

Original Research Article

Portrayal of Religious Syncretism in Akiki Nyabongo's Novel: *Africa Answers Back*

ABSTRACT

Akiki Nyabongo's novel, "*Africa answers back*", reveals that religious syncretism in Africa is a reality that has persistently painted Christianity as an offshoot of traditional African religions. Using qualitative content analysis that looks at the text for themes, meaning and underlying values, the study critically analyses the two major religious thoughts of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in the context of the rite of passage – pregnancy, naming, baptism, marriage, death and burial. The study found out that religious syncretism as portrayed in *Africa Answers Back* is evident in all the major rites of passage. The conflict portrayed between the two religious beliefs shows that syncretism is a major issue today among African Christians and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. I conclude that most African Christians will take long to detach themselves from traditional African religious beliefs, because their way of life and practices are rooted in African traditional religion. I recommend continuous negotiations between African traditional religions and Christianity as each has something to offer to enrich their respective faiths.

Keywords: *religious syncretism, African Christian, African traditional religion, Uganda*

1. Introduction

This paper investigates religious syncretism in Akiki Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back*. The concept of religious syncretism has to be understood before we can analyze it. Existing literature defines the concept in several ways but one of the most prominent ones is by Imbach [1] who defines religious syncretism as *a process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. Syncretism is the fusion of two or more thought systems, and can be applied to philosophy, politics, and religion* [<https://www.compellingtruth.org>].

In this study, religious syncretism is understood as the practicing of elements of Christianity and African traditional religious beliefs in the Ugandan context.

According to Leonard [2] the life of an African is interwoven with religion because they eat, drink and sing religiously. In the same vein, Ezeanya [3] argues that in Africa, "life is religion, and religion is life". This means that religion and African lifestyle cannot be separated. The Western concept of religion as introduced by Christian missionaries seems to have divided life into sacred and secular and yet to the traditional African, everything is religious. To the traditional African, every fortune or misfortune is divine matter.

To Adamo [4], African Christianity is hypocritical because many African Christians still trust in African traditional religions, most especially in times of emergency. For instance, Okurut in *The Invisible Weevil* depicts Kaaka as a very committed Christian who had given birth to five girls. But on the sixth child, she decides to consult diviners. After drinking the herbs from the traditional medicine man, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy, Okurut, [5]. This is the kind of conflict which the African Christians have. They believe in Christianity but when things get tough, they run to the diviners and later return to Christianity. Could this be the reason why Adamo [4] contends that there is need for dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religions; because African Christians are also members of African traditional religions?

Africans embraced Christianity because it was appealing (accompanied with other social services and technology) but as long as it separated life between the sacred and the secular, the African is not comfortable. This has made the traditional African to live in religious syncretism where elements of both religions are practiced, but with the traditional one more entrenched, though practiced in secret. Awolalu [6] confirms this when he argues that African traditional religions are not a thing of the past. He says that although this religion has no written literature, it is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their proverbs, pithy sayings, songs, dances, liturgies and shrines.

A study in South Africa by Denis [7] found that the conflict between African traditional religion and Christianity is still common. He emphasizes that during the time of Apartheid in South Africa, African traditional religion was extensively practiced but in secret. This is because the missionaries opposed traditional African practices, calling them barbaric and superstitious. According to Mills [8], traditional religion is being practiced in South Africa up to today, even if it is condemned by the church.

The adoption of Christianity by Africans has not been very successful as the converts appear to be hypocritical in their actions. In the public eye they pretend to be committed Christians, while doing other things in secret. For example in *Fate of the Banished*, Ocwinyo [9] portrays Father Dila having challenges with celibacy and secretly falls in love with Flo, committing adultery. Ocwinyo continues to portray priests who bleat homage to The Pope simply because he is the guarantor of their material comfort! Bishops are rumoured to have bickering concubines in Nurses' quarters and convents! , Ocwinyo [9] The Catholic Church expects priests to live celibate lives but a number of them don't.

In traditional African religions sin was punished by the gods on the spot. Udo [10] agrees with this when he asserts that among the Ibibio in Nigeria, committing adultery is a big offence. If a woman commits adultery, the ancestors would be offended, and the consequence is death. In addition, the husband of such a woman would die if he condones the sin, or the woman herself would die during child birth. He also says that a woman's adultery is not committed against the husband only but against the ancestors, who would punish the woman's sin with death. The fear of sin was very strong in

traditional African religions to the extent that in Nigeria, up today nobody steals anybody's property even if left at the roadside. From the foregoing, it can be seen that traditional African beliefs are still very prevalent and persistent and Christianity has not been able to wipe them out.

2. Thesis

Nyabongo has shown that religious syncretism is an African phenomenon that is here to stay as Africans have not yet completely embraced Christianity.

3. Problem Statement

In the novel *Africa answers Back*, Nyabongo depicts African traditional religions as being deeply rooted in the African ethos of faith and evident in several rituals where elements of both African traditional religions and Christianity are prevalent. **This study is to analyze the depiction of religious syncretism in Nyabongo's *Africa answers Back*.** The purpose of this study is to analyze the depiction of religious syncretism in a Ugandan novel, in the context of rites of passage – pregnancy, birth, naming, marriage, death and burial.

4. Methodology

The design is **a descriptive study** of one main Ugandan novel. The method used is qualitative content analysis that looks at the text for themes, meaning and underlying values. The study critically analyses the two major religious thoughts of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in the context of the rite of passage – pregnancy, naming, baptism, marriage, death and burial. I used the Postcolonial theory which is based on the main aspects of colonialism and its effects on the colonized people. This phenomenon has persisted even after the end of colonial rule. The theory has helped me to explain the themes as depicted in Akiki Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back*.

5. Findings and Discussion

In this study, we analyze the depiction of religious syncretism in a Ugandan novel, in the context of rites of passage – pregnancy, birth, naming, marriage, death and burial. In

traditional Africa, these rites of passage are accompanied with several rituals which are religious in character. These rituals are embedded in African traditional beliefs and are in conflict with Christian beliefs. Nyabongo, writing from the perspective of a traditional African, presents the main characters in constant conflict with Christianity, which leads to compromises and religious syncretism. I now present the depiction of rites of passage in its chronological order and discuss how each of them conflicts with Christian beliefs; the outcome being in form of religious syncretism.

5.1 Pregnancy and birth

In Nyabongo's community, like in most African communities, the birth of a child is celebrated cheerfully (Mbiti) [14] because it ushers in an additional member to the community and saves one from childlessness, which is feared and is considered a curse. In Nyabongo's case it is even more special because Chief Ati is expecting a child who is to be heir to the throne. As Chief Ati returns from the religious war between the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans (he being on the side of Anglicans), the wives are excited to receive him back safely, but he realizes that Aboki, one of his favoured wives, expected to produce the heir, is missing. He gets concerned and asks the senior wife where she is. He asks so many questions about the pregnancy of Aboki which are against his culture. The senior wife wonders who taught him the bad habit of asking embarrassing questions while at war. The chief admits his fault and accepts that they are bad influences at war, Nyabongo [11]. But he insists on seeing the wife who is in labour. As the senior wife narrates to Aboki:

He had come to see you, but of course I could not let him in. You understand all of that, I don't have to explain to you...why did he come to see me? Does he want me to suffer or does he want the child to die... he learnt bad habits during the war, Nyabongo [11 p. 44-45].

In Nyabongo's culture, husbands are not supposed to see their wives when they are in labour and if he does, they believe the mother will suffer or the child will die. Chief Ati admits that because he has been with foreigners, he has forgotten some of his culture. Child birth is characterized by rituals, prohibitions, observances, and ceremonies by all family members, Owor and Naula, [12].

Contact with the Missionaries at the religious war front by Chief Ati influenced him significantly to the extent that he abandons some of his traditional beliefs. In this case a conflict is witnessed in which some aspects of Chief Ati's old culture are given up in favour of the new. This is what we call religious syncretism, as we see Chief Ati living in two religious worlds at the same time.

5.2 Naming

Naming as one of the rites of passage is one of the most important rituals in life of a child, Mbiti [15]. The naming ritual announces the birth of a newborn, and introduces the child to his or her extended family and the larger community, and it confers on the child a name that connects it to the family that gives it a sense of belonging.

A study in Nigeria by Nwadiokwu et al [13] found that African names have meaning and therefore it is an important occasion marked by ceremonies in many African societies. A naming ceremony takes place a few days after the birth, accompanied by presents to the parent's child. The naming marks the child's ritual entry into the family. An elderly person in the family announces the name of the child.

Nyabongo presents Chief Ati as very eager to name his long-awaited son. The naming of the child is done three days after birth but Chief Ati wants to name the child immediately, Nyabongo, [11]. Instead of the custom of giving names of African heroes, season of the year, circumstances the parents went through and famous men or women in the community, Ati plans to give the son a name that has never been used before in his culture. But the wives remind him that he cannot do that as it is against their customs. The naming of the child is the responsibility of the father's family but Chief Ati plans to name the child by himself. One of the older ladies thinks that he has lost his head:

“Are you losing your head, asking to name your child yourself?”... The chief cleared his throat and continued... Since Stanley was their great man, the boy shall be named after him. His family name will be Mujungu, after these people that roam, Nyabongo [11 p 53-54].

Chief Ati impresses upon his people that he wants to bring a new language and names from the white man to his people. He names his son Stanley Mujungu and convinces his people that this Stanley is a good man (a missionary) who read the Bible to them and also gave the King a gun as a gift. Chief Ati says that he wants his child to learn about these white men and know their ways, Nyabongo [11].

To Africans, naming of a child is normally handled in two ways: The traditional religious and the Christian way. They normally start with naming the child traditionally then later the child is taken to church for baptism. This is expressed in Nyabongo's novel as Chief Ati instructs the elder sister who, according to custom, has the responsibility to name the brother's children:

It is our custom to give the child three names; the first one is selected from the twelve praise-names; the second from God's action; the third name from God's will. I shall permit my sister to pronounce the name of the child, Nyabongo [11 p 58].

To Nyabongo's community, naming of a child is done on the third day after the birth of a child. It is a very big celebration accompanied with drinking and eating. The aunt of the child chooses his/her name in the presence of the community. This aunt must be very familiar with the custom that the child has to be given three names with different meanings and purposes. In this case Chief Ati, having been influenced by the missionaries, chooses to combine African tradition and Christianity in naming the son. The aunt was instructed to give only one traditional name and this is what she says:

You must remember, my people, that we have selected only one name - the praise name. The other names are chosen by the child's father. The elder sister spoke in a trembling voice, my people the child's praise-name shall be Abala. We are all familiar with that praise-name, but the father has brought new names to us. The first name of this child shall be Stanley, Nyabongo [11 p 58-59].

Before the aunt pronounces the child's name, she speaks in a trembling voice because the father of the child has told her to name the child differently from the tradition. The tremour in her voice shows the fear she has due to the changes in the child's naming,

which affects their custom. The naming of the child both traditionally and in the Christian way is uncomfortable to the women who are the custodians of the traditions as expressed below:

When she pronounced the names Stanley, a few women cried out. Our customs, our customs! The second name shall be Mujungu. Again the women cried out our customs, our customs, our customs, are gone! The drum sounded softly, showing sadness at the change of the customs, Nyabongo [11 p 58-59].

Nyabongo depicts the women crying at this point when the aunt of the child announces strange names to them. They expected the naming of the child to follow the traditional order they are familiar with. But to their disappointment, the child's name is given by the father and the aunt only pronounces it. In addition, the name given to the child is Western. Nyabongo depicts the women who are the custodians of the culture crying out: *Our customs, our customs, our customs, are gone!* Even the drumming changed. *The drum sounded softly* as a way of sending a message to Chief Ati that the people are not happy. Even the mother of the child is not happy:

.... He does not need to be baptized twice... one baptism is enough Nyabongo [11 p 62].

From the beginning Chief Ati plans on baptizing his son in a Christian way. That is why he asks the aunt to name the child Stanley Mujungu. The mother to the child is not in agreement with the father's idea of taking the child for church baptism. Chief Ati goes ahead to ask the priest to baptize the child, since the traditional naming and the celebration is over:

I want him to be baptized into your Christian religion, and I wish to name him after our friend Stanley, of course, I have named him already, but I want you to do it again in your way. Now his name is Stanley: and his family name is Mujungu, Nyabongo [11 p 63-66].

After Chief Ati names his son traditionally, he plans to have him baptized in the Christian faith. He approaches the missionary, the Reverend Jeremiah Randolph Hubert, and he requests him to baptize the son.

This is a typical case of religious syncretism, where both traditional beliefs and Christianity are practiced at the same time. Chief Ati is portrayed to have a desire and bring new language and names from the white man to his people. He wants to baptize his son both traditionally and in church and gives the son both traditional and Christian names.

5.3. Marriage

Marriage in Nyabongo's community is depicted to be overwhelmingly polygamous. The existing wives participate in wooing more women for their husband and even participate in preparing his wedding, Nyabongo [11], Chief Ati is portrayed to have married 375 wives. In African traditional society, polygamy is readily acceptable, contrary to the Christian faith of monogamy. And for chiefs or kings, polygamy is a norm.

After the death of Chief Ati, Mujungu is installed as heir and successor to his father. As a new chief, he immediately begins a long list of innovations. He starts by sending all his father's wives away and remains with only one. When the wives hear this, they mourn and the older men of the clan shake their heads in disappointment. When Mujungu learns that his people are not happy with him, he abandons the whole idea of monogamy and gets a few more wives, Nyabongo [11]. This is a scenario where Chief Ati dies and his successor, Mujungu, tries to implement the Christian teaching of monogamy but it fails.

Despite his progressive reforms, public opinion influences him to worry and act contrary to his convictions, as illustrated by Nyabongo in the text below:

Mujungu began to worry whether all his innovation has been for best. He got rid of all the wives but one, in the hope that his example would be followed by the rest of his subjects. He still believes in the value of his reforms but perhaps it was best to slow them up. The first thing he plans was to get a few more wives – three or four at least. Then he might have some peace to carry out his plans Nyabongo [11 p 278]

Mujungu, having gone to a Christian school headed by reverend Hubert, has acquired Christian beliefs but also retains some of his traditions. Nyabongo portrays Mujungu having a conflict of two beliefs. As he is enthroned as the chief of his people, he immediately starts his reforms. At first he does not like polygamy. He tries to send away all the wives and remains with one but with time he learns that it is not working for him as a leader of his people. So, he decides to add a few more wives to fit in the community of his people, making him polygamous like his father. This is another display of religious syncretism where elements of two different beliefs are practiced side by side.

5.4 Death and Burial

Death and burial in African tradition is one of the major rites of passage. It is normally celebrated in a special way and with unique rituals. Chief Ati misses the elaborate burial rituals because he dies of the small pox epidemic, which is itself traditionally considered a curse:

The doctor comes at once to the chief and realizes that he is dying. ... He tells Mujungu that it is better that all the wives - except two - should go from the house. one by one they leave, weeping silently. Soon after they had left the house, the doctor pronounces the death. ... The next morning Mujungu tells his people that his father had passed away. He selects a few people who had who had suffered from the small pocks to bury him in his own graveyard. The burial is simple. All the usual ceremonies are omitted on account of the epidemic, Nyabongo [11 p 252]

When chief Ati dies of the epidemics, Mujungu selects a few people who have recovered from small pox to bury the chief's remains. The burial is ordinary; they could not follow the African traditional way of burying a chief because of fear of the epidemic. All the usual ceremonies are omitted on account of the epidemic. This is not usual for African ceremonies of burying chiefs. This leaves the people feeling very bad because the chief is not mourned in the traditional way. The chief ought to have died in the hands of his many wives; however, only two senior wives are allowed to take care of the chief to avoid further spreading of the disease. The chief dies in the hands of foreigners and only two senior wives which is very unusual.

Mujungu having been influenced by Christian beliefs uses the death of his father in an epidemic as an excuse to avoid the elaborate and sometimes unhealthy traditional burial rituals. Christianity teaches that death is the end of one's earthly life. It doesn't matter whether you are a chief or a commoner, your destinies are the same. Having traditional death and burial rituals side by side with Christian rituals brings about conflict. No wonder many Africans practice both beliefs and end up with religious syncretism.

6. Conclusion

Nyabongo has portrayed that the Christianity has to some extent influenced the way of life of Africans but much of it has remained intact. He demonstrated this through the rituals of the rites of passage – pregnancy, birth, naming, marriage, death and burial of a prominent African royal family. Nyabongo portrays Africans as being in the state of blending their cultures and Christianity, leading into religious syncretism, and forming their own religion which is not fully African traditional religion and not fully Christianity. The African are in the third space and the state of hybridity [16].

I conclude that African will continue practicing both the traditional and Christian beliefs because the former is deeply entrenched in their religious ethos. Africans appreciate that certain elements of their traditional beliefs need to be discarded because they are no longer useful but they are trapped between the familiar and the foreign leading to religious syncretism.

Up to today Africans still practice African traditional religion alongside Christianity, implying that Christianity still has a long way to completely transform African society.

7. Recommendations

Having discussed the place of syncretism in the Nyabongo community and how it has led to the progress of the community in terms of merging both the Christian and traditional religious elements, we recommend that syncretism should be promoted through negotiations between African traditional religion and Christianity over what each of them can learn from the other, as each has something to offer.

Secondly, African traditional religion treats evil/sin more punitively than Christianity does. Christianity teaches that sin will be punished on judgment day, while in African traditional religion sin is punished by the gods on the spot. Christianity should learn to treat sin with the contempt it deserves. Otherwise the current rampant theft, corruption, child sacrifices and abuse of public office, as well as immorality and perversion, are because sin is not punished on the spot. Since the majority of African Christian men practice polygamy in both secret and public, they need to be talked to one by one. On the other hand, polygamy, widely practiced in African traditional religion, reduces a woman to man's property while Christianity promotes monogamy and equity in treatment.

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