

CHRISTIANITY AND THE PEOPLES CULTURE

Christianity, by virtue of its peculiar divine merits and universal scope, is far above the culture, customs or traditions of any peoples – be they Jews, Greeks, Romans, Britons or Nigerians. Though it is possible to reflect a people's culture in its practice, there can be no harmony between it and any culture or tradition that is based on idolatry or superstition. And so whenever any aspect of a people's culture runs counter to the tenets of Christianity, the only path of honour open to anyone who, indeed, is a disciple of Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures, is to reject such a culture and subject himself to the will of the Most High God.

According to *The Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia*, culture is the “way of life of a society, without implication of refinement or advanced knowledge”. And *The American Peoples Encyclopedia* defines it as “The total round of human activities, not due to heredity, shared by members of a group”.

As regards the origins of the various cultures of people in the world, historians and social anthropologists have expressed difficulties that beset their inquiries. Thus we find Professor E. O. James of the University of London, in his *History of Religions* stating: “We just do not know, and we have no means of finding out, exactly when, where and how the various traits of what we call collectively ‘culture’ came into being and precisely what form they took.” However, what is certain is that every race, tribe or nations has a cultural history. With the passing of time and increase of knowledge as well as the interchange of ideas with other peoples various cultures have changed or developed from stage to stage. And it has also been stated that “some cultures are more conservative or more resistant to change than others, and part of a culture may change rapidly while another part is little affected”.

The claim that differences in racial ability are responsible for the variety in the cultures of peoples cannot be scripturally or historically substantiated. And so today, any claim to racial superiority on the basis of culture is unjustified. On this score, *The American Peoples Encyclopedia* states: “Such claims have been disproved by archaeologists and historians who have shown conclusively that peoples once far advanced have sunk into oblivion. At the time Egypt led in civilization, Greece and Rome possessed simple cultures. In classical times the later were dominant, and the peoples of central and northern Europe were living under primitive conditions. The time came, however, when these very backward peoples became world leaders.” – Vol. 6, page 622.

God Almighty who knows the end from the beginning made an auspicious promise to Abraham that in him and his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. (Genesis 12:3, 18:18) The birth of the Jewish nation was a stage reached in pursuance of the Lord's promise. Their culture, customs and traditions were based on the laws of God that were given them through Moses. It was by reason of those divine laws that they were easily distinguished from the Gentiles not only as a great nation but also as “a wise and understanding people”. – Deuteronomy 4:5-7.

The culture and customs of the Israelites were by all standards more purposeful, more significant and of higher qualities than those of the gentile nations. While the way of life of the Jews was directed at the clean worship of the Almighty God, the Creator and Possessor of heaven and earth, the other nations were doing service to things which by nature were no gods – the works of their own hands.

Heathen Gods

The gods of the heathens even up till this day have always been made of wood, silver, brass, gold, stone or clay. They worship the planets and even the meanest of creatures. Do some not worship lizards, snakes, fishes, crocodiles or even flies? Are there not those who have trees – the oak tree, palm tree and so on – as their gods? Do others not worship the god or goddess of the sea to whom they make libation? And what about road junctions? Are they not of “special significance” as centres for sacrifices?

Nothing else could account for all this than total blindness of the mind or crass ignorance at the instance of satan the devil who is capable of inducing man into making an ass of himself. Otherwise how could man who is endowed with intelligence by the benevolent and all-wise Creator set up piece of wood or an image made of clay and pray to that inanimate object to protect him or bless him with children and other good things? Or how could man who is the image of God and who is made to have dominion over all other creatures on earth, stoop so low as to regard the crocodile, snake, lizard or fly as his superior, deserving reverence? Yes, well did the Psalmist say: “Man *that is* in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts *that* perish.” – Psalm 49:12, 20

With regard to the gods of the heathens it is written in the Psalms: “Their idols *are* silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; *so is* every one that trusteth in them.” (Psalm 115:4-8) Viewed against the background of the religious system of the heathens in all the world -Europe, Asia, Africa and so on – it is understandable why their cultures and traditions based on superstitious tendencies are fundamentally the very opposite of the expressed will of the Almighty God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Paganism

It is a known fact of history that the cultures of the various tribes of this country, like those of other parts of the continent, were basically associated with the worship of ancestors, pagan gods and such like. Professor J. F. Ajayi in his work, *Christian Mission in Nigeria 1841-1891*, wrote about the complex religious system of the people which he said “was not so much a matter of personal beliefs as the culture of the whole of the community”. He added: “The welfare of the individual, the family, village or larger community was believed to depend on the members severally and collectively maintaining the right relationships with the ancestors, gods and other

unseen powers through a complex system of rival observances. There were beliefs of course, about the organic philosophy of the community, the proper relationships between the gods, between them and man, man and woman, the living and the dead; beliefs about the mysteries of life, sickness and death good and ill fortune, and so on.” – Page 4-5

This fact is also well acknowledged in the *Nigeria Handbook* 1970, published by the Federal Ministry of Information. Under the subject “Culture”, it is written: “With almost all people, traditions and cultural achievements can generally be traced to expressions of religious belief. In time past it is probably true that most of the dwellers in what is now Nigeria were animists...”

The *Nigeria Handbook* 1970 further stated: “Some of the traditional festivals are reserved for special occasions such as the play, performed in Lagos, usually in honour and remembrance of some great sons of the past. This play, in which several eyes or houses take part, symbolizes the spirits of the ancestors returning to bless the people. It is also a reminder that ancestor worship holds a high place in traditional beliefs... In Southern Nigeria the preparation and ceremonies for installation (of chiefs) may... often involve traditional rites performed at the old shrines and sacred groves...”

It continues: “Closely allied with this adherence to tradition are the customs associated with the preservation of the memory of ancestors. These include the observance of the second burial ceremony in the case of the recently departed... and the observance of annual ceremonies in honour of the old, gods. Among the Yoruba peoples of the Western State of Nigeria it is said that there were over 400 different deities and even today ceremonies are observed for the god of Iron, or Shango (the god of thunder) for Olokun (goddess of Sea) and many other deities too numerous to mention... Seedtime and harvest, fishing and hunting, birth, marriage and death each have their dance and ceremony invoking the pleasure of the gods and success in the undertaking. Many of these dances involve the wearing of masks which may be an artist’s interpretation of the spirit said to preside over the particular event being celebrated, which brings us to another form of tradition.” – Pages 65-66

If ancestor worship and the observances and rituals for the god of iron, or god of thunder, or goddess of the sea as shown in the foregoing, are not paganism, what are they?

From all indications, subtle attempts are being made by certain people who persuade Government to use tax payers’ money in the guise of reviving culture to instal paganism as a sort of national religion in this country.

We are not saying that pagans and all others outside the Christian Faith should not project their culture or tradition. There is freedom of worship or religion for all and sundry in this democratic country; but has anyone the right to use the Nation’s money owned by the tax payers who belong to various religions to boost or revive a particular religion of his liking?

“Cultural Revival”

Some now take the “cultural revival” to mean the restoration of long-forgotten, antique ancestral shrines with all the rituals, and a projection of fetish or juju even in its basest form. And there have been reports of missing persons in the country and some are suspected to be victims of ritual practices. Will the sort of cultural revival now going on not encourage perpetrators of such iniquitous acts?

The most unfortunate aspect of the whole affair is that it is not only the heathens who engage themselves in this paganish exercise but also some who profess to be Christians; they cherish these heathenish activities and are grossly involved in them – all in the name of “cultural heritage”. Thus said God Almighty: “...Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people *are* vain: for *one* cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They *are* upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also *is it* in them to do good.” – Jeremiah 10:2-5, See also Leviticus 18:24-30, Romans 3:29-31, Matthew 5:17-19

Whoever calls himself a Christian but is not given to understand in the light of the Scriptures that the “Gentile times” are ended and gone forever, needs be pitied. For a Christian to join or take part in paganish activities is very mean indeed and is a sin to the core. To such erring Galatians St. Paul wrote: “Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you...” – Galatians 4:8-11

Cultural Heritage

If there is anything of virtue, and if there is anything of pride or rather glory, Nigeria has to present to the world in her cultural heritage at this stage of her advancement, it is not, definitely not, her competence in idol worship, or display of demonic masquerades carrying dreadful images with jaggy teeth and horns; obviously, it is not her parade of nude young women or those who are scantily clad with a few rounds of beads on their waists. It is gratifying to note that some columnists have come out in strong condemnation of what have been described as “these immoral practices that are clouded under the façade of cultural revival”.

Mr. Olu Makinde had the support of decent people when he wrote under the heading, “CULTURAL REVIVAL OR PORNOGRAPHY?” thus: “Apart from the official frowns upon whatever seems to threaten the sanctity of sex or anything which degrades its meaning, I am at a loss to figure out why a person capable of retaining an enough presence of mind should revel at the sight of bare-breasted teenagers hopping publicly and exhibiting their sacred parts to curious onlookers under the pretext of a so-called cultural renaissance. It is nothing short of pornography incarnate.” – *Daily Sketch* July 17, 1974, Page 3

If the tendency is to present to the outside world at the festival how primitive Nigerians still are then all that is savage, all that is wild, all that is immoral in their culture should feature at the show; then demonised juju priests should be brought to demonstrate how they are capable of eating the raw flesh of dogs and of leaking all sorts of blood; fierce masquerades should all come with whips to administer strokes of their canes on spectators; and men and women in the nude should not be left out. Or are these not parts of Nigerian culture? Let us hope that those at the head of cultural matters will be able to discern and discriminate as to choose what in the people's culture are noble, decent and of merit socially, morally and intellectually.

There is much in African culture that can be projected with dignity and honour, even in Christian worship without offending against the laws of God. Our songs, dances and modes of dress should be aimed at giving glory to God Almighty rather than glorifying idols. But there are several obnoxious and even abominable things in our culture which should only be treated as things of the past. This, of course, is not peculiar to Africa. Our forebears relished in those things because of the circumstances of spiritual darkness – gross ignorance of God's purpose – that pervaded their times. The opportunity of enlightenment consequent upon the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and other developments which the present generation has, was not available to them. It will be sheer self-deceit to think that times have not changed, and not to change with times. Knowledge, true knowledge of God, should make us feel the sense of shame over certain aspects of the cultures of our people.

Is it not true that some who appear to be modern and sophisticated are in reality primitive, uncouth and old-fashioned at heart? Is there not cause to suspect that to some who are over-zealous about cultural heritage, human sacrifice may still mean a thing of relevance? Only God knows what people do in secret. However, it is certain that no one can escape the consequences of his doings. Said God: "Woe unto the wicked! *it shall be ill with him*: for the reward of his hands shall be given him." – Isaiah 3:11, see also Proverbs 11:19-21, 2 Corinthians 5:10

What about Ifa – the oracular deity? Is it not paganism? Those who believe in it say it does some good. But we see it as a weapon of the devil in dividing people and causing confusion. And Chief Adewale Fashamu was being honest when he stated that "there were some unscrupulous diviners who manipulate the Ifa in the interest of the highest bidder in a dispute". (*Daily Sketch* of August 5, 1972) Have people not been accused of witchcraft or other wrong deeds of which they were, in fact, innocent? Superstition and speculations are its stock-in-trade. No true Christian will have anything to do with such aspect of the people's culture.

Another thing is the practice of circumcising women. It is not from God. Circumcision, which is God's own institution, began with Abraham the faithful. And God ordained that only males should be circumcised. (Genesis 17:10-14) But its pollution by the gentile nations brought about the circumcision of women which is now also a part of the people's culture.

Medical doctors know and have condemned the evils of women circumcision. A 20-year-old housewife was once reported to have suddenly collapsed and died shortly after she had been circumcised. The report, according to the Nigerian Observer (September 2, 1972) said that "the woman started bleeding profusely after the operation which was done in accordance with the

age-long tradition of the people". Attempts to rush her to a medical clinic were said to have been "rejected by some villagers who contended that treating her in hospital was untraditional and abominable".

These are a few instances of the aspects of the people's culture and customs that are inconsistent with the laws of God as enunciated in the Scriptures. True Christians must keep away from them. It is a sin for a Christian to compromise with idolatry. St. Paul charged: "But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils." – 1 Corinthians 10:20, 21, see also 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, 1 John 5:21

Much is being done on the aspect of cultural dances, some of which still need refinement. But have Africans or Nigerians, to be nearer home, not some games by which their culture can also be projected? Why are some of these games which require tact, real exercise of the intellect and which are amusing or entertaining not developed to international standard? And while talking of African cultural renaissance, African States are spending much money on football, cricket, hockey, tennis and other games which are products of the same western civilization. Is the style of wrestling so in vogue and which people view in TV our own? Or is boxing an African game?

It appears the leaders of thought on African culture are losing sight of many things that could manifest the intelligence of Africa but stressing on things which in this age are primitive, savage and of no consequence.

Christianity

The idea that Christianity is the "white-man's religion" or a part of Western civilization is very wrong indeed. This is the ignorance of our people. The European or American has no right whatsoever to lay claim to Christianity more than the African. The fact that the Europeans came in contact with the Christian gospel earlier and had the advantage of first being in possession of copies of the Holy Bible does not in any way place them in a position of superiority over Africans in God's order of things.

Indeed, some of the prophets of God whom He inspired to write the Bible were black men: Job, Solomon and Jeremiah were black. The prophet Solomon said: "Look not upon me, because I *am* black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; *but* mine own vineyard have I not kept." – Song of Solomon Chapter 1 verse 6

And so in Christianity, the blackest man in Africa has the same opportunity as the "whitest" man in Europe, America or elsewhere. Even the natural Jews who were once the Lord's favoured people and from among whom Christianity originated have equal opportunity with any other race

that accepts Christianity. When knowledge of this divine fact was revealed to the apostle Peter at the time of the conversion of Cornelius, he declared: "...Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." — Acts 10:34, 35

To regard Christianity as a religion of any particular tribe, race or nation is a blatant error. Christianity is for all the world irrespective of nationality, race or colour. (Matt. 24: 14; 28: 19, 20; Acts 1: 6-8) Jesus Christ is the promised seed of Abraham through whom God had purposed to bless all the families of the earth. (Gal. 3: 13 – 16) Simeon, that devout man, spoke of him as "a Light to lighten the Gentiles".

It could be recalled that when some of the Jews in their characteristic obduracy rejected and opposed the Christian gospel, St. Paul and Barnabas told them in plain language: "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting lasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation into the ends of the earth".—Acts 13: 46, 47.

Christianity aims at the universal modification of the various religious systems, traditions and cultures of all peoples of the world, and at directing all men to the clean worship of the Almighty Creator through one and the only mediator, Christ Jesus. It was the stubbornness of the Jews and their failure to understand and appreciate this divine purpose of Christ's mission on earth that led to their rejection of Christianity to their own grief and ruin. And their suffering even up till now cannot be dissociated from their attitude of having treated the grace of God with contempt.—John 1: 10, 11; Matt. 23: 37-39; Acts 13: 44-52.

And so today a Nigerian or Ghanaian or any other national who accepts Jesus Christ and worships God in truth stands a better position to claim Christianity than a Jew who is an agnostic or a non-Christian. In true Christianity there is no room for tribal discrimination or racial segregation. And St. Paul said: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: FOR YE ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS."—Gal. 3: 27, 28.

What the colonists brought to Africa was nominal Christianity. It is replete with anomalies both in doctrinal content and in other practices for which there can be no scriptural justification. This is by no means saying that the missionaries did not do good works but there were observances brought under the cloak of Christianity which, in fact, originated from Romish paganism or were features of European culture.

To blame whatever was their shortcomings on Christianity is most unfair—it is an error of judgment.

Any nation that denounces Christianity and will not serve God through Christ will be cutting off itself from God's universal arrangement, and the consequences will be disastrous. As it is written;

“And He (God) shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you... And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not fear that prophet (Christ Jesus), shall be destroyed from among the people.”—Acts 3: 20-23; see also Isa. 60: 12; Jer. 10: 10, 11: Rev. 14: 6, 7.