

BEYOND MYTH: A HISTORICAL DISTORTION OF THE MWAGHAVUL TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

Distortions and changes occur in almost all religions of the world. While some religions experience drastic and holistic changes, some have very slow and insignificant changes that may never be noticed for a long period of time. The case with Mwaghavul traditional religion is not different, distortions have occurred for a very long period of time even before the advent of Christianity and Islam . In an attempt to look at some changes that have occurred in prehistoric times in this part of the globe, this paper investigate the distortions that have occurred in the traditional Religion of this Chadic speaking group within the Jos plateau. Being an ethnographic studies, the qualitative method of research is employed where the researcher analysed some historical facts which are today seen as myth about the religion. Women who were known to be the custodians of the religion were today seen as performing mere roles of subordination and are kept at the background. This change is considered a distortion because it left behind some basic component not fully captured thereby leaving some loopholes or contradictions about some major tenets of the religion, for example the feminine nature of Mwaghavul God, the masquerades were all feminine with the exception of one. The researcher interviewed aged individuals who were practitioners of the religion, elderly women who though are no more practising but were witnesses to some of these practices and discovered that women were the custodians of the religion from those early times. The researcher recommends that women should not be relegated to the background today even in the new religion being practiced today by Mwaghaavul people for they will help in uplifting its propagation in a very significant way.

Keywords: Ancestors, Goddess, Historical Distortion, Mwaghavul Traditional Religion, and Myth

Introduction

The religion of a people affects their way of life, social structure, politics and so on. People's religion is not static, constant contacts or globalization affects the perception of people and the perception they have about life in general.

However, the degree of such changes differs from one religion to the other. There are also inspirations from within which could also affect the religion of the people. Africa as a nation has experienced changes since the days of colonialism and then the coming of the foreign religions. Some of these changes are radical while some are so slow that they are hardly noticed (Mbiti 210). The Mwaghavul traditional religion is no different. This change has affected and distorted a lot of historical facts of which some have been lost and some being regarded as myth. The idea of a woman being regarded as a chief priest in Mwaghavul traditional religion for example is seen as a myth in recent times hence this is the soul of this paper. The Mwaghavul religion from pre-earliest times, the *Nanaan* concept and women as masquerades will be presented as fact and not myth. This is but a historical distortion of the representation of women in the Mwaghavul traditional religion and societal socio-structure as a whole.

Mwaghavul Religion from the Earliest (Precolonial Times)

This was a question asked as to why the Mwaghavul people came to view the Supreme Being and most of their masquerades as feminine. This was answered with a cosmological myth. That once upon a time in the history of Mwaghavul people religion or the worship of *kum* was solely in the hands of women, they dominated, controlled and executed rites and rituals such as the worship of the deity, festivals and other affairs regarding the religion. Men were nonchalant about religious affairs. As time goes on, some of the women became “too powerful”, the men felt threatened as a result of that, the men accused the women of acquiring witchcraft (*soghot*). One occasion, the men gathered and took a decision with one voice during a secret meeting concerning the women, they unanimously agreed to take over the affairs of the religion with the fear that the women would become too strong to them. Through the power of intuition (*zari*), two men turned into birds. They perched under the stem of a big tree where the women usually meet for their nocturnal activities while men stayed indoors. The two who became bird broke a large part of the branches of the tree and threw it down at the centre of the dancing women. The sound of the felled branch was so bad then it brought confusion and they were so terrified that they had to run. At a pre-planned signal all the men rushed outside and took control of the situation. The men later told the women that they have save the whole community from total destruction by evil spirits. Right from that time the men took over the religious affairs and gave a decree that whenever they are performing religious

rites and rituals women must remain indoors so that the evil spirit wont attack them again. Men today use the same ruse in staging the reincarnation of the ancestors(nji) from the underworld at the cry of which every woman must remain indoors. The Mwaghavul men therefore took over to change the feminine nature of the religion, but simply gratified new masculine concepts on what they had inherited. The names given to the deities and masquerade was a demonstration of this fact, however no masculine name for *Naan* was introduced (Nader,aged 78; Dafuk,aged 86, interviewed).

Irrespective of the one's conclusion of this myth, there is no doubt about the fact that Mwaghavul women played very significant role at the formative age of the religion as far back at those prehistoric times although it was later dominated by men through means that were considered evil. This is suggestive of the fact that men in Mwaghavul society has for long been suppressing women and have relegated them to position of being quiet in most vital decision making in the drama of life. This early matriarchal history of Mwaghavul people is traced today in the role of the maternal uncles in the affairs "and ownership" of his sister's children (interview).

According to Danfulani the maternal uncle is always referred to as "the uncle whose granary I can climb" (kin dyar). (Danfulani, The Triple Religious Heritage 22). Although the feminine qualities of the religion have been mystified by men in the eyes of women, children and non-initiates by hedging around it a number of taboos and secret, there are still some categories of *kum* that were carried out solely by women, (interview Da Luka). This has also debunked the assertion by the men that women decided to go underground (soghot) in search of new spiritual freedom since they have been denied the freedom to participate in *Kum* (23). However, his roles are minimal compare to what was obtained when they were in control.

Mwaghavul Traditional Religion Today

Today the Mwaghavul religion is strictly the affairs of men. The male counterparts precide over the main decisions or rituals regarding the basic tenets of the religion ever since it was snatched away from women. Just like most religions of the world today worlds, men dorminates the religion subjecting women to mere subordinate roles and few serious roles that must be delegated to them by men. It was considered a taboo for any woman to participate in any role not assigned to her by either her husband or any man who has been given the

mandate to do so. Below is the religion, popularly referred to as *kum*, as it is practiced today in the land.

kum in this context represent the entirety of the traditional religion of the Mwaghavul people. It is their religion per excellence which today is being translated by some Christians as ‘paganism’, “idol worshipping’. Generally, *kum* is seen as the direct worship of Naan. Here the researcher is exploring *kum* as the traditional religion of the Mwaghavul people as mentioned earlier. An informant ‘*kum ni a sondangnaan*’- *kum* means following *Naan* or striving in the worship of *Naan* (Bulus 66).

The origin of the deities involve in the worship of *kum* is obscure but oral tradition has it that or insisted that it was given to *gurum* by *Naan*. The deities were believed to have taught humans how to make idols- that is the outward caricature expressions of the deities. As for their essence and spiritual forms, *Naan* is said to have created same among *njigolmo*-denoting a free spirits occupying a specific place and very old ancestors that are no longer remembered. The divinities were sent to the people according to their problems, there are those in-charge of every affliction and illness.

The worship and approach of the *kum* deity involves simple and complex rituals which vary from one *kum* to the other both in terms of the materials used and the time and period during which they are held. The *kum* are placated or invoked collectively during festivals individually in the ritual of *tokkum*. The worship is organized and led by the chief priest (*mishkagham kum*) of the clan and the extended family heads (who in their respective capacities are priests and individuals according to the category of deities involved. Extended and family heads hold regular rituals as a matter of duty to their personal, family and clan *kum*”. Not every male or person is qualified in the ritual of *tok kum*, only persons who have undergone manhood rituals and have been schooled in all the rituals of a particular *kum* may officiate such rites. The Mwaghavul say that such a person ‘*diyeskakitokkum*’ –that is all the secrets that are associated with the worship of *kum*. The materials which are commonly used for the worship of *kum* is a reflection of the economy of Mwaghavul people and their neighbours. Local beer (*mwos*) brewed from sorghum or millet is used as libations, a special specie of fonio (*kusuk*) known as “*zor*” is used in preparing the sacrificial meal and sometimes as libations. Fonio is generally very significant for ritual and is use for the purpose by almost all people on the Jos Plateau. Animals such as goats, sheep,

dog, cows, horse and fowls are used for sacrifice. Different “*tokkum*” have a particular animal that could be used and animal must be healthy (Danfulani 45).

The blood of the slaughtered animal is poured into the shrine and poured on the effigy or the symbols of the deity to invoke it. Libations are poured into a small hole in the centre of the shrine or on the boiled sacrificial meat (without salt) dressed in a ritual oil (olive oil) together with fats and sacrificial food (prepared from fonio) are thrown on the shrine place on grooves on rocks on flat stones as observed in the bong kum (shrine) of the late Dikam vombok of Mangun in 1985. (55). The initiated male participants eat the remaining parts of the meat used for the sacrifice. This shows the physical realm of both deities and human in the participation of the rituals and it is a sign that a particular problem has been solved. In Mwaghavul traditional religion, the spirit is not invoked with the jingling of bells or clapping of hands. Blood must be involved or flour libation poured or portion (medicine) wrapped around the deity to invoke it, if a sick person has been neglected for long time providing a specially prepaid beer by women enough for the ritual. This should be done before the actual ritual of the kum (Wambutda 109).

Concept of Naan (Goddess)

The concept of the deity (naan) among the Mwaghavul people is purely the feminine gender (the Goddess) “Naan” is seen as the great mother who gives birth and life to all creatures. “nanaan wura a ndi shye, wura des met jir” which means the goddess is supreme and the first, “Mu cin baal di met jir ni a naan wura; wato naan di sighit ni a nanan” which means all honour and power are given to her.(nanaan).She is first in the hierarchy of beings. *Naan* is derived from the word *na(nin)*, meaning mother, ninkam (grandmother)and nankam (mother in-law). *Naan* therefore means the mother goddess of all mothers. Hardy observed with surprise that “another area which has to be in the fore front of current affairs was the fact that God can be a woman”.

Most cultures are not familiar with the Supreme Being as “Goddess”, but are found among the Chadic speakers. According to an informant, the change to *Danaan* which is semi masculine is a recent development which came as a result of the coming of Christianity. The emphasis on the Supreme Being as a goddess was no more. Mwaghavul people share the believe that they were hatched and not created by the Supreme Being and so the deity has to be female with breast milk in order to sustain the dependent child (symbol of life and fertility).The origin of the

term *naan* was traced to her abode which is the sky (deng naan-the sky of the deity), or “the tree of the Supreme Being” (ting naan). The name of *naan* emanated from the deity (ndigis naan). It is a cobweb called “house of the Divinity” (lu naan), depicting the sky, since the spider builds his house in a spiral shape, Mwaghavul had myths associated with the spider and *naan* but has been lost in history, but the spider was named “ndigis naan”- (the cricket of Deity) (Danfulani 60).

Rainfall was associated with the belief that *naan* resides in the sky. Drizzling and rainfall are seen as the mixture of the spit of the child of the goddess (na naan), and the water that escape from her hands or fingers feeds her child. This phrase in Mwaghavul “nanaan wura dung shuwa la kwe” -Mother –goddess is about to feed her child. Thus, *Naan* is pictured in anthropomorphic terms as having and feeding a child as it is being practiced today by women in the community. The rumbling of the sky is said to signify the belch of a well fed child which equally signals the falling of rain (Danfulani 16).

Women as Masquerades in Mwaghavul Traditional Religion *Nwong*

Nwong simply signified the return of the ancestors (*nji*) as masquerades to the abode of humans, “*tanwong*” means reincarnation that’s the permanent return of the ancestors to the human community through birth. *Nwong* means the vital force of *Nji*, and when the *nji* visits in human form they are called masquerade (*wong*). The *masquerades* in *Mwaghavul* community serve as the meeting point between the living and the dead (Danfulani 45).

There are many categories of ancestors (*nji*) who came out as *nwong*-masquerades some are named according to the task they *perform*. They also vary in their time of appearance in the *Mwaghavul* community and festivals involved. Some came during a season and the plagues that came upon a community. Normally they come around April and June. They are present during major festivals, installation, and burial rites of title holders and during boys’ manhood initiation rites. (Bulus 46)

There are two pairs of ancestors in the form of masquerades that appear around April. One represents a child and the second represent an old woman who comes out crying in a high pitched voice “hi wa wa wai ina niwa nji eh” (enchantment the old woman asking the other about their arrival). This announces the coming out of the “*nwong mo*”. Names of the ancestors were called out in a chronological order, (that’s how long they have been death) some

include “nji nen”-ancestral spirit of toughness, “nji pus or na pus”- ancestral spirit of the sun, “nji kam”- community spirit. (Bulus 43)

The female masquerades include:

1. ‘Nabishigi’ (owner of the fonio stalks, who therefore wears them).
2. “Na nyim” (owner and wearer of leaves)
3. “Na nlir” (owner of cloths)
4. ‘Na mulum” (owner of the slimy river weeds, spirogyra)
5. “Na shi kudun” (the crippled or one legged one).
6. “Na ruru” (the one with high pitched cries)

Only “Daglim” (masquerade of harvest) and “Na lir” (masquerade of death or the one who wears the black cloth) are masculine’. The presence of more feminine masquerades in Mwaghavul traditional religion is an indication that women’ roles are very significant. There is a contradiction about the fact that women forms majority of the masquerades and they are never allowed to see certain types of masquerades. One would be tempted to ask why. The women too are the ones that prepare the food (climbing beans-kwakil coated in sesame or benni seeds (kudul), which was the most palatable food for the masquerades. The life of a woman is threatened if she doesn’t have food to present to them when they visit her compound. Most of the masquerades do come out in the night, few appear in the day time. Curfews were imposed by day or by night according to the security situation. A woman who views them secretly or eats food meant for them is exposed by “Paa Divination” and pays in livestock fines. Any woman that refuse to pay the fines would have herself to blame, she may have problem with child bearing in her later years. One of my informant confess she was a victim of that (Nader, aged 76), she peeped through the window when the masquerades were passing as a teenager and in her later years experienced the death of her first two children, cleansing was done in order to appease the gods which marked the end of that calamity. Unless a woman is in her menopause that’s a period when women are equated with men (Danfulani 46) they can never be free to view the activities of the masquerades. Masquerades supervise both men and women as they work during the harvest and threshing of fonio and millet urging them to work hard.

The Perception of Women among the Mwaghavul

Women play few significant or recognised roles in the socio-political and religious affairs of Mwaghavul people. Few women assume leadership position in the society. Though women were generally conceived of as being capable of possessing intellectual abilities to influence the society, the customs of the land does not allow equal representation to the women as the that of the male counterparts. Apart from her exemption from leadership, several other customary taboos excluded the woman. She was excluded from attending the meeting of the elders (*kapuk*) that is the highest decision making body of the people represented by respectable elders of the community. The woman only goes there strictly on invitation to confess or testify on some crimes she alleged to have committed. She must not be seen during the *kum-ji* or the *byangfwan* (ancestor worship and the festival that heralds the commencement of rainfall). It's normally an exclusive rite for men to commune with the ancestors or the spirits in the shrine amidst feasting on delicacies prepared by women (Hayward 21). Women were forbidden to pass in front of men who were seated, particularly if she was carrying a pot. After giving birth in some of the districts within the community it was a taboo for a woman to even see the male folks until after some specified number of days (Bukar 11).

In those days women were wealth and household properties of men. Economically, the woman's productivity was defined and dictated upon by the man and basically for his benefit, so whatever a woman has as a wife, daughter or dependent, belong to either her husband, father as the case may be. The woman threshed and transports grain from the farm to the house. She cut and carried firewood and prepare the corn ready for eating using a stone enough to sustain the entire family. The only time she has for leisure was only during the annual girls dance (Hayward 25).

Although the woman lived and worked to please others, she was given very little power that she could exercise. For example, she could be permitted to cultivate a small portion of land outside the control of her husband. The proceeds from the farm would be used to meet her personal needs. A woman was also free to run away from her matrimonial home to a new husband or arrange to elope with a new husband. Both instances provided grounds for retaliatory "captures" which invariably led to violent village brawls. By this, it is clear that the weight of societal tradition and customs forced women to depend entirely on the male counterparts. They hardly enjoyed any freedom for independent action. This had

grave implications for conversion to Christianity when the European Christian missionaries came. In the course of my research on the role of women in Mwaghavul traditional religion I was privileged to meet quite, a number of the practioners of the religion and those who were part of the religion before converting to Christianity majority of them responded to me openly that today in the religion women does not have any significant role to play in the worship of *kum* (the religion itself). Only about three most elderly ones opened up and told me about the myth I narrated above apart from the materials I got from the work of Danfulani. Deducing from these two divergent or conflicting facts from the religion one then would agree that men for long had suppressed women in Mwaghavul socio political setting. Matriarchy has for long been trampled upon despite its major contributions at the formative age of the religion. The myth maintained that the men felt threatened by the persistence of women on religious affairs in those early periods thereby associating witchcraft to any woman who was becoming too powerful.

Conclusion

There is something missing ever since men snatched the religion from women which today remained a point of confusion among mwaghavul society as a whole- the name of the god which they claim is in the masculine *Danaan* from *Nanaan* , even with the coming of the foreign religions (christisnity and islam) the name given to the supreme being remains neither as female nor male –Nannan to Dannan.for Nannan means a goddess but Dannan means He goddess making a caricature of the name of the supreme being reducing him to a hermaphrodite.

Mwaghavul traditional religion from the prehistoric times no doubt was dorminated by women and their contributions can never be relegated to the only subordinate roles confining them to mostly domestic or subordinate roles only. The suppression of men in the society has had effect on behaviour of the women thereby resulting to inferiority complex, gender discrimination. Matriarchy is almost non existent in mwaghavul society as a whole .This is seen in the timid nature of Mwaghavul women in the contemporary society when comparing them with their counterparts from other neighbouring groups within the state for example the Tarok women.

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