

COMMON PRACTICES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHERUBIM AND SERAPHIM CHURCH IN OGBOMOSO, OYO STATE, NIGERIA

Oladosu, Olusegun Peter

*Department of Christian Religious Studies
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo
08032688351/08051479746*

Email:oolusegun61@gmail.com/

Ph.D Student

*Department of Religious Studies
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo*

&

J.Afolabi Ampitan, Ph.D

*Department of Religious Studies
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo*

Abstract

The Cherubim and Seraphim church exemplifies a fascinating synthesis of African traditional religion and Christianity. The paper delves into the common practices shared by African traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church revealing a rich tapestry of spirituality such as prayer, song and sacrifice among others. This synthesis of African traditional religion in Cherubim and Seraphim Church reflects a dynamic, adaptive approach to spirituality, addressing the diverse needs of its adherents in line with their cultural background. The study adopts historical and theological analysis to unravel the common practices. By examining these common practices, this paper shed light on the complexities of religious expression in Nigeria, highlighting the blurred lines between traditional and Christian spirituality. Furthermore, the study offers recommendations that; African inculturation theology and African religious tradition and culture should be studied seriously, because they constitute the foundation for the possibility of meaningful interreligious dialogue in Nigeria; African traditional religious practices, beliefs and traditions should be preserved and documented so as to preclude cultural erosion and enhance intergenerational knowledge transfer; develop inclusive worship services that incorporate African traditional religion and elements, allowing adherents to express their spirituality freely and authentically and people should bear it in mind that they are serving the same God, and that the way of adoring Him is distinct.

Introduction

African traditional religion (ATR) and Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S) have some common attributes. This is in spite of the fact that the two did not start operating simultaneously. While African traditional religion had hitherto been in

existence before the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church started its spiritual activities in 1925 via the peripatetic ministry of Moses Tunolase Orimolade. It should be noted with utmost significance that the obvious significance gap in the formation of both does not impede certain common characteristics between the two. It can probably be conjectured that the Cherubim and Seraphim Church borrowed some attributes of the African traditional religion which are considered to be of enormous significance to its spiritual growth and development.

This borrowing by Cherubim and Seraphim Church from African traditional religion could probably be a way of converting adherents of African traditional religion to Cherubim and Seraphim Church in a simple way. While they still proselytes, they are convinced that what is found in their former faith is equally found in their present belief, therefore, it was easy for them to blend almost instantaneously, or at least at a later period in time. Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is to explore some common practices of African traditional religion and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria. Doubtlessly, there is inculturation in the religious practices of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

African Traditional Religion

There is no gainsaying the fact that African Traditional religion is indeed, not a fossil religion. Awolalu postulates that African traditional religion is the indigenous religion which Africans regarded as their authentic religion that passed from generation to generation.⁴⁶ Nwaoga, Nche and Olihe assert that it is a religion founded on African soil, and inextricably interwoven with the culture of the people expressed in their beliefs and practices.⁴⁶ George and Amusan pontificate that African traditional religion (ATR) is the fundamental religion of the indigenous African people in Nigeria and the belief and practices of ATR are based upon the faith of the ancient indigenous people handed down from one generation to another.⁴⁶

According to Ekwunife, ATR are those institutionalized beliefs and practices of Africans which are rooted in the past African culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in light of new experiences through the dialectal process of continuities and discontinuities. They centered on supernatural beings, ancestor worship, the belief in a spirit world and free will. They believed strongly that deceased humans (and animals or important objects) still exist in the spirit world and can influence and interact with the physical world.⁴⁶

Ugwu maintains that ATR is full of lives and activities through ceremonies, festivals and so on. It has values and places emphasis on virtues and morals.⁴⁶ Awolalu and Dopamu aver that the practice of ATR is based on African world view with a hierarchy of the following beings; belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, belief in mysterious powers and also the practice of magic and medicine each with its own consequent and attendant cult.⁴⁶ Uche pontificates that, the religion is not based on scriptures or chronicled on a founder. It is a community based religion that does so much to instill discipline on the people with lots of do's and don'ts. It is a guide to the life of an African. There are religious functionaries that facilitate the practice of ATR which include priests, priestesses, diviners, devotees, queens, rain makers, traditional healers among others.⁴⁶

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church

The Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church was founded in 1925 by the spiritual alliance between Moses Orimolade and Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church is a prominent African independent church in Nigeria.⁴⁶ The blending of different religious traditions is a common feature of African religious expression.⁴⁶ Nigerian worldview is intensely charismatic and alive; the gospel was interpreted in a lively manner and infused with many culturally relevant events.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church, arguably, is the name of the oldest and most prominent Yoruba Indigenous Church in Nigeria. This church was founded and led by the Yoruba. It is found in virtually every area occupied by the Yoruba. It became a full-fledged prayer group in 1916 in Ijebu-Ode. Prophet Moses Orimolade Tunolase, the acclaimed founder of the C & S, was a prince of Ikare in the Akoko Division of Ondo State. He was born in 1870 with physical disability in one leg. Prior to his ministry, he claimed to have seen a vision in which he was instructed to take water from the stream for divine healing. He obeyed the divine instruction and was partially healed, though he limped for the rest of his life. Due to this vision and the partial healing of his leg, his followers strongly believed that their church was not founded by an ordinary human being, but by the divine spirit.⁴⁶

As a result of this divine instruction and healing, Orimolade became an itinerant evangelist. He moved from one place to another for revivals that witnessed divine healings. He moved outside Yoruba territory to Ilorin, the present Kwara State capital, for revivals. There were great signs and wonders in Ilorin, but he did not plan to plant church. He proceeded from Ilorin to Ibadan, an important Yoruba city. In Ibadan, his ministry grew phenomenally and whenever he led prayers, miracles followed. He established a prayer band in Ibadan and later moved to Lagos. He lodged with a sexton of the Holy Trinity, *Ebute Ero*, Lagos in 1924.

In Lagos, he was given the name *Baba Aladura*, (i.e. the praying father), because he went from house to house praying for people's needs,⁴⁶ and his prayer were quite efficacious.

During the course of his evangelistic work in Lagos, Orimolade had an encounter with a young girl called Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon, who was a domestic servant in the home of Mr and Mrs Hunny Moitte. On June 18, 1925, Abiodun with her friends went to witness the *Catholic Corpus Christi* in Lagos. At this occasion, she had an encounter with a divine power, and went into a trance for many days. She did not regain consciousness until they sent for Prophet Orimolade to pray for her. After Prophet Orimolade had prayed, she recovered and narrated her divine experience. Her testimony attracted many people to her residence. This caused embarrassment for her master, who sent her back to Orimolade. In Orimolade's home, many people came for prayers and wanted to hear more about her testimony. Orimolade used this opportunity to establish a powerful prayer meeting in his house, which eventually culminated in the formation of the present C & S Church. Perhaps, one of the greatest secrets of the growth of this church is the endowment of God's power in Orimolade that manifested in healing, prayer and evangelism.⁴⁶

The name of the church came after a three-day fasting and prayer exercise. On the third day, September 9, 1925, a female member saw a vision with the inscription *SE* written in fire in the sky. The Reverend Barber of the United Native African Church (UNAC), Lagos, interpreted the letter as *Serafu* (Seraph, because these are the first two letters of the word seraphim). The whole congregation accepted this interpretation and the church adopted the name *Egbe Serafu* (the Seraphim Society). Later the word *Kerubu* (i.e. Cherubim) was incorporated and the name became officially known as Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S) Church. As a result of Abiodun's testimony and her other spiritual gifts, the church experienced tremendous growth. Orimolade and Abiodun were the two personalities that moved the church to greater heights. Orimolade recommended that the church continues to wear white garment for worship.

Nexus between African Traditional Religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church

In the modern society that is saturated with Christian thought and emerging movements, one still observes some notable influences of ATR in the affairs and religious lifestyle of adherents of C & S Church. The C & S still exhibit some common characteristics which show their affinity to their ATR. These common practices, however, do not suggest that the C & S Church does not trust in God; it shows, rather, the fact that Africans find it very cumbersome to leave their former way of life. Some of the common practices in ATR and C & S Church are found succinctly discussed below:

Both the African Traditional religion (ATR) and the Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S) Church are found in rigorous prayers. Prayer is a universal religious phenomenon because it stems from natural human disposition to give verbal expression on thought and emotion. Bandon observes that prayer is a universal religious phenomenon.⁴⁶ A common feature of ATR and C & S is their emphasis or reliance on prayer. The most significant feature of Cherubim and Seraphim Church in the view of Horton and Turner is the belief in the efficacy of prayer.⁴⁶ The Cherubim and Seraphim believe strongly that prayer to God, (if properly conducted) brings definite and predictable results in the world of space, time and events. It cures diseases, brings financial success, breakthrough, promotion and so on. The C & S Church sincerely believe in the power of prayer. That is why they are noted for praying vigorously and loudly. Often, they expect their prayers to be answered instantaneously, especially in cases of healing.⁴⁶ They hardly ever give up in any case no matter how hopeless or impossible, not even when it has become glaringly intractable. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church observed prayer and fasting in their true spirit as the twin pillars that support the system of spiritual, moral and physical discipline. They make retreats on the mountain, seaside and observed holy bath.⁴⁶ In the same vein, prayers are said in ATR constantly. Prayers can be said during an annual festival and it can be extempore. There is resilience in prayer in African Traditional religion. According to Awolalu, the world, according to the Africans, is the best place in which to live. Hence, it has been said that the Africans' attitude is world affirming, not renouncing. What is uppermost in the mind of an African man is to have life; that is, to have peace, happiness, good health, prosperity and longevity of life and he is ready to utilize whatever means by which such good things are available.⁴⁶ To accomplish these, Africans have the strong conviction that there is absolute need for prayer.

Prayer is a communication with God which includes listening to His words, worshipping, adoring and petitioning him as well as confessing and interceding for others. In the Old Testament, it is to call upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 15:2ff; 18:23ff), to intercede for Israel (Exo. 32: 11-13; 33: 12-16; Deut. 9: 18-21), to seek the face of the Lord (Ps. 100:2; 63:1ff) and to confess national failures and sins (Ezr. 9:6-15). In the New Testament, prayer is the ethos of the life of Jesus (Lk. 5:15ff; 6:12; 9: 28ff ; Jn 12: 20-28; 17:1ff) and is to be also that of his disciples (Matt. 6:9ff). Paul's letters contain prayers (Rom. 1:8-10; Eph. 1: 15-19) and exhortations to prayer in the spirit (Eph 6:18; 1 Cor. 14:14-16). Prayer is regarded as absolutely essential for all believers (1 Thess. 5: 17).⁴⁶

African Traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church believe in singing songs, especially choruses. It should be noted without any spirit of

immodesty that song can serve as a means of communication. African people are fond of singing. Music, singing and dancing, therefore play important roles in worship. The people have many musical instruments that accompany songs. The commonest are drums and gongs. Music is employed during communal worship, on festival occasions and at funeral rites. There are usually occasions for singing and dancing. Ritual songs are accompanied with clapping, drumming and dancing. People on these occasions may also go in procession from the temple of their divinity to the town, and there will be much singing and dancing.⁴⁶ Song enhances emotional and physical participation and or gyration in an act of worship and they often lead to ecstatic experiences. Ecstatic experiences and possession by the divinity form an indispensable part of worship during the annual festivals of certain divinities like *Sango*, *Oya*, *Osun* and *Ogun* in Yorubaland. At such times, the singing and dancing penetrate wholly into the very being of the worshipper and the force and energy with which they are performed provide an outlet for the worshippers' enthusiasm for the divinity so worshipped. A possessed devotee may give a message from the divinity.⁴⁶

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church has features that differentiate it from the mission churches. A common feature is the African mode of worship, which employs singing, clapping, dancing and stamping of feet. Most of the songs rendered are usually in the Yoruba dialect. At the church's inception, spontaneous compositions accompanied by ringing of bells and drumming were employed. Musical instruments play vital roles in the liturgy of the church. They function as accompaniment to singing and other musical performances. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church started with a few traditional musical instruments, such as *Agogo* (bell), *Sekere* (rattle), *Apepe* (clappers), and *Akuba* (drum), *Gangan* (talking drum) among others. Most of these are equally found in African Traditional religion. In point of fact, they were borrowed from the indigenous religion. African Traditional religion was using these, even before the advent of Christianity in Nigeria. Recently, the prevalent use of Western musical instruments dominated the instrumentation. Bass, Rhythm Guitar, Saxophone, Trumpet, Clarinet, Flute, and keyboard, violin among others are now the vogue.

Besides, Africans really believe that the outward form of worship actually has a symbolic significance, totally different from the imagination of a casual observer. Interaction with the divinities, therefore, is to be carried on not simply through direct personal communion, but also through such bodily actions as kneeling and raising up of hands, through sacred dances and songs. For example, during congregational worship, each worshipper may stand or kneel, while the officiants, usually the priest or priestess stands, kneels or genuflects in front of the shrine. At times, the worshippers will bow their heads and some parts of their bodies, while women may tie their clothes above their breasts. All these are the outward expressions of reverence or respect before the divine. The act of kneeling and

raising the hands, followed by the bowing of the face to the ground, correspond to the behaviour of the vassal in the presence of his king. Here, we find sociological patterns giving meaning to a theological phenomenon. And so, in religion, these acts symbolize the submission of the supplicants to a will higher than his or her own.⁴⁶ Indeed, this is rife in both African Traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

Again, sacrifice in African traditional religion is the act of offering the life of an animal or object to the divine power or powers. It forms an essential part of every religious ceremony, and it is fundamental to worship. Sacrifice is primarily a means of contact or communion between the divine and man. It serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship. It is also valued as the most effective means employed by man to influence the divinity to be interested in human affairs. Right relationship with the divinity, as well as his favour, will be secured by giving him his dues. Different things can be offered to a divinity, depending on his taste and the occasion of the sacrifice. Among other things, sheep, goat, cow, fowl, pigeon, egg, yam, rice, porridge and other food items can be offered as sacrifice. But as each divinity has his taste, each also has his food taboo.

Sacrifice may be exposed at cross-roads or at the market place; they may be buried, they may also be shared as communion or as a sign of friendship, in which case the sharers regard themselves as having communion with their god. It is believed that primarily, all sacrifices belong entirely to the divinities. That is why certain sacrifices cannot be shared among worshippers. Also, the way certain sacrifices are treated hinges markedly on the prescriptions of the oracle. African people know that whatever person offers as sacrifice expresses his/her attitude to the Supreme Being or Deities.⁴⁶

Sacrifice in the Law of Moses is the offering to God of oxen, sheep, goats and pigeons to be killed and then either eaten before the Lord or consumed by fire is central. There was the sin-offering (Lev. 4:1-35; 6: 24-30), the guilt offering (Lev. 5:14; 6:7), the burnt-offering (Lev. 1) and the fellowship- offering (Lev. 3). Each day in the temple, animals were sacrificed to be burnt-offering to God (Exo. 29:38-42; Num. 28: 3-8). They were accompanied by offerings of cereal/grain.⁴⁶

In the same vein, there are some sacrificial rites of Cherubim and Seraphim that resonate with rites in African traditional religion. For example substitutionary sacrifice. This is common among Cherubim and Seraphim church. In most cases, animals are used as substitutes for men's lives. The animal may be killed and its blood used for rituals in order to ward-off the evil intentions of the wicked ones, either physically or spiritually. Fatokun posits that this ritual sacrifice is prevalent

most especially in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church and it is tagged *femi r'emi* (which means substituting life for life).⁴⁶ In some cases, a coffin is procured in which the cloth of the sick or victim of attack and some other materials like sponge are contained. After the deliverance rite has been performed, the coffin will be buried to substitute for the death of the person. This is similar to what is obtainable in African traditional religion whereby in substitutionary offering, a ram or sheep is slaughtered or clubbed to death according to the dictate of *Ifa* oracle.⁴⁶ A piece of cloth or banana throng or mat is used to bury the dead animal. What is more important in this ritual is that an animal substitutes for the life of a human being.

The Cherubim and Seraphim also have similar sacrificial practice. Whenever a member is facing hardship or misfortune in business, the prophet may ask that, for peace and progress to be restored, the person would need to appease his/her ancestors through some rites. Hence, it is a common thing to see some Yoruba (who are members of Cherubim and Seraphim Church) carrying bean cake or other rites to the graveyard of their dead parents. It is believed that such peace or propitiatory offering will appease the aggrieved parents and result in positive response. At other times, the rite may be in form of a gift to the beggars on the street or the needy, or in form of provision of food items for little children. This is known as *ipese*.

The places designated for ritual performances which also have parallel operative scheme in African traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim include road junctions, river banks, groves and mountains.⁴⁶ The Cherubim and Seraphim Church is noted for its profound use of streams and hills. Some Cherubim and Seraphim Church structures are erected near streams because of their constant use of streams and water for therapeutic purposes. In the African traditional religion, the use of *Osun* water by barren women is pronounced. Also, the symbolic use of the term *agbala* (backyard) by the Cherubim and Seraphim is reminiscent of the traditional belief of the *babalawo* (herbalist) compound where herbs are prepared for clients. From all the foregoing, it should be noted that ritual activities in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church entails not only curative but also preventive, diagnoses, prescription and control of temporal-spatial events. Testimonies are given that people of diverse diseases receive their healings through all these combined activities.

Also, there is the strong conviction in the usage of object. An African does not believe in abstract faith, he believes in means and concrete objects. The traditional healer met this by providing him with charms, amulet etc. Africans believe in objects that can be regarded as sacred. Thus, they hold tenaciously to objects that can preclude them from imminent danger. The Cherubim and Seraphim church imbibed this by holding tenaciously to its usage of holy water,

candles (white, red, blue) and incense. The Cherubim and Seraphim church had provided Christians with answer for the patient's existential challenges. It supplements his abstract faith with objects such as consecrated water, candles and incense to ward-off evil spirits and witches.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is apparent that African traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church share a link in relation to the cultural worldview that is common to them. It is also clear that the Cherubim and Seraphim Church groomed amidst the culture, has borrowed a lot from the culture to enhance its acceptability among the African people. Through the engagement of the aforementioned elements in Cherubim and Seraphim Church, it is observed that the African socio-cultural and religious worldviews are important to the survival of the church. Through these elements, the members of the church are careful about the world they live in and those they relate with. In the course of appropriation of the natural and synthetic elements in African traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the ideas about the ability to control spiritual issues and augment, safety are reflecting glaringly. This shows that African traditional religion and Cherubim and Seraphim have certain things in common, because the various religious elements discussed in this paper are contagious for the two religions.

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