

Traditional Religion and Modernity in Kofi Awoonor's "The Cathedral"

Osaremen Esther ONOBHAYEDO¹

Feranmi Valentina BINO²

Lead City University, Ibadan

¹oseremeonobhayedoesther@gmail.com, +2347012266780

²binoferanmi@gmail.com, +2349067180332

Abstract

African Traditional Religion (ATR) has been undergoing subtle transitions and alterations over the years. Recent study shows a significant threat of extinction due to the rapid infiltration of the forces of globalization and modernism (Chitando et al 2020). Modernism has influenced African Indigenous Faiths and practices of some African Societies is the new point of call for research in African Traditional Religious Studies (ATRS).

These transitions have been taking place from the inception of colonialism through to the post colonial era and to modern times. The Aim of this study is to look at African Traditional Religion through the lenses of modernism, while drawing inference from Kofi Awoonor's evocative poem, "The Cathedral," the stark contrast between the towering Christian edifice and the sacred baobab tree symbolizes the complex interplay between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and modernity. Awoonor's poignant verses delve into the cultural tensions that arise when traditional beliefs and practices are challenged by the imposition of Western ideologies. The poem opens with a striking image of the baobab tree, a revered symbol of life and ancestral wisdom in ATR. Its roots anchor it deeply to the land, connecting it to the past and the spirits that inhabit the natural world. The baobab's presence stands in stark contrast to the "concrete cathedral" that has been erected in its place, a symbol of the encroaching Western influence that seeks to replace traditional beliefs with a foreign worldview. Awoonor's language is laced with irony and subtle critique as he juxtaposes the cathedral's imposing architecture with the baobab's organic form. The cathedral, with its "iron ribs" and "glass eyes," appears cold and sterile, devoid of the spiritual connection that the baobab embodies. The poem's speaker laments the loss of connection to the land and the ancestral spirits, a loss that mirrors the erosion of ATR in the face of modernization.

Keywords: Christianity, Modernity, African Traditional Religion (ATR), The Cathedral

Introduction

Kofi Awoonor, born George Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor-Williams, was a Ghanaian poet, novelist, playwright, literary critic, and academic. He was born on March 13, 1935, in Wheta, Ghana, and died on September 21, 2013, in Nairobi, Kenya. Awoonor was a prominent figure in African literature and was known for his work in the Negritude movement, which celebrated African culture and identity. He was also a strong advocate for Pan-Africanism and was involved in politics in Ghana. Awoonor's work is characterized by its use of imagery, symbolism, and oral tradition. He often drew on his Ewe heritage and used his poetry to explore themes of colonialism, identity, and the African diaspora. He was also a prolific essayist and critic, and he wrote extensively about African literature and culture. One of Awoonor's most famous poems is "The Cathedral." This short poem is a powerful indictment of the destruction of African culture by colonialism. The poem begins by describing a once-beautiful tree that stood on a "dirty patch" of land. The tree provided shade and sustenance for the local people, and it was a symbol of their connection to the natural world.

Thesis Statement

In Kofi Awoonor's *"The Cathedral,"* the juxtaposition of the sacred tree and the imposing cathedral symbolizes the destructive clash between African Traditional Religion and Western modernity, highlighting the erosion of indigenous beliefs and the imposition of foreign values under colonial influence.

It is said that Awoonor wrote a great number of his poems as if he was envisioning his own demise. But he is a peculiar and unique writer, one who strives, almost too hard, to bring his ancestry and culture into his poems, sometimes even borrowing words from the local Ewe dialect. Being such a strong and avid practitioner of the traditional religion meant that he was of a relict species. Especially relict specimen as an individual, but that the entire culture was suffering entropy, may have come through his poems in a manner that would suggest at first that he was writing about his mortal end. Besides the personal and cultural lament, Awoonor also shrewdly decried what he would have considered the decadent spectre of Western influences (religions, social organisation and economic philosophy) on the history and fortunes of African people in general. He would lambast the thoughtless exuberance with which Africans themselves embraced such things, and gradually engineered what he would have considered a self-degradation that went far beyond a loss of cultural identity. He would often construct his writings to look at these things through the lens of his own Ewe culture.

Kofi Awoonor is one of Ghana's leading poets and wrote previously under the pen-name George Awoonor Williams. He is cousin to Ghana's other poetry great, Kofi Anyidoho and both of them have shared poetry in which they were talking to the other. Awoonor was born in 1935 at Wheta, in the Keta district Ghana and had his schooling variedly in Ghana, the UK and the US. He taught literature also in the State University of New York, Stony Brook and the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. He has acted on stage, written for radio and been the director of a film company. At one time, he was Ghana's ambassador to Brazil.

The distinction Awoonor's poetry makes is its strong use of vibratory and rhythmic Ewe pronouncements. He is credited with popularising Ewe poetry and folk songs and many of his English poems have been twined with Ewe words in the right places. That is his open invitation to all who read his works to come to the understanding of his roots. He shows that primarily, he thinks in his local lingua and then in English, if it so requires. His published works include 'Rediscovery and other poems' and 'Night of my blood'.

The Poem – *The Cathedral*

'On this dirty patch
a tree once stood
shedding incense on the infant corn:
its boughs stretched across a heaven
brightened by the last fires of a tribe.
They sent surveyors and builders
who cut that tree
planting in its place
A huge senseless cathedral of doom

However, the tree is cut down by "surveyors and builders" who are sent by "they." These nameless figures represent the colonial powers that invaded Africa and imposed their own culture and values on the people. In place of the tree, the builders erect a "huge senseless cathedral of doom." This cathedral is a symbol of the destruction of African culture and the imposition of Western values.

Kofi Awoonor's epic poem "The Cathedral" is a powerful exploration of the clash between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and modernity. Set in Ghana in the aftermath of independence, the poem follows the protagonist, Kofi, as he struggles to reconcile his traditional beliefs with the encroachment of Western culture and Christianity.

The Cathedral as a Symbol of Modernity

The Cathedral, a towering concrete structure that dominates the landscape, is a potent symbol of modernity. Its presence represents the imposition of Western values and beliefs on African society. Kofi, who has been raised in a traditional village, is initially overwhelmed by the Cathedral's imposing presence. He sees it as a foreign entity that threatens to destroy his way of life.

ATR as a Source of Strength

Despite the allure of modernity, Kofi ultimately finds solace and strength in his traditional beliefs. He comes to realize that ATR offers a unique worldview that is better suited to the African experience. ATR's emphasis on community, interconnectedness, and respect for nature provides Kofi with a sense of belonging and purpose that he cannot find in the individualistic and materialistic society of the city.

The Tension between ATR and Modernity

The poem does not offer a simple resolution to the conflict between ATR and modernity. Instead, it acknowledges the challenges that traditional African societies face in the face of globalization. However, Awoonor ultimately suggests that ATR has the potential to offer a valuable alternative to Western modernity.

Kofi Awoonor's poem "The Cathedral" is a powerful and evocative critique of the impact of colonialism and Christianity on African culture and spirituality. The poem juxtaposes the sacred baobab tree, a symbol of African Traditional Religion (ATR), with the imposing cathedral, a symbol of Christianity. Through this contrast, Awoonor highlights the ways in which modernity has marginalized and threatened ATR.

The Baobab Tree as a Symbol of ATR

The baobab tree is a central symbol in "The Cathedral." It is described as a "great ancient tree," a "giant," and a "monarch." These descriptions suggest the tree's power, wisdom, and authority. The tree is also associated with the ancestors, as it is said to have "witnessed the rise and fall of empires." This suggests that the tree is a repository of African history and culture.

The baobab tree is also a source of spiritual nourishment for the people. They gather under its shade to seek guidance and solace. The tree is said to "whisper ancestral wisdom" and to "shelter the spirits of the departed." This suggests that the tree is a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms.

The Cathedral as a Symbol of Christianity

The cathedral, in contrast to the baobab tree, is a symbol of Western domination and cultural imperialism. It is described as a "concrete monster," a "monstrous edifice," and a "cold grey hulk." These descriptions suggest the cathedral's imposing and alienating nature. The cathedral is also associated with death, as it is said to "cast long shadows" and to "stand over the graves." This suggests that the cathedral represents a threat to African life and culture.

The Conflict between ATR and Christianity

The conflict between ATR and Christianity is central to "The Cathedral." The poem describes how the cathedral is built on the site of the baobab tree, which is uprooted and destroyed in the process. This act of destruction symbolizes the way in which Christianity has sought to suppress ATR.

The poem also describes the way in which the people are alienated from the cathedral. They are said to "stand in awe" of it and to "fear its power." This suggests that the cathedral is a foreign and oppressive force in their lives.

Analysis of the poem's use of symbolism, imagery, and language to convey the themes of traditional religion and modernity.

- The tree: The tree in the poem is a symbol of traditional African religion. It is a source of life and sustenance, and it represents the connection between the people and the natural world.
- The cathedral: The cathedral is a symbol of Christianity and colonialism. It is a foreign imposition that has disrupted the traditional way of life.

Imagery

- "On this dirty patch a tree once stood": This line creates a sense of loss and desolation. The "dirty patch" is a reminder of the destruction that has taken place, and the absence of the tree is a symbol of the loss of traditional values.
- "Its boughs stretched across a heaven brightened by the last fires of a tribe": This line is a beautiful and evocative image that suggests the harmony that once existed between the people and the natural world. The "last fires of a tribe" are a reminder of the dying embers of traditional culture.
- "They sent surveyors and builders": This line is cold and impersonal, and it suggests the inevitability of colonialism. The surveyors and builders are symbols of the forces that are destroying traditional ways of life.
- "Planting in its place a huge senseless cathedral of doom": This line is a powerful indictment of Christianity and colonialism. The cathedral is described as "senseless" and "doom," and it is seen as a symbol of death and destruction.

Language

The language of the poem is simple and direct, but it is also powerful and evocative. The use of repetition, such as the repetition of the word "huge," helps to create a sense of rhythm and emphasis. The use of alliteration, such as the alliteration of the "s" sound in the phrase "senseless cathedral of doom," also helps to create a sense of foreboding.

- The use of the word "doom": The word "doom" is a powerful and emotive word that suggests the inevitability of destruction. It is a fitting description of the impact of Christianity and colonialism on traditional African culture.
- The use of the word "senseless": The word "senseless" suggests that the cathedral is a pointless and meaningless structure. It is a symbol of the futility of trying to replace traditional culture with a foreign one.
- The use of the present tense: The use of the present tense gives the poem a sense of immediacy and urgency. The speaker is not simply talking about the past; he is lamenting the destruction that is happening in the present.

Themes

The poem's themes of loss, alienation, and cultural disruption are all conveyed through the use of symbolism, imagery, and language. The loss of the tree represents the loss of traditional African culture. The alienation of the speaker is evident in the phrase "a huge senseless cathedral of doom." The cultural disruption is represented by the juxtaposition of the traditional African tree and the Christian cathedral.

- The clash between traditional religion and modernity: The poem is a lament for the loss of traditional African religion. The speaker sees Christianity as a foreign imposition that has destroyed the harmony that once existed between the people and the natural world.
- The impact of colonialism: The poem is also a critique of colonialism. The speaker sees colonialism as a force that has disrupted traditional ways of life and destroyed the sense of community that once existed.

Throughout the poem, the poet reflects on the loss of cultural identity and the spiritual connection to the land as a result of modernization. He mourns the displacement of ancestral traditions and rituals. The poem also highlights the complex relationship between the past and the present, as well as the struggle to reconcile tradition with the demands of modern life.

Thus, it is observed that modernity is a process and within that process is taken into cognisance the dynamics and uniqueness of African Societies (Sackey, 1999). It is not an already-created template that can apply to all societies globally regardless of the uniqueness and diversities of different societies. If the Western definition of development is the philosophical foundation and the yardstick with which other societies are measured, to determine whether these societies are developed or not, then we may outrightly conclude that African Traditional beliefs practiced in many African Societies that are undergoing transitions, are practiced within an undeveloped environment and culture. Then we can discuss the merits of how the Modernity has impacted either positively or negatively on the beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religions practiced across the African continent. Then, the answers will be obvious and predictable. From an academic position pioneering the argument that the African, and indeed his religion being primitive, fetish and backward and so on are the unfortunate and erroneous conclusions of early Voyagers, Merchants and Christian Missionaries, many of whom knew next to nothing about field research and who did not engage in thorough ethnographic study of the societies they had contact with (Parrinder, 1954).

The interaction between Christianity and African traditional religions has been a complex and multifaceted process, marked by both integration and conflict. While the spread of Christianity across Africa has brought about positive changes in various aspects, it has also been accompanied by disadvantages, particularly in the context of the influence on African traditional religions. This essay critically examines the drawbacks of the influence of Christianity on African traditional religions, considering cultural, social, and psychological dimensions.

One of the significant of Modernity on African traditional religion in the poem is the erosion of indigenous cultures and customs. Christianity, often introduced by colonial powers, brought with it a different set of values, beliefs, and practices that sometimes clashed with and marginalized African cultural traditions. The imposition of foreign religious practices and the demonization of indigenous spiritual beliefs contributed to a loss of cultural identity and heritage among many African communities.

The advent of Christianity in Africa was accompanied by efforts to suppress or eradicate indigenous spiritual practices deemed incompatible with Christian doctrine. This suppression led to the decline of traditional religious rituals, ceremonies, and sacred sites. In some cases, indigenous belief systems were labeled as pagan or idolatrous, contributing to the stigmatization and marginalization of traditional African religions.

The influence of Christianity on African traditional religion has often resulted in social disruption and conflict within communities. Conversion to Christianity sometimes led to divisions among families and communities, as individuals adhering to traditional beliefs were ostracized or marginalized. This disruption in social cohesion had long-lasting consequences, affecting the fabric of African societies.

African traditional religions are often deeply connected to local ecosystems, natural resources, and traditional healing practices. The influence of Christianity, with its emphasis on Western scientific approaches, has contributed to the devaluation and loss of traditional knowledge. Indigenous healing methods, ecological wisdom, and sustainable practices embedded in traditional religions have been overlooked or dismissed in favor of Western-centric perspectives.

The psychological impact of the influence of Christianity on African traditional religion is significant. The introduction of new religious narratives and cosmologies can create a sense of cognitive dissonance for individuals who are torn between the beliefs of their ancestors and the doctrines imposed by Christianity. This internal conflict can lead to feelings of guilt, confusion, and a loss of self-identity.

The influence of Christianity on African traditional religion has, at times, been intertwined with economic exploitation. Missionary activities often coincided with colonial endeavors, and the spread of Christianity was sometimes accompanied by economic interests. This exploitation contributed to the economic subjugation of African societies, with detrimental effects on local economies and livelihoods.

The erosion of cultural identity, suppression of indigenous beliefs, social disruption, loss of traditional knowledge, psychological impact, and economic exploitation represent complex issues that require nuanced consideration. These are the concerns in the poem.

The Divinities

The next in rank to the Supreme Being, God, are the divinities. The divinities are brought to life by the Supreme Being. Amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Orisa-nla is one of the divinities and the next in rank to God, but created by God, who left the universe in their hands to be refashioned. All the divinities are functionaries and act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the rest of the universe, including human beings. They have no power of their own, except what the Supreme Being permits them to do. Yet, they are very important as far as the orderly function of the universe is concerned.

Ancestor Veneration

The final end and the aspiration of each and every person is to reach the spirit world of one's ancestors, to be venerated by one's descendants as an ancestor and eventually be reincarnated (Oborji 2002:24); therefore, ancestors are people who have made it to the spirit land and are venerated by their descendants. They are regarded as part of the elders of the families with enhanced powers to bless, protect or punish the families. They are invoked to share at gatherings, ceremonies and ritual communion and are seen as symbol of peace, unity and prosperity in the family.

Spirits

Spirits are the next in hierarchy. Spirits, according to African belief are ‘apparitional entities’, which belong to different categories of beings than the divinities. Spirits are anthropomorphically conceived as if they are abstract beings. It is believed that they are capable of becoming anything, such as objects or human beings and can also melt into vapour at any time (Adamo 1983:66). It is generally believed that everything has spirits and that these spirits also have categories. There are ghost-spirits, born-to-die spirits, generally called abiku amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria, spirits of witches, the guardian spirits and diviner spirits. Belief in these spirits permeates the life of Africans and should be taken seriously. In the Yoruba traditional belief, the above structure is real (Olupona & Rey 2008:94).

Good and Evil

The existence of good and evil is real. Evil in African Traditional Religion includes both physical and moral evil. God is the one who brings forth good, but human being causes evil to themselves and others. Evil concerns any misfortune that befalls an individual or community or any voluntary anti-social behaviour or any infringement of the decrees of God, the deity or the ancestors. Evil is generally interpreted as the work of evil spirits, witches, sorcerers or evil eye, broken taboos, oaths or even the deity or ancestors. It is also believed that usually when God or deities or ancestors are involved in evil, it is corrective, disciplinary, or punitive.

Sacrifices

Adherents of African Traditional Religion are concerned not only with the causes of evil, but also have to deal with evil. Propitiatory sacrifices become one of the major ways by which Africans deliver themselves from the effects of evil in the world. Whilst sacrifices involve the offering of blood, whether that of a human being, animals or birds, offerings do not involve blood, but the giving of other gifts such as food, oil, water, yam, milk, honey, money and others. When blood is involved in making a sacrifice, it means that the purpose must be serious.

The Afterlife and the Final End

The central motivation in African Traditional Religion is the quest for life and its security. This is because life in African indigenous tradition is conceived as continuum, with a dynamism of rhythm and circles that follows the process of birth, death and rebirth. What is of paramount interest is that people can still have access to the eschatological realm of existence through rituals by invoking the powers of divinities to renew and revitalise their potentials, so as to put right any broken relationship during their life time. People’s hope is to join the rank of the ancestors in the spirit world, with all its rights and benefits and used their enhanced powers for the benefit of their families and clans

Admittedly, globalization, modernization and technological advancement have changed the entire narrative of African Traditional Religion. It needs to be pointed out clearly that, if at the close of the century the African, in sizable numbers, can still hold onto their indigenous faith and religious practices just as they did in early traditional societies, without succumbing to the influence of modernization and all that it brings along, then indeed it surely will survive. Therefore, the fact that African Traditional Religions in its structure, values, norms and several other tenets of this indigenous faith is undergoing rapid transition cannot be ignored. This fact has been well-established.

The clash between African traditional religions and Western modernity represents a complex interplay of cultural, spiritual, social, and economic forces. As Western modernity, characterized by technological advancements, globalization, and evolving societal norms, intersects with the deeply rooted traditions of African societies, a destructive dynamic has emerged. This essay delves into the multifaceted aspects of this clash, exploring the negative consequences on cultural heritage, spiritual identity, social structures, and economic well-being.

One of the primary consequences of the clash between African traditional religions and Western modernity is the erosion of cultural heritage. The imposition of Western values and norms often leads to the marginalization and devaluation of indigenous African traditions. This cultural erosion is not only a loss of rituals, languages, and customs but also disrupts the spiritual harmony deeply embedded in African traditional religions. Individuals may experience spiritual dissonance as they grapple with the conflict between ancestral beliefs and the pervasive influence of Western ideologies.

The clash with Western modernity has given rise to social upheaval within African communities. Rapid urbanization, shifting family structures, and the introduction of individualistic values challenge the communal foundations of African societies. Traditional social structures, based on collective responsibility and interdependence, are strained as Western modernity emphasizes individual autonomy. This disruption often leads to social disintegration, with generational divides and fractures within communities.

The economic consequences of the clash between African traditional religions and Western modernity are evident in disparities and exploitation. As modern economic systems take precedence, traditional livelihoods and sustainable practices are marginalized. Western models of capitalism may exploit African resources without adequate consideration for environmental sustainability and local economic well-being. This economic exploitation exacerbates disparities within African societies and contributes to cycles of poverty and dependency.

The clash between African traditional religions and Western modernity is also evident in educational systems. Western-centric curricula often overlook or marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, perpetuating a skewed understanding of history, science, and cultural practices. This educational bias not only contributes to the devaluation of traditional knowledge but also hinders the development of a holistic and culturally inclusive educational experience.

The clash extends to health and wellness, as Western medical practices sometimes overshadow traditional healing methods deeply ingrained in African cultures. Traditional healing, rooted in a holistic understanding of well-being, may be dismissed in favor of Western biomedical approaches. This clash can lead to a loss of valuable traditional health practices and hinder the development of culturally sensitive healthcare systems.

Conclusion

The clash between African traditional religions and Western modernity has brought about destructive consequences that permeate various aspects of African societies. Cultural erosion, spiritual dissonance, social upheaval, economic disparities, biased educational systems, and health challenges are interconnected facets of this complex dynamic. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced and collaborative approach that recognizes the value of both African traditions and the benefits of certain aspects of Western modernity. Through dialogue, mutual respect, and adaptive strategies, it is possible to navigate the clash in a way that preserves cultural heritage, fosters social cohesion, and promotes sustainable development in Africa.

However, the Poet, made it known in the poem that Modernity in the guise of Christianity had disrupted the the balance, the peace and identity of the traditional religion which features the African belief system, way of life, tradition, cosmology, norms and organization. Some may argue that it is ablessingin disguise but to the poet, Kofi Awoonor, it is nothing but a 'dirty patch'.

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