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Inculturation of Luhya Birth and Naming Rituals in Christian Worship: A Study of The Baptist Church in Vihiga County, Kenya

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African Christians are in a dilemma of whether to fully embrace western-prejudiced Christianity or to stick to their traditional forms of faith. Influenced by the fear of syncretic worship, the Baptist church in Vihiga County, which is out rightly committed to Western Christianity condemns and opposes Africans who embrace their traditional religious rituals and rites. Despite this, the Luhya community who profess the Christian faith secretly are adamant in practicing their birth and naming religious rituals in worship. The paper argues that inculturation of Luhya birth and naming rites and rituals in Christian worship in the Baptist church in Vihiga County, Kenya has a significant impact on the survival of Christian message among its membership. The faith that does not become culture is not a lived faith. The study was informed by animism and sociological theories. Descriptive research design was employed with qualitative approaches of analysis. The sample size of the study was 221 participants comprising 183 Lay Christian and 38 Key informants (16 Pastors and 22 Church Leaders). The findings revealed that many Baptist Christians are resistant to inculturate Luhya rites and rituals of birth and naming into their worship, instead they condemn them and those that perform such rituals. This resistance makes them live inauthentic Christian life within their cultural context. The study recommended the Church leadership, theologians, and scholars to advocate for values in Luhya birth and naming rites and rituals that are consistent with Christian worship.

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INTRODUCTION

African Baptist church members in Vihiga County find themselves in a conflicting state of affairs, especially when it comes to African traditional cultural practices and embracement of the Christian message as preached to them by the White missionaries. This is specific to Luhya birth and naming rituals in Christian Worship where Christians are in a dilemma whether to fully practice their traditional rites of passage that embed certain religious meaning like veneration of ancestors and other related meanings. For instance, Christianity teaches on the supremacy of God as the creator of everything and the only one to be worshipped limits Christians in performing certain related cultural practices with deep religious implications in their diverse cultures (Okeke, *et al.*, 2017). In the attempts to carry out with their traditional cultural practices they are labeled to live a double kind of religious life not accepted by the church. Sometimes they are even condemned and excommunicated from the church membership. The implication of this is that the church is not prepared to inculturate certain traditional practices that transmit and build religious faith and experiences of the faithful.

As argued by Bae (2007), the greatest challenge facing the church is to ensure the gospel is understood by people in their diverse cultures. Walligo (1986) in his foundational theology argues that Inculturation of Christian theological message is a genuine way of increasing the understanding of the gospel of salvation in every culture, location, and era. In the same line of thought, Khan (2019) asserts that the Catholic Church in her official teaching emphasizes that all cultures have the right to an independent existence within Christianity

since in their cultures they preserve the gospel values that Christianity teaches. This should be done in a manner that does not compromise the authority of the Bible. Such an important shift positively promotes dialogue between Christianity and African traditional cultural practices thereby developing deep rooted holistic faith that considers worshipping Christians (Kurgat, 2009; Kyalo, 2013).

Ntrie-Akpabi (2016) posits that Pope John Paul II proposed the possibility for a Christian culture that is oriented by the gospel truth and not European culture infused within African Christianity. This stance of the Catholic Church advocates for dialogue and integration of Christian theology with the values preached by African Traditional Religions. This is because faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, and not faithfully lived (Senn, 2012). The efforts to embrace inculturation according to Cone (1997) and Ntrie-Akpabi (2016) sustains and improves Christian theology to African churches and peoples. It is manifested through the adapted and blended Christian religion where sacred music, dancing, drumming, art and local materials are used during worship (Khan, 2019; Bae, 2007). In South Africa, for instance, Bae (2007) observed that Black African Christians have adopted traditional practices around ancestral worship in Christianity in Ghana; Ntrie-Akpabi (2016) argued that Christian worship should include the beneficial aspects of indigenous religious and cultural beliefs. Ntrie-Akpabi (2016) further observed that the gospel message becomes weak when it lacks roots in people's culture and traditions. However, Okafor (2016) studies indicate difficulties in assessing the effectiveness and standard of mainstream churches

like African Inland Church and other churches' worship services since many of them have compromised Christian liturgical practices for cultic worship, hence misleading the congregation. While Acquah (2014) emphasized that in every child-naming ceremony African faithful observe traditional religious rituals in line with worship and reverence to God, which according to him is contrary to Christian beliefs.

In Vihiga County, Appiah & Gates (2010) affirm that 94% of the Luhya profess Christianity blended with indigenous beliefs and traditional practices. While Kayeli (2012) points out that Avalogoli Catholic Christians practice both traditional rites and Christian rites without finding any fault. This is not the case with the Baptist church which does not accept the practice and performance of cultural birth and naming rituals among her membership during worship. Notwithstanding diverse stances, the point to note is that the acceptance of inculturation of Luhya birth naming rituals in Christian worship in the Baptist church in Vihiga County, Kenya has a significant impact on the survival of Christian message among its membership. This should extend to people's rituals that are celebrated in the birth and naming ceremonies, prayers and sacrifices made, spiritual invocations and veneration performed, and so forth.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the fact that Luhya Baptist church members profess their faith in Christ as their saviour; their worship practices remain influenced by traditional practices particularly birth and naming ritual ceremonies. These ceremonies are accompanied by customs and rituals that tend to undermine Christian worship; they occupy a large spiritual space for the Christians. This is fundamental because offerings, sacrifices, ancestral veneration, libations and other rituals have profound religious and spiritual influence to the people. However, despite this, the Baptist church does not recognize these rituals but condemns them and those Christians performing

such rituals. The church is reluctant to study and Inculturation birth and naming rituals in her doctrines and practices. This leaves the Christians to live what the Baptist church calls a "double way of life" one being "pure Christianity" and the other a traditional and sinful way of life. This misconception informs this study on the importance of inculturating Luhya birth and naming rituals in Christian worship in the Baptist church in Vihiga County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inculturating the Gospel makes it incarnate in different cultures while transmitting the intended values within different cultures; it nurtures the relationship between culture and faith in people's lived religious experience, enabling them to live the faith in their cultural context. This is a fundamental requirement that guarantees the indigenization and ownership of Christian faith. Inculturation of the gospel is not just of pastoral urgency for the evangelization of peoples but is more of a Biblical mandate for the church as found in Acts 15:1-35 where there was the conflict that led to the Council of Jerusalem in which the apostles said to the Greeks that they did not need to become Jews before they can accept Christianity as they can be Christians in their cultural setting as Greeks. This same sentiment is held by Pope John Paul II who urged the church in Africa to accommodate useful African values, embracing them within Christianity (Kyalo, 2013).

Liturgical enculturation closely engages localities, societies and sub-cultures in which Christians worship God thereby grounding their spiritual growth. According to Kurgat (2009) the Church's teachings should consider culture as a right of independent existence within Christianity by adopting and preserving the values, institutions and customs of the adherents. Okafor (2014) observes that Gusii Christian practice enculturation in which catechism, reading from the Bible and hymns are combined with Gusii traditional practices that affect

Christian worship. While Duncan (2014) affirms that inculturation improves Christian theology, making it resonate to African churches. This significant feature was not recognized by the Western missionaries when they came to preach the gospel to the African people; they did not see any relevance of having a dialogue between Western Christianity and the traditional religious practices of the local people (Cashen, 2010).

According to Lugira (2009), rites of passage are practices, customs and ceremonies that people perform to move people smoothly through the stages of life from birth, childhood, puberty and initiation, marriage, aging and death. A study by Galieu (2016) shows that Japanese traditional culture on the birth of children is embroidered within ancestral religious veneration and the wearing of protective artifacts for safe childbirth. Through the ancestors, birth prayers to God (*Yama*) are believed to bring protection the child. This is also found among the Kono people of Sierra Leone who believe in ancestors as having a vital role in all aspects of their life; they believe ancestors are intermediaries between the living and God (Conteh, 2008). The birth rituals are accompanied by prayer, sacrifices, invocations, and appropriation of ancestral spirits to mediate for a successful accomplishment of the ceremonies.

The explained aspects of local cultures are what liturgical theology should seek to interpret for the enrichment of fundamental doctrines of Christianity that seeks to explicate the meaning of specific texts

and rites of worship (Senn, 2012). The unfortunate thing is that many writers hold the position that inculturation of the local rites and rituals (especially birth and naming rites and rituals into Christian worship and way of life impoverishes the message of Christianity. For instance, Drati (2018) maintaining the conservative position argues that African Baptist churches (due to attachment to traditional rites and rituals) have lapses in their liturgical worship contrary to set standards by the church founders the gaps while Stamps & Emerson (2017) affirms that Baptist churches have an undeveloped theology. Hence such misconceived and theologically impoverished positions make the Gospel message perpetually alien to the local people. To correct his mishap, Ntrie-Akpabi (2016) holds that it is the African theologians that have the responsibility to make the Gospel message relevant and useful to African Christianity since they understand their own people and their religious practices.

METHODOLOGY

Being a qualitative study, a descriptive research design was used as it facilitated in-depth data that gave insights on the study problem (Kumar, 2010 & Khan, 2008). The target population was 2288 participants from the 21 Baptist local churches in Vihiga County with a sample size of 221 participants as advised by Devi (2017) who sustains that a good sample must be representative of the entire population of the study in the Table1 below:

Table 1: Sample Size

Target group	Target Population	Sampling Procedure	Sample Size	Percentage
Pastors	42	Purposive	16	7.2
Church Leaders	220	Purposive	22	10
Lay Christians	2026	Random Sampling	183	82.8
Total	2288		221	100

Source: Researcher (2023)

The sample size was determined following Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) who advised that a

sample size of 10% is suitable for a population exceeding 1000; whereas a sample size of 30% is

suitable for a population of less than 1,000, and for a population of 100 and below the researcher should take 100%. Since the study target population was 2288, the study adopted 10% formula. Random and purposive sampling techniques were employed to sample respondents.

The entire study was enucleated by the animism theory of religion by Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917) and sociological theory of religion by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). The animism theory of religion was relevant because it argues that religion is constructed upon religious rituals, centered on spirits as agents to the Supreme Being. The sociological theory by Emile Durkheim argues that religious societies are linked with symbols like religious rites and rituals that express their relationship with the sacred. Both theories provided insights that helped the discussions on inculturation

of Luhya birth and naming rituals in Christian worship in the Baptist church in Vihiga County, Kenya. Data was collected using a questionnaire for 183 Lay Christians and interview schedules for 38 (16 Pastors and 22 Church Leaders) as key informants. This was for the purposes of obtaining significant and representation for authenticity and objectivity of the study findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The discussion of the study findings on inculturation of Luhya birth and naming rituals in Christian worship in the Baptist church in Vihiga County was thematically. On the various possible aspects of inculturation, the findings of 183 Lay Christians were as illustrated in table 2 backed up by responses from 38 KINF (Pastors and Church Leaders):

Table 2: Birth and Naming Rituals

Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
Naming of children after the ancestor or saint	4 (2.2%)	25 (13.7%)	9 (4.9%)	19 (10.4%)	125 (68.3%)	183 100%
Use of animal blood during birth and naming ceremonies	3 (1.6%)	24 (13.1%)	12 (6.6%)	19 (10.4%)	125 (68.3%)	183 100%
Other forms of libation and washing of the mother and child after birth	4 (2.2%)	14 (7.7%)	11 (6.0%)	14 (7.7%)	140 (76.5%)	183 100%
Seclusion and Purification Rituals of the mother and newborn	1 (0.5%)	20 (10.9%)	7 (3.8%)	20 (10.9%)	135 (73.8%)	183 100%
Ancestral veneration rituals (visit to shrines and ancestral sites)	0 (0%)	5 (2.7%)	10 (5.5%)	33 (18.0%)	135 (73.8%)	183 100%
Blending of Luhya birth and naming rituals with Christian names	7 (3.8%)	20 (10.9%)	5 (2.7%)	21 (11.5%)	130 (71.1%)	183 100%
Incorporate Luhya birth and naming traditional values with Christianity	4 (2.2%)	18 (9.8%)	10 (5.5%)	27 (14.8%)	124 (67.8%)	183 100%

Source: Field Data, 2023

On the theme of birth and naming rituals, the questionnaire findings indicate that 30 (16.4%) of the Lay Christians were in agreement to name the child after the ancestor, 9 (4.9%) were neutral 144 (78.7%) were not in agreement. This means that the majority of the members of the Baptist church in Vihiga County are not in support of inculturating birth and naming rituals into Christianity. Despite

this, there are those who perform those rituals. For instance, a participant in the interviews opined:

Baptist Christians secretly perform traditional birth and naming rituals but they fear to publicly pronounce themselves. They fear the sanctions from the church authorities that are opposed to such rituals (KINF 1).

For the Luhya the birth of a child to starts with conception or pregnancy where an expectant woman has to observe a number of rituals and taboos. After actual birth, sections of the Luhya Christians in Vihiga County name the newborn child after an ancestor or saint. This informed the research question of why people name their children after a family ancestor or member. A participant in the interviews informed:

Practice on birth and naming starts from home where traditional rituals are performed by elders in reverence to the ancestors or forefathers. It is a way to honor one's religious heritage, and keep a sense of belonging in the family. We do this to keep our religious heritage, but the Baptist church prohibits us from performing any birth and naming ritual (KINF 1).

This assertion embeds many reasons, which include but not limited to the honor or tribute given to the ancestor or family member for the continuity of family traditions and names. For instance, to signify the expression of gratitude and recognition of the role the ancestor plays; strengthens family bonds and kinship, fostering a sense of belonging and identity within the family, and also helping the child feel more connected to their extended family. Further, naming after the ancestor in the family setting commemorates a special person who has passed away, keeping his memory alive within the family. The findings are in tandem with Adjei (2011) who informs that birth is the transition of the child from the world of the ancestors to the physical world, and incorporation into the living community to perpetuate family existence. Other participants informed:

The naming of the child is done with many religious rituals, invoking the spiritual and religious meaning that go beyond the mere carrying of the name. In naming, we as a community of the living are united spiritually to the ancestors who continue to perform good

deeds and continue to do so in the world of the dead (KINF 6).

From a Christian perspective, naming a child after a saint is a recognition of our faith in the power of the saint, and allowing him/her to be part of the child's life. We do not give children names to enable them fit in with the secular world, rather to constantly remind them of the purpose of their faith into which they are baptized (KINF 13).

Just as Christians dedicate a child to the Lord through baptism, acknowledging their need for God, and welcoming the child into the Christian community, so is naming to the traditional cultural Luhya community. Birth and naming rituals serve the purpose of socialization or welcoming the child into the cultural Luhya society by emphasizing the formation of a certain identity in conjunction with prescribed needed or desired behaviour for the child.

Thus, in both Christian and Luhya traditions, birth and naming rituals are part of baptism as a traditional ritual, inextricably bound to existence, where nothing exists unless it has a name; the very essence of the child is concentrated in his name. The findings are in agreement with Gyekye (1996), who holds that African parents in all other societies want their children to develop good character traits, and the giving of an ancestral name, especially of a person of good character guarantees this.

The notable fact about naming both in the Luhya traditional culture and Christianity is to secure solidarity of family ties. The names are used to communicate spiritual meaning, enlarging of the faith community, affiliation with the spirit beings, including God. It symbolizes new birth into either the Christian community or the cultural family.

On the theme of the use of animal blood during birth and naming, the questionnaire results showed that 27 (14.8%) Lay Christians were in support of the use of animal blood during birth and naming, 12

(6.6%) were undecided; while a majority of 144 (78.8%) disagreed. These results were indicative of a conservative church that is not in support of traditional religious practices. However, a participant in the interviews was of a different opinion:

When the woman gives birth, it is a painful and risk-taking incident where she pours her blood. To sanctify this, the family or community slaughters an animal or hens to signify that blood was poured as thanksgiving to the ancestors, the gods for saving the life of the mother who has given birth. We see nothing wrong in performing this ritual, but being Christians in the Baptist church, the practiced is out rightly forbidden (KINF 10).

The findings despite the differences show that animal sacrifices are being used in birth and naming ceremonies by the Baptist church members. This is in tandem with Douglas (2015) who holds that animal offering is an important aspect of worship in the church in relation to birth. The shedding of animal blood in birth and naming sacrifices for the Luhya community symbolizes fertility and life giving. The ritual is believed to release the vital force that sustains life where the pouring of animal blood is used for purification of the mother, after birth, which also symbolizes that life has been given.

The point to note is that the pouring of blood is not unique to the Luhya community. Throughout the Holy Scriptures the ritual of pouring of blood is associated with opposites of life and death, death and redemption, eternal life, and so forth. Blood symbolically represent life, where the life (blood) of the victim is used to symbolize the union between the living, ancestors, the gods or God. For instance, in Exodus 24 and Hebrews 9:13, the blood smeared on the door posts was a sign of confirmation of the covenant between the Israelites and God. While in the New Testament, the spiritual meaning of blood, especially of Christ offers atonement for the sins

committed and the new union between Christians and God.

The study further considered the theme of libation during birth and naming in Luhya cultural ceremonies. The questionnaire findings illustrated that 21 (11.5%) Lay Christians were in support of the ritual, 11 (6.0%) were neutral; while a majority of 151 (82.5%) were not in support of the ritual. However, the field verbatim data is of the contrary opinion as a participant informed:

As a traditional community and church members at the same time, we believe that the spirits in some way are linked to us. And therefore, we perform libation during birth and naming ceremonies because we believe that the spiritual beings give so much to us, including life. We use libation to give thanks for the blessing of life given to us. Through the spitting of busaa - traditional liquor or blood on the ground, we invoke the spirits to involve themselves in the life of the newborn child, taking care of the child in the form of protecting the child. This ritual is forbidden by the Baptist church; it is considered satanic and therefore not allowed by the church (KINF 16). While another participant informed:

Libation and dependence on ancestral spirits go against the injunction on the worship of the Lord God.

Libation involves poring of water, which is an indispensable ritual and form of prayer for the Luhya community also found in other traditional African cultures. It is connecting the living and the ancestors and other spiritual beings, divinities, fundamental forces, and so on. The verbatim data assert that libation for the Luhya community in Vihiga County is a form of involving the spirits and also communicating with the ancestors and finally with the God as a Supreme Being. In the Old Testament (Leviticus, 23), where the temple priest makes sacrifices of lambs, grain offering, pours out a fourth of a pint of wine as thanks for the harvest

in the tabernacle. It is used as a symbol of welcoming God, the gods and other spirits to participate in the life of the community. Today, among Christians this noble practice or ritual is not misconceived to contain sinful behaviour not permitted by the church.

The study looked at the theme of seclusion and purification and found that 21 (11.5%) Lay Christians were in agreement with the thesis, 7 (3.8%) were undecided, and a majority of 155 (84.7%) were not of the view that church members to participate in seclusion and purification rituals for the mother and the newborn child. These questionnaire results are illustrative of the reluctance of the Baptist church incorporate seclusion and purification Luhya traditional rituals into worship. However, the study went further to inquire the reason for seclusion and purification rituals for the mother and child.

Seclusion of the mother and child is done to ensure their safety from those believed to have an intention to harm them. The child is put a protective charm that repels those with bad intentions (KINF 18). The mother is secluded because she is considered to be weak and impure after giving birth. After some days she is removed and washes herself with some herbs that are believed to purify and protect her (KINF 20).

The findings show that a woman who has given birth is considered impure and therefore remains secluded for some days where some purification rituals are performed. The practice of seclusion and purification are consistent with Biblical sentiments. For instance, according to Leviticus 12, 2 a woman who gives birth, especially to a son is considered to be impure; the woman is to wash all her clothing, shave off her hair, and wash. All this is done for the sole purpose of temple worship and therefore should be purified. It is done to free her from all forms of *uncleanliness*, especially prior to worship of God.

The fundamental point is that both the Luhya and Biblical traditions consider.

On the theme of ancestral veneration, the field findings from the Lay Christians demonstrate that 5 (2.7%) agreed with the assertion that veneration of ancestors is performed by the Baptist church Christians, 10 (5.5%) were neutral; while an overwhelming majority of 168 (91.8%) were opposed to the ritual and therefore not accepted by the church. The sentiment was reiterated by an informant who opined:

God and ancestral spirits can't be compared because it contradicts biblical teaching on Christian indulgence in the worship of other gods, invocation of spirits (KINF 14). However, there were those with a different view:

In the Luhya community, ancestors are never worshipped, they are venerated since through them blessings are achieved and prayers reach to the Supreme Being called "Nyasaye". Ancestors are actively involved in the life of the community and that is why some of the Baptist church Christians continue with the practice of venerating them (KINF 6).

The findings at some level agree acknowledge that the Baptist church faithful do venerate the ancestors; they are revered as intermediaries between the living and the spirit world. In the veneration ceremonies or rituals performed at the community shrines, offerings of food, water, and other goods; burning of incense to honor them. The Luhya people construct ancestral altars and shrines where religious feasts and festivals are performed. The findings are in agreement with Conteh (2008) who affirms that Africans venerate their ancestors as divinities through prayer, sacrifices and divinations on communal occasions in reverence to God.

Finally, the study sought the views of participants on blending of Luhya birth and naming rituals with Christianity. Data from the field as illustrated in

table 2 show that 22 (12.0%) of the Lay Christians are in support of the thesis, 10 (5.5%) were undecided, and an overwhelming majority of 151 (82.5%) were not in support of it. These questionnaire findings were demonstrative of the fact that the majority of the Baptist churches Christians in Vihiga County do not openly support inculturation, though secretly they perform rituals and rites related to them. However, participants from the interviews were of a different view:

Luhya birth and naming rituals have a profound religious meaning that can enrich the Christian message and make Christianity a lived faith, a faith that is enshrined within the context. This is why some Christians in the Baptist church practice those rituals despite being not accepted by the church authorities (KINF 9).

The church doesn't allow African ritual practices because church members are to be trained in a Christian foundation and not a syncretic one (KINF 15).

The verbatim finding showed that Christians in the Baptist church find it important to incorporate Luhya birth and naming rituals into their worship. However, this calls for a profound theological research and dialogue with the Luhya religious culture. The study sentiments agree with Kyalo (2013) who in agreement with Pope John Paul II encourage the church in Africa to accommodate useful African values, embracing them within Christianity. Thus, the inculturation of Luhya birth and naming values entailed in their respective rituals is an indispensable way towards indigenizing Christian theology and faith in liturgical worship and rites.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study showed the divergence of views within the Baptist church membership. However, the results significantly revealed that the Baptist church is reluctant to embrace Luhya birth and naming rituals that embed important religious

values, which impedes the process and importance of inculturation of the gospel it preaches. Luhya naming rituals were noted to be a common practice performed by Christians during worship. The study clearly show children were named after their ancestors, saint, eminent situations at the time of birth. Veneration of saints and ancestral spirits remain a conflicting practice between Christians and the secular world. There are salient levels of Inculturation of Luhya birth and naming rituals into the Baptist Church liturgical worship thus an important aspect in Africanization of Christian theology.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommended the Baptist church to engage in a meaningful theological research and dialogue on the Luhya community and their religious traditional rituals and rites.

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