

# **Beyond Syncretism to Acquiring 'Faith-skill': Exploring Religious Hybridity for Survival**

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Wednesday December 16, 2020

# Synopsis

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# Introduction

Drawing insight from experiences of people in a select urban African setting, this paper analyses responses of acclaimed adherents of the Christian and Islamic faith, who also profess some belief in African Traditional Religion (ATR) by patronising ATR agents and agencies, for instance the *Babalawo*. It raises questions such as the following:

- i. Why do adherents of both the Christian and Muslim faith in this locality patronise the '*Babalawo*'?
- ii. Are these respondents, in virtue of this patronage, genuine adherents of the faith they profess?
- iii. What does the practice hold for African Studies?

# Clarification of terms

For the purpose of this study, the use of key terms is as follows:

## Religion

- It is the belief “in supernatural beings, some kind of supernatural life, having effect on the living (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979, 1985: 131).
- Religion is a relationship between a human person and some nonhuman entity, supposedly sacred, supernatural and self-existent (Bouquet 1941; Omoregbe, 1993).
- It is characterized by the existence of doctrines, feelings of faith, belief, cultic practices (rituals, rites), unity in a community of those who share this belief (Delany, 1911; Akin-Otiko, 2015).
- The religions in Nigeria are as follows: Muslim 51.5%; Christians 46.9% and others 1.6% (CIA, 2018).

# Clarification of terms.../Continued

## Syncretism

- This is the fusion of diverse beliefs and practices into one religious system (Leopold and Jensen 2016).
- In a specific sense relating to Christianity it is “the substitution or modification of central elements of Christianity by beliefs or practices introduced from elsewhere...” (Ferdinando, 1995)

## Religious hybridity

- This is a softer synonym of the value-laden and pejorative term ‘syncretism’.
- It is construed as a phenomenon of religious and spiritual fluidity (Cornille, 2019).
- The putting together one’s faith and practices by taking bits and pieces from previous religious traditions (Berger, 2016).

# Clarification of terms/.....Continued

## **‘Faith-skill’**

- This is a neologism in the category of learning conjured to fit this paper. It depicts the ability to deploy belief/belief-systems as a technique of survival. It is acquired from instruction and experience.

## **‘Babalawo’**

- The Babalawo is a priest; a diviner and a custodian of the Ifa Corpus (Margetts, 1965; Bascom and Bascom, 1991; Akin-Otiko, 2015: 64).
- As a therapist, he is a “religiously skilled medical expert” (Adekola, 1995).

Although inaccurately called ‘medicine man’, the Babalawo is said to be distinct from the Onisegun/Adahunse (herbalist/medicine man), the Alasotele (soothsayer) (Oyebola, 1980).

# Methodology

- This work adopts a mixed research approach (Quantitative and qualitative approaches).
- Random sampling of a selected location in an urban area of Lagos State.
- It is conceptually framed around the Pragmatic theory which posits that the value of principles, systems lies in their usefulness and workability (James, 1943 ; Creswell, 2014).
- Questionnaires and interview
- Speculative interpretation to evaluate the implications of the analysis of the survey.

# Analysis

- In determining the response of people living in urban areas for this study, three Babalawos were interviewed, and questionnaires comprising 14 questions were randomly distributed to 160 people living around Akoka, Yaba area of Lagos State. The questionnaire made provision for:
  - Age brackets of respondents
  - Sex of respondents
  - Occupation of respondents.



# Results

## Age Brackets of respondents

18-29	30-39	40-49	50 & above
79%	16%	5%	0.00%

## Sex

Female	Male
73%	27%

## Result/Contd.

### Occupation

<b>47%</b>	<b>STUDENTS</b>
<b>5%</b>	<b>SELF EMPLOYED</b>
<b>11%</b>	<b>EMPLOYED</b>
<b>32%</b>	<b>UNEMPLOYED</b>
<b>5%</b>	<b>OTHERS</b>

## Responses to questionnaire

Nr.	Queries in the Questionnaire	Yes	No	Can't Say
1.	Awareness of the existence of Babalawos in their locality	84 %	16%	0.0%
2.	The Babalawo is a medicine man (Native doctor)	74%	10%	16%
3.	The Babalawo is a priest/sage	42%	37%	21%
4.	The Babalawo has powers of divination	58%	21%	21%
5.	The Babalawos has powers of unravelling mysteries	42%	21%	37%
6.	The Babalawo can solve perplexing human problems	63%	26%	11%
7.	I have engaged the services of the Babalawo	63%	37%	0.0%

## Responses to questionnaire/Contd.

Nr.	Queries in the Questionnaire	Yes	No	Can't Say
8.	I consulted the Babalawo for material prosperity	47%		
	I consulted the Babalawo to address 'spiritual problems'	42%		
	I don't why I consulted him	11%		
9.	The result of consultation was successful	15.8%	47.4%	36.8%
10.	Presence of Babalawo in the city is normal	68.4%	21.0%	36.8%
11.	The Babalawo has roles in contemporary African life	73.7%	15.8%	10.5%
12.	I am a practising Christian/Muslim	90%	5%	5%
13.	Consulting the Babalawo is not against my faith	58%	26%	16%
14.	The Babalawo links one to ones African roots	42.1%	31.6%	26.3%

# Findings

- That there is a strong awareness of the existence of the Babalawo in the city, and it viewed as normal.
- That despite the fact that *Babalawos* see themselves first as sages and custodians of the ideas by which traditional Africans live, a perception in the city is that the Babalawo is a 'medicine man' of sort.
- That affiliation with foreign religions has little or no significant dissuading effect on urban dwellers who patronise the Babalawo.
- That whilst the Babalawo has a role to play in contemporary African life, surprising this role is rather pragmatic than ideological.

# Evaluation

- **Are these respondents, in virtue of this patronage, genuine adherents of the faith they profess?**

Theologically, these respondents may be termed syncretists.

However, from a pragmatic-existentialist perspective, I identify them as persons deploying 'Faith-skills' in learning to survive.

'Faith-skills' are

- i. learning techniques for wellness, resilience and survival in the face of great adversity.
- ii. based on the assumption that religion is practical. (Armstrong, 1993: xxi).
- iii. As Ferdinando (1995) posits,, posits that 'supernatural beliefs ... serve mainly as explanations of "troubles" (LeVine 1963; Beattie, 1969; Evans-Pritchard, 1956)

# Evaluation ....continued

## What does this hold for African Studies?

- i. There is an emergent African religiosity characterized by a multiplicity of fluid religious practices and spirituality, driven by a quest to survive.
- ii. Such fusions may take the form of
  - i. Christianity + Islam + ATR,
  - ii. Chirsitianity + Islam,
  - iii. Isalm + ATR,
  - iv. Others

## Conclusion

Whenever people engage in transitions from one faith to another, rather than view this fusion as a religious practice to be criticised, it should be considered as a quest to acquire a skill for survival.

Such religious consciousness tends to be driven not by a quest for logically sound religious doctrines, but by a quest for survival.



▪ **FINALLY**

**Thank  
YOU**

