African Christianity:
The search for an African Personality

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Abstract

African Christianity, as the synthesis between Christianity and African Traditional Religion, seems to evoke an inquiry relating to the issue of African personality. Scholars such as Blyden and Damuah viewed African converts as extenders of alien traditions by turning away from their own. For this awareness, both scholars proposed an alternative approach – that is, the resuscitation of African persona, whereby African Christians can resuscitate and grow their own indigenous traditions, focusing on the African Traditional Religion in particular, and cease to extend alien traditions, which are often put together with African ideals. Using a qualitative research approach, in the form of document analysis, this paper critically examines the advocacy for African personality by Blyden and Damuah and the reasons for calling for such an approach.

Keywords: African Christianity, African Traditional Religion, African Personality.

Introduction

In the words of Joseph Galgalo (2012:5), "[t]here is a paradox at the heart of African Christianity. It is vibrant and growing but at the same time shallow and superficial." It is characterized by the struggle for authenticity, uniqueness and identity (Oden, 2007:93). On the one hand, it is a form of resistance against the early missionary activities and their presentation of Christianity in a western apparel; and on the other, a search for self-actualization in a convoluted interplay between the African religio-cultural and African identity. There is no single way of defining identity. Some scholars look at it in two different but complementary ways. Hammond (1980:2) stated that:

> The first way of looking at identity suggests the immutable, or at least the slowly changing core of personality that shows up in all of a person's encounters, irrespective of differing role-partners. The second way suggests the transient and changeable self as persons move from one social encounter to another, offering a somewhat different identity, as it were, in each place.

Commenting on the two ways of looking at identity, Oppong (2013:13) also stated that the first way of conceptualizing identity "brings up the issue of involuntary dimension of identity, while, the second raises the issue of adaptability of identity". This means that the involuntary dimension of identity concerns the elementary core of personality, which does not change or at least changes slowly over a long period. Whereas the adaptability of identity concerns the transitory changes and developments in identity that occur due to new life experiences, and social milieu outside of

primary groups. With this interplay in mind, one may ask: What makes African Christianity Christian?

Moreover, is the distinction often made between 'African Christians' on the one hand, and 'Christian Africans' on the other? Noticeably, there are various answers and interpretations to these questions. However, in whatever way one might look at this, the two expressions 'African Christian' and 'Christian African' seem to imply different connotations. The concept of 'African Christian' seems to denote a Christian convert who is fully aware of the religio-cultural demands that are aligned to the African identity; whereas the notion of 'Christian African' seems to imply a convert that is primarily Christian, but who also happens to be African (Galgalo, 2012:5).

An African Christian therefore may be a Christian convert that lives within the world that is referenced by the religio-cultural underpinnings of his or her African heritage and acknowledges them as his or her own. A Christian African, on the other hand, may be a Christian convert who upholds the teachings of scripture without giving due regard to his or her religio-cultural heritage and leaves it behind as if it is not his or her own. The fact that he or she is an African happens to be a mere coincidence, which has no bearing on his or her Christian status (Galgalo, 2012:5).

Against these contrasting ideas, it is worth asking another question: How do African Christians practice their Christianity, within the African context, without betraying their heritage? Alternatively, Is it the betrayal of their African heritage that makes them authentically Christian? Two prominent scholars, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1967:241) and Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah (1971:8), seem to have attempted to respond to this enquiry. Their views, even though longstanding, remain as valuable as the first time they were communicated.

These scholars saw African converts to Christianity as extending alien traditions and turning away from their own. For this awareness, they proposed an alternative approach – that is, the resuscitation of the African persona, whereby African Christians are encouraged to resuscitate and grow their own indigenous traditions and to cease extending imported religious and cultural traditions. This paper therefore critically examines their debate on the matter, and the reason why they advocated for the resuscitation and growth of the African personality.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, in the form of document analysis, was used in this study. Document analysis refers to the use of documents that contain information about the phenomenon that the researcher wishes to study (Bailey, 1994:194). It involves the study of "existing documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:3). It is a research technique that is "used to categorize, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, most commonly written documents whether in the private or public domain" (Payne & Payne, 2004:61-65).

In this study, the researcher used both primary and secondary documents. Primary documents refer to originally written materials by the author, reflecting their own experiences and observations, such as the accounts provided by Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah. Secondary documents, on the other hand, consists of public materials that are derived from secondary sources – that is, from someone other than the original author (Neuman, 2000:395). In compliance with this, secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed articles were used where appropriate. The researcher interpreted these documents in order to give voice and meaning around the topic of African Christianity: The search for an African Personality.

Christianity in transition

Living in an age where the gravitational pull of Christianity has moved from the Northern continents to the South, where Africa has a "pride of place in this shift", it may seem paradoxical to ask this question: "Is Christianity in fact suited for the African?" (Bediako, 1995:3). Even though the first response would immediately draw upon Biblical accounts, where Africa features significantly in Biblical literature, the not so obvious response regards the ownership of Christianity by the Europeans. One scholar, who appears to have been bothered by this was Edward Blyden[1].

Blyden was a pioneer in the fields of basic research in African history, sociology and anthropology. He (1967:241) and appears to have been bothered by the observation that "since Christianity left the place of its birth, it has seemed to be the property exclusively of the European branch of the human family". Convinced that Christianity was not a European religion, he argued that it should not be localized. He asserted that:

> Christianity is not only a local religion, but it has adapted itself to the people wherever it has gone. No language or social existence has been any barrier to it; and I have often thought that in this country [Africa] it will acquire wider power, deeper influence and become instinct – with a higher vitality than anywhere else (Blyden, 1967:89).

Because Christianity has often been treated as 'property exclusively of the European", he wondered if it was suited for Africans. His argument was based on the foul treatment, which was given to Africans by the so-called 'Christians'. He wrote that:

> When we look at the treatment which our own race and other so-called inferior races have received from Christian nations, we cannot but be struck with the amazing dissimilitude and disproportion between the original idea of Christianity, as expressed by Christ, and the practice of it by his professed followers (Blyden, 1967:89).

It was this from of Christianity, in the hands of Europeans, that made Blyden question its suitability or relevance for the Africans. As a continent, Africa carries a profound history in terms of Christianity, particularly when one considers the history of Egypt, Ethiopia, early Portuguese Catholic missions (around the *'padroádo'* period - 1450-1790 CE) and the arrival of Dutch Protestantism in the Cape of Good Hope (Sundkler & Steed, 2000:45; Kalu, 2013:32; Oden, 2007:78f; Kruger, Lubbe & Steyn, 2012:12). A great number of scholarly and historical works documents the beginnings, development and influence of Christianity in Africa (Hastings 1979:5f). These include an extensive quantity of biographical works on early Christians, Church Fathers, and various synods that were held, which debated important doctrinal matters that helped advance the traditions of the modern-day Christian Church (Oden, 2007:122).

These were synods in which renowned African writers whose works are regarded as monumental, particularly those from Carthage and Alexandria, were directly or indirectly involved (Isichei, 1995:23). The list of these African writers include the likes of Didymus the Blind, Minucius Felix,

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[1] Edward Wilmot Blyden was a West Indian-born Liberian citizen, statesman, diplomat and educator.

Arnobius, Lactantius, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine and many more. These African writers extended the influence of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond (Hastings, 1994:65–66). However, because Europeans claimed Christianity as their own property, they tended to undermine the long-standing traditions of Christianity in Africa and used it to colonize other cultures (Oden, 2007:78).

Having experienced harsh treatment from the so-called 'Christians', Blyden concluded that "it was not Christianity which held greater promise for the enhancement of African life [...]" (Bediako, 1995:13). For that reason, he advocated for the resuscitation of an African Church that would be African, not an English re-production, and yet that would make Africans feel the spirit of communion with all God's saints of old, at present and to come. His advocacy led to the formation of the United Native African Church in Lagos, which preceded the twentieth-century existence of massive African Independent Churches (Blyden, 1967:vi).

Even though Blyden perceived the unsuitability of Christianity in Africa, he did not offer a lasting solution to this dilemma. Blyden described some distinctions between the character of the European which was plainly displayed by violence, brutality' and crudeness; whereas the African character, on the other hand, was spontaneous offering goodwill, but was sadly seen as deficient by the European (Blyden, 1887; 1994). He, however, shaped the intellectual debate on the call for the Africanisation of Christianity and the non-localization of Christianity by Europeans. Indeed, his advocacy for Africanness or 'African Personality' and 'race integrity' left a lasting legacy for African scholars to develop. In this vein, I wish to extend the debate. Is it still beneficial to continue blaming Europeans for making Christianity their 'exclusive property' even though there has been a gravitational shift from the Northern to Southern continents?

Certainly, the Southern continents have a significant role to play in the reconstruction and personification of Christianity henceforth. If the shift has indeed occurred, what are Africans doing with Christianity in order to challenge the prevailing status quo? Are they re-acting against the European precedence or working towards re-defining Christianity for themselves and for their context? In that case, what guides or informs their practices in re-defining Christianity within their African context?

'African Personality' – A Damuahan approach

One of the prominent African scholars who has engaged with the subject of African Christianity is Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah[2], formally known as Father Vincent Kwabena Damuah, born in April 1930 in *Wasa Amanfi* Traditional Area in Ghana. In his PhD thesis[3], presented at Howard University in 1971, Damuah made an important observation that no study has, before then, given an "ideological perspective within the framework of the African Personality". His notion of "African Personality" regards the discovery of authentic African or native values that can be grown from within to the outside, instead of Africans becoming extensions or offshoots of other traditions. Damuah was an earliest member of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) who

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[2] For a full biography of Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah and his significant contribution to African intelligentsia, see Kwame Bediako (1995:18ff). "Christianity in Africa: the Renewal of a Non Western Religion". Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press.

[3] Kwabena Damuah (1971). *"The changing perspective of Wesa Amanfi Traditional Religion in contemporary African" (PhD thesis).* Washington, D.C: Howard University.

resigned in August 1982, left the Catholic Church and founded an "Afrikanist" religion (Ray, 1986:32).

He described this ideology in the following manner: "The main trend is to discover our own authentic native values and grow from those roots rather than trying to be an extension or offshoot of other traditions" (Damuah, 1971:8). Damuah was advocating for the internal transformation of African values and the intensive growth of such ideals to be sustainable. He desired these to be validated at an international scale. In that regard, he proposed the systematic affirmation of five "leading ideas".

These are: *(i)* the profundity of Traditional African Religion and how it pervades every aspect of traditional Africa; *(ii)* how this characteristic is ingrained even today in the twentieth century non-Westernised African; *(iii)* how Christianity and Islam do not seem to satisfy adequately Africa's quest for identity and self-determination; *(iv)* how a reconstructed Traditional African Religion may be considered as a likely answer to Africa's search for freedom and self-determination; and *(v)* that Traditional African Religion can exist in its own right on equal terms with other religions within an ecumenical framework (Damuah, 1971:8).

In his exposition of these five "leading ideas", it becomes evident that Damuah takes the position that what is held to be cultural is valid, simply for being cultural. He argued that "[c]ulture itself becomes the measure of value", an out-working of his ideological commitment to the profundity of traditional religion[4]. Using his own native background – the *Wasa Amanfi* culture of Ghana, he considered culture "as a locus of divine self-disclosure through the traditional religion" (Bediako, 1995:24). Hence, his discussion on the matter is crested by a section titled 'The Search for a New Synthesis', which reveals the complexities that are inherent in African identity.

In this substantive chapter of his thesis – *'The Search for a New Synthesis'*, Damuah highlighted what he considered to be the complexity in African Christianity:

> When it comes to religious values, contemporary Africa is the battleground of four contending forces: Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam and religiously indifferent materialism. The traditional religions seem to be everywhere in decline, in step with the dissolution of traditional society. There is no attempt to capitalize on any specific traditional religion. Nowhere in Africa is there anything parallel to the organized pressure for a return to Hindu theocracy found in India, State Shinto in Japan, or even to the politicization of certain types of Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Damuah, 1971:95ff.).

The fact that traditional religions were marginalized and were on the wane in Africa seemed to displease Damuah. Worse than that, he had observed that African converts to Christianity had

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[4] A number of scholars seem to think that there is little doubt about the intimate link between religion and culture (Marty, 1972:5-21; Stout, 1975:204-224; Padgett, 1980:55-77). This means that religion can be used as a point of reference for ethnic identification. Abramson (1980:869-875), for instance, argued that in some instances, such as the Amish, Hutterites, Mormons, and Jews, ethnicity equals religion. By implication, this means that were it not for religion, these ethnic groups would have not existed.

"un-acknowledgedly" began to infuse African traditional values with Christian belief systems. He noted that:

> [M]any Christian churches have been rapidly Africanising their clergy and hierarchy and also incorporating traditional African musical and artistic forms into their services and religious edifices – overall, Christianity's image in Africa is still that of a de-Africanising institution, whose educational and proselytizing practices lead to the adoption of an alien culture and a turning away from African roots (Damuah, 1971:102ff).

By infusing African traditional values with Christian belief systems, Damuah saw African converts as extending alien traditions and turning away from their own. For this awareness, he proposed an alternative approach – that Africans must resuscitate and grow their own traditions, in particular the African Traditional Religion, and cease to extend alien traditions with African ideals. He attested that:

> The time has come when the African intellectual must take a new look and help resuscitate Traditional African Religion so that she can take her rightful place in the struggle for liberation and self-determination. The fact that she has been able to survive despite the encroachments of Christianity and Islam, is an indication that there is something in the tradition which God wants preserved (Damuah, 1971:153).

This is where Damuah seems to have invoked the notion of 'African Personality'. He, however, did not coin the concept of 'African Personality'. He borrowed it from the writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden. In "Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race", Blyden had urged his educated and Westernized Liberian audience to study African indigenous institutions and customs – 'we must study our brethren in the interior, who know better than we do the laws of growth for the race' (cited by Bediako, 1995:24). In this manner, Blyden was developing the concept of 'African Personality'. He insisted that:

> The African must advance by methods of his own. He must possess a power distinct from that of the European. It has been proved that he knows how to take advantage of European cultures and that he can be benefited by it. This proof was perhaps necessary, but it is not sufficient. We must show that we are able to go alone, to carve out our own way. We must not be satisfied that in this nation [in this case Liberia] European influence shapes our policy, makes our laws, rules our tribunals and impregnates our social atmosphere. We must not suppose that the Anglo-Saxon methods are final, that there is nothing for us to find for our own guidance, and that we have nothing to teach the world. There is inspiration for us also (Blyden, 1967:7).

The most important objective of this concept is that Africans must be able to go alone, to carve out their own way and not be satisfied by the fact that Europeans or Anglo-Saxon trends or methods of doing things influence them. In this line of thought, it is clear that Damuah explicitly

valued the African Traditional Religion, as his own cultural tradition and saw Christianity as the accommodation of religious convictions and practices. He argued that "[a]ll of us have to serve God, and the best way to do so is through our culture" (Damuah, 1983:1). He attested that God is satisfied with the widow's mite and we do not need foreign exchange to fulfil this duty. Therefore, he concluded that the African Religion has a lot to offer the world and that Africans cannot afford to neglect their heritage – "this is our choice and a challenge" (Bediako, 1995:29).

Why call for African Personality?

Both Blyden and Damuah seem to have advocated for African personality because of the inability of Africans to go alone, to carve out their own way and their contentment in relying on European or Anglo-Saxon methods of doing things. This form of heavy reliance on imported knowledges and methodologies, therefore, is perceived as the restrictor or hindrance that thwarts the growth of indigenous traditions. Of course, Africans have benefited from these imported knowledges. However, they must learn to stand-alone and advance by their own methods (Blyden, 1967:7).

They must possess some level of command and autonomy distinct from that of the Europeans. It has been proved that they know how to take advantage of European cultures and that this benefited them. Perhaps, this proof was necessary. Nevertheless, as Blyden (1967:7) argued, "it is not sufficient". Africans must show that they can stand-alone and are capable of carving out their own way. They must cease to let European *epistemes* influence or shape their policies, makes their laws, rule their tribunals, and influence their religious and socio-cultural interactions.

They must not presuppose that the Anglo-Saxon methods are final, that there is nothing for them to find in their own heritage, and that they have nothing to teach the world (Blyden, 1967:7). As Damuah (1971:153) insisted, "[t]he time has come when the African intellectual must take a new look […]," work towards the advancement of the African heritage and cease to place more value on foreign traditions. Such continuation in this regard constitutes as an epistemic violence to the African heritage. As a form of knowing, *episteme*, together with its parallel concept, *techne*, have dominated the Western thought since the Renaissance. Taken together therefore, *episteme* and *techne* "are judgments about how knowledge is to be verified, codified, and expressed, once it has been discovered" (Wears, 2004:15).

Because there are no scientific grounds in which to verify, codify or quantify the reliability of the African heritage, Europeans, among others, continue to undermine indigenous knowledge systems. They opt for open-ended descriptions of the African heritage. Misguided and derisive terms such as superstition, idolatry or primitivism are often used for indigenous systems of expression and knowledge. These have become fixed categories in which to classify aboriginal, otherwise known as 'illegitimate' systems of knowledge. This epistemic injustice must end. Hence, relative epistemologies must come to play in order to reconstruct these distortions (Mokhoathi, 2019:33). This is the way forward, which both Blyden and Damuah proposed – that "[t]he main trend is to discover our own authentic native values and grow from those roots rather than trying to be an extension or offshoot of other traditions" (Damuah, 1971:8).

Conclusion

From the writing of both Blyden and Damuah, it appears that African converts to Christianity are viewed as extending alien traditions and turning away from their own. For this awareness, these scholars, in different measures, proposed for an alternative approach – that Africans must grow their own traditions, in particular the African Traditional Religion, and cease to extend alien

traditions with African ideals. They indicated that the time has come for African intellectuals to introspect themselves and adopt approaches that will develop their own indigenous traditions rather than extend foreign traditions. Using the Traditional African Religion as an example, they insisted that homegrown ideologies and heritages could be universalised. In so doing, both of these scholars advocated for African Personality. Their notion of "African Personality" regards the discovery of authentic African or native values that can be grown from within to the outside, instead of Africans becoming extensions or offshoots of other traditions.

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