Syncretism in Two African Cultures

Diane Simpson

The University of Western Ontario

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol2/iss1/13
Syncretism in Two African Cultures

**Keywords**
religion, Islam, Christianity, Tswana, Nubian, Africa

**Creative Commons License**

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
For hundreds of years religion has formed the basis of society. It not only provided the ideologies, social, economic and political structures of society but, in some cases, was the sole basis for community life. This is definitely the case when considering the traditional religions of those who inhabit the African continent. Religion is a general belief in a spiritual world that helps to guide and give meaning to the living. Africans, in this sense, were religious people, their religion was the central institution around which communities were built. Each African group was a complete social, economic, religious and political entity – their religions, however, were not universally held beliefs. Consequently when organised religions invaded the continent, and sought to exert their ideologies, transformations took place among the traditional societies. What did these transformations entail? How did the African people deal with these transformations? The answers are not easy, as each cultural group in Africa is unique, with their own history, their own adaptations to varying geographical environments, and widely varying traditional systems of belief.

In seeking answers to these questions a comparative analysis of Islamicization and Christianization is useful. Through studying the arrival of these religions in Africa and the alterations they implemented, an adequate understanding of the adaptations Africans made can be grasped. Adaptation was not one-sided, however. Both Christianity and Islam were forced to accommodate certain necessary traditional beliefs. Thus syncretism comes into play as a working solution for religious institutions to accommodate each other’s belief systems. Syncretism is an attempted reconciliation of conflicting or opposing beliefs, the development of a religion by the subsuming of older forms (New Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus, 1991:1003). Through an analysis of the arrival and survival of Christianity among the Tswana of Southern Africa and Islam among the Nubians of East Africa, syncretism becomes apparent.

THE TSWANA AND THE NUBIANS

Though completely different groups, the Tswana and Nubian peoples shared general religious beliefs and practices, as do many traditional societies on the continent, a fact which suggests to many a common origin. These beliefs and practices include the following common elements: belief in a supreme being, belief in spirit divinities, belief in life after death, the existence of religious personnel and sacred places, and the belief in witchcraft and magic practices (Gordon and Gordon, 1992:224). To these people, the world held no mysteries. Death was not a puzzle to them because when someone died they simply carried on with their designated work, which entailed watching over the well-being of the rest of the community. Their god was as much a part of creation as he was a creator (Alverson, 1978:15). These beliefs and practices are often referred to as animist beliefs, that is, the belief in a doctrine that all life is produced by a spiritual force separate from matter, and all natural phenomena have souls independent of their physical being.

Geography plays a role in characterizing the beliefs and ideologies of individual groups. It is here that differences arise between the Tswana and Nubian traditional belief systems. The Tswana were self-sufficient agricultural and pastoral people, practicing hoe agriculture and rotating fallow (Alverson, 1978:9). They depended, for their livelihood, on seasonal rains. Consequently, many of their ceremonial practices centred around this dependency (Pauw, 1960:31). The Nubians were located on the Nile river, so the Nile became a dominant theme in their lives. Many elements of Nubian traditional belief system centre around the Nile, such as Mela ikam ijinaman and aman mitu, the river angels and the water people. The Nubians believed in a world within the river in which the river angels and water people lived, and a large set of beliefs surrounded this world (Kennedy, 1978:15). Did Christianity and Islamic beliefs destroy these customs, practices and ideologies? Did the Nubians and Tswana abandon all characteristics of their traditional beliefs? Not entirely, though the syncretisms generated by Islamicization and Christianisation in these areas of Africa were quite different.

THE TSWANA AND CHRISTIANITY

The Tswana are a group of individual chiefdoms located in what is now Botswana and South Africa. Their first contact with Europeans came at the close of the eighteenth century, shortly after the London Missionary Society arrived in Tswana in 1816 (Lye & Murray, 1980:65). It was this group of missionaries that were the leading influence on the Tswana throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The London Missionary Society held that the natives lived in moral chaos, and condemned many of the Tswana beliefs and practices (Schapera, 1970:24). Robert Moffat, a missionary with the London Missionary Society, wrote home in 1842:

Indifference and stupidity form the wreath on every ignorance, the grossest ignorance of Divine things, forms the basis of every action, it is only things devilish which stimulate to activity and mirth...only satiate their mundane spirits by perpetually going, and we are all that is good ... (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986:3)

The missionary would establish a relationship with the chief of a given chiefdom and would interest him in material goods that would better his people, items such as the plough and weapons to ward off intruding groups or other Europeans (Schapera, 1970:38). The chiefs would then invite the missionaries into the villages and the missionaries would begin preaching to the "barbarians" the good of Christianity and how to travel the road to heaven. Christianisation was sudden, resulting in quick changes in religious ideologies soon
followed by more sweeping changes effected by colonialism and imperialism.

**THE NUBIANS AND ISLAM**

Islamicization of the Nubian people was, by contrast, a far more gradual process. Unlike Christianity, Islam was not introduced (at least initially) by missionaries. Instead, Islamic warriors, nomads and traders travelling through Nubia spread the word of Islamic beliefs (Jennings, 1991:545). Christianity had already been in the area for a few hundred years, but had not had a significant impact on the Nubians, who still practiced most of their pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. (Trimingham, 1980:24).

By 640 A.D., through conquest, Egypt had fallen under Islamic control. From this foothold in Egypt, the Islamic religion spread south as a result of informal missionary efforts by merchants and clergy (Gordon and Gordon, 1992:242). As a result, Islam became the religion of the rulers and the elite in eastern Africa. By the eighteenth century, Islamic ideas were spreading from the upper classes down to the masses. Whole-hearted adoption of Islam only came with the formation of indigenous clerical families who spread Islam from one Nubian community to the next (Trimingham, 1980:24). In the nineteenth century, Islamic ideas of Jihad and brotherhood of all believers helped natives combat European imperialism. While many adopted Islamic faith for the practical reasons of banding together and countering imperialism, the Nubian people also followed Islam because of its relative liberalism towards traditional beliefs (Gordon and Gordon, 1992:244).

**SYNCRETISM**

In most regions the tenor of Islamicization was one of lenience, while that of the Christianization of the Tswana was harsher and stricter. This becomes especially apparent when analysing the impact that each organized religion had on each indigenous society. In particular, missionaries in the Tswana region required converts to follow certain outward observances. These included the wearing of European clothing, abstinence from native beer, ceremonies, the giving of bogadi (bride wealth), polygyny (allowing more than one wife), and the use of magic. The natives were led to understand that through the observances of these rules, salvation would be obtained. These rules, in effect, formed the essence of being a true Christian (Pauw, 1960:218).

Islamic beliefs were filtered into the system and not preached or enforced by missionaries. Nubians were not forced to abandon traditional practices. In fact, many of the beliefs held by Islam are quite compatible with traditional Nubian beliefs. One example of this is Sufism, a mystical practice that correlates with some of the rituals performed among traditional Nubians. It advocates asceticism and meditation as a means of achieving rapturous union with the divine (Trimingham, 1980:24). Observance of Islamic rules rose not out of enforcement, but rather through an understanding and respect for the Islamic doctrine. The Nubians adopted Islamic clothing in response to the Islamic sensitivity to nakedness (Jennings 1991:546). It thus becomes apparent that the changes that took place among the Nubians were from within, while those among the Tswana were enforced from outside. This difference can be directly associated with the amount of time over which Islamicization and Christianisation took place: the former being gradual, the latter sudden.

The changes which took place during this transition period were surprisingly similar, involving, as they did, two major themes: the dwindling of the ancestor cults and the transition from a small scale family based society to a universal belief system. The disappearance of the ancestor cult among the Tswana was implemented through a series of alteration imposed by the missionaries. One of these alterations involved the practice of burying church members in consecrated plots on the outskirts of villages. Soon after, it was suggested that all people should be buried in these plots. Previously, the Tswana buried their dead at home, promoting the belief that the deceased would watch over and protect the lineage. Thereafter, by removing ancestors to an area separate from the lineage base, the illusion of ancestral spirits was destroyed (Schapera 1970:150). The abolishment of the ancestral cult was also related to the transition from a society based on small lineage groups to a universal cosmology with many members. Consequently, the patrilineal lineage group which, in the past, was the centre on which village life was based, lost much importance. The central element of socialization and community life was now the church. Unlike the Nubian people, the Tswana were being Westernized, as it was the missionaries who were considered the most significant educators of Western ideology in colonial Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1986:14). This ideology centred around universal views which debased the family as the sole institution of subsistence strategies and socialization processes.

The main changes among traditional beliefs of the Nubian peoples were similar to those of the Tswana, yet were gradually implemented, thereby acceptance was through a complete understanding of the ideologies underlying Islamic customs. The disintegration of organized cults of ancestors and community spirits governing social life was gradual. In time the Nubian people began to replace polytheism with the worship of one God. Ancestors became paralleled with Islamic saints, they became mediators between themselves and God, old Nubian holy men and women were venerated after death and shrines built to which pilgrimages and sacrifices were periodically made (Jenning, 1991:546).

Islam, like Christianity, is an impersonal and abstract system, compared with the diversity and complexity of the Nubian way of life. The Nubian people transformed their society from being lineage-centred to being centred on the Mosque, with fewer problems and conflicts than the Tswana. The sole reason for this was that the introduction of Islam among the Nubians was characterized by a series of gradations which acted as insulators gradually exposing Islamic radiations upon the communities of Nubia. Impersonal and abstract elements which might undermine or discredit the traditional social system were not stressed (Trimingham, 1980:41).

Islam was centred largely around legalistic and politically structured legislation, legislation which impinged on all aspects of life. The changes imposed by this can be seen today, but their impact was gradual, only slowly affecting the structure of Nubian society (Trimingham, 1980:41). In general then, it is reasonable to think that the psychological shock of the phasing in of the new religious ideology was not as substantial among the Nubians compared to those among the Tswana.

The psychological shock of new religious ideologies replacing traditional belief systems is curbed by the
phenomenon of syncretism. As defined previously, this refers to the accommodation of two belief systems towards the beliefs, rituals and practices of each other. Among the Nubian people these beliefs and practices arose in the form of a final stage of a long process of two religions living alongside one another until the newer one, Islam, subsumed the older one. Among the Tswana, syncretism arose as a solution to conflicts that had come about through drastically different approaches to life.

**Syncretism of the Tswana religion and Christianity**

Among the Tswana, syncretism took place in two forms, substitution by the Tswana of previous beliefs and rituals within the Christian church environment, and the church’s modification of certain practices in order to adhere to the needs of the Tswana people. Though the church tried to abolish traditional practices they were not able to completely wipe them out. Consequently many of the traditions that the church did not adopt into its doctrine still continue today. These traditions include initiition ceremonies, the giving of bogadi and the consultation of native doctors (Pauw, 1960:121). The Tswana seemed to have few problems with maintaining these traditions outside of the newly adopted Christian ideology. The traditions they no longer adhered to included those that the church had incorporated into its doctrine, and those that had become adequately replaced by elements of the Christian religion.

The Christian church modified and adapted in a number of ways in response to traditional beliefs. This modification included the traditional rituals and beliefs that had found their ways into the churches, and new rites that had been formulated as a substitute for traditional ritual. An excellent example of the relocation of a traditional ritual to the church is that of rain ceremonies. Within the Christian church, prayer meetings had been devised to promote the falling of rain upon crops. This provides an excellent example of Christian adaptation because of rain rites uniqueness to traditional beliefs. Rain was material in its connection with food consumption among the Tswana, and their traditional beliefs dealt with real factors connecting the Tswana with the world in which they functioned (Pauw, 1960:209).

Most Christian beliefs and practices dealt with concepts foreign to the everyday lives of people. The Christian church was forced, in order to promote conversion, to alter this approach to a more concrete one. Other rites the church adopted were services for the birth of a new born child, memorial services some time after the death of an important person and, divining through the use of the bible as opposed to the traditional practice with dice (Pauw, 1960:209).

The elements of the Tswana traditional religion which found substitutions in the Christian church were the replacement of the lineage group as a socializing agent and community base, and the replacement of the ancestor cult. The decline of the importance of lineage groups as socialisers and community bases correlate with the rise of the missionary schools and church events. Subsequently the focus of life was transferred from that of the family to that of the church. The church was now the basis around which social events and functions operated. The patterning of church offices tended to directly reflect the pattern of traditional lineal political organization (Pauw, 1960:120). The church was the basis from which everyday life functioned systematically and successfully. Connected very closely with these ideas was the decline of an ancestor cult. God had become the sole coordinator of life, thereby devaluing the powers possessed by ancestors. Instead, the idea arose that ancestors spirits stood in an intercessory position between the living and God. Instead of looking to the ancestors as controllers of seasonal patterns, the Tswana looked to God (Pauw, 1960:32).

Syncretism arose among the Tswana to accommodate the beliefs of both the church and traditional Tswana practices, thereby creating a working environment for the Tswana people.

**Syncretism of the Nubian religion and Islam**

Syncretism was a different scenario for the Nubian people. The Nubians, over the years in which Islam exerted its beliefs, had merged their ancient belief system with the newer religion in many ways. This was possible because of Muslim theology condoning beliefs in angels, devils and mystical forces. Islamic theology allowed traditional beliefs to prevail as long as they were adjusted to fall in place within an Islamic scheme in which the absoluteness of Allah (God) remained unquestioned (Jenning, 1991:546). Thus the assimilation of the Nubians’ traditional veneration of nature prevailed within the new belief system. Subsequently many Islamic ceremonies within the Nubian communities contained elements from their traditional past. The Islamic Zikr ceremony is an excellent example of elements from pre–Islamic times in a non–traditional ceremony. These elements, which arise at the closing of the ceremony include water, dates and rice. Each of these items hold a special value in Nubian culture. Water as a symbol of the Nile and a necessity for successful harvesting; rice representing a multiplicity of grains and blessing symbolizing their agricultural past; and dates as a reminiscence from pre-dynastic times (Jennings, 1991:547).

The syncretism of Nubian ceremonial practices generally contained three categories of customs and beliefs: non–Islamic or strictly pre–Islamic practices; popular Islamic or those elements compatible with both traditional and Islamic practices; and Orthodox Islamic elements–those that contained strictly Islamic elements without the influence of Nubian traditional beliefs (Kennedy, 1978:8). Non–Islamic practices, which were still carried out in rural communities, were those concerned with the spirits and beings of the Nile and crisis rites. Though these are facing decline today, the survival of these practices over hundreds of years stresses not only the importance of these practices to the people, but also the Islamic tolerance and acceptance of elements foreign to, though not directly contradicting, their own doctrines (Trimingham, 1980:44).

There are many factors which further emphasize the syncretism which so naturally arose between the two religions. Mentioned previously was the tendency for many Islamic beliefs to parallel with those of the Nubians. Musha(-)hara is an example of this being the Islamic belief closely associated with beliefs in sorcery and the evil eye. This belief correlates with the Nubian belief in witchcraft and magical abilities (Trimingham, 1980:44). Furthermore, when assimilation took place between African institutions being assimilated into the Islamic institutions, the situation was reversed. For instance, in the social institution of marriage, the bride price system remained the basis and the Islamic system of payment of the
bride was incorporated into this Nubian system (Trimingham, 1980:44). Acceptance and adaptations of both belief systems unfolded over the years.

As with the Tswana, however, some of the beliefs held by the Nubians seemed to stand in striking contrast with Islamic beliefs. These contrasts centred around seasonal rituals, priestly privileges and the great importance of traditional seasonal festivities. The Nubians, now following the Islamic God, adapted their rituals and festivities to centre around this God. They now conceded that the rains were sent by God, yet the timely arrival and welfare of the villages and fields of grain depended on performances, dance and calls for plentiful rains (Bauman, 1987:90). More specifically the Nubians believed that God created the world and also ordained the order which causes crops to grow, harvesting to be successful, and rains to fall on time. But only by natural observances by the Nubian people and priestly ritual can that order ordained through God be maintained (Bauman, 1987:107). Thus justification in the realm of the Islamic belief system had been created in order to maintain traditional practices that were seen as necessities for the successful passing of the days.

CONCLUSION

Syncretism was the result of a compromising relationship. It was in no way one sided. Both the traditional religion and the organized religion made adaptations in order to assimilate dissimilar beliefs into one working system. This was the case with both the Islamic movement and the Nubians and the Christian movement in Tswana. The circumstances underlying each regions’ road to syncretism were remarkably different, yet similarities could be drawn from the methods of adaptation made by all involved. It cannot be said that syncretism is a final stage in the assimilation of two conflicting belief systems. The world is not static and subsequently neither are the foundations of religious beliefs, especially in light of present day ideologies. In time, it may be that syncretism is merely a stage on the road to a completely new religious ideology, or it could itself provide the basis for a lasting religious belief system.

REFERENCES


