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## AFRICA DIASPORANS AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY: POSSIBLE PANACEA FOR RESOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN AFRICA

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**Abstract:**

*THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE SUSTENANCE OF PEACE IN AFRICA. DUE TO THE PERCEIVED “FETISH” NATURE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION BY THE ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS, AFRICANS IN AFRICA TEND TO HAVE ACCEPTED THE LATTER. YET CONFLICTS PERVADE THESE “NEW” RELIGIONS. IRONICALLY THE AFRICANS IN DIASPORA SEEM TO HAVE FOUND RELEVANCE IN AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY EMBEDDED IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION DUE TO THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL CIRCUMSTANCES.*

**Keywords:**

SPIRITUALITY, DIASPORA, POPULATION, CONFLICTS, COMPETITION

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## INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of ‘new’ religions, essentially through the desert and the Atlantic coast, into Africa, the basis of African spirituality was considerably overshadowed as new bases for religious existence and, indeed, the explanation for economic and political survival was fundamentally transformed. Hitherto societal arrangements tended to, somewhat, maintain an ‘equilibrium’ wherein the substructures bear, to a high degree, a resemblance to the superstructure. In fact, the extent to which people within a certain environment are able to exploit that environment seems to determine the basis of relationships at the family, religious, economic, and political levels. Thus, where the means of production were at relatively low levels, the social organization necessitated the extended family networks wherein many hands were required to exploit the land; religion seemed to be communally inspired; the extent of economic exchange was limited; and power relations were through inheritance.

Religion, according to Durkheim (1976), is the veneration of certain symbols around which behavioral dispositions are organized and such dispositions and the symbols are not only community specific but are undertaken for the survival of the society/community. Religion, therefore, functions to ensure conformity to norms and values. It sanctions negative behaviors against community-defined sacred objects. Thus it helps to forge a common understanding of communal purposes and ways of life. Religion, in short, represents a community’s world-views both in terms of relating to physical and supernatural existence. The supernatural existence is reinforced through physical objects, even as in ‘modern’ religions, around which ritual practices are established either in terms of what is consecrated as ‘holy’, or the instruments with which religious practices are deemed to have been undertaken such as ‘rosary’; the ‘crucifix’, ‘bread’, and ‘wine’ as well as ‘stones’ and ‘carved instruments’.

Essentially, what characterized Africa’s indigenous religious symbols, and practices were (are) different both for different communities as well as for the ‘received’/ ‘impacted’ religions. Nonetheless, all have experienced changes. While the received religions have experienced dynamism in terms of what and how worship is undertaken, indigenous religions have also experienced such changes in the process of interaction with other religions and within and by themselves. Since the contacts from the North and the Atlantic however, as both influence each other, the received religions seem to be gaining ascendancy over indigenous traditional religions. By and since independence, the two received religions of Islam and Christianity have virtually replaced the former as shown below:

## REGIONAL MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN POPULATIONS

Table 1a: Regional Muslim and Christian Populations in Africa

Approximately 140.3 Muslims in West Sahel				
Country	Total Population	Muslim Population	% of Muslims	% of Christians
Benin	7,250,033	1,450,000	20	30
B/Faso	13,574,820	6,787,000	50	10
Chad	9,538,544	4,864,000	51	35
C/d'Ivoire	17,327,724	6,497,500	37.5	25
Ghana	20,757,032	3,321,000	16	63
Guinea Rep	9,246,462	7,852,000	85	8
Guinea Bissau	1,368,363	615,000	45	5
Liberia	3,390,635	678,000	20	40
Mali	11,956,788	10,761,000	90	1
Mauritania	2,998,563	2,998,000	100	-
Niger	11,560,538	9,248,000	80	-
Nigeria	137,253,133	68,626,000	50	40



Senegal	10,852,147	10,201,000	94	5
S/Leone	5,883,889	3,530,000	60	10
Togo	5,556,812	1,111,000	10	20

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Table 1b: Regional Muslim and Christian Populations in Africa

Approximately 90.3 Muslims in the Greater Horn of Africa				
Country	Total Population	Muslim Population	% of Muslims	% of Christians
Burundi	6,231,221	623,000	10	67
Djibouti	466,900	438,000	94	6
Eritrea	4,447,307	-	-	-
Ethiopia	67,851,281	315,000	47.5	37.5
Kenya	32,021,856	3,202,000	10	78
Rwanda	7,954,103	365,000	4.6	95
Somalia	8,303,601	8,303,000	100	0
Sudan	39,588,225	27,403,000	70	5
Tanzania	36,588,225	12,805,000	35	30
Uganda	26,404,453	4,224,000	16	66

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, The World Fact book

There is nowhere traditional indigenous religion constituted the majority except in the small Benin (see also Asante, 1998) and those collecting information/statistics do not seem to be interested in them. Or, perhaps it is because those who profess to be either Muslims or Christians patronize traditional religion. Even if they do however, this is done clandestinely. Indeed, one may hazard that lack of interest in traditional religion is not unconnected with the fact that they are not engaged in conflicts, at least, manifestly, to warrant attention. There is nowhere the Christian religion totally dominates unlike for Muslim religion in Somalia and Mauritania. We can thus assert that there are more Muslim countries in Africa rather than Christian countries. It is however ironic that where the Christian religion seems to dominate, in Rwanda, conflicts seem to be endemic meaning that, perhaps, other reasons may explain the conflicts therein, that is ethnicity.

With the ascendancy of Islam and Christianity, there seems to have been the intensity of conflicts in Africa with little or no conflict within African Traditional Religion (ATR) or between ATR and other religions.

Paradoxically, as these conflicts between Islam and Christian adherents in Africa continue to escalate, traditional indigenous religion is unifying (or an important factor uniting) the Africans in Diaspora in spite of their being divided by capitalism, racism and European supremacy (Millar, 1993). Thus rather than viewing the world through the Islamic or Christian prisms, ATR has become an important tool for African Renaissance. Within this framework, ATR is reinterpreted as a very relevant aspect of culture (as against the ‘primitive’; ‘cannibalistic’; ‘fetish’; ‘idolatrous’ and other demeaning ideas) even within the seemingly advanced economic system. Indeed, Caribbean theologians now



argue that the cosmological understandings that obtain within ATR are an extension of the biblical cosmos (Mulrain (n.d)). In 2001, the World Council of Churches, having realized the contribution of Africa to the religious heritage of the world, and acknowledging the need to challenge the negative perception of Africa, agreed to provide a space for the integrity of Africa through dialogue, gospel and culture. This is because, they observed, ‘(t)he power and vitality of African traditions and spiritual values...play(ing) a significant role on the continent of Africa itself, particularly through the African Instituted Churches, and in Christianity and Islam in Africa’ as well as in the different Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions (World Council of Churches, 2001). Through Pauline On-line publications, Christian theologians now accept the importance of contextual understanding and are interested in the indigenous ways of life for elucidating Christianity. With the September 2001 attack on the United States of America, Americans are now reconsidering their understanding of Islam within historical and contemporary contexts. In this paper, attempt is made to reconsider the experience of the Africans in Diaspora and African Spirituality as a possible way for resolving religious conflicts in Africa.

### **Religious Conflicts in Africa**

Armed conflicts in Africa have been succinctly constructed around seven issues each of which may not exist solely by itself. Such issues have been categorized by Lodge (1999) to include:

- ethnic competition for control of the state;
- regional or secessionist rebellions;
- continuation of liberation conflicts;
- fundamental religious opposition to secular authority;
- warfare arising from state degeneration or state collapse;
- border disputes;
- protracted conflict within politicized militaries.

In executing these conflicts, very young children have been enlisted as combatants in Uganda, Sudan, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia and South Africa. In Nigeria, where it is not documented, children have been seen to be harbingers of conflicts, even as cultism penetrates into secondary institutions. Ethnic competition for state control led to more than one million deaths in the wars between Burundi and Rwanda; secessionist rebellions have left uncountable deaths in Sudan’s protracted war with religion being a major factor as it in Algeria (Smith, 2005). The politicization of Islam, as Dickson (2005) describes it, through the discrimination against the religion in colonial mission schools in East Africa leading to unemployment among them; and the Saudi-sponsored Wahabism with its potential acute impact in Ethiopia, has made Africa volatile on armed religious conflicts. These facts are manifest in spite of the end of cold war in 1990 when the Soviet Union and the United States supported one African government/ ‘warriors’ against the other.

In the wake of these conflicts, apart from, perhaps, uncountable deaths and rampant socio-political instability, millions of Africans have been internally displaced, asylum seekers, and refugees in countries other than their own. Up to 15 million people have been estimated to be forcibly displaced and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has only been able to render assistance to just 4 million (Doherty, 2004). As the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) noted earlier, as at 2001, 18.5 million Africans affected during armed conflicts were in need of urgent humanitarian aid. This is because, during these conflicts, natural resources are pillaged, livestock and farms are destroyed, and land-grabbing is almost always on the increase thus inhibiting access to livelihood (IFPRI, 2001). Unfortunately, donors seem either to be oblivious to or disinterested in the plights of these people. For instance, still according to this Institute, the Official



Development assistance dropped 21 percent over 1992-1997 and Aid to sub-Saharan Africa fell 13 percent during 1994-1997. Also, aid to agriculture, which is often mostly affected during armed conflicts, declined significantly by almost 50 percent.

Just as it is for the politicization of Islam, Jibrin Ibrahim and Toure Kazah-Toure (2003) have identified religion as:

(t)he most significant sociological variable in Nigeria over the past twenty years....(Levels of) growth (of religiosity) is expressed both in the intensity of belief and in expansion of time, resources and efforts devoted to religious practice. Religious practices have not surprisingly, as is popularly assumed, been exclusively subjected to political instrumentalisation by the political elite. The Nigerian religious sphere developing in a specific cultural context. The norms and practices of the growing number of religious movements and activism is characterised by norms that often antithetical to democratic ones. They include unquestioning faith, intolerance and a propensity to hate free speech and undemocratic organizational practices.

No doubt these represent the Nigerian experience but, they seem to be answers to reasons for religious conflicts in different parts of Africa. Indeed, as Amoo (1997), the Senior Adviser, Emergency Response Division of the United Nations Development Programme, has shown, the argument that the elites manipulate the people in ethnic conflicts, and I add religious ones, ‘assumes too much to be valid: at worst it is prejudicial and condescending’ (p.7) because it underestimates the ‘roles of fear and group psychology, and the importance of symbolic controversies which are often less comprehensible to the “outsider”’(p.7). Thus, religious extremism and fanaticism characterized by unquestioning faith in religious leaders; sectarianism and exclusiveness, intolerance of others’ views and undemocratic organizational practices need to be explained within the context of the human need perspective which emphasizes, apart from biological needs, the basic socio-psychological needs of human beings. Such needs include group identity, security, recognition, participation and autonomy. These were important variables that conditioned African Spirituality among Africans in the Diaspora. It is to the enunciation of these that the paper addresses next.

### **Africans in Diaspora and African Spirituality**

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of the African intellectuals in Diasporas is not only the political-economic Pan-African ambitions of Kwame Nkrumah’s attempt of *Africa-Unite* but also a redefinition and reengineering of African culture, aesthetics, poetry, and philosophy. Prominent among these intellectuals are, according to Mazrui (2005), Alioune Diop, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Cheik Anta Diop who authored various works about Africa’s contributions to world civilization. Others, according to Mezzana (2002) include Danquah, Boulaga, Ela, Mbiti among others. Martin Bernal’s *Heresy in the University...* has also been setting the records straight. It is generally agreed, to a large extent, among these writers that the shores of African continent delimit Africa’s territoriality as pan -Africanism includes sub-Saharan, trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic.

In line with this therefore, African Spirituality, as shown by van Binsbergen (2005) and Hunter-Hindrew (2005), becomes a socio-economic and political construct. It is not limited to the mere construct of the Berlin Conference defined by the land-mass with forms of local identity and symbolic production. It is a historical phenomenon with the communal identity residing in the determination to confront and overcome hegemonic subordination through transformative localization of culture after diffusion. African Spirituality is, therefore, economic and political in its reaction against North/Atlantic mercantilism, slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonial dominations. It



attempts to affirm a South identity within a particular historical situation of neglect and misinterpretations and the negation of such within the wider global world. As such, African Spirituality within this new perspective, is argued to possess identifiable forms in terms of shrines and their social and spiritual significance; spirit possession; ancestral worship through kinship rituals and royal rituals; divination methods; among others, depicting continuities and similarities all across Africa and extending even into the Old, and sometimes into the New, World (van Binsbergen and Geschiere, 1985). Even though this spirituality transcends the continent, its practices are influenced by the socio-economic and political circumstances within which they exist.

In other words, just as ideas are not abstract forms but informed by the reflections on the society, African Spirituality in the Diaspora has also been affected by the historico-sociological circumstances that condition its existence. The acceptance of these reflections however emerges out of contestations with existing ideas so that the ‘new’ ideas often undergo refinements and redefinitions. Thus African Spirituality among the Africans in Diasporas conditioned, by their masters’ oppression, the need to fight against the negative ways by which their masters treated them, necessitated the utilization of the cultural imprints and traditions derived from beliefs and religious systems carried over from Africa (Ogunleye, 2006). In turn, their masters’ treatment meted on them was informed by the world view that perceived others’ way of life as being inferior to theirs’. In fact, while imperialism was the motivating factor, as has been widely acknowledged for this world view, the ‘civilising mission’, through ‘evangelism’, gave slave trade and colonialism the catalytic boost needed in the enforcement of this world view. Thus while some slaves were made to renounce their faith for a so called ‘higher’ one, the ‘new faith’ is/was not in its ‘pure form’ for slaves- with the saying that “neither Christianity nor Islam recommends that we drop our tradition”. Others who did not renounce their faith in traditions at all had to redefine the new environmental situation in creating a ‘new’ way of life.

It was not surprising, therefore, that in spite of the reigning Euro-centered view of religion, the African Independent Churches, for example, among those who renounced their faiths, gained prominence and were started ‘in response to the “Africans” need for opportunities for self-expression and fuller involvement in the service of the worship of God, and in society as a whole’ (5<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District (n.d.) p.1). Since slaveholders did not allow dancing and playing of drums, as usual in African worship, the slaves held meetings at secret places to share their joy, pains and hopes. They sang spiritual precursors which they called “corn ditties” (Spiritual Workshop, Paris, negrospirituals.com). In the colonies where the senior positions of power were held by Europeans, the racial divide created prejudices which led to double standards and, therefore, the request for a West African Church (Blyden, n.d.). In the last five centuries, the spread of Christianity in Africa is far more the story of African Christians spreading the gospel in Africa than it is the story of European or American Christians (African Christian Homepage, 2000). Indeed, as Addo (n.d.) noted, the Black Church is still the only viable social institution which is dominated, operated, and totally controlled by African Americans.

Outside Christianity, indigenous African religion is coming to the fore involving, if you like, a better interpretation in the process of enhancing respect for the rights and values of those within the Diasporas and attempting a new foundation in an African paradigm. Within this new paradigm is the position for, Hunter-Hindrew (Op.cit. p.xxix), that:

...until the spiritual and creative geniuses of African peoples are respected and accorded proper recognition, the overall spirit and experience with academia will continue to remain historically fragmented and intellectually impoverished.



Thus when deeper knowledge is sought through African Spirituality, the understanding of the physical environment, including social relations, would be improved. This position is potent when one considers not just the ability of the Africans in Diaspora to sustain their ways of life for centuries under extreme humiliations and suppressions but also their ability to reinvent appreciable understanding of their new environment. Consequently, Adeleke (2005: p.1) has referred to these new development as ‘gloracialization’ which:

...essentializes race as a unifying umbrella for all blacks, regardless of geographical location. It advances a monolith construction of Africans and blacks in the Diaspora as one people united by negative experiences emanating from historic encounters with Europeans (and, I may I add, the Arabs).

These reinventions and reinterpretations, according to Mezzana (2002), began less than seven decades ago when, unfortunately, it was too late to reverse the deep-rooted process of stigmatization which has produced negative consequences in terms of understanding the African economy, society, political scenario and international relations as well as affecting the self-esteem of Africans at home and in the countries of the diasporas. Nonetheless, these attempts are being made to re-institutionalize ‘moral dignity’ for African Traditional Religion with the abundance of studies and websites. Perhaps due to these efforts, following from the 2001 World Council of Churches’ recognition of ‘(T) he contributions of Africa to the religious heritage of the world’ (World Council of Churches 2001), the high priest of Benin, Amadou Gasseto of the Avelekete Voudoun community was invited to make an official presence at the Day of Prayer for World Peace held in Assisi on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

Foundational to African Spirituality is the community which derives its existence through the family. For the Africans in the Diasporas however, the community (and the family) transcends blood relations as a result of their historico-sociological experiences, hence their spirituality. Yet, the African group-living (spirit) conditions their existence locating it within the need to unite against socio-economic and political oppression. In place of blood relations, therefore, it seems, is the need to survive within a defined common purpose.

### **Africans in Africa: The need for a redefinition of existence**

As earlier alluded to, religion functions within a social structure. Unfortunately, religion, in present day Africa, as in other institutions, is located outside a disjunctured socio-structural arrangement. Whereas the need to survive determines institutional creations and establishments within environmental circumstances, socio-economic and political arrangements in Africa are informed by external dictates. Consequently, the relationship between the environment and the institutions created to tackle existential realities are disjointed. Religious conflicts are, therefore, inevitable. In other words, as Giddens (1976), commenting on the classical sociological theorists, has shown, human faculties are both produced and sustained by the society within which they are created. Thus, African cultural systems, comprising of survival within the environment of holism; harmony with nature and humanism, and values and attitudes based on the sanctity of motherhood; centrality of the child; and reverence for the elderly cannot be easily sustained on cultures based on individualism (competitive) and the amassing of material wealth without sharing such with the community.

Thus, contrary to the structuralist arguments tending towards evolutionism explained under the guise of diffusionism, ‘imported’ ideas have continued to contribute to conflicts and the underdevelopment process. Embedded in these ideas are the ‘ethic’ and ‘spirit’/rationality peculiar to capitalist/industrial societies wherein the ‘individual’ rather than the ‘group’ is isolated as possessing an ‘ethic’/a way of life different from the groups’. This way of life is guided by the competitive spirit



with its foundation in the ‘survival of the fittest’ doctrine. That is, summarily, ‘it is only those who are wealthy on earth that are predestined to inherit the kingdom of God’. As such, one of the important conditions for qualification to the kingdom of God is based on ‘materialism’ rather than a veneration of the community, even though the ‘rich’ is expected to ‘give to the poor’. This is also replicated in the ‘achievement’ orientation in other social institutions like education, which has become the means to securing economic and political positions. Unfortunately, the ‘poor’ do not seem to be content with his/her/their poverty status thus the contestations and conflicts in Africa.

Ironically, the basis of competitions and contestations in Africa are the political and economic proceeds that seem to be unequally allocated. These, that is, the political positions inherited from the colonial overlords and the resources which the former colonial overlords now require as the basis of the new relations- on neo-liberal basis- constitute the major sources of conflict in Africa. Central to these are the processes by which resources are allocated since, in Africa, those who successfully control the political space determine the allocation process. Thus, the basis of African crisis can be narrowed down to politics depending on the ‘survival of the fittest’. Those who control the political processes safeguard their ‘constituencies’ both in ethnic and religious spheres and those without the political instrument contest their status position. Nonetheless, those who really control are in the minority but need to create an identity and inter-subjectivity for the legitimization of their positions. They are those who have made it but ‘give to the poor’ safeguarding, they would seem to do, the basis of their wealth. As such, there is a linkage between religion, ethnicity and the political-economy.

## CONCLUSION

In redefining their basis of existence therefore, Africans require an understanding and appreciation of the need for basic means of survival and thus a reorientation towards the satisfaction of these means. Such a reorientation is the redefinition of the ‘spirit’ based on ‘communality’ rather than ‘individuality’. Thus, the church is redefined in its originality of ‘doing things in common’ yet recognizing the need for the existence of others. Indeed, as observed by Quarles (1970), the Negro Churches in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America was democratically organized giving a substantial voice in the religious exercises and business affairs to the rank and file. This was the attraction of the Africans in Diaspora to these churches. Such was the situation in pre-colonial Africa which allowed for the survival of others. However, this reorientation requires a fundamental transformation of the political and economic arrangements. These also need to subsist on the understanding of the environment, how to exploit it within the available technology created communally for that purpose, and the bases of distribution based on the communally created technology. The recommendation for a ‘communally created technology’ is founded on the need to cater for all more especially because ‘imported’ technology is not only relatively and increasingly unaffordable but also degrades the environment, in many cases.



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