

# The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity

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**Dates:**

Received: 06 May 2021

Accepted: 21 July 2021

Published: 22 Sept. 2021

**How to cite this article:**

Iheanacho, V.U., 2021, 'The significance of African oral tradition in the making of African Christianity', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(2), a6819. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6819>

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As religious systems are intertwined with social systems, change and continuity in thought and practice constitute a significant feature of Christianity. Thus, African Christianity embodies a distinct socio-cultural stamp of the continent. Considering the historical phases of Christianity, this socio-cultural stamp distinguishes African Christianity within global Christianity. One of the cultural vehicles of this imprint on Africa Christianity is the African oral tradition. Oral tradition is a necessary social antecedent and cultural heritage of Africans. African oral tradition is visible primarily through proverbs, folktales, songs, dances, customs, traditional medicines, religious practices and ancestral utterances. Through a substantial range of literature research on the subject matter, this article contends that African oral tradition is a relevant socio-cultural element in the constitution of African Christianity and its influence cannot be ignored. It sets out to pinpoint certain incontestable contours and marks of African oral tradition on African Christianity. In other words, it seeks to highlight what could possibly be described as the defining or peculiar hues of Christianity in Africa as impressed upon it by African culture and tradition especially in the oral form. By means of qualitative methodology and a multidisciplinary approach in the assemblage of materials and sources, the article argues that African oral tradition, even if not openly acknowledged, has been both essential and instrumental in the making and shaping of Christianity particularly in the sub-Saharan part of the continent.

**Contribution:** As an observational research, this article painstakingly pinpoints the remarkable imprints of African oral tradition on the evolution and practice of Christianity in Africa. Situated within the confines of theology and history of religion, its major contribution lies in the drawing of attention to the remaking of Christianity on the continent with some obvious African trademarks.

**Keywords:** African Christianity; African Independent Churches; Pentecostal and Charismatic churches; indigenous oral culture and tradition; sub-Saharan Africa; healing; prosperity; re-appropriation.

## Introduction

Theologians in their theological presuppositions tend at times to insulate their specific religions so that they may appear shielded from religio-cultural ambience from which such postulations or inferences emerged. Contrary to such surmises, every religion often bears the imprint of the religious and cultural contexts of its origin (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:114). In equal measure, religions reflect the traditions and worldviews of their practitioners and devotees. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), religious traditions were largely codified in oral forms, and because they were not written in books, both vertical and horizontal interactions were mostly oral. Hence, by means of the oral tradition, Africans in indigenous societies learnt their origin and history, civic and religious duties, crafts and skills, as well as traditional myths and legends (Cooper 1983:101–102).

Prior to the advent of colonialism, Christianity and Islam, Africans had their own beliefs, thought patterns, practices and worldviews. According to Mazvita Machinga, indigenous thought and tradition were handed down orally from generation to generation. The core of African thought has long been influential in shaping the responses of individuals and communities to social issues (Machinga 2019:151). Incorporable beings were part of the nucleus of indigenous spirituality imbued with attitudes, beliefs, practices, and rituals that enabled Africans cope with daily existential realities (Machinga 2019:151). Although those spiritually informed approaches, perspectives and structures have been somewhat modified in certain instances, they have

**Note:** Special Collection: Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (University of South Africa) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (University of Limpopo).

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remained influential in the lives of many Africans, whether they be traditional worshipers, Christians or Muslims. Whether consciously admitted or denied, the oral tradition and its multifaceted aspects remain an essential constituent of the rich African cosmology and way of life (Machinga 2019:152).

Oracy can legitimately be described as the hallmark of African civilisation. African historians such as Théophile Obenga and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, and literary icons such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Ng giwa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe and a host of others, have searched through African oral tradition for a luminary past to highlight a positive image and identity for the black people (Gampiot 2017:73; Sackey 1991:389). The creative use of African oral tradition is quite visible in the writings of the first and second generations of African writers from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Their skilful retrieval of African oral narratives and their incorporation into structure, theme and style gave birth to the Africanisation of the novel form. As Mbop Louis (a Kuba elder) once explicated in a conversation with the Belgian historian and anthropologist, Jan Vansina: 'We too know our past because we carry our newspapers in our heads' (cited in Newbury 2007:215). Similar view is upheld by John Mbiti in reference to religion amongst the African people:

Religion in African societies is written not on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings .... (cited in Kamara 2000:507)

This article discusses the significance and influence of African oral tradition on African Christianity. Particular attention is focused on the oral culture as expressed in sermons, prayers, songs and prophetic utterances. The aim is to demonstrate that African oral tradition is an important socio-cultural component in the making of African Christianity. For this reason, qualitative methodology and a multidisciplinary approach have been used in this article to explore and describe the important place of African oral tradition in African Christianity. By looking at subtitles such as a die-hard primal worldview, innovative syncretism, pragmatic selections and performative Christianity, this article considers some key conceptual underpinnings of African Christianity as displayed in a few places in SSA. This is performed primarily through the optics of the African Initiated Churches and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, with occasional allusions to the mainline churches.

## A die-hard primal worldview

A staunch member of the Harrist Church almost equated the Liberian Grebo prophet, William Wade Harris, to Jesus Christ. Through his message, the wandering prophet made a deep impression on his African converts because he shared their worldview. Harris simply preached that the 'devil is defeated'. He was held in high esteem by his adherents. An ardent follower of his, made this remarkable conclusion about Harris in relation to God and other prophets:

God sent his sons to a different people to save them. Jesus went to Europe to save the whites, but he did not come to Africa. It was the prophet Harris, an African like us, whom God sent to bring us into the light. (Gampiot 2017:60)

Harris and other founders of African Initiated Churches, adopted a practical approach to Christianity, accompanied by a problem-solving mentality. Whether it was Simon Kimbangu in the Congo, Isaiah Shembe in South Africa, Samuel Oschoffaor and the founders of the Aladura churches in Nigeria, they all shared one thing in common. They held in unison an 'enchanted worldview' whereby the old terrifying gods in the over-spiritualised indigenous cosmology re-emerged and clothed with new Christian aprons (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:110). This is also true of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that now populate African religious landscape. The 'enchanted worldview' with its traditional religious beliefs and practices, is embedded in Africa's religious revitalisation. It makes it possible for pre-Christian consciousness to impinge itself upon the followers of the founders of the second and third phases of African Christianity (Kollman 2010a:14).

Undeniably, traditional religion has got its own tenets, but it does not possess, in the strict sense of the terms, enforceable theological dogmas such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is a religion of the heart that is enshrined in the cultural identity and value system of the people. Although Africa is a geographical entity and a political constitution, however, it is not a monolith reality. Its diversities do not preclude a 'simultaneous homogeneity in epistemology and philosophy in which the religious factor is both active and powerful' (Machinga 2019:152). The religious component and outlook to life are a visible thread in the African cosmology predicated upon a 'mystical causality'. It is this mystical causality as encased in indigenous religious worldview, in the assertion of J.K. Asamoah-Gyadu, that explains Africa's seemingly incurable religiosity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:94). It is not hard to imagine that religion is bound to become a strategy for survival in a cosmology where the physical world and the habitation of human beings are construed as a playground for contending and contradicting powerful unseen forces (Adogame 2000a:6; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:93-94). Within the labyrinth of warfare between supernatural forces, human beings consider themselves as pawns. The philosophy of life and the value system that are orally imbibed, teach Africans to look towards benevolent forces for blessings and protection from malicious spirits. In that worldview, every misfortune and inexplicable death 'provided occasions for consultations with priests and diviners for supernatural answers and interventions' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:94).

A glimpse of African traditional 'mystical causality' can be gleaned in Ayi Kwei Armah's book, *Fragments*, typified by the folktale tradition and worldview of the Akan people of Ghana. The reason proffered in the novel for the death of a child five days after his birth is something most traditional African societies can easily relate to. In the conversation between Naana (voice of the ancestors) and Baako (the

principal character of the novel), it comes to the surface that the little child's death could not be prevented. It is the punishment on the living for their failure to respect the norms and practices of the powerful ancestors such as the offering of libation (cited in Sackey 1991):

Did they pour a libation before starting this drinking? I heard nothing, neither the silence nor the words.

There was no libation, Naana.

Do not play with me, Baako. You made my heart jump.

It's true, there was none.

She sighed. Great friend, they have taken to forgetting the ancestors themselves. They do not look to those gone before, and they do not see the child. Where are their eyes, then? [262-263]. (pp. 393-394)

The prevalence and centrality of 'healing' and 'deliverance' rituals in contemporary African Christianity is without doubt anchored on the resilience, affinity and reality of traditional religious worldview. Afe Adogame observed that the benevolent and malevolent spiritual entities are part of a polarised African cosmos. It is a cosmology that is hinged upon the belief in malevolent spiritual powers that include evil spirits, witches and wizards (Adogame 2012b:80). Traditional religion offers a sense of security and protection from supernatural evil powers. It is cast against the background of a precarious environment where release from problems and challenges because of natural causes is considered paramount to human survival. The transposition of indigenous belief system has led to the re-invention of Christianity in Africa and amongst Africans in the diasporas. This is not surprising because traditional religions as a common heritage of Africans, involves their body, mind and soul. It influences their pragmatic view of religion in coping with various existential challenges, particularly with the retention of indigenous aetiologies of diseases, illnesses and evil spirits (Adogame 2012b:89; Kamara 2000:509). The comment of Carl Sundberg on a Congolese who migrates to Sweden can be applied to many Africans in the diasporas. They do not easily shed their indigenous worldview on matters of health, wealth and success. Sundberg observes that a Congolese who moves to Sweden, for instance, does not immediately or even after a pretty long time in Europe, change his or her ideas about why certain things happen. In peculiar circumstances, even the inability to get a visa to Europe or America is sometimes interpreted as a religious problem that requires prayer (Sundberg 2019:337, 339).

In former times, recourse was made to diviners and traditional healers who could read signs and prescribe appropriate remedies. Similarly, Christian prophets and pastors are now also sought after for their supposed spiritual abilities and pedigrees to ward off evil spirits and assure their followers of blessings. The emphasis on 'power' in the re-appropriated African Christianity strikes a familiar cord in the African context where the supernatural realm is invoked upon for active power, intervention and succour. It is an enduring worldview where religion is experiential and used for the practical purposes of explanation, prediction

and control in view of the ubiquity of evil spirits (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:114). Prayers, sacrifices, offerings and rituals were deployed in indigenous worldview to secure practical ends such as success, prosperity and general well-being. In the summation of Mbiti: 'In prayers for wealth, success, and prosperity, African peoples indicate their conviction that man's physical welfare ultimately depends on the spiritual realm of God and the departed' (cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:105). This explains why rituals in Africa have particular importance especially in terms of socio-cultural and religious symbolism. Rituals as symbolic acts are underpinned by their religious connotation based on their relation to the spirits and supernatural world. Ritual actions serve as an exchange between human beings and the spirit world, giving access to power to heal, protect and grant material prosperity (Meyer 2007b:14). It explains why the ordinary human experience may be understood in traditional cosmology as a mimetic of the transcendent. Herein, every misfortune is perceived as a diminution of the vital force from either of the three worlds of traditional cosmology: human, natural and supernatural. The physical world serves as a vehicle for the spiritual, which is built around the 'mystical causality' because every conceivable human problem appears to have been caused by some 'mysterious' force (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:105; Machinga 2019:155).

## Innovative 'syncretism'

Religions like cultures are porous by nature, on the recognition that they are open to intermixture and mutual borrowing from each other. They undergo historical changes, especially in a competitive environment in the fight for attention and attraction of adherents. The process is equally characterised by inter-penetration (Stewart 1999:41). In its earliest usage, as coined by Plutarch (AD 46-119), syncretism was employed in a positive sense as a means of survival. It appeared for the first time in Plutarch's *De fraterno amore*, where he used it to describe the strategy adopted by the Cretans against the onslaughts of a common foreign enemy. In his depiction of the resourcefulness of the Cretans to mend their differences, Plutarch reported thus: '... though they often quarrelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was which they called "syncretism"' (cited in Berner 2001:505).

It goes to show, as found in the work of Plutarch in the first century, that syncretism was originally a strategic means for survival and preservation. From the standpoint of its etymology, syncretism and the needed process for its fruition, appear to occur in situations of tension or crisis. According to Charles Stewart, syncretism only acquired an overriding negative connotation in the 17th century (Stewart 1999:45). The negative usage of the term became more heightened in Africa with the emergence of African Independent Churches in the early 20th century. It was used to denigrate local churches that broke away from the spheres of the control of mission churches. African Independent Churches as result of

their native origin and establishment by Africans, slowly acquired their own space through creative innovations in the mixture of Christian and indigenous mindsets (Stewart 1999:45–46).

In anthropological parlance, syncretism has come to mean a synthesis between foreign and indigenous elements. It is like the melting point of integration in which the meeting cultures involved, lose and acquire, in equal measure (Stewart 1999:49). It facilitates the amalgamation of different religious traits for interaction and mutual borrowing (Adogame 2000a:5). Used anthropologically in application to the 'Africanisation' of Christianity, the term implies a positive understanding. In this sense, it incorporates indigenous religious thought and practices into African Christianity. In this regard, Christianity and traditional religion have been engaged in a continuous dialectical interlock of mutual exchange and creative appropriation. From anthropological prism, tradition becomes much more than something of antiquity that constitutes an essential part of African cultural and religious heritage (Meyer 2004a:455, 457).

The American anthropologist, Melville Herskovits (1895–1963) offered insights into the aforementioned view of syncretism with an illustration from the integration of African Americans in an overwhelmingly white society. As a realist, Herskovits was convinced that African Americans whilst integrating into the American society, still unconsciously preserved a good number of their African cultural roots. These were visible in the areas of religion, folklore and music. Herskovits coined the term 'cultural imponderables' to underline the lingering ethnic particularity of a group. It means that syncretism contains both 'survivals' from the past and offers a means to unite the past and the present (Stewart 1999:50). The interrelation between the past and the present through the mediation of creative syncretism comes in the form of a hybrid. Interestingly, in its original Latin provenance, hybrid was used to denote the offspring of a tamed sow and a wild boar.

In view of this discussion, it can be surmised that all religions, to some extent, may be described as hybrids because of the variety of their overlapping and criss-crossing experiences. It presupposes that every system has undergone some form of change over time since its beginning (Bernier 2001:502; Stewart 1999:45). A good example, in reference to Christianity, is from the Late Antiquity in the collection of hymns by Synesius of Cyrene (373–414). Hymns 6, 7 and 8 of that collection are particularly instructive because Christological themes are couched in metaphors taken directly from ancient Greek mythology (Bernier 2001:508). Jesus is addressed in those hymns as the 'glorious offspring of the virgin of Solyma', which is an allusion to the Olympus, or the mountains of the Solymi as mentioned by Homer in his *Oedipus* ('Solyma' in Smith 1854). Encapsulated in the same worldview of Greek mythology, Jesus is lauded by Synesius for descending into the Tartarus, which is a place of torment and suffering for the wicked. In his praise of Jesus, Synesius

exclaimed that an 'uncountable races of demons all around the air' trembled at the sight of Jesus, the ruler of souls and the conqueror of Titan, 'the shepherd of the nocturnal gods' (Pachulia 2019:63–66).

Theologians, on their part, like to consider syncretism as a normative category but in a somewhat negative sense. They use it to describe the religious processes or phenomena that may be looked upon as deviations from the essence of Christianity. This occurs if syncretism happens at the level of system within the process of blurring the boundaries between different religious systems. The desired intention is the reduction of tension between the different systems. Contrarily, historians of religion use syncretism as a descriptive category where it takes place on the level of elements and is directed towards incorporating elements from different religious systems. It does not obliterate the boundaries between the systems. In contradistinction to the position of theologians, historians of religion hold the view that there is not 'a fixed centre inhabited by imperturbable contents of faith and revelation' (Bernier 2001:499).

Whilst historians of religion may recognise the 'cores' and 'boundaries' of different religions, what they disapprove is the derogatory use of syncretism to deny the respective religious expression of certain values: authenticity, consistency and creativity. As far as historians of religions are concerned, there is no 'pure' religion and there is no 'pure' culture (Bernier 2001:502–506). As two dynamic phenomena, both involve a combination of elements that are borrowed from two or more different traditions. Consequentially, religions like cultures, embody present composites that may eventually innovate and forge new hybrid forms in the future. Again, the history of Christianity indicates that the Christian religion has not always been 'pure' as there are cultural traces of borrowed elements from other religions (Stewart 1999:55). The dynamism of Christianity makes it possible for it to adapt and borrow as it continues to interact with other religions and cultures. This explains why African Christianity as a distinct blend within global Christianity, is a veritable adaption of Christianity to the African context. Its adaptation is the end product of a mixture and mutual influence between Christianity and traditional religious and cultural heritage. Like in other places, the appropriation has been mediated by local differences, and at the centre of which, is to be inserted African oral tradition (Werbner 1997:315).

Employing the process of creative fusion, Christianity in Africa has retained its core belief systems and multiple rituals whilst at the same time, it has taken up certain strings of the African cultural matrix. Like African literature inspired by African oral tradition, Christianity equally feeds from particular African belief systems. This is discernible in religious music, dance, and displayed vibrancy in worship. It is a truism that African ontology is expressed in colours, made visible in traditional attires, singing and celebration. These cultural traits leave their imprints on Christian worship,

whether of the mainline churches, the Protestant churches or the Pentecostal religious services. Their aesthetic quality is undeniably rooted in indigenous ingenuity (Kamara 2000:513). It bears reiterating that the emergence of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and their flourishing on the continent have brought innovations within African Christianity. There is no denying the fact that, in many respects, those innovations have been accomplished against the backdrop of pre-existing traditional religious and cultural worldviews.

## Pragmatic selections

Africa, as Paul Kollman has observed, probably houses a larger variety of manifestations of Christianity than any other continent in the world (Kollman 2010a:4). The phenomenal success of Christianisation in SSA was achieved by means of what Kollman describes as 'choice-encompassed' (Kollman 2010b:126). In the explication of Kollman, the term refers to the agency within which Africans could incorporate and adapt new religious identities. The remaking, as it were, of Christianity on the continent occurred within the broader perspective of the continent's overall adjustments to Western and Arab intrusions. Africans in the face of Christian missionary evangelisation, selectively appropriated the Christian message on their own terms, and found therein possibilities for a creative agency amid constraints. In several ways, through their dynamic responses, they helped shape missionary activity on the continent as missionaries constantly had to assess and renegotiate their strategies to local reality (Kollman 2010b:126).

In other words (Maxwell 2006):

[M]ission Christianity became African when it re-sacralised the landscape and made use of local agents in proselytism, preaching and prophetism, and also when Africans seized hold of Christian symbols and powers, especially literacy. (p. 380)

Quite noticeable and interesting, is the fact that Christian missionary enterprise in Africa became particularly successful in those parts of the continent where it subtly adjusted to African 'predilections' (Maxwell 2006:380). In comparison to the land of the missionaries, the efforts of Africans to 'domesticate' Christianity and to make it theirs, took place in a very short period of time. Conversely, it took Europeans about 10 centuries to transform Christianity from its Jewish roots into a European religion. According to Nicholas Creary, Africans were resourceful in their selective appropriation and incorporation of foreign elements from either Islam or Christianity into their own religious systems that pre-existed the arrival of European missionaries (Creary 1999:766). Specifically, in the case of Christianity, there ensued an Africanisation of Christianity as a result of that intermingling, accompanied by a spectacular growth that is probably unprecedented in the history of Christianity. As Kollman explains, it is a growth that 'represents possibly the largest forty-year transformation to a new religious identity in human history' (Kollman 2012c:304). In hindsight, the words of Mojola Agbebi (cited in Killingray 2011), etched in 1889, about the local content and the place of indigenous

agents in the progress of Christianity in Africa, now seem prophetic:

To render Christianity indigenous to Africa, it must be watered by native hands, pruned with native hatchet, and tended with the native earth. It is a curse if we intend for ever to hold at the apron strings of foreign teachers, doing the baby for aye. (p. 96)

The rooting of Christianity into the African world may be comparable to pan-Africanism as envisioned by Naiwu Osahon. For Osahon, it ought to be a movement that should emerge from within the continent and 'must be founded on ideas and philosophies that have emerged from the African human experience, the African soul, and the African psyche' (cited in Ugwuanyi 2017:68). Putting aside differences and variations based on geographical locations and personal preferences of African church founders, a common supposition can be made about the hominess of Christianity on the continent. It has to do with the pragmatic selectiveness that has given African Christianity its peculiar hue. Its offshoots include a praxis and a spirituality that is enclosed in an African 'performed theology'. It involves a belief system that is highly experiential rather than a primarily cognitive understanding of the Christian faith (Skelton 2010:156). The Yorubas of Nigeria is a good example of an African people that were not crushed by a monolith of Christian doctrine and practice. They did not accept in an indiscriminate manner every tenet of Christianity. Instead, they selectively took from Christianity what they liked, and used it to enlarge their worldview. Contemporarily, they re-cast the fruits of their borrowing from Christianity in their traditional and cultural mode so that some elements from the native culture found their way into the people's practice of Christianity (Maxwell 2006:385). The Zionist churches in southern Africa achieved a similar feat in drawing on their African cultural resources, which they conjoined to their new Christian faith to fashion out their unique way of being Christian (Kollman 2010a:8). The experience of the Yorubas and Zionist churches in terms of the intermixture of Christianity and their respective native cultures, may be described as having the best of two worlds without the fear of contradiction and syncretism.

A similar congruence and fusion is presently taking place within Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. The convergence gives birth to a new ontological fit on the heels of African cosmological presupposition, in relation to practical help and the promises of Pentecostalism, especially success and prosperity (Kollman 2010b:133). The emphasis is on the power of word of mouth to effect what it says through uttered declarative prayers in order to conjure God into intervening in favour of the intercessors. It is an interventionist theology about God's immediacy, coupled with an expressive spirituality that appears to suit African religious psychology (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:101, 105). It is not uncommon to hear the complaint of the Pentecostals against mainstream churches whose liturgical services and preaching are judged by the Pentecostals as lifeless. Priority appears to be accorded to experience. The 'Pentecostalisation' and 'Charismatisation' of African Christianity fits so well into the narrative of pragmatic selectiveness where the preponderance of oral expression

favours spontaneity (terms borrowed from Adogame 2012b:78). One remarkable aspect of this spontaneity is the amazing and extempore recollection of Bible passages and verses by many African preachers and individual Christians (Sundkler & Steed 2004:1031). Although not exceptionally African, one cannot but acknowledge that the almost faultless recalling of Bible verses from memory by a good number of African preachers is commendable, with a uniqueness of its own. It carries the stamp of African oral tradition that is sometimes glossed over. It is not uncommon on many occasions to hear a preacher expound on the word of God without a written text in hand. Such spur-of-the-moment calls to mind the African penchant for oral spontaneity. It is imperative to note that the offhand practice in sermon delivery is not only limited to the second and third generation churches in Africa, but also to older denominations such as the Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches. The sermons, in some cases, are lengthy and last more than an hour. The scene is impressive and recalls the power of oral tradition to develop and train the human intellect, and memory to retain information and sharpen imagination (Cooper 1983:103).

There is a part of African Christianity that may be identified as 'popular Christianity' or 'Christianity of the ordinary people'. It is the doorway for the expression of African supernaturalistic orientation to life. It is nurtured by indigenous epistemologies that most African Christians rarely discard (Adogame 2012b:91). For this reason, certain religious practices such as hymns, gospel choruses, prophetism and belief in the Holy Spirit are regularly relied upon in order to keep 'popular Christianity' alive. The prophets and founders of African Independent Churches who first strutted sub-Saharan African religious landscape reserved a prominent place for hymns. Many of those hymns were inspired by the life and conditions of their followers. Their interest in hymns with an African proclivity can be qualified like Charles Wesley's interest and the Methodist movement who wrote hymns for the working class in England of the 18th century. An example of the ordinariness of their hymns is provided by Afe Adogame, who examines a didactic hymn from the Celestial Church of Christ's hymn book. The cited hymn carries the marks of ordinary, everyday life, and echoes the cultural wisdom that inspired its composition (Adogame 2000a):

We come to market, we come to market  
 We come to market in the world  
 No matter how sweet the world may be  
 We shall depart one day.  
 When the saints go marching home  
 Lord, I want to be among them  
 Let the prayerful one's mind their works  
 Those who weigh our works are coming. (p. 3)

There is a close discernible similarity in Kimbanguism concerning the centrality of hymns in their worship, which is a window into the core of their spiritual life. The BBC journalist William Edmundson once wrote a piece about his

journey to the town of Nkamba in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nkamba, known as Jerusalem to members of the Kimbanguist Church, is home to a vast green and white church that functions as the headquarters of the movement. Although their conviction that the grandson of Simon Kimbangu is a reincarnation of the prophet, and is therefore, the Holy Spirit, may be an extreme assumption, their worship is nonetheless, truly African. According to Edmundson (2015), the Kimbanguist religious services are enlivened with a sequence of hymns and a 30-piece brass band, rendered in perfect timing and harmony. The accentuation of hymns is reflective of a Christianity that is doing an 'update' on indigenous religion (Dall 2019; Edmundson 2015). Someone like prophet Harris in Liberia even encouraged the creation of an indigenous hymnody amongst the Dida. It was to be based solely on traditional forms of indigenous music (Adogame 2000a:10). Similarly, the Pentecostal and Charismatic strand tends to give singing a prime of place in their worship, imbued with a somewhat 'military strategy' (Adogame 2012b:92), where worship is akin to war. Jesus is appropriated in context and worshipped as the changer of destinies as expressed in a popular Ghanaian gospel chorus: 'The Lord has made all things new. My unfavourable destiny, he has turned around in my favour' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:96). The war mentality is even clearer in this praise worship song by the Nigerian gospel singer Gloria Oluchi and her Restoration Praise: 'We are in battle, we are in battle in this world. Enemies may try but victory must be mine'.

With regard to pneumatology, the understanding of the Spirit in African Christianity is approached from the conception of power. In the explanation of Allan Anderson and David Ngong, this is shaped by African worldview where power is conceived as a 'vital force' (Anderson 2003:178–186; Ngong 2011:53–95). The mainstream churches uphold the traditional Christian view of the Holy Spirit as laid out by the first seven ecumenical councils, whilst the understanding varies in the African Independent Churches and the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. The experience of the power of the Spirit can be seen as the hermeneutic key to understand the theology of the Pentecostal-type churches. There is the fire-brand pneumatology that finds resonance in the African context. In general terms as posited by Colin Skelton while citing Allan Anderson and P. Makhubu, the familiarity of the spirit world in traditional culture prepared the way for the acceptance of the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit (Skelton 2010:155). Once again, like other Christian beliefs, pneumatology is carefully selected and appropriated to envisage God as present, active and powerful through the Holy Spirit.

## Performative Christianity

The religious ferment within African Christianity is a continuum that must be placed in broader historical and cultural contexts. It relates to the pragmatic and tolerant attitude of the African mind on religious questions because traditional religions are multifaceted with no strict dogma or orthodoxy to enforce as a rule of faith. It can be said that

religious fundamentalism was somewhat alien to indigenous societies. That African religious liberalism has survived to a greater extent in many parts of SSA. It is not uncommon for a good number of African Christians to pragmatically shop around in the competitive religious market of Africa. Individuals may attend different church services on different days of the week. They may patronise mainstream churches on Sunday as key service providers and flock to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches on another day where they wet their aspirations and desires for success and prosperity (Deacon & Lynch 2013:115). Bishop Akin Omoyajowo of the Anglican Church once predicted the future of Christianity in Nigeria to reside with the Aladura churches: 'Say what we may, the survival of the Christian Church in Nigeria today lies mainly in the direction of the Aladura Churches' (cited in Sundkler & Steed 2004:1034). Were he to make a similar prediction today, he would agree with Paul Gifford, Birgit Meyer and J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu that Pentecostal and Charismatic churches mark the new phase in articulating African Christianity. Their explosion has greatly changed the face of African Christianity so that even mainstream churches have had to adjust out of necessity to accommodate the indigenous expectations of their members (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:95; Gifford 1994b:525; Meyer 2007b:7).

Like the African offshoots of the mission churches, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches also have foreign origins. They are the African re-invented and appropriated strands of their American parent churches. From the historical perspective, the prosperity gospel that now seems to be the dominant form of Christianity in Africa, was first propagated in the preaching and writings of two American evangelists, Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland. Their evangelism of prosperity took place during the boom decades of the 1960s and 1970s in America. It was a graced period in the United States of America, characterised by an upward social and economic mobility that propelled an increase in the living standard of many Americans (Deacon & Lynch 2013:110). The evangelists of the prosperity gospel made their mark within the American context of their time because the prospect of opportunities and success appeared all-time within reach. On the contrary, the transposition of the prosperity gospel on Africa's shores appeared when standards of living were on the downward slope on the continent. Their proliferation began its ascendance between the 1980s and 1990s, during the period of considerable strains for Africans on account of economic stagnation, political repression and authoritarian misrule (Deacon & Lynch 2013:109).

As a re-invented and a re-appropriated version of the American model, African Pentecostalism thrives on the assumption that prayer covers a gamut of issues, problems and difficulties. Situated within the African context, it provides the platform for the justification of wealth on the basis that Christ wants people to be wealthy. Its exponents argue that 'True Christianity necessarily means wealth' (Deacon & Lynch 2013:109–110). Armed with such a conviction, they accord a superlative importance to the

declarative or performative use of the Bible as well as declarative preaching and declarative prayers (Gifford 2008c:206). All three are influenced by the oral tradition where rhetoric is both performance and declaratory. Like incantations in indigenous religion, there exists in the Pentecostal and Charismatic hermeneutic, an interconnection between word and action. Both are performative effects, and answers to declarative prayers that are meant to nullify and reverse any demonic plans against believers. As worship is encased like performance in a warlike setting, it is not out of place to whip Satan into submission and the demons hooked at, stepped upon and boxed in an imaginary fight (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:104). It has equally given rise to 'healing camps' where pastors hold sway like actors in a theatre as in the performing arts, accompanied by clapping and dancing, and hysterical demonstrations. According to Asamoah-Gyadu, even 'healing and deliverance' has become a sub-culture of its own within African Christianity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:98). Therein, pastors declare 'breakthroughs', proclaim 'miracles' through certain manners of speaking, dramatisation and spurious claims such as the raising of the dead (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:98, 104; Gifford 1987a:68; Meyer 2007b:18).

Regarding the performative use of the Bible, Paul Gifford underscores it as serving the purpose of driving home the message that the Bible is a book of God's promises for Born-Again Christians (Gifford 2008c:206). The performative usage of the Bible is very illustrative of the oral tradition. The utterances and proclamations of pastors on the word of God, are tailor-made to enclose promises for the congregation and serves to meet their specific need in a specific circumstance. Pentecostal pastors are idolised because of their perceived power, encapsulated in their word of mouth to declare blessings such as these expressions: 'You will be a lender, not a beggar', 'I am a king', 'God has not planned any defeat for my life', 'God will turn the tables in your life', 'I am a winner, losing is finished', 'If God says you are blessed, you are blessed and there is nothing the devil can do about it'. Interestingly, all these promises and declarations are considered fulfilled and effected in the lives of believers through the proclamation of the powerful man/woman of God whose word is supposedly marched with action (Gifford 1987a:82, 2008c:206, 214–219).

## Conclusion

Africa may be described as the land of oral tradition *par excellence*. Its indigenous cultures, religions, history, tradition and philosophy of life are conserved in the memory of its people. The oral tradition in diverse forms through the centuries has given to Africans their cultural identity as a people. It has created an impression of Africanness upon them that has remained indelible whether they be Christians, Muslims or adherents of traditional religions.

This article has striven to trace the marks impressed upon Christianity by African oral tradition. Christianity found a fertile soil in Africans because their attitudinal religiosity is characterised by tolerance. This mental frameset is bequeathed

to Africans by their indigenous worldview and religions. It means that the history of African Christianity displays a remarkable degree of pragmatism in its selective appropriation and adaptation on the African soil. Its performative brand is a response to the yearnings of the African soul that places value on the experiential knowledge of religion as opposed to the cognitive demand of the Christian faith.

There is no doubt that Africa has developed its own variant of Christianity. It carries with it the unmistakable emblem of African cultural forms that distinguish it within global Christianity. It has charted its peculiar path like the older forms of Christianity such as Greek, Latin, Syrian, Armenian and Egyptian Christianities. Those were specific diversities and each was coloured and shaped by the variety of its national culture. African Christianity, in likewise manner, has achieved a synthesis through the fusion of African cultural traits in their oral forms and the Christian system of beliefs and symbols. It is a vibrant Christianity that is reflective of the pragmatic and tolerant attitude of the African mind on religious questions. The adaptation of Christianity in the African locale has been made possible by innovative syncretism and pragmatic selections, also facilitated by African cultural matrix, at the centre of which, is the African oral tradition.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of the Free State for financial support. Thanks to Dr Idara Otu for reading the first draft of the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## Author's contributions

V.U.I. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This article is part of the author's contribution as a research fellow at the University of the Free State.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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