

Religious Syncretism and Duplicity: A Reflection on the African Struggles for Spiritual Identity in James Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The Black Hermit*

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ABSTRACT

African religion and culture have existed and served Africans before the colonial incursion and conquest. However, the arrival of alien religions and cultures ignites tension in Africa, destabilizing and disrupting peace and stability of the earth-centered tradition in the continent. The denouement of this tension is hybridity or religious syncretism. Since then, syncretism has continued to gain momentum in Africa unabated owing to persistent neo-paganism revival and promotion. The result is spiritual identity struggles. Based on this, the paper examines both religious syncretism and duplicity in James Ngugi Wa Thiong O's *The Black Hermit* to ascertain its implications on the entire African continent. It is a qualitative research method based on direct lifting of information from the text after a careful reading. Anchored on theory of hybridity, it is the submission of the paper that faith fusion brings about spiritual identity crisis as seen in Africa today.

Keywords: Religion, Syncretism, Hybridity, Culture, Duplicity, African Traditional Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Religion exists simply because of man's ultimate search for relationship with the creator. It is a socio cultural system that is marked by sacredness, beliefs or institutional practices which draw mankind to the supernatural. Edward Taylor (1871) in his *Primitive Culture*, defines religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings". The supernatural or 'spiritual beings' are referred to as the incorporeal or immaterial power which is capable of influencing man's life on earth. For instance, in the Bible, God is called the 'spiritual being' who created heaven and earth (Gen.1, 1). Apart from God, other spiritual beings are devil, Satan, Angel, gods, among others. In Qu'ran, it is Allah, Mala'ika, Jinn, etc. This underlines that humans live in a religious world.

In Africa, greater populations tie their lives to one faith, belief or the other. In other words, Africa maintains religious plurality. Dominant religions in the continent are Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religion (ATR). Research reveals that African Traditional Religion is the mother of all other religions in Africa. It is based on native customs and traditions and generational since it is transmitted through the words of mouth to generations. These traditional beliefs and practices range from songs, narratives, festivals, ancestral worship, belief in deities, all help shape African values, identity, humanity, institutions and even dignity. In confirmation, Mbiti (1990, 2) submits that before colonization, African communities were predominantly guided by indigenous belief systems that emphasized communal well-being, ancestral worship, and harmony with nature. Peter Sunday Atanda et al (2026, 89) then refer to African Traditional Religion as ...religion of the land owing to its ancestral background. In other words, religious beliefs and practices form part of social structures in African setting.

This apart, African Traditional Religion takes root in the African culture. Gabriel (2015, 98) refers to culture as totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies. He adds that these peculiar traits involve dance, music, dressing, language, arts, work, religion, values, among others. It is all over individuals, households and communities as a source of unity and identity. It manifests in rules, taboos, divinities, rituals, belief in deities, ancestral worship, religious objects, festivals and ceremonies, etiological myths, creedal myths, cosmogonic myths, prayers, presence of shrines, sacred locations, etc. They are symbols of communal life. Although Africans have diverse cultural backgrounds through different ethnic groups in the precolonial era, there is always cultural harmony and the phenomenon of culturalism, signifying living organic customs and mores.

However, African cultures and religion begin to fray at the edges with the arrival of colonialism. Colonialism brings cultural hegemony through Christianity and Islam. The contact between the native customs and religions and the colonial evangelism witnesses inculturation and acculturation in Africa. With this, the religious lives of the Africans then face syncretism. While Islam centers on the teachings about Allah and Prophet Mohammed, the Christianity dwells on the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. Because colonialism comes to conquer and dispossess, the Europeans fail to see anything good in African ways of life. Rather, they view the continent as 'Whiteman's Grave', 'Heart of Darkness', dubbing the culture as evil while labelling the people's practices with all manners of discriminatory words such as fetish, idolatry, heathen and paganistic. In a bid to resist the European incursion into Africa with their negative impressions and cultural imperialism, Ethiopianism springs up in the continent.

Ethiopianism is a movement by a group of black people for the liberation and improvement of all aspects of African lives socially, politically, economically, culturally and even in religion. It is like image-making organization. Kalu (2008, 24) argues that the group counters the European missionary denigration of indigenous cultures. According to him:

The movement, dubbed Ethiopianism, could be regarded as the first response by the Africans. It challenged white representation of the African values, cultures and the practice of the Christian faith. It challenged white monopoly of the cultic and decision-making powers within the church, and the monopoly of interpretation of the canon and the cultural symbols of worship. Ethiopianism countered the denigration of the indigenous cultures with a nationalist antistructure and a quest for the Africanization of the gospel.

Did this movement succeed? Partially because while their voice is felt then, it fails to achieve the Africanization agenda. This apart, the effect of this effort by the colonialist to fossilize African religion and culture is that Africans experience loss of vital cultural traits in their lives in part. In other words, the faith expansion diffusion is felt in the people, but the African cultural and religious worldviews, as well as traditional cosmologies are embedded in their hearts. Then, what appeared to be interfaith dialogue as some tricky Europeans may view it gradually slithered into syncretism. The Africans end up accepting the European religion and culture, combining it with theirs.

Since the era of syncretism, it has been discovered that religious identity crisis and duplicity have become daily life companions to Africans. People now engage in fake religious piety perhaps to achieve their personal interests. This has been identified by this research as a pervasive spiritual headache plaguing the continent unabated. In fact, it has eaten deep into the socio economic and political fabrics of Africa that spiritual piety among the people has become tenuous. Based on this, the paper therefore examines faith fusion in Africa to ascertain how duplicity and religious identity struggles are shaping perceptions about the continent today. Preliminary survey reveals that instances of duplicity abound in the text. This is a qualitative research anchored on Hybridity Theory (HT). The paper discovers that faith fusion is capable of causing subtle but perceptible societal despair and decline in social cohesion. As a result, the research posits that syncretism can bring about spiritual identity crisis.

Theory overview

This research is anchored on hybridity theory. It is a concept that emerges from postcolonial experiences. It is extensively an intricate term that can be applied to different contexts. This may be why it appears controversial before scholars. Bill Ashcroft et al (1995, 2003) confirm this when they assert that "hybridity is one of the most

widely employed and disputed terms in postcolonial theory". This apart, hybridity as a concept is traced to Homi (1994) in his *Location of Culture*. It simply refers to 'crossbreeding,' 'amalgamation,' 'mixture' or even 'combination'. It implies that two or more elements are involved, and when this happens, there is always a result of something new.

From the view above, hybridity explains the mixture of separate social, cultural or lingual components to form a new meaning. Considering this, Ann (2006, 209)) argues that "hybridity or syncretism is a process in which the interaction of cultures creates blended ones, mixture of the native and the colonial". As a postcolonial term, when two cultures meet, the intersection will definitely result in acculturation. Some scholars may view the phenomenon as transculturation. In this regard, Bill Ashcroft et al (2003, 118) submit that hybridization is "the creation of transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization". According to Robert (2003, 79), hybridity works in different ways at the same time according to cultural, economic and political demands of specific spaces to which new meanings are given. Young clarifies that the term is technically a cross between two different species.

This apart, hybridity theory tends to also capture resistant mettle of the colonized. Homi Bhabha (1994) and Joseph (1999) affirm this view when they say that 'hybridity' has been characterized as a subversion of political and cultural domination. Bhabha (1994,112) in his *The Location of Culture* in a comprehensive description submits that:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities. It is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity [...] displays the necessary deformation and displacement of sites of discrimination and domination.

However, during cultural or religious contacts, there is always hostilities which give way to change. There is a gap in-between the antagonizing breeds. Scholars termed the gap between the two entities that meet 'space'. Bhabha calls it 'third space'. According to him, it enables other positions to emerge (Rutherford, 1990, 211). So, the other positions are attained under hybrid when the boundary of a repertoire of a people's cultural or religious values widens and accepts new forms and practices. Before this, dialogical process that will experience tensions happens first. The process is usually between the alien and the native or local breeds. The one that is superior is assimilated by the inferior other, depending. This superior-inferior binary division calls to the mind that under hybridity theory, there are 'destabilizing hybridity' and 'assimilatory hybridity' (Anna Bernhard, 2007, 2013).

In assimilatory hybridity, the thought patterns of the alien are accepted and adopted or imitated. The alien actors employ a subtlety of peace to achieve this. For instance, in Africa, all the French colonies experience assimilatory hybridity during colonialism. On the other hand, destabilizing hybridity forces the thought patterns on the locals, with stiff resistance and tensions. That is why according to Nederveen (1994, 172), it "blurs the canon, reverses the current, subverts the center". For example, many West African countries under British control during colonization experience this form of hybridity.

To sum it, theory of hybridity underlines cultural differences and fusion, intercultural mixture or cultural mixture and adaptation. When it happens, there is syncretism. According to Kraidy (2005, 148), it is 'the cultural logic of globalization' as 'it entails that traces of other cultures exist in every culture'. This theory is considered appropriate in the research because since the end result of hybridity is syncretism, it will help the readers come to terms with the implications of cultural fusions, especially in African, considered largely as a conquered continent, where duplicity is now part of the daily lives of many people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term religion, is derived from the Latin diction, 'religio', meaning conscientiousness, relationship, devotion, or being tied, restricted and controlled. With civilization, the meaning changes to faith, beliefs, practices and dedication to the supernatural. In Islam, the word is Al Diin, meaning 'supreme power and authority to dispose' (Adamu Musa, 2024, 2). However, people may wonder whether religion is created like man by God or not. There are several theories that attempt an answer to this.

First is the anthropological theory. It submits that since man is society and society the anchor of man, development of man goes hand in hand with that of the society. So, as man transits from the lower form to the complex one, his cognitive ability on mysteries about the universe begin to deconstruct his existence laden with uneasiness, fear and anxiety about life and death. From this, he comes to understand that beyond the physical, exists the metaphysical. As a result, he sees the need for his safety and protection by being tied to the supernatural. James Frazer (1922) in view of this defines religion as a belief in 'powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life'. Frazer believes that man is under divinities, gods, otherwise supernatural and the only relationship with them lies in obedience. This may be why some scholars do say that religion emanates out of man's cognitive illusion (Tyler Greenway & Justin Barrett, 2022, Lawson, Thomas, 2022).

Outside of this, in sociological theory of religion, it argues that religion is the product of society. Society applies it as a tool to enforcing compliance among members, thereby making them avoid what Thomas Hobbes refers to as 'state of nature'. Then, theologically, it is stated by some scholars that religion is in existence because it is innate in man. According to Omoregbe (1993), man has within him, an irresistible desire for the infinite, and a desire which renders him restless until it rests in the infinite. In view of this, Muller (1873) submits that religion 'is a mental faculty or disposition, which, independent of, nay in spite of, sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and under varying disguises...'

Apart from the above, religion can be defined through interdisciplinary lens such as philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology, among others. For instance, in theology, Rudolf Otto (1917) describes religion as a mystery that is "at once awesome and attractive". It points out that religion encapsulates fear of the divinity that magnets man into obedience and salvation. So, St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) is right in this regard to assert that 'religion denotes properly a relation to God.' What is more, it is the life of God in the soul of man according to Henry Scougal (1677).

In sociology, religion is seen not as anything that connects to the supernatural or sacredness capable of drawing man to God. According to Gellner (1992), sociologists regard religion as a non-rational knowledge or an explanation system which "believes in a unique truth and which believes itself to be in possession of it". So, it implies that the sociologists study religion as an approach to a range of notions, convictions or principles that connects to man's conduct. In this case, values can be a veritable tool here. Therefore, the study of religion to them has serious social implications since values can shape moral compass of any society. For instance, in church, there are rites and rituals. These are believed to be guides on members' conduct. Following this, Emile Durkheim (2001) states that 'a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called church, all those who adhere to it.'

Then in the field of psychology, religion is attributed to the things of the mind, not supernatural. According to the psychologists, religion emanates from mental development of individuals. Based on this, Sigmund Freud (2012) argues that religion is 'an attempt to get control of the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world, which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities.' To him, religion is a product of neurotic obsession. This apart, modern psychologists such as Paloutzian and Crystal Park (2006) view religion as 'a framework of ideas, values and practices that helps an individual make sense of the world, provide purpose, and shapes how they navigate life events, crises, and interpersonal relationship.' From these views, one can see that psychologists believe that man is always helpless in the face of trials and tribulations of the turbulent world and therefore needs insulation and comfort from the harsh realities of life, hence, the need for religion.

As for anthropologists, religion has to do with human relationship with the traditional environment. In fact, religion is generally viewed by anthropologists as a 'cultural universe'. Following this, Clifford Geertz (1966) argues that religion is a 'system of symbol which acts to establish powerful pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.' This definition brings religion side by side with culture, and implies something, whether tangible or not which projects the people's worldview and guides how they live their lives.

Apart from the above, the views of religion by Philosophers center on the experience of man, his existence and functions. On the experience and existence, Karl Marx (1843) defines religion as opium of the masses. Marx is actually coming out from the perspective that the world is full of thorns and thistles, producing suffering and tears. So, religion offers cushioning effect to man's suffering in the hands of the merciless world. In view of this, Ludwig Feuerbach (1841) submits that religion is man's alienation; it is the means by which man strips himself of his own essence, his best qualities and reduces himself to nothing.

These definitions above prove that religion has no fixed meaning but according to scholars' opinions. This apart, religion is a permanent part of man and society. It is built around tenets, social order, fairness and justice, as well as existential meaning. Therefore, man is a religious being, or else, he will suffer existential void in the world Max Weber describes as full of 'disenchantment'.

However, religion can be syncretic. Syncretism is a derivative from the Greek one, 'synkratein,' meaning to put together. When two or more things are put together, they are combined, joined, or amalgamated to form or become one. Mokotso (2015) submits that 'synkratein' is like putting wine and water in a cup where you can neither again have water nor wine but entirely a different liquid substance. Rising from this background, Elizabeth Odey et al (2024) refers to religious syncretism as inclination of the Hellenistic philosophy to blend and blur various diverse faiths. That is, a blend of rituals, practices and doctrines. In view of this, Mokotso (2015) defines syncretism as the practice of amalgamating elements from different belief systems, ideologies and perspectives, even if they are contradictory, in order to create an entirely novel doctrine.

In this sense above, people create a room for integration of two religions into their lives. This phenomenon is mostly found in Africa battered and mangled by colonialism. The colonialists bring their religions into the continent and use them as instruments of conquest against the natives who are majorly immersed in African traditional religion. Then, the natives are forced to expand their thought pattern boundary and assimilate the alien religion. This is technically called hybridity. George Ike (2022, 2) notes the implication of syncretism in Africa when he says that ...an eradication of indigenous culture and practices has been harmful. What does it do? It is no longer a rare sight that many Africans who go to either church or mosque to worship will return to engage in traditional practices. To clarify this empirically, George Ike states thus: 'My own experiences in pastoral ministry resonate with these observations, as I have witnessed the confessions of many people who worship in church as well as utilize native practices'.

This apart, more empirical examples of syncretism in Africa abound. Gill (1999) reports that in 1860s, there are cases of people practicing syncretism in Lesotho, under prophetess Mantsope. According to Gill, Mantsope informs the people of Africa that the teachings of western religions are not all-compassing of what God represents, that unless they are combined with the native practices, it will not serve the Africans' need. Today in the continent, many African people still belong to either Christianity or Islam, yet, retain African religious consciousness through ancestral veneration, accepting of superstition, believe in magic, reincarnation and other sacred cultural practices.

Following this, Odey et al (2024, 1) remark that the impact of religious syncretism between African Traditional Religion and Christianity on African cultural heritage and values, mostly refers to the consequences of blending or merging both religions on African cultural heritages and values is real. Mokotso, cited in Oleska and Schineller (2011) therefore acknowledges that syncretism alters the content and elements of the original gospel message, particularly during the process of contextualization, because of the inclusion of religious elements from the receiving culture. In other words, some native legacies and standards have been contaminated and adulterated through syncretism, giving room for religious duplicity among Africans. Some Africans now engage in some fake religious practices just to serve their own interests, not those of the divinities and supernatural. As a result, African socio cultural tenets which used to be ingredients of African Traditional Religion and regarded highly for fear of consequences of violations, are now being trampled upon anyhow.

Moreover, recall that before the cultural and religious hybrid, Africans are very religious but since the era of syncretism, things have fallen apart. Owing to this, Ugwu (1988), cited by Ihenwa (2014) observes that the authority of many divinities and deities is diminished, undervalued and consequently disregarded and trivialized. No wonder today in the continent, instead of worshipping God or gods as the case may be, the worship of materialism has eating deep into the socio political and economic lives of many Africans. Therefore, it is not surprising the exponential rise in what Maria Rosa Antognazza (2014) called 'metaphysical evil' in Africa as a result of syncretism. What is sacred is now profane. The belongings of Caesar are now mixed with those of God. Delusion and disillusionment have become permanent parts of the daily companions of many Africans thereby creating absurdity in their lives.

To sum it, it is clear that religion is a matter of opinions in terms of meaning. It represents anything that draws man to the supernatural. This apart, cultural and religious hybridity is acceptable under globalization according to global citizens. However, in Africa, the wind is a rough one, blowing sands into the native food. The reason in favor of syncretism is purging evil practices of African culture and tradition. Nevertheless, a look without blinkers will definitely reveal that syncretism in Africa in this regard is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. So, while sanitizing the customs and traditions, vital African thought patterns are lost in the process. The new garment from syncretism seems to be more profane than sacred now as a result of interfaith crisis. This has opened the door for the unthinkable reality to stare the continent in the face, in what some scholars may call religious duplicity. Religious duplicity is a fake religious practice.

ANALYSIS

African culture and religion are intertwined and one. In fact, African Traditional Religion revolves around the native traditions and customs, and therefore commune and move together like the "legs of a twin compass," portrayed by John Donne in his poem, "A Valediction; Forbidding Mourning" (1633). They are really inseparable realities of interpersonal relationship and social harmony among the Africans with the supernatural. Based on this, the play presents the encounter colonial cultures have had with the African culture and religion and the effects of syncretism on the Africans after hybridity.

For instance, in the play by Ngugi, Nyobi, the mother of Remi and the wife of late Ngome of Marua tribe (Africa), shares under soliloquy, some emotional lamentation of what used to be revered socio-cultural tenets but no longer there as a result of acculturation in their tribe, thus:

Of a truth. This world is really bad. Not the same as the old. When sons still gave respect to parents. Honoring claims of motherhood. Harkening to the call of blood and soil. Many letters have we now sent to him. But no

reply. Not a word from him, a child I bore. And like a plant in the field tended carefully. Anxiously watching the sun, the wind and the rain. That no malicious weather should come to harm him (Act 1, Scene 1, p2).

Nyobi, by these above implies that syncretism has badly affected some native principles believed to have formed ingredients of African Traditional Religion and eventually brings a new social evaluation, perception and referencing thereby causing a shift in the native ethical compass. In the time past in Marua, parents are seen as the second God, deserving respect, honor, obedience, devotion and service. This is their cultural decency and also native religious obligations. However, the external contact the native customs and tradition has had with the alien religions and culture has made everything crumbling and disappearing. This is highlighted in the messages sent to her son, Remi, she sacrifices to raise but he chooses to ignore them owing to city life as opposed to the rural one, prompting the mother's regret. This is interfaith crisis.

Again, it is both in the tradition of the people of Marua tribe and their religion that a woman without a husband or child has no honor. They believe that a woman's honor lies with her husband. This is captured in the play when Thoni's husband dies in an accident without any child for her. It throws her into cultural and moral anxiety and panic as reported here:

Thoni:

Yet, I cannot do without a husband. Without a man to warm my bed. A man to ask me for a meal in the evening. A man to make me wash his clothes. And a child of my own. A child to call me mother. To make me feel a new self (Act 1, Scene 1, p3).

Nyobi, Thoni's mother-in-law, paints more picture of how Marua tribespeople view a childless woman: Nyobi:

A woman's joy is scolding her children. It lies in seeing their smiles and cries. Doing little things for them, the loved ones. A woman without a child is not a woman (Act 1, Scene 1, p3).

In African culture, tradition and religion, children are seen as God's gifts. So, any woman who does not have a husband, not to talk of a child for the husband suffers scorn, disrespect, and considered as an ill-fated being who is required to appease her chi (personal god) for liberation for elusive blessings to return and locate her. Therefore, unless a woman marries and have children, she is neither recognized as a woman nor valued in Marua. Basden (1966,68) affirms this when he asserts that childlessness, especially in Africa, is understood as the greatest calamity that can befall a married woman. With the arrival of syncretism, this begins to melt away.

In the same vein, if a man is ripe for marriage but unable to take a wife in this part of Africa, he becomes worthless. He must marry and have children to enable him hold his head high in the village gathering. All these are also African Traditional Religion expectations. However, syncretism emerges and many of these social and religious expectations begin to lose relevance as can be depicted in the words of one of the elders to Nyobi, thus:

Elder:

Thank you, wife of Ngome. May God guard his spirit. He was a man, oh yes, your husband was, before the white-man stole his heart. And turned him into a Christian. The Gods themselves are jealous. They only take away the choicest in the land, leaving the weak and the feeble (Act 1, Scene 1, p7). Ngome, the husband of Nyobi, is a man as confessed by this elder above because he fulfills all his cultural and religious rites before his death. He is a religious traditionalist, but when the alien faith and culture comes upon the Marua tribe, the hybrid wind blows him away from the native customs and tradition into the hands of Christian religion. Though now a Christian convert, detaching himself from the native religion and culture becomes a conflict. The result of it is a divided allegiance to the two religions and cultures; one to native customs and tradition, the other to the alien. This is confirmed by leader of the elders of Marua tribe, listen to him:

Leader:

You all know what a fine man his father (Remi's) was, before he came under their influence and lost all his manhood. He never became himself, except when he was near death. Then, he turned to us, not his wife, to make Remi marry this woman. That should show you our strength (Act 1, Scene 11, p14).

There is a sense of crisis in the elder's words above. Ngome, Remi's late father, slides into religious infidelity by maintaining dual loyalty to both the African religion and that of Christianity. He converts to Christianity, yet, asks Remi, his son, to fulfill the customs and tradition of Marua he is no longer a part of by marrying his late brother's wife, Thoni. He even engages the elders who are core traditionalists to pressurize Remi to honor the cultural rites of their people. From this scenario, Ngome is neither a bird nor an animal. This is what is called religious duplicity.

If he has an interest to protect as seen here and he knows the particular faith that will enable him achieve that interest, he tilts towards that faith. For instance, he knows at the point of his death that Christianity abhors 'marriage by inheritance.' He then seeks its fulfillment for his son through African traditional religion. This is pure hypocrisy, fake religious devotion and piety. This is a syncretic effect among Marua tribesmen. This apart, there is also a religious insincerity or pretense traced to Nyobi, Remi's mother and wife of Ngome. She is a Christian but believes in black magic. Watch her encounter with one of the elders:

Elder: You know what our neighbors are. The tribes that surround us, don't want to see us rise. Who knows? You are there. I, your neighbor, here, can't I use black magic to turn your mind against the tribe and this earth? Nyobi: Do you think so? Elder: Why not? You have eyes and cannot see. Remi, your son, and ours, is the only educated man in all the land, exceeding in knowledge, all the people, black and white put together. Nyobi: Christo, save my son. Make ineffective the bad medicine, that turns away his mind from home. Elder, what shall I do? Can't you and the tribe do something? (Act 1, Scene 1, p9). From this dialogue, it is clear that the elder is intelligent and very wise, like serpent. He knows too well that it will be hard to convince Nyobi as a Christian to accede to his mission. What does he do? He creates a prickling fear using 'black magic' tale. He therefore stagnates her mental faculty with it first before freezing her conscious thought, a thing which throws her off balance. Then, she indirectly accepts 'black magic' power and worse still, looks helpless before the elder as seen in the last two questions she asks above. This is harmful and contradictory to her Christian doctrine. In this sense, Dirk Kohnert (2022) confirms that 'black magic' used to have negative effects when he states that belief in 'black magic' used to harm other people for selfish purposes. This is not all, Nyobi's capricious mind finally capsizes into the ocean of Christopaganism in the hands of the elder that has visited her as seen here:

Elder: We want to send a man to the city. A man who will carry a little medicine, to make Remi turn to the tribe.

Nyobi: Who...who gave the medicine?

Elder: We of Marua tribe are not children, or foolish either. Do you still believe in what the white-man said? He said our medicine was bad, bad! Some people were easily deceived.... They have not discovered the lie. You still call yourself a Christian? I'll tell you. Remi, Remi. We must fetch him from the city.

Nyobi: Tell him, his wife and mother want him back, oh, elder, if you can.

Elder: Trust Marua tribe medicine to do its work.

Nyobi: I...I do.

Elder: There is something else, we wanted you, to give our messengers and their medicine, a mother's blessings to attend to them on this difficult journey.

Nyobi: With all my heart. Go in peace and success attend you (Act 1, Scene 1, pp10-12).

How does that happen? She ends up giving a motherly blessing to the charm parcel (black magic) prepared by the elders of Marua to use its power to bring back Remi, the hermit, from the city. Ordinarily, a Christian should not engage in neo-pagan practices, but when it happens like this one, it is syncretism. It is normal to be desperate to see her run-away son back home after a long time. However, it is a faith failure on her side as a Christian to derail in the doctrine. Worried by the spate of this syncretic life in Africa, Mercy Nnedinso Ossai (2025, 221) observes that the growing attraction to neo-paganism, is not primarily the result of renewed traditional consciousness, but rather a consequence of incomplete Christian conversion in which many adherents embraced the church externally without undergoing genuine spiritual and moral transformation.

Moreover, Nyobi's apostasy or doctrinal deviation is confirmed further by the elder to their leader, thus:

Leader: Did the woman pour blessing on our mission?

Elder: Like rain. Her son is dearer to her than her Christianity (Act 1, Scene 2, p14).

With this behavior of Nyobi, it is now clear that Julian Chukwuemeka Ibe and Nicholas Chinaemelum Alutu (2025, 3) while referring to syncretism, may be right to declare that a fusion or amalgamation of contrasting and

opposing elements can only be superficial and cosmetic. In Christian perspective, Louis Luzbetak (1998, 360) describes the Nyobi's religious life here under syncretism as 'theologically untenable amalgam'. In other words, combination of two faiths produces an improbable, ridiculous situational reality. In literature, it is a case in point of situational irony.

However, when Nyobi's eyes clears, she runs to her pastor for confession, listen to her:

Pastor: But what's the trouble? You look strained. What load sits in your heart?

Nyobi: I've been caught. The elders guiled me.

Pastor: What do you mean?

Nyobi: They want to send for him, so they came to me for blessings. And I, overwhelmed by a mother's desire to see her back, betrayed my heart, giving the required blessings (Act 1, Scene 3, p17).

Nyobi's responses above reveal that religious duplicity is hinged on interests. It is a selfish interest for her to choose for even a moment to be half Christian and half pagan just for her son to be brought back to her. The end result of it as seen already is a Christian dualism, with two parts: one sacred and the other secular. Of course, these are diametrically opposed and supposed to be parallel lines. No wonder syncretism has become in Africa not only cancerous but also a deadly spirit, permeating society today, with agitating consequences.

Furthermore, Remi who is brought up in the African customs and tradition suddenly abandons African ways to embrace alien culture and religion through his parents. When the conflict and pressure emanating from both the local and alien ways of life hit him hardest, he chooses to be neutral and as a result, runs to the city. In the city, he engages in clubbing, nightlife and cohabitation. This is confirmed by his city girl-friend, Jane, thus:

Remi: ...seriously, I'm tired.

Jane: Would you have said that last year? You went from night-club to night-club as if you are haunted, running away from something (Act 2, Scene 1, p25).

Apart from this, Remi confesses his religious identity crisis when he tells his friend, Omenge, why he leaves village to be a hermit in the city, hear him:

Remi:

Soon after this, my father fell ill. It was the shock of my brother's death. He called me to his bed and said: 'Remi, you know our custom, your brother's wife is now your wife'. I refused to marry her. I had already reconciled myself to the fact that she was my brother's wife, and she was. How then could I take another man's wife? It is not that I am very religious. Even today, I could run away with your wife if I knew she loved me.

Omenge: What happened?

Remi: O, my mother wept. My father, although a Christian, wailed and cursed. The elders of the tribe came and prayed me to do a father's wish and obey a sacred custom. Finally, I agreed to live with her (Act 2, Scene 2, pp34-35).

From the dialogues and Remi's flashback before Omenge, one can detect conflict of the people's culture with the Christian faith in him. As a result, Hillary Okeke (2011, 2015) asserts that when cultural promotion and revival...interposed with the Christian faith, the resultant effect is often an "apostasy".... To avoid further confusion, Okeke therefore warns that 'Christians must constantly be on their guard against compromise with idolatry, superstition and fetish practices under the guise of culture.' The point here is that the traditional African religion is so deeply rooted in Africans that romance with the alien religion cannot totally drain the blood out of them. Syncretism only brings crisis and confusion as seen in Marua tribe in this play by James Ngugi Wa Thiong'O.

Meanwhile, some Africans do believe that syncretism will give the continent a befitting sense of peace in their relationship with the supernatural which will in turn impact positively on the already established vibrant socio cultural tenets. Nevertheless, it has proven to be an incongruous amalgam resulting in a confusing religious identity struggles.

DISCUSSION

Religion, no matter the way it is viewed, is good for man since he is consisted of both the physical and the spiritual. While the physical part of him enables him to relate with fellow man, that of the spiritual helps him connect to his maker, the supernatural. The latter enables him exercise what Thomas Aquinas calls ‘infused virtues’. However, infidelity is poisonous to religion. For religion to benefit man and help advance society, there is the need for adherents to be constant and consistent in their faiths. When infidelity or doctrinal deviations occur in religion, it is traced to either incomplete conversion or syncretism. Studies reveal, especially in Africa, that syncretism does not only encourage religious infidelity but also create religious identity issues. In fact, it opens a door for duplicity to thrive. This is probably why Chukwuemeka Ibe et al (2025, 4) call African Christian converts caught by syncretic wind ‘glorified paganists’. In the play by James Ngugi Wa, the late Ngome, his wife, Remi, are all guilty of religious syncretism. Syncretism can only pave way for hypocrisy in people’s lives. In a religious context, it brings about fake religious devotion and piety. This has never stood Africans in good stead. In view of this, this research therefore submits that acculturation can cause existential crisis, faith-wise. Today, Africans are at the spiritual crossroads, a thing which has continued to impact their global perceptions negatively as a grimy continent.

CONCLUSION

Africa as a conquered continent has continued to grapple with a lot of colonization consequences. One of which is religious syncretism and duplicity. It looks harmless on the surface. However, this is another lingering war Africans are faced with in a bid to salvage the continent for good. As a result, this research discovers that religious syncretism has been subtly instilling societal despair and existential void in Africans over the years in their relationship with the supernatural while tarnishing their global image as a continent without moral conscience. Rising from this, it therefore posits that faith fusion can cause spiritual identity crisis.

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