was supposed to start at zero. In contrast, the Methodist clergy

suggests that in the process of evangelization there are no active senders and passive recipients. The missionaries ought to be learners as much as the prospective convert is a receiver because we are all equal in the eyes of God. Both Reverends, Gakii and Mbae were in agreement that Christianity has to look at the contemporary Meru situation in order to be relevant. The two reverends therefore agree with Waliggo (1986) who argues that for the gospel to be effective, it must use the language, the signs and the symbols of the people to whom it is addressed.

According to church elder Jacob Kaaria, indigenizing Christianity means the worship will be accommodative through the use of local and understandable language, songs and dressing that will not disrupt a weak brother in the worship service. The elder noted that the use of foreign languages has made some worshippers to feel out of place. The elder further observed that the dressing styles that some churches allow become disruptive in worship services. He said that the use of local language will be an effective tool in evangelism, and a milestone in achieving the process of indigenization. The use of local music and local names will make Methodists African Christians appreciate and own Christianity as it will no longer sound foreign religion to them. As a result, the gospel will find home in the hearts of many Africans because communication would have been made easy. This can be done without changing the teachings of the Bible.

The researcher observed that the Laity, leaders and the clergy are not ignorant of the constraints to effective indigenization of Christianity in the county. Most of the respondents were in agreement that indigenization is a controversial and greater task which demands a lot of planning as well as time. This is because of the diversity of cultures in Meru County through intermarriages and immigration. As a result, the younger generation is getting more used to foreign language especially English. Reverend Mbae said that the Methodist church is a universal church with members from different cultural dimensions and backgrounds. He further noted that the

Ameru are living in a multi-cultural and multi – racial society from where future Methodist converts and leaders will come. The Methodist clergy therefore preferred to base their strategy of indigenization on the authority of the Bible other than focusing so much on western Christianity and culture.

Reverend Doris Wanja suggested that indigenization should include the removal of the term “traditional” which betrays Christian bias and is meant to portray African religiosity as old fashioned and outdated hence irrelevant. The reverend noted that the use of the term traditional makes some believers to view ATR as a phenomena only important to those interested in studying history of the past. She suggested that it should simply be referred to as African religion just as there is for instance Muslim religion or Hindu religion.

Enculturation

The researcher observed that the Methodist church adherents tend to view Christianity as foreign or alien, one that has come to challenge their traditional religious practices. It is for this reason that many respondents during the oral interviews concurred that efforts must be made to enculturate the church to the times and cultures of contemporary Meru people. Church leader James Mugambi observed that the modern MCK church traditions and doctrines are flexible enough to accommodate the African background.

He cited examples from the Bible where God addressed himself to the day to day problems or situations of the Israelite community. The church elder argued that the church tradition must be relevant to African situation. Along the same line, Reverend Gakii said the church needs to be inserted into the Meru culture so that the Christians can express their Christian practices in the language of today. This is the only way God’s saving power through Jesus Christ can be understood by people of all cultures. Reverend Gakii’s view concurs with that of Waliggo (1986) that for the church to be truly the church of Jesus Christ, it must be both universal and particular, and also reflect the characteristic culture of its people.

From the oral interviews with the ordinary church members, it came out clearly that the Laity adapted to the way of thinking and acting of the Meru people. This, they argued will make Christians in the Meru culture to view Christianity as a religion that belongs to them and can offer solutions to their problems even in times of crisis instead of turning to African solutions. To the Methodist clergy, enculturation is the

only way to make Christianity permanent in Meru by making it a peoples’ religion and a way of life.

The researcher observed that some church leaders and elders were opposed to the idea of enculturation. The researcher sought to establish why some respondents were opposed to enculturation. Their responses were captured and analyzed in table below.

Table 2: Reasons against enculturation

Responses	No. of Respondent	%
Did not understand its aims	10	17
Fear that it might create a faulty Christiani-	5	14
Will lower Biblical Standards	5	9
Will create syncretism	5	9
Will contradict the teachings of Jesus Christ	15	26
Will bring division in the church	16	28
Will create unhealthy imbalance between local and universal church	15	16

Incarnation

Many respondents were in agreement that Christianity should cease to be a foreign religion and become part of African Life, more specifically part of the Ameru life. Their views concur with Mbiti (1969) that Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as indigenous, traditional and African religion. Mbiti says that failure to incarnate Christianity into the African cultures had made the religion to remain foreign to the Africans.

According to reverend Mbae, MCK leaders must follow the example of Jesus Christ and make efforts to incarnate Christianity into the Meru culture. Mbae concurs with Waliggo (1986) who says that Jesus saw it fit to enter the reality of humanity in full and became man while remaining perfect God. Reverend Mbae argued that the Methodist church should incarnate Christians into the Meru culture so as to continue with that saving mission of Jesus. Similarly Reverend Wanja affirmed that it is only the de-

nominations that are ready to make efforts to deeply incarnate the church that have a bright future. She further observed that where the opposite is the case, the church will remain weak and will always be seeking ways and means of retaining their members. Her views concur with those of Waliggo (1986) that for the gospel to be effective, it must use the language, the signs and symbols of the people it is addressed to and this is only possible through incarnation. Reverend Wanja also asserted that it is the desire to incarnate Christianity into African culture that made African independent churches to secede from the mission churches during the colonial period.

Another ordained minister, Reverend Gakii added that incarnation is unavoidable if the MCK is to have a future among the Meru. The reverend argued that the immersion of Christianity into the Meru traditional set up must be a reality if the scripture “God with us” is to become practical.

She further pointed out that the Meru religious beliefs are to stay especially with the current revival of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru region. Her views agree with those of Emile Durkheim (1917) whose theory guided this study that the religious practices and beliefs that have a function in a society continue to exist while those that have no function cease to exist. Reverend Gakii faulted the missionaries for having ignored the attachment of the Meru Christians to their religious beliefs and practices.

Muturi Nkaabu, a youth leader argued that the younger Christian generation in the Methodist church is quick to sift the Meru religious and cultural practices to retain those that are advantageous to them and leave out those that are not useful and are in conflict with Biblical teachings. He further stated that ATR is still relevant to the contemporary Christians. He thus suggested that the MCK leaders should come up with a way of making Christians part and parcel of the Meru people.

According to Muturi, ATR is complex and even if the younger generation of Christians has abandoned many ideas and practices, others have still persisted and even some old ones are still being revived. The youth leader added that the youth have already embraced the good in both ATR and Christianity hence the need for incarnation.

Culture

Data collected through oral interviews, with the respondents showed clearly that culture is an issue that needs to be addressed in order to make Christianity to be lived practically in MCK in Meru County. Elders Gerishon Gitonga noted that right from the beginning the African converts in the MCK were not able to distinguish between the missionary work and the western culture. The elder pointed out that instead of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ, the early Methodist converts in the region were struggling to adopt western culture. The Christians were not able to distinguish between the culture of the missionaries and the gospel the same missionaries were preaching. As a result, some African Christians ended up moving to the African independent church-

es which accommodated the Meru cultural and religious practices. Elder Gitonga noted that culture is not static and therefore the church should not ignore the changes that occur but should keep on adjusting so as to accommodate all people.

Conclusion

Theologically, there is need to develop a theology that will accommodate African Christians the way they are. The clergy need to devise a new approach with a view to promoting an understanding between Methodist Christians and Ameru traditional religious inclinations, ideas, values and beliefs. The Bible does not disagree but enriches and fulfills traditional religious beliefs and practices. Both the old and new testament give testimony to this. Just as the Jewish traditions prepared the Jews for Christianity, Ameru traditions provided enough background for conversion to Christianity. The problem of alienating the Ameru in the Christian churches need to be alleviated, for example, by finding a place for Jesus in the Ameru traditional religious set up. He would be the greatest ancestor who would do for the Ameru all that the ancestors did for them and even more. The word of God is meant to be effective in Christian lives today and it is the task of modern preachers to make the faithfuls realize this fact. All cultures need the gospel and will be judged by it. The Meru people have retained their religious beliefs alongside Christian faith and this makes it necessary for the MCK to develop a theology that will recognize the centrality of Jesus Christ and at the same time express a genuine African apprehension of the Christian faith.

The MCK members have sifted both Christianity and ATR and have accepted what is advantageous to them and left out what is of no advantage. As a result, the type of Christianity that has emerged in the MCK in Meru County is one that is enriched by the traditions of the Meru people. It is Christianity with a human face that is no longer abstract or mere ideology, but a reality.

Recommendations

If Christianity is to be lived and not to be just a matter of assent, then it requires concerted efforts by the entire modern Christian community. In view of this, the researcher recommends the following:

- i) Christian life and doctrines should be reformulated in the patterns of each and every culture. This is necessary if Christianity is to be durable among the Ameru. Otherwise it will remain a foreign religion while the Ameru continue with their traditional religious practices.
- ii) The thought forms and world views of particular communities should be incorporated into Christianity so that Christianity can fulfil its mission of development and fulfilment of human beings. This will enable Christianity to build itself up within existing viable human communities.
- iii) Leaders of all Christian denominations should strive to make Christianity strong and permanent. They should allow African culture and Christianity to blend one another so as to meet the needs of Christians and give solutions to their spiritual problems. This will make Christianity a people's religion.
- iv) The modern Christian leaders should evaluate ATR and understand it in the light of God's word so that where truth is found, it is preserved, and where errors exist, they are exposed by the standard of the scripture.
- v) The modern church should do whatever it takes to make Jesus Christ appear universal and truly local at the same time. This will make Christianity in all its totality accomplish its founder's mission to be all to all people and win all for God.
- vi) All Christian denominations should design ways of accommodating ATR in their worship so that believers will not feel out of place.

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