



Religion: A Widget of Culture in African Societies

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Abstract

Culture is a total way of life of every one in a society. Every human in a society is under a certain set of rules, regulations, behavior, mindset, and even materials for a way of living. The concept of culture is a debatable discussion among many scholars, but every society and scholars agreed on the existence of culture. Thus, culture is a universal phenomenon found everywhere but in a different format, this culture changes over time and the causes of its changes usually account for the external factors accepted by an individual or group of people under the same culture. This paper seeks to highlight religion as a key factor controlling culture and influencing other parts of culture in a giving society. The paper gives an empirical analysis of various aspects of culture been influenced by religion from different part of Africa, with much attention from Nigeria as a region. The paper concludes with an overview that culture is influenced by many factors, but religion is a principal factor and served as the widget of culture in African societies.

Keywords: *Culture, Religion, African Societies, Widget, and Influence.*

Introduction

As discussed earlier, many scholars have put down their respective opinion on the term culture. The term culture is a broad concept that no

consensus have been reached among scholars, which means, there is no generally acceptable definition(s) of culture in our society, but that

notwithstanding, every scholar uses culture as a total ways of life of people and defined the term according to the area of interest and what is obtainable from their discipline or environment. Thus, among numerous definitions of this concept of culture, many scholars have agreed upon the definition by the famous anthropologist "Edward B. Tylor" who defined culture as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871). MOCA (2019:2) stressed further on the definition of Edward that culture is "passed down from generation to generation or horizontal between individuals and collectivities in manner that involves social learning rather than specific genetic programming".

According to Linton (1945) culture is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits they learn, share and transfer from one generation to another; Banjo (1997) observed culture as traditional behavior or ways of life which include their ideas, acts, and artifacts which are passed from one generation to another. Etu and Ekpe (2017) opined that culture produces similar behavior and thought among most people in a particular society. Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people in a group from another group" (Hofstede, 1994:5). Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientation to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the meaning of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey 2008:3 *cf* Spencer-Oatey 2012).

Thus, the most acceptable fact is that culture includes all aspect of life/ways of life of people mostly passed down from one generation to another, which is liable to changes over time. This culture had been hunted and still hunting by several factors which are responsible for the changes, demise and or extinction of culture in most African societies. Etu and Ekpe (2017) strictly provided that, the factors responsible for the negated of African culture include religion as the first priority; ignorance; globalization and digitalization, among others. It was also observed that many scholars who have writing the causes of African cultural changes agreed on the term religion as a principal factor for many of the changes in African society, but no literature(s) has pointed out the area of influence of religion over other aspects of culture in Africa societies, so as to agree with the concept that "religion is a widget of African culture". This gap

however, is the key to the call of this paper. The paper addresses religion in culture, influences of religion in many parts of culture and how religion controls other aspects of culture.

Before dwelling on the concept of what constitute religion, it is very essential to agree that African societies attached more value to their belief system and this therefore served as the genesis of establishing their cultural practices in the past. In many African societies, their beliefs dictate their laws, morals, norms, behavior, artifact and other ways of life (culture) and this therefore make it easier for religion to serve as a key element or engine controlling other part of African cultures both in the past and till present. The concept of religion is also debatable among social scientist scholars, but notwithstanding the concept of "belief" operates everywhere and this governs the practices of an individual in society. Bergunder (2014) also agreed that what constitute the definition of religion has never been reached and that no sign for any consensus in the foreseeable future.

Swidler, (2014) sees religion as an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on some notion and experience of the transcendent. He stated further that religion is characterized by creed, code, cult and community known as "four C's". Tylor (1871) sees religion as "belief in Spiritual Beings". Williams (2009), observed that religion is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual human in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever, they may consider the divine. With the numerous definitions giving by these scholars, we could agree to the concept that religion is all about belief of an individual or group of people in a giving society.

Moreover, this paper attests that religion is not the only factor for cultural changes in African societies, but serves as a widget that controls most other parts of culture. Since culture is a complex whole as stated by E.B. Tylor and agreed by many scholars, the culture comprises of many branches aside of material and nonmaterial, but these include norms, moral, beliefs, and other entire ways of life. The common social system theory however, understand that culture comprises of interrelated branches that made up of a single culture that mostly influence each other, but religion here in this paper is observed as a key that controls many other branches of culture.

Theoretical Framework

System theory is seen as more related framework that suit the explanation of the subject matter. The system theory is seen as an inter-disciplinary study of systems as they relate to one another within a larger, more complex system. Beven (2006) opined that the goals of the theory are to model a system's dynamics, constraints, conditions, and to elucidate principles such as purpose, measurer, methods, tools, among others that can be discerned and applied to other system at every level of nesting, and in a wide range of fields for achieving optimized equifinality. The system theory is also seen as a conceptual framework based on the principle that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of the relationship with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation (Wilkinson, 2011). It is also argued that a change of one part of a system, might affect other parts or the whole system (Beven, 2006). This is well appreciated with the concept of culture as explained above that is a complex whole that comprises of many sub-systems (Tylor, 1871) and if a sub-system of culture is affected, might affect the other or the entire cultural practices. In this context, the changes in religion practices among many African societies is seen as sub-system that has an influence in affecting other parts of culture in African societies.

Religion A Widget of Cultural Practices in African Societies

Religion has influence over other aspects of culture and these influences are the souls that gave rise to religion in controlling culture of many African societies. Much priority is giving to religion and this is an ability to dictate of do and don'ts of many cultures in African societies. Likewise, changes of religion practices orient changes of other aspects of cultural practices in most African societies as seen below:

Dressings: this is an important feature of all human societies. Although, many literatures and dictionaries have defined this concept to mean only "traditional garment or piece of cloth worn by an individual in society" but, dressing here is not only peculiar to garment but all accessories, hairstyles, and any other alterations either temporarily or permanently on human in society. In many societies, traditional attires have been influenced today by religion at different regions in Nigeria and other part of Africa societies. The traditional people of Koma in Adamawa state, covers their body with leaves from ancient time and some are still found in the present time with leaves as their attire, which is based

on their traditional believes. Thus, the rapid changes in their dressings today while majority are putting on foreign attire is because of introduction of foreign religion practices such as Christianity and Islam in the region. For instance, the uses of white garment among many African religion practices indicates differences in their dressings according to their respective religion and any announce or denounce of religion among this group of people might account for changes in their dressings. Among many religion practices in Nigeria there are Muslims with long garment called Jalabia mostly ware to perform prayers and this long garment (white) is also found among some group of Christians called 'Sutana', which is peculiar to Cherubim and Seraphim. Although, the designs and sowing patterns of these garments differs and the changes makes the differences in their religion practices. Buddhism religion ware white garment for funeral; Hindu uses white cloth for funeral; widows and widowers are to also be on white garment; Judaism also uses white cloth for celebration of *Kittel*, Islam requires uses of white garment for Aharam (during Hajj) the dressings and sowing patterns of their garment pointed to the differences in their religions. Among the Ogboni cult of Kwara state in Nigeria, they have peculiar attire which is mostly found among the members of the group (Folorunso, 1999). In most part of Northern Nigeria where women are mostly found with Hijab, using to cover their body after putting on cloth, is an influence of Islamic religion practices in the region. Many Muslims in the region walks with their counters called *Tesbiyy* and some put it on their neck, while many Christians put their cross on neck which is also part of their dressings and in accordance with their religion. In African societies, hair is seen as the most elevated part of human body, which is the closest to the divine and as such is a way of communicating to divine being. Therefore, an individual engaged in their hair style such as Natives of Ugogo in Africa Cogo, Serpa Ointo, Ozondato and Ondegura hair styles among the people of Namibia; Karamo people of Nigeria, Wolof people of Senegal (Ratzel, 1898) all engaged in their respective hair styles according to their traditional and nature believes. Researches have however shown that, if there is any change towards this religion practices, it affects their dressing pattern which is part of the sub-system of culture.

Diet; what society eat differs from one and other; as most at times, what is obtainable in society determines their diet aside of long trade and trade by batter. Apparently, religion practices have for a long time in the history prohibits certain foods and allow certain foods for the members in the same religion,

either such food is available or scarce in the community. Among the people of Kabka in Plateau state, they are prohibited from killing of snake talk less of eating snake and who so ever that violet such law will be penalized by Dodo over the settlement, even though their settlement is favourable for bush meat and snake inclusive, but their religion dictate what to eat and what not to eat. The Ikoyi people from Oyo in Nigeria are not allowed to eat "bush rat" *Okete* in the local language and even with the abundance of this *Okete* within their community, they are prohibited from killing and eating such animal based on their religion believe. In the religion practices of Baragoni of Yiku settlement in Kubwa, FCT, Abuja they used their ancient settlement as farm land and before the yearly time of cultivation, they must carry a sacrifice which include an intestine, tail and head of a dog placed on the hill-top for their fur-fathers, and in return, the remaining part of the dog will be prepared and every member of the King's family must eat from the prepared dog meat. Thus, among the society stated above, if there is any announce or denounce of any of these religion practices among any members of the society, will dictates the other eatable and non-eatable fruits or meat among the people of society.

Taboos: traditionally, societies were restricted and allow for number of practices according their respective norms and traditions. So long in the history, every society is governed by certain taboo(s) as the case may be, and every member of that same group have to strictly abide by such rules and mostly set down by respective believe system. Commonly found among the people Buhaya of Tanzania, that all the iron smelters working in the community were restricted from having sex even with their legal wives, no visitors will be entertained and no bathing during the process of smelting activities, because of the religion believe attached to the smelting activities in the settlement. Among the traditional worshippers' groups in Osun, Oyo, Ibadan, Osogbo, Ogbomoso among other communities in some part of south-western part of Nigeria, they have certain rites performed yearly and this require sacrifices, during the process of this, nobody is allowed to come out except the members of clerics. This religion practice is also found among the people of Bakyano Kasa in Nasarawan-Eggon and Dugu people in Lafia all in Nigeria. Also, societies also recognize incest taboo respectively; among the Muslims, their scripture (Qur'an) has unequivocally mentioned whom not to marry and whom to marry to every practicing Muslims. But traditionally, society defines their respective incest taboo according to their religion practices. There is a community that

allowed marrying a cousin sister as legal wife, which is insect taboo in another community (Rosman et-al, 2009) and some society even entertain their visitors to have sex with their legal wives at home; and among the Shite (some Muslim group with black garment) declared every member of the group free to each other during any festival or occasion within themselves and such act is not regarded as fornication. Also, this same group engaged in temporary marriage as allowed in their beliefs and not allowed in another religion practices and even among other Muslims in the same region.

Festivals: Although some number of festivals remain unchanged even with the coming of foreign religions among many members of communities such as “Tсахdi festival” among the Hausa/Fulani, “harvesting festival” which usually takes place during the harvesting period yearly among many other festivals. But, that notwithstanding, religion practices had passed down some festivals and also reduced the number of indigenous groups participating in some of these festivals. Every Muslims engaged in Eid-l-Hadia and Fitir festive celebrations and durbar mostly done among the Hausas during these periods; while Christians engaged in Christmas and New year festive celebrations. Today, Osun-Osogbo festival is a very announced, sound and popular festival in Yoruba land, every indigene of Osogbo must attend the celebration and people attends from different locations for tourism and some came for request from the water based on the same believe, but today, large number of indigenous members of Osogbo are no longer participating in this practices and even their kings. There is also a popular festival called Adasobo celebrated yearly among the people of Kishi in Oyo, Nigeria, which is usually led by the King and every members of the community followed in the past, but today, majority of the inhabitants of the settlement are not interested in the practices any longer and including the incumbent King declining from the practices because of their present believe systems. The people of Wurma in Katsina, Bakyyano Kasa in Nassarawan Eggon, Kariya in Bauchi, among many popular communities engaged in Masquerade practices in the past, but not more found in the present day, because of introduction of foreign religions. The popular Eyo Festival celebrated yearly in Lagos reported to have losing populations as result of religion influences (Williams, 2008) and same applicable to Ekpe festival celebrated among the people of Cross River state, Eket, Enugu, Ebonyi among others (Etu and Ekpe, 2017) all as a result of religion influences.

Settlement layout: Settlement pattern depicts the social relation, which forms the framework of a society; it consists of the location and use of resource present in the environment (Aliyu and Okpoko 2006:171). settlement patterns are usually oriented from centre (Okpoko and Ekechukwu, 1999), and mostly what constitute the center of the settlement include Palace, market, religious houses among other vital monumental architectures in any giving society. But today, the religion house changes over time as because of the influence of new religion practices or most popular religion among the people of community. In Kishi, the only noticed religious house closer to the Palace was shrine in the past, but today, the settlement have built a mosque situated also at centre of the settlement close to the Palace. In archive record, Emberton (1917) reported that there was a conventional representation of a snake with a principal sacrifices consisted of a goat at a shrine situated at the centre of Bini-Nupe kingdom, today the layout had completely changed as there is no more shrine rather a mosque situated at the center of Tafyan settlement that served as the premium settlement among the Bini-Nupe kingdom. The influence of these changes is as a result of announce and denounce of religion believe among members of many societies in Africa.

Conclusion

Cultural practices from system theory work as sub-system that operate together and when one is affected, it likely affects the other systems. It should be therefore understood that other sub-cultures also have influence on other aspect of culture, but religion serve as a widget that controls must other parts of culture. Another point of view from this discussion is that, there was a practice of '*Abobaku*' that when a king dies, one of his servants will be buried alongside with the King, which is mostly common among the Yoruba communities, but this practice, was abolished today because of external religion practices. Zenegambia megalith attested to this practice as well in Zenegal based on the antiquity remains of megaliths over the community but such practices are not more in the present. However, since culture encompasses of both materials and non-materials, the religion had influenced both classes of culture. For instance, believe system that made up of religion among the people of community change their supplications and this goes down even to the mindset (thinking and rationale) of an individual in a society. Thus, people from the same single community with the same affinity, kinship and dialect, have differences in their

operations of what they eat, architecture, dressings, festive performances and even taboos as a result of religion influences in the past and till present. It should however, recommends that community should utilize the opportunity of religion practices as a means of societal development not as an agent of destruction. Since religion is seen as a principal part of culture that has influence on other aspects of culture, can as well be used in controlling behavior, act, norms and other traditions of many society and these will go in a long way towards the development of many African societies.

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