

RELIGIOUS INTERACTION AMONG THE AKOKO OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper discusses Religious Interaction among the Akoko of Nigeria. The work explores Christian-Muslim relation in Akokoland and specifically examines why Christians and Muslims have lived in peace since inception till date. The paper defines the Geographical location and the people of Akokoland. It discusses the advent of Islam and Christianity in Akoko. It examines the features of Islam and African Christianity. The paper highlights the facilitating factors, mode, and way of interaction. It gives suggestions and draws a conclusion. In our finding, it is discovered that in Akokoland, Muslims, Christians, and African religion live in absolute peace since the introduction of the religions into the area. The secret of this success is discovered to be hinged on mutual respect, accommodation, tolerance dialogue, and understanding among the religions in the area.

Keywords: Religious Interaction, Akoko, Nigeria

Introduction

Interaction is the activity of talking to other people and understanding them. It is a reciprocal action. Religious interaction is the understanding between two or more religions.

The key objective of this paper is to discuss Religious interaction among the Akoko of Nigeria. It aims at exposing African Cultural Revolution. The paper explores Religious interaction in Akokoland and specifically examines why Muslims and Christians and Afrelis have lived in absolute peace for a very long time now. This work is limited basically to interaction among the people of Akoko. Akokoland is used as a case study for the entire Yoruba of South West.

In an attempt to achieve this objective, we will indentify the Geographical location and the people of Akokoland. The advent of Islam and Christianity in Akokoland would be

discussed. The features of Islam and Independent African Christianity will be identified. The work will highlight the facilitating factors and mode of interaction, give suggestions, and draw a conclusion.

Geographical Location and the People of Akokoland

Akokoland is situated in the North East part of Yoruba land and Northern side of Ondo State. It has a common boundary with Edo State, Kogi State, Ekiti State and Owo division respectively. In the North, the area is bounded by Kogi State; in the East, it shares a common boundary with Edo State, while in the South and West, it is infringed by Owo Division and OmuoEkiti State respectively. The area is presently divided into four Local Government areas of Ondo State namely AkokoNorht east, North West, South East and South West.

The people occupy forest area where rainfall is moderate all the year round. They belong to the 'Kwa' sub-group of Niger-Congo family language (Adediran 1985:17; Akinjogbin 1985:35). The people have a common identity with Akoko Edo and Owe, Bunu, Ijumu-Kabba. They were once under the influence of Okene and Kabba during the Sokoto Caliphate (Murray Last 1967, 1977). The people occupy forest area where rainfall is moderate all the year round. The common cash crops grown by the people include: Cocoa, Kolanut, and coffee, while the major food crops are Yam, Cassava, Cocoyam, plantain and maize. The people have big rivers which drain their land and make the land fertile for agriculture. Such rivers include Awara River in Ikare, Ugbo and Ajuwa rivers in Okeagbe among others. The animals common in this area include: deer, antelope, grass cutter, and monkey. The occupations of the people in this area apart from farming include hunting and trading.

The area is full of mountains and hills. These hills and rocks served as hidden places and sources of protection for the people during the "various wars in Yorubaland in the late 19th Century (Hogben 1967:158). This is why 'The people of Afa, Oge, Ido, Aje and Oyin for example, settled in one place after the war". Today, these towns have formed the present Okeagbe and speak four variations of AkokoYoruba dialect (Adamolekun, T. 1984:2). This could probably be the reason why most towns and villages in the area came together to form big towns. The present town of AjowaAkoko where people who formerly lived in various clusters came together is also came in mind. Ajowa town is a typical example of this post war reconstruction of the area.

The people of Akoko claim that their forebears came from Ile-Ife probably in the 19th Century. Akoko people have different Yoruba dialects peculiar to them which are not

easily understandable to other Yoruba groups. In Okeagbe for instance there are four dialects in one town, so also is AjowaAkoko. This is why people usually use the Biblical adage for Akoko people that it is where “God confused the tongue or language” of His people (see RSV Bible Gen. 11:6-8).

The language of the people can play a great role in explaining their identity. Within the towns in Akoko area, there are different villages that understand the dialects of one another. The people of Oyin, Arigidi, Erushu, Afa and Igashi towns speak the same dialect; the people of Oka, Ishua, Ifira, Shosan and most villages in the present Akoko south speak the same dialect; the people of Eriti, Afin, Irun, Iro, and Eshe speak the same dialect with Ekiti. Akoko people, though claimed to have come from Ife in the 19th century, are probably influenced by their closest neighbours as seen from similarities in their dialects or languages and cultural affinity.

The Advent of Islam and Christianity in Akoko

In this section, we shall discuss the indigenous religion, the coming of Islam and advent of Christianity so as to ascertain the level of interaction and understanding among the people and their religion.

1. The Indigenous Traditional Religion of the people:

The people of Akoko practiced their indigenous religion before the coming of Islam and Christianity. This indigenous religion cut across different towns and villages with different names; and their festivals were held at different periods of the year.

The commonest local divinities of most towns and villages are ‘Imole’ (fetish) and ‘Egungun’ (masquerade). Imole in Akoko could be compared to orisa divinity in Yorubaland. This ‘imole’ could be a person believed to have been deified at his death and it could be a spirit in the river; while ‘egungun’ (masquerade) among Akoko people is “the concept of reincarnation in a materialized form, which is a robe figure or masquerade (Adedeji 1983:117f).

In Oyin town, they have four different ‘imole’ namely “imoleohun, imoleneje, imoleooto and imoleOloni” (Ogungbemi and Olupintan interview 1984). They also have two types of masquerades which indicate the presence of their ancestors in the midst of their people. These masquerades are called “EgungunGbede”. They came out once a year during “AkaraItan” (i.e Beans cake) festival. The people of Okeagbe have five types of imole and egungun masquerades. These are: Ene, Olomi, Imene, Aya, while the masquerades are

“EgungunGbede,Oluderi, Ede and Aborogin”. These masquerades came out at different seasons of the year. The Erusu people worship “ImoleOlu and EgungugnArimisewa” while the people of Arigidi worship “ImoleAmo O and Esi” in addition to Egungun Ede which they claimed to have brought from Ekitiland. Eriti people have four types of imole namely “OrunEriti” ‘imoleohun’, imoleiyago and imoleOgoho”. Ogun (god of Iron) is worshipped in Oba Akoko in addition to OrisaAlala, Orisainuri, and OrisaKlenmen.

One can therefore infer or conclude from the evidences of divinities above that before the advent of Islam and Christianity to Akokoland, the people had already had their own indigenous divinities which were worshipped and various festivals associated with the divinities regularly worshipped. Their devotion to these divinities dictated their attitude to the new religions of Islam and Christianity.

2. Advent of Islam: Islam entered Akokoland before Christianity. Islam came through trade with the Northern people. Islam entered Akokoland through Okene in the North and Agenebode in Edo State. In 1895 according to Hogben (1967:58)

The Nupe Fulani had over run nearly all that country inhabited by the Aworo, Kakanda, Yagba, Bunu, Igbira and Akoko peoples. The latter (that is, Akoko) had the unhappy experience of being raided by Nupe, Ilorin and Ibadan.

The statement of Hogben (1967) above made one to suggest that Islam entered Akoko through Okene since the then Colonial resident had her headquarter here at this time, and besides, Akoko was under Okene then.

Islam is very strong in Ikare, Afin, Eshe, Irun, Eriti, Ogbagi in Akoko South West area. Islam entered Akokoland through Okene, Igara, Afamai, Auchi,Ilorin and Agenebode. The Fulani Jihad of Sokoto Caliphate that overthrew Ilorin (Murray Last 1967, 1977) had great impact on Akoko people. Some of our old Muslim informants related how they served as slaves in Ilorin and Okene area.

There are substantial numbers of Muslims in Akokoland today. Although the numerical strength of the Muslims is not upto the number of Christians in the area today, yet a sizeable number of Muslims can be found in Ikare, Eshe, Irun, Ogbagi, Ifira and Afin which are strongholds of Islam in Akokoland.

3. The Establishment of Christianity in Akokoland:

Christianity according to Akeredolu (1986) entered Akokoland through Oba in 1896. This was Anglican (Orthodox) brand of Christian mission. The 50th Jubilee anniversary for the establishment of Christianity in Akokoland was observed in 1948 thus confirming the actual time of the genesis of Anglican mission in Akokoland. It was the soldiers that returned home after the inter-tribal war under the command of Ogedengbe of Ijebuland in the early nineteenth Century that brought Anglican brand of Christianity to Oba Akoko in 1896. These returned discharged soldiers who later returned home to be vanguard of Christianity in Akokoland include Akiti, Isaiah, Samuel Olamudun, Atere (leader) and Omosanya (Adamolekun 1984:7). It was Omosanya who took the responsibility of gathering the new converts together to form Anglican Church. These people later requested for a teacher or leader (as it was called then) from Ilesha to lead them. A leader was sent to them. From Oba, Catechists were sent to places like Idoani and Ikare thus the seed of Christianity was planted in Oba, Idoani and Ikare in that order respectively.

Although Rev. Leanon was generally accepted as the architects of the Anglican mission in Akokoland, Anglican Church was already planted before Rev. Leanon came. However, it was Leanon who consolidated the Christian mission work in Akokoland (Akeredolu 1986). Rev. Achdeacon Leanon first settled in Oba Akoko before his transfer to Ikare. Leanon worked in Oba during the reign of Chief Olaluya as the king of Oba (interview .O. Arepo 1984). When Leanon moved to Ikare, he sought the help of the resident District officer (D.O as was called then) for the establishment of Anglican mission in Akoko. The resident District Officer gave the early Christians in Akoko the necessary support and protection which enabled them to worship with minimum resistance from the traditionalists and Muslims.

The protection given by the District Officer helped Christianity in Akokoland. From Ikare, Anglican Church brand of Christianity spread to other towns and villages in Akokoland such as Okeagbe, Oka, Ishua, Ipesi and Ajowa. The influence of Rev. Leanon was very strong as he served or acted as the District Officer in Akoko when the incumbent District Officer (D.O) went to Britain on leave. Leanon's influence in his capacity as a Government Official assisted the planting of Christianity in Akokoland.

African independent Christianity (Aladura) was established in Akokoland in 1930 and 1941 respectively during the revival and missionary trip Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Joseph Ayodele Babalola to the area (Alokan 1991 Olusumbola 2001). Moses Orimolade according to Omoyajowo, J.A (1982) was born in Ikare Akoko in 1879. He established

Cherubim and Seraphim church at Ikare and Okeagbe from where it was spread to other areas in Akokoland. The Christ Apostolic Church was established in Akokoland by Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1930. Babalola and his revival group visited many towns and villages in Akokoland for one month. He left representatives behind at Ikare and Oka who eventually established C.A.C church in this area. African Independent Church (Aladura) appealed to Akoko people as many towns and villages embraced this brand of religion. The Cheribum and Seraphim Church (C and S); Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), the church of the Lord, Synagogue church, and Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) (that come later in 1980s) spread all over Akokoland today. The population of these independent African Churches put together is more than the number of converts of orthodox churches. Infact, many of the converts to these African Independent Churches in Akokoland are drawn from Islam, traditional Religions, and Orthodox churches. The factors responsible for the influence and growth of Independent churches in Akokoland will be seen in the features of the Independent African Churches which is our next discussion.

Features of Islam and Independent African Christianity (Aladura)

Islam and Christianity are alien religions in Nigeria. They both met traditional African religion on ground. The Religions of Islam and African Christianity have some features that attract the people to them. These things do not contradict African culture; unlike Orthodox Christianity that condemned almost everything African. Islam and African Christianity did not condemn them. This attitude of not condemning some African religions practices enhanced the interaction of the religions.

Features of Islam:

Islam as a new religion in Africa brought a new set of beliefs, new set of values and new culture. It is non-racist like Orthodox Christianity. Islam preaches and practices equality among believers. It is a religion characterized by its very simple doctrine. No imposition of monetary subscriptions in Islam. Its laws either from the Quran, the Hadith or other Holy books, contain no complicated disputes such as the essential nature of the God-head; its message is that “there is one God, Allah; and Muhamad is the prophet of God”. Although Islam is a challenge to indigenus life, the challenge is not so sharp, it is neutralizes by the similarities rather than contrast between traditional African religions and Islam. Islam has similarity with Traditional African religion in these areas: one, priest of traditional religions and Islam similarly worship as well as dispense herbs and divine oracle. Thus the Muslim

cleric or evangelist is both preacher and herbalist. Two Help or aids to the afflicted, the depressed and the sick, through the help of Muslim cleric and priest of indigenous religion consisted of sacrifices and application of charms. Three, Islam and Traditional religion is similar in the area of family and the relations among the component members. Monogamy is not ruled out but it is not the order. African religion took wives according to his means and betrothals are in vogue. A man could have many wives if he so wished and the relations between the husband, his wives and the children as well as the kinsmen and relatives are governed by conventions among Africans and by the Quran, the Hadith and the principles of the Sharia among Muslims. Both conventions are very similar. Four, another similarity between Islam and some indigenous beliefs, practices and social conventions is inherent in mass participation in ceremonies and other acts of worship. Generally speaking, a lot of pageantry accompanies Muslim's ceremonies and the outings of adherents of indigenous religions. Thus, to a vast majority of converts, Islam did not completely detach them from their roots; since Islam did not completely uproot the tap-roots of African culture. Five, another feature of Islam is that it gave African literacy. As Islamic education grew and Islamic institutions emerged in Yoruba land, many indigenous people acquired the knowledge of reading, writing and conversing in Arabic language. Arabic is even translated into Yoruba language.

The above mentioned features and similarities in Islam and traditional religion make interaction easy and possible in Akokoland.

Features of African Christianity (Aladura):

African Christianity in this context refer to Independent African churches (Aladura) that take root in Africa whose founder and leaders were the indigenes of Africa. The leadership and founding of the churches are not based on the frontline orthodox established churches. These churches include: The Church of the Lord, Cherubim and Seraphim Church; Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, Celestial Church and the like (G.A Oshintelu 2007).

The African Independent Churches have some distinct characteristic which mark them out from the mainline orthodox churches. The characteristics are immensely diverse among the African churches. Some of these features have similarity with Islam and traditional religion and are in line with African culture which makes interaction possible among Religions in Akokoland.

The basic characteristics which African Independent Churches share include: prayer, visions and dreams, use of objects, acceptance of polygamy, liturgical revolution, attention or regard for women, Healing, Oath, Vow or covenant-making, and Ancestor veneration among others (see (G.A. Oshintelu 2007, DejiAyegboyin and AdemolaIshola 1997). We shall discuss some of these.

Prayer: - A common feature of African Christianity is their emphasis or reliance on prayer. The most significant feature of Aladura church movement in the view of Horton and Turner (1967) is the belief in the power of prayer. The African churches believe that prayer to God, properly conducted, brings definite and predictable results in the world of space, time and events. It cures diseases, brings financial success, sources of promotion and so on. The African Independent Churches sincerely believe in the power of prayer, which is why they are noted for praying vigorously and loudly. Often they expect their prayers to be answered spontaneously, especially in cases of healing (Omoyalowo 1982). They hardly ever give up any case as hopeless or impossible not even when it has become so glaringly obvious. It is the strong faith which drives some of them to the point of rejecting medicine of any type. The African Churches 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 e.g. Mount Tabora at Ilorin and Imeko and other place (Omoyajowo 1982; Turner 1967; Ayegboyin 1997).

Use of Objects: - An African does not believe in abstract faith; he also believes in means and concrete objects. The traditional healer met this by providing him with charms, amulet etc. Western Orthox Christianity took these away from him, and gave him abstract faith. Thus, he remains a Christian only when it is convenient to be one. At any crisis point in his life, he returns to the traditional healer or diviner to get himself equipped. But African Christianity met this challenge by holding tenaciously to its use of holy water, candles (white, red, blue) and incense.

The African Independent church healer had provided Christian answer for the patient's existential problems. He supplements his abstract faith with objects such as consecrated water, candles and incense to chase away evil spirits and witches; any special psalm which is believed to have the same power as incantations and imprecations. In a way, he does not have to visit secretly the traditional herbalist or Muslim Malam anymore. This is the way we must see the African Christianity healing ministry and their belief in the power of efficacy of prayer for an objective assessment of their functions as Christian movement.

Visions and Dreams: - African Independent churches believe in dreams, visions and prophecies. It is generally accepted that revelation can be received and spiritual guidance obtained through dreams. In this regard, Aladura prophets normally engage in interpretation of dreams brought before them by members. Generally, the African churches see this as normal and as being in keeping with biblical trend because numerous cases and dreams as a means of divine guidance occur in the Bible. Visions may occur during corporate worship or during private meditation. This is normally a specialty of the prophets, but ordinary members from time to time see visions which are then referred to the prophet for interpretation. Visions are specially associated with praying and fasting. Visions are sometimes guide to prayer, sometimes warning about future events, sometimes instructions about things to do to avert some crisis and misfortune, or to usher in some blessing. Visions can really be subjective especially in the hands of unscrupulous and self-seeking prophets who can easily manipulate his charismatic gift to gratify their own lusts. This is one of the reasons according to Omoyajowo (1982) why sections of the Cherubim and Seraphim church have ordered their prophets not to visit members in their homes to relate visions and prophecies and never to tell visions to non-members. There is also a regulation which forbids telling of fruitful and unpleasant visions directly to their victims.

Acceptance of Polygamy: - The African Independent churches do not denounce polygamist principle in their midst, even some of the founders are well known to be polygamists but some of them still maintain monogamy. This is in line with African culture and practices in Islam but orthodox Christianity is opposed to the concept of polygamy.

Attention or Regard for Women: - One of the distinctive features of African Christianity is the elevated position accorded women. African Independent Churches have been exceptional in encouraging women to participate in the ministry of the church. They provide opportunities for leadership and the exercise of authority for women who usually far outnumber the men who attend these churches. Some of these churches were and are being established or co-founded by women e.g. Madam Abiodun Akinsowon was one of the co-founders of Cherubim and Seraphim Church; also Grace Odunlami was one of the founding members of the C.A.C). Omoyajowo (1982) has a long list of such founders in Nigeria. Other positions of leadership for women as Omoyajowo and Barnet show include: Reverend-Mothers, Lady-Leaders, Mother-in-Israel, Superior-Mothers, Praying-Mothers, Lady-Evangelists women-church planter and so on (see Deji Ayegboyin, Ademola Ishola 1997:30).

In these churches, women get more possessed, they are prone to give more testimonies, and they are operative in initiating songs, dancing, jumping and clapping, than men. From the foregoing, it is not surprising to note that there are usual far more women societies, prayer groups, hospitality associations and welfare unions than men in African Christianity. The Aladura churches (i.e. African Christianity) encourage women in the church ministry. Just as in Yoruba traditional religion, a woman can be the high priest or priestess in traditional shrines. Also there are many founders, leaders and prophetesses in the Aladura churches.

Liturgical Revolution: One of the fascinating features of the African Christianity is their so-called free and lovelier mode of worship. The African naturally enjoys a more demonstrative form of worship. Consequently, in contrast to the supposedly dull liturgy of the mainline mission churches, the African Independent Churches have given a home to a more fascinating and exciting form of worship with singing, clapping, dancing and stamping of the feet. Most of the songs sung are customarily indigenous composition accompanied with ringing bells, drumming and the use of other native musical instrument. In African Independent Churches (Aladura), members are fully involved in the whole service from the beginning to the end. The individual in the words of Ayandele (1966:388f) is ‘‘a heart and soul participant in the service and not the passive members who allow only the clergy and the key officials to ‘dramatis personae’.’’Everybody participates in clapping, dancing and singing. Prayer is also spontaneous and everyone is inspired to pray and deliver a message or give testimony’’ (Ayandele 1966;Oshuntelu 2007). This is one of the things that naturally attract people even from the mission established Orthodox churches to independent African churches (Aladura) when the worshippers feel more at home and more meaningfully involved in the act of worship.

Facilitating Factor, Mode, and Way of Interaction

The facilitating factor responsible for interaction is mutual understanding between the adherents of Islam, African Traditional Religion, and African Christianity. Some of the practices of Islam and Christianity are in line with African culture. In our finding, Christianity, Islam and African religion have certain things in common culturally; therefore religions understanding make interaction possible. All the religions in Akoko share in common the view of Supreme Being but worship Him in different perspectives. The absence of religious fanaticism between Islam and Christianity gives room for interaction. It is to be

noted here that Islam, Christianity and African religion have existed in Akokoland side by side more than any other part of Yoruba land.

The mode of interaction is seen in the way the people live together as an entity. They stay in the same family house, share family discussion together and hold political position in the community in spite of their different religions affiliations. They have interaction in different ways through customs, social activities, education and dialogue. In Akokoland, Traditional age group, community and social services join the people together irrespective of their religious affiliation. They are all duty bound to serve the community when a call for such work arises. In this way, the people interact together.

Akokoland is a society of different people with different religious ideologies but united for the sake of their welfare. As a group therefore, they are duty bound to interact together despite the fact that they have different religions learnings.

We shall allude to the mode of interaction we have in mind here in five ways:

One, The people of Akokoland have interaction by attending or participating in the religious activities of each religion. Example of the type of interaction we have in view is the attendance and participating in religious festivals of each religion such as harvest and special services. Christians attend Harvest festivals of Muslims on invitation and vice visa without any discrimination.

Two, The children of the same family may belong to three different religions, yet they interact together at home when they return back from their different places of worship. In this way, one would see that family solidarity is much more important than religions solidarity thus tolerance and understanding exist among the religionists.

Three, Political ideology join the people together. There are people of different religious affiliations that belong to the same political camp not miniding their divergent religious views.

Four, Family Union and solidarity shared among Akoko people is an avenue for interaction. There are avenues for meeting in the society for social and political activities.

Five, The Quest for peace, unity, development and stability in the community necessitates interaction among Religions organizations. Akoko in Yoruba community as part of Nigeria Nation, is a multi-religions and pluralistic society therefore, Religions interaction and good relation is a mandatory obligation for peace and unity.

Conclusion:

Attempt has been made in this work to establish the fact that there is Religions Interaction among the Akoko of Nigeria. The Geographical location and the people have been identified. The advent of Islam and Christianity in the area is pointed out. The features of Islam and African Christianity are identified. It highlights the facilitating factors, mode and ways of interaction. It is the opinion of this paper that there is religions interaction among Akoko of Nigeria as pointed out in the body of the work. In our finding, it is discovered that Muslims, Christianity and African religion have lived in absolute peace since the introduction of the religions into the area (Dopamu T. Abiola 2007:309-324). It is noted in this findings that Religious friction has not degenerated into bloody clash or disturbance of peace in this area in spite of religions diversity among the people. This definitely is due to understanding, accommodation, tolerance and dialogue among the religions. We share the opinion of Mustapha Abdul-Hamid (2011:25) that it is the ‘dialogue of life’ that ensures peace between two faiths rather than conference meetings and half-hearted hand-shakes. The theory of ‘dialogue of life’ states that life itself offers opportunities for people of different faiths, ethnicities and background to interact as they go about their daily activities. Interaction builds camaraderie and understanding. It is our suggestion that sustenance of continuity in maintaining understanding on a personal every day level that will ensure peace of different faiths rather than yearly conferences should be the practice in Akoko community in particular and Nigeria as a whole.

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