

Engaging the religiocultural quest in development: An African indigenous perspective

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The intertwining nature of African life and livelihood is a considerable challenge to the discourse of development. In as much as the view on unlocking both the spiritual and physical dimensions of life in developmental endeavours is frowned upon, contemporary exploration into indigenous knowledge systems as an alternative discourse of development does not simply transform the dialogue but posits it as a discourse of power. This article examines the interplay between indigenous beliefs and knowledge systems and the discourse of development, with a focus on the Nankani in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

Introduction

Development does not occur in a vacuum. It does so within a sociocultural setting. The view that development takes place in specific historical and cultural settings – settings that are not devoid of their religious, environmental and political contexts – remains intricately undeniable (The Report of the South Commission 1990:11). The historical link between Christian Protestant ethics and the socio-economic development of the West illustrates this (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012:62–78). Even so, while this recognition is acceptable with reference to the major world religions, doubts are raised when this view is associated with the many indigenous religions of the world (Ter Haar 2011:3–4). Yet, irrespective of the state (form and condition) in which one finds these factors (sociocultural, historical, environmental, political and religious), they affect and are in turn affected by whatever new knowledge and resources are introduced. Therefore, in Africa where the sociocultural, economic, environmental and political dimensions are complexly interwoven with its diverse, yet uniquely homogenous, indigenous religions (see Cox 2000:131–132), a careful consideration of the context is relevant in the search for development in its communities (Amenga-Etego 2011).

Of course this view is not new. Gustavo Esteva (1992) considered this observation alongside Rodolfo Stavenhagen's 1986 concept of ethnodevelopment. Understood as a developmental process emanating from within one's own culture and resources, ethnodevelopment pays attention to indigenous culture, knowledge and skills (Esteva 1992:7; see also Gadagoe 2009). Again in 1998, the president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, observed that '[t]he key development challenge of our time is the challenge of inclusion' (Todaro 2000:16). Thus, conspicuously confronted with the view that the context is essential, both contemporary discourses on development (see Briggs 2005) and community (evidenced-based) development strategies (Shaffer 2015) have sought ways of making this possible. The challenge, however, is how can this awareness translate into practice? This is because the quest for inclusion is not only ambiguous but also complex. What should be included and how it should be included remain unclear. For example, whose understanding of inclusion is in operation when the indigenous religiocultural systems are not strategically engaged?

Initially, some form of resolution to the problem was found in the so-called participatory approach, a perspective that sought to involve indigenous communities in both the decision-making and developmental processes (Rahnema 1992). Unfortunately, this had no depth. This is because any call for the participation of the indigenous African communities without their religioculturally imbued worldview is impossible. Even so, the key issues lie in the nature and content of these religions (Tafkord 2013). Thus both scholars and development agents are saddled with the nagging problem of how to handle Africa's indigenous religiocultural systems (Ter Haar 2000). Consequently, the subject of what aspects can be incorporated into modern development processes without compromising their current Western secular orientation is crucial. Somehow, the participatory approach provided an opportunity for effective window dressing as well as the silencing of agitating communities and their representatives.

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The underlying problem above is partly because the complexities embodying both the phenomenon and the word *religion* continue to pose great difficulties for any definite articulation. Reiterating the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John S. Pobee observes that 'we do not know the phenomenon called religion but we know one when we see it being practised' (Pobee 2011). This lucid historical statement and reiteration stands at the heart of this perplexity. In Pobee's view, the bases of his identification and understanding of what is or constitutes religion is on its physical manifestation in practices or lived experiences and not in its abstract theoretical conception or formulation. In other words, the apparent lack of a satisfactory grasp of religion, as well as the diverse manifestations of the phenomenon (of religion), undoubtedly is a crucial factor in its exclusion in this field of endeavour. It follows therefore that if the practitioners and scholars of religion are unable to clearly unpack and delineate 'religion', it is not surprising that development advocates, agents and scholars are evasive about it.

Unable to critically tackle the religious factor, therefore, the focus shifted to culture. According to *The Report of the South Commission* (1990), '[c]ulture must be a central component of development strategies in a double sense: on the one hand, the strategies must be sensitive to the cultural roots of the society, to the basic shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and customs; on the other, they must include as a goal the development of the culture itself, the creative expansion, deepening, and change of the society's cultural stock' (The Report of the South Commission 1990:132). Perhaps this is because culture is viewed as the solvent of religion. For instance, social scientists, especially anthropologists and sociologists, include customs, beliefs, symbols, attitudes, values and traditions in their definition of *culture* (Busia 1955:1). This notwithstanding, it is not an easy way out. In as much as the above is true, religion also creates and shapes culture. This symbiotic relationship compounds the problem.

Even though it is quite possible to easily identify the core religious features of the indigenous religions of Africa, it is very difficult to disentangle Africa's cultural heritage from its religious beliefs and practices. This is partly because the latter are also intricately interwoven with one of the core indigenous religious features. For instance, it is presently difficult to separate the cultural dimension from the religious dimension of the belief in ancestral spirits and their role as the moral custodians of the living or their role in creating certain festivals and customs. That is to say, even though a specific practice might have been cultural (hence can now be a cultural heritage), the fact that it was bequeathed to the present generation by the past (ancestors) can render it religious. This makes the question of whether such a practice is currently religious or cultural intriguingly complicated, hence the use of the term *religiocultural*. This term not only encompasses the two distinct sides of the religious and cultural but also the area in between. Consequently, innovatively pragmatic answers should be expected in any given situation; both religion and culture are dynamic,

evolving constantly with respect to new encounters and challenges. In each case, the old is reinterpreted, renewed and integrated into the present (see Pottier 2003:4–5).

Nonetheless, from the cultural perspective, Albert A. Awedoba called on development partners to be well informed of Africa's cultural values and practices. Identifying language as the soul of culture, he observed that this would enable them to draw informed conclusions and make decisions that are inclusive and beneficial for the communities involved (Awedoba 2002). At the community level, Awedoba identified religious beliefs as a crucial index for rural development. Similarly, Abraham Akrong encouraged the inclusion of what he called the contextual 'cultural values', because for him religion rounds up African culture (Akrong 2003:36–38). In other words, culture holds the key to community unity, continuity and change. Thus from both the international and indigenous perspectives, the ability of culture to nurture, challenge and innovatively engineer development is clearly established. It is in this respect, therefore, that culture must be handled with care.

Challenged to the core by these glaring problems, the strategy has been to turn to the phrase 'indigenous knowledge systems' as an alternative source of development on the continent. Derived from the cumulative lived experiences of the past, sustained and pragmatically interwoven and interpreted in the present, this does not solve the problem either. Similar to the issues associated with religion and culture, much of the indigenous knowledge systems are entangled with the *religiocultural* systems. Consequently, the need to consider these three as an integrated whole is important for moving forward. Therefore, this contribution engages the discourse of development from the quest to engage the *religiocultural* systems at the grass-roots level in African communities.

Engaging the *religiocultural* quest is therefore a call to dialogue and the initiation of contextually pragmatic, innovative choices. Hence there is the need for scholars, development advocates, activists and agents to come to terms with each other and their communities through dialogue and negotiation. This might take time, because sometimes representatives of the indigenous communities might take time off for further consultation with the rest of the communities' members and their belief systems before making decisions. Moreover, this could involve rituals. More importantly, it calls for repetition because different communities are involved.

African indigenous religions, culture and knowledge systems

As outlined above, indigenous beliefs and practices, culture and knowledge systems are intricate interconnected factors that are difficult to disentangle. From the abundant literature on the nature and character of the indigenous belief systems in Africa, from Geoffrey Parrinder's works in West Africa to Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti, to the countless works produced

over the years, the key features have been identified as the belief in the Creator Spirit (Supreme Being), Divinities, Ancestors and a countless host of Spirits or Spiritual Powers, also known as the 'Community of Spirits'. Thought to be ever present yet somehow uninvolved with the daily needs of humans, except in critical situations, the Creator Spirit is believed to have taken a fatherly or kingly role as depicted in various appellations, such as *Nana* and *Naba* by the Akan and Nankani of Ghana, respectively. It is important to note that the Supreme Being is perceived as uninvolved because of the delegation of roles to the divinities, ancestors and a host of spiritual powers with the necessary spiritual support for action. These delegated roles include the request for rain, good harvest and animal or human fertility. Thus humans may call upon any of the host of spiritual powers for a good harvest in addition to the roles played by the divinities and ancestors. Alternatively, even though the ancestors and divinities may protect a man, he may also acquire a specific amulet or talisman to protect him and his family from witchcraft.

Thus, delegated with assorted tasks, some of which are interlinked, the divinities, ancestors and spiritual powers are both benevolent and malevolent in their relationship and discharge of duties to humans. Consequently, the accumulated interactions and experiences with these diverse spiritual beings and powers have produced different practices and resources among human beings. Referred to as the *indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge systems*, they are the legacy of Africa and her people's religiocultural, sociopolitical, environmental and economic past, present and future, supported by its notion of the unbroken cycle of life and worldview. This is perhaps why Mbiti includes religion in his understanding of Africa's cultural heritage. For Mbiti, religion is not only the dominant part – it is also the richest component of African culture (Mbiti 1999:10). Mercy Amba Oduyoye believes that the traditional values and knowledge systems are permeated by religion and they continue to serve African society in diverse ways, despite the influence of Islam, Christianity, modernisation and urbanisation (Oduyoye 1979:116). For her, 'the ancestral cults have been the custodians of the African spirit, personality, and vivid sense of community' (Oduyoye 1979:110).

Is it therefore not ridiculous to reject or ignore the indigenous religious beliefs and practices in contemporary development programmes and discourses and claim to be interested in its culture or knowledge systems? For instance, the word *accumulated* in the above paragraph refers to the ancestors' role in the formulation of these systems. That is, by evaluating their experiences, they formulated the initial ideas that are now revered as traditions, culture and/or knowledge systems. This is irrespective of whether they are in the form of values and norms, taboos, rituals, symbols, myths, folktales, proverbs and sayings or riddles. Each one, as well as all of them, are essential in the constructed religiocultural beliefs, practices, culture and knowledge systems. This is not to imply that African beliefs and practices, culture and other forms of knowledge systems are static. Rather, each generation adapts, reinterprets and adds to their cherished

heritage, making them dynamic, yet keeping relatively close to the core principles as they evolve. Consequently, this contribution engages the three major components simply as the religiocultural quest.

In other words, any serious discussion on development in Africa cannot choose or focus on one component and leave out the others. Moreover, external notions as well as forms of development need to be adopted, motivated and driven by indigenous communities if such notions are expected to make a significant and/or sustained impact. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to understand Gerrie ter Haar's statement:

For most people in the developing world, religion is part of a vision of 'the good life'. If their religious point of view were to be given its due place, development would occur from the inside out, so to speak, rather than the other way round, and they would be empowered to employ their religious resources as part of a development strategy. (Ter Haar 2011:5)

According to Ter Haar, religion has the 'spiritual power', that essential 'enabling power' that:

enables people to take control of their own lives by reference to an invisible world inhabited by spiritual entities in the form of gods, deities, personalised spirits or impersonal spiritual forces. For those who believe in it, spiritual power not only represents real power, but it is also *transformative* power. (italics hers; Ter Haar 2011:14)

Such an endeavour takes advantage of any existing opportunity and resources in the community to enable it to effect the necessary change. Consequently, a development initiative that does not take the indigenous religiocultural systems into consideration is an imposition (Cowen & Shenton 1996:1; Todaro 2000:16–17).

Development in African indigenous communities

The indigenous religions, culture and knowledge systems have an underlying influence on people's perceptions and practices. This is evident in the way in which beliefs and practices are understood and sometimes applied to the use of natural resources, even in modern developmental ventures. For instance, nature is perceived as both sacred and secular (Busia 1955:4). Thus imbued with the spirituality of the Creator Spirit, it is revered and sometimes feared because of its spirituality. Even so, people use its physical manifestations for their livelihood and other things. This notwithstanding, the perceived sacredness of nature affects the way some natural resources are harnessed and used. With care and maintenance, the natural resources are tapped responsibly following the rules and regulations of the specific resource and its sacredness (Amenga-Etego 2016:15–29). The responsibility attached to the use of some natural resources is not necessarily because of reverence to the embodied sacred entity – that is, its benevolence or sustainability purposes – but it is sometimes a result of the fear of its malevolent powers. This is because any serious infringement could result

in disastrous consequences. As such, infringements of the rules are corrected with ritual performances. This is not to say rituals in this area are mainly corrective mechanisms; rituals also play a vital role in ensuring harmony and balance in this duality (sacred and secular), especially within the context of the individual and community engagement with nature.

Notwithstanding the above, natural resources are used variously for different purposes including contemporary forms of development, which includes industrial and infrastructural developments. For instance, in the gold mining area of Tarkwa, small-scale surface miners, known as *galamsay* [surface miners], continue to revere the land as a sacred entity (divinity). As such, before work commences on any new site, rituals are performed to seek permission and safety from *Asase Yaa* (the spirit of the land – the goddess after whom Thursday is named, according to the Akan day-names and calendar) to harvest that which lies within her bosom or within her, safely. It is believed that if such a ritual is not performed, accidents and deaths will occur in the course of mining. This belief does not deny human error, but it is an example of how the people's beliefs and practices are employed to aid their psyche as it provides an avenue for composure and mental stability for work. Such a view is not only relevant in the current environmental crises, but also for other forms of developmental projects that involve the people's belief systems.

Similar to the spirituality associated with the divinities and spiritual powers illustrated above, the ancestors are particularly concerned with the development of the family and the care of family properties. Family can hinge on human development, which is paramount in the indigenous scheme of thought. Human development in this context is not necessarily based on the quality of people's lives. This is because references are first and foremost made on the numerical strength of the family. This is not to say the physical, mental, moral, social and economic development of people are not valued. As a matter of fact, indigenous communities, even in the past, were very much concerned with the holistic development of people. In my article '*Chinchirisi: The phenomenon of the "spirit children" among the Nankani of Northern Ghana*' (Amenga-Etego 2008:183–214), I discuss how an integrated notion of religion, being human and development is contextually expressed both as a myth and a reality. While acknowledging how delicate and highly contentious this embedded phenomenon is in our modern society, especially where the right to life and children's rights are a concern, I explain that the people's understanding of religion and development is enshrined in it. Elaborating on the issue, I first illustrate how babies, and sometimes toddlers, with serious birth defects were perceived as malevolent spirits infiltrating families (the physical world through births). Then, I described how the people believed they had found a way of returning those 'spirit children' back to their rightful abode (the spiritual realm) through rituals.

Examining the article further, it is quite clear that framing this phenomenon within the concept of *spirit children* not only provides a psychological cushioning for eliminating these children, but it also illustrates how the people were grappling with the concept of development. This is because, even though their physical deformities served as an illustration (evidence) of mal- or underdevelopment, it was believed that their presence and sustenance in the human family might destroy whatever progress (development) the family might have made and could make in the future. For instance, it is believed that because of their acute need for care, caring for them requires resources and time, a situation that could be lifelong. In that case, the time and resources spent on caring for them could delay or prevent the birth of other children. Now one needs to examine this argument within the context of this indigenous African society where human fertility and multiple childbearing are an essential component of ensuring generational continuity and a visible physical sign of wealth and development. Moreover, as malevolent spirits, their presence could also thwart the family's progress. Therefore, using the concept of *chinchirisi*, we see that the Nankani were, and to some extent still are, not simply dealing with a religiocultural issue but also a developmental one.

Notwithstanding the above, the conceptual framing of *chinchirisi* and the practices associated with it dives deep into what it means to be human in this context. This is because the phenomenon of spirit children straddles the understanding of being human and the indigenous ubiquitous worldview of spirits. The ardent belief that spirits are both benevolent and malevolent and can transform themselves into human and non-human entities to tempt or trick the living has provided an avenue for this phenomenon and its associated practices. Now conflicting with both development and human rights discourse and practices in global society, this is one contextual example that requires critical religiocultural engagement. As a matter of concern, it is this lack of critical engagement that has protracted efforts toward the eradication of the phenomenon in the Upper East Region for the past three decades.

Apart from the above interconnected discussion that sprang out of the issue of quality, priority is placed on the quantity (numerical) of people. As such, the inability (or lack of interest) of any family member to have more children was, and still is to some extent, viewed as creating a problem for underdevelopment in the family. These provided concrete reasons for other forms of acceptable sexual relationships outside marriage (Mbiti 1999:143). The indigenous kinship system is therefore another way to understand development in indigenous African societies. In other words, development is not simply about the material, scientific and intellectual but about the family. As a matter of fact, it is believed that development starts with the family. In his classic book *Tradition and Change in Ghana*, G.K. Nukunya (2014) observed that the indigenous family system performs three important functions, namely procreation, socialization and economic cooperation (Nukunya 2014:57). In this situation, all three functions are essential for development. In the indigenous

sense no family is considered developed if its family size is decreasing, no matter its increasing members' material, social, political, intellectual or scientific development. It is for this reason that members are socialised, among other things, in marriage and procreation as well as interdependence and economic cooperation. In her chapter titled 'African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty', Elizabeth Amoah in a way discusses these interrelations under 'The principle of sharing and reciprocity' (Amoah 2009:119–120). The view that both community and family resources are mobilised for the welfare of all and not the development of a competitive individual or selective individuals is a hallmark of many indigenous communities.

It is also for this reason that discussions relating to family size, population growth and development (family planning and contraceptive use) need to enter into serious dialogue with the sociopolitical system (leaders), being mindful of the gender dynamics in the respective community. This is necessary because of the strong link between the family (living), childbirth (unborn) and ancestral beliefs (dead), a belief that constitutes the interconnected and cyclical worldview of the present, future and past. Entering into dialogue with community leaders or representatives is crucial because they are the custodians of the religiocultural heritage of their people. Therefore, they may be able to balance their dual role of safeguarding the traditions bequeathed to them by their ancestors, amending them cautiously where necessary, if even with rituals, to reflect the times and condition, and at the same time sustaining the balance for the future. Elizabeth Amoah calls these practices 'innovations' (Amoah 1998:5).

Leadership positions and inheritance in general are also keenly aligned with ancestral beliefs and practices. Thus, where an individual traces his descent through the patrilineal line, his main inheritance will be determined by that system (Sarpong 1974:36). It is the backbone of many African extended family systems and its associated privileges and responsibilities. This notwithstanding, the same principle applies to the matrilineal family system.

Discourses on religion and development in African communities

According to Ter Haar (2011):

Religion and development have more in common than is normally apparent. At the foundation, both are visions of how the world may be transformed. From the religious perspective, the transformation of individuals, or inner transformation, is deemed a necessary condition for transforming society and the world as a whole. From the professional development perspective, on the other hand, it is primarily the external environment, or the arrangements made for the provision of material resources, that constitutes the site of transformation. (p. 5)

However, with the perceptions that indigenous societies, along with their religiocultural systems, are primitive and

hence undeveloped, Mario Blaser, Harvey A. Feit and Glenn McRae have argued that these particular religious beliefs and traditions are continually subordinated in the development terrain (Blaser, Feit & McRae 2004:3–4). Writing her introduction on what she calls 'Truth from Below', Elizabeth Isichei observes in turn that '[t]he interface between Africa and the West has often been a source of exploitation and pain, but it has also been a place of cultural innovation' (Isichei 2002:6). Reflecting on previous perceptions that the indigenous religions of Africa 'would die out with the advance of Western education, and of Christianity and Islam', Isichei uses Geoffrey Parrinder's view on the belief in witchcraft to illustrate how instead of its disappearance, tradition has found other ways to express itself, hence her argument for the 'continuing reinvention of "traditional" religion' (Isichei 2002:7).

The question then is why is the unique nature of indigenous religious systems used as a basis for decreeing them primitive and consequently underdeveloped? Again, why are they cast against development, with the prediction of their demise? In other words, why is development perceived as the ultimate winner? Having already discussed the indigenous religions with some illustrations on the notions of development above, there is the need to also look a little more closely at development. According to the Report of the South Commission:

Development therefore implies growing self-reliance, both individual and collective. The base for a nation's development must be its own resources, both human and material, fully used to meet its own needs. External assistance can promote development. But to have this effect this assistance has to be integrated into the national effort and applied to the purpose of those it is meant to benefit. Development is based on self-reliance and is self-directed; without these characteristics there can be no genuine development. (The Report of the South Commission 1990:10)

For development means growth of the individual and of the community of which the individual is a part. In the modern world, that community ranges from the family, the village, town, or city to the nation and the world as a whole. (The Report of the South Commission 1990:11)

...development is a process of self-reliant growth, achieved through the participation of the people acting in their own interests as they see them, and under their own control. (The Report of the South Commission 1990:13)

In the above quotes, the core factors in community development are identified as a growing sense of 'self-reliance' and 'self-direction' (ingenuity and motivation), the use of one's 'own resources' alongside the integration of 'external assistance' and, lastly, a genuine sense of participation. In as much as all these are essential, the latter, a genuine sense of participation, is most important. This is because the notion of participation involves giving the indigenes in that particular locality a sense of respect and dignity through hearing them and giving them a voice. These people need to be engaged through constant dialogue and involvement. They need to work hand-in-hand with the

external partners. This should not be limited to community-level meetings but should also occur in the documentation and implementation of the project. This gives the community members the opportunity to relate their 'own interests' and to feel that they jointly own and 'control' that specific developmental project. Unfortunately, what often happens on the ground is quite different. In many cases, the participatory factor is window dressing, where the so-called participants are rendered voiceless. This is especially so if the indigenous participating team is religiously (ritually) inclined. Yet these are often the leaders of the communities, acting in their capacity as religious leaders and community representatives. Thus, ignoring their views can either lead to resentment or a lack of genuine participation (involvement), which can also lead to the lack of sustainability of the programme or project in question.

Walter Rodney reiterates J.E. Casely-Hayford's statement that '[b]efore even the British came into contact with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government' (see Rodney 1972:36). An understanding of these notions of earlier developed indigenous religiopolitical institutions and systems of government can be deciphered from Adu Boahen's *Topics in West African History* (1966). In this book, Boahen illustrates how the Akan administrative system and chieftaincy institution, as well as the person and function of the chief, epitomises this. He notes that the chief was the central authority and chief architect of development, with his ministers being the clan heads acting as policy implementers (Boahen 1966:69–77; see also Brempong 2007). I made a similar argument in 'Tribes without leaders? Indigenous systems of governance and sustainable rural development' for the communities without chiefs, especially those in Northern Ghana. Using the *tindana* [earth and/or land priest; also, the custodian of the land] (pl. *tindaama* and/or *tindanduma*) as demonstration, I explained how the *tindana* performed multiple roles with clan heads and other ritual leaders. It must also be stated that even where chiefs existed, chief priests and *tindanduma* continued to play certain important roles alongside the chief (Amenga-Etego 2012:119–134). Thus these indigenous leadership systems, which compare well with contemporary decentralised processes, not only provided political harmony but sustained development within the indigenous context (Amenga-Etego 2014:24–25).

Unfortunately, '[t]he African independent state inherited a colonial administration suspended above but not integrated into African society' (Glickman 1988:230). Educated and trained under the so-called civilizing mission, the elite who took over the affairs of governance and development looked down on the indigenous systems instead of initiating an integrated approach. Sustained by elitism and self-interest, African nations pursued national development, and continue to do so, along the lines of their colonial masters, without due regard and consideration for the African indigenous religions, culture and knowledge systems. Having lost the

battle at the national level (with government), indigenous communities are seeking something different at the local level (with individuals, groups or non-governmental organisations [NGOs]). However, Blaser, Feit and McRae are of the view that indigenous African communities are sandwiched between governments and multilateral development institutions. In this situation, local NGOs have become the most important institutions on the negotiating or peacekeeping front for development in indigenous communities (Blaser *et al.* 2004:12–14). Emerging or situated within the target community with a much-limited scope, these local NGOs are in a better position to mitigate the tension created at the national and international (multilateral) levels through specific negotiations and interventions.

Notwithstanding the ardent desire to include indigenous cultural or knowledge systems, recent indigenous community development is polarised. Whereas one dominant discourse is of the view that no amount or form of external knowledge alone is capable of redeeming Africa, particularly rural Africa, the other observes that the indigenous religiocultural and knowledge system alone is also not capable of responding to Africa's developmental needs (see Amenga-Etego 2011:8–11). This is where the local NGOs are significant. They are in the best position to negotiate and balance the appropriate indigenous knowledge systems, relevant to specific development projects, to enhance efficiency and the overall project of community development in indigenous African societies.

Thus far, the discussion lends itself to Louke M. Van Wensveen's typological analysis of religion and sustainable development (Van Wensveen 2011:81–108). Identifying the four broad forms of engagement within the religion and development debate as additive, integral, evaluative and cooperative, the analysis has helped to articulate the debate on this subject a bit more clearly. The problem now is, in as much as indigenous communities today are fully aware of the fact that their religiocultural beliefs and practices cannot form an integral part of the contemporary forms of development, they refuse to view or accept, at least at this point in time, that their religiocultural systems should be simply additives (see Tsing 2007:33–67).

This situation seems to leave us at a crossroad. Fortunately, the crossroad in many traditional societies, including the Nankani and its neighbouring communities in the Upper East Region of Ghana, is a safe zone or heaven. It is a symbolic place of neutrality and impartiality. Hence, it offers its 'residents' a place of freedom, rest, renewal and resuscitation. Additionally, it is a place of recollection, stock-taking and decision-making; the crossroad is not a place of destination but only provides a kind of temporal relief. So the journey must continue. Significantly, Van Wensveen's evaluative and cooperative are still open for discussion. This means that all parties are needed at the negotiating table for dialogue, one that gives each party equal opportunity because this neutral zone offers each one of them a fresh start.

Conclusion

Despite the diverse forms of contemporary influence in African societies, the reality of daily living reveals a multifaceted, layered lifestyle of indigenous beliefs and practices (see Opoku 1978:1). As noted by scholars of religion in Africa, the depth of life and livelihood in communities are continually steeped in the indigenous religiocultural systems. For if the indigenous religions, culture and knowledge systems are fluid and dynamic in such a way that every generation can adapt and modify them to suit their existing context, then it is unreasonable to argue that they are militating against Africa's development. As indicated above, the worldview of people underlies their development. Why, therefore, should Africa's case be different? It is for this reason that development workers need to actively engage the indigenous religiocultural system for genuine and sustained development in the continent. As Ter Haar puts it:

[i]t is more convincing to suppose that religion will shape the development of many countries in the non-Western world in the years to come. The mere fact that religion, in whatever forms it manifests itself, constitutes both a social and political reality requires a reconsideration of its role in development.' (Ter Haar 2011:6)

Therefore, the continued assumption by some development partners that Africa's religion and culture is militating against her development needs to be reconsidered (Awedoba 2002:9).

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