

Religious Charlatanism and the Writer's Vision in Liwhu Betiang's *Beneath the Rubble* and *The Cradle on the Scales*

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to unmask religion not only as a cesspool for exploitation, but as a force of digintegration. In its real sense, religion should provide succour and solace to humanity, and also serve as an instrument of societal cohesion, but it has become a machination through which humanity is plagued. In Nigeria, religion has been used as a means for perpetration of violence and fuelling of ethnic consciousness. It has also been used to polarise the nation and this has seriously disrupted the peace and wellbeing of Nigerian society. Following this, the writer, being a sensitive member of society, is left with no option but to conceive, portray and examine these contradictions in a specialised creative manner aimed at exposing and sensitising the people on the contradictions and apprehensions inherent in religion. Through textual analysis and interpretation of Liwhu Betiang's novels: *Beneath the Rubble* and *The Cradle on the Scales*, the paper presents an in-depth exploration and unmasking of religion as no longer the "opium of the society but a drudgery plain laced with stumps. The paper adopts New Historicism as its theoretical framework because New Historicism examines how a writer's time affects his work, and how his work also reflects the undercurrents of his time. The paper recommends that adherents of religions should apply reason and not emotion in their practice of religion in order to launch society back to the path of honour.*

Keywords: Religious Charlatanism, Nigerian Society, New Historicism, Betiang.

Introduction

Religion is as old as man, and every attempt at a simple and generally accepted definition has always proved abortive. This is because, in its conception and practice, there is more of emotion and individuality than reason. It represents different things to different people at different points in time. Following this plurality of what religion represents, Samuel Aruwan avers that:

To many people, religion is an organised system of beliefs, ceremonies, practices and worship that centre on one supreme God, or deity. For some religion involves a number of gods, deities. While others have a religion in which no specific God or gods are worshipped. There are even those who practice their own religious beliefs in their own personal way, largely independent of organised religion. (3)

The idea of what religion represents is inexhaustive. The confluence point, however, is that whichever angle or perspective it is looked from, there is a reference and reverence to a deity or a supernatural being. Another point of convergence in the concept of religion is that every

religion preaches peace with fellow human and peace with whatever supernatural being it reverts.

In Nigeria, religion has become a source of despair. In fact, one wishes Karl Marx were alive and, perhaps visit Nigeria to witness that religion has departed completely from his notion of religion as the "opium of society". Instead of providing succour and solace to mankind and also serving as instrument of societal cohesion, religion has become a mixed bag of contradictions, apprehensions, exploitation and hypocrisies. OmakaNgele couches the above sentiment in these words:

Religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fuelling ethnic consciousness and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains, massive killings and wanton destruction of lives and vandalising of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other regions. (4).

This is traceable to the dichotomous relationship between the two major religions in the country-Christianity and Islam. Ngele further observes that "this religious madness has, like a clysmic vortex, devastated the ground for sustainable socio-economic development of Nigeria" (4). The stories would have been different if leaders of these religions were sincere and hold fast to the preachments of their respective religions. For example, G.J.O Moshay argues that contrary to the much-touted claims by adherents of Islam that Islam is a religion of peace, in reality, the religion encourages violence. He bases his argument from Sura, a chapter in the Holy Koran, 47.4, where Muslims are commanded to smite the neck of anyone who does not accept the teachings of Islam. Today, the Boko Haram insurgents repeatedly rationalise their wanton killings and destruction of properties as a fight for Allah and Mohammed. In the year 2000, a religious crisis which stemmed from a cartoon of Mohammed in a Danish Newspaper enveloped the country resulting in wanton destruction of lives and properties. The question is: what is the relationship between the Danish press and Nigeria. "Why will rain fall in the forest and flood run at home"? (Akung 108). Answers to these questions will buttress the fact that, on the contrary, adherents of Islam are not adhering to the preachments of that religion. On the other hand, the Christian faith, to some extent, also encourages violence when Christians quote and misapply how the Kingdom of God suffers violence, from the time of John the Baptist, and the violent take it by force (Mtt. 11: 12). Does this scripture suggest covetousness, deceit, killings and destroying of lives and properties? The answer may never be in the affirmative. Thus, Jonas Akung is right when he argues that:

Both religions have been involved in the conquest of the souls of humanity now imprisoned by faith without reason. Any attempt at fostering reason in interpreting religions has been resisted by supposed men of God who arrogate to themselves the position of gatekeepers to the temple of truth (108).

Akung in the above quotation seems to lay the blames on the leaders of these religions. Their leaders lay unfounded claims of doctrinal supremacy, and those who do not embrace those claims as infidels or unbelievers. Rabiun Adebayo observes that:

This has led to the propagation of such doctrines through fanatical means. Some of the foul means taken to achieve this include brute force, economic, political and social strangulation of the right of the so called 'infidels and unbridled political, educational, economic and social favouritism of the so called elects of God to the disadvantages of other citizens (6).

This has certainly shaken the unity of the country to its roots. The country is now polarised and everybody becomes religiously conscious such that whatever happens in the country today is interpreted along religious lines. For example, the appointment of many Muslims into sensitive portfolios in the Muhammadu Buhari-led presidency is seen by Christians as an attempt to Islamise the country. In all these, it is the religious leaders who orchestrate these differences and indoctrinate their followers through hate speeches aimed at usurping supremacy at the expense of the other. They have realised that the best way to exploit and plunder their followers and remain perpetually on top is to sponsor terrorism and militancy, cause the poor masses to hate and kill each other and create instability and disaffection. It creates opportunity for them to continually remain in power.

As members of society, writers cannot just sit on the fence while the society stinks from the contradiction and hypocrisy of religion and its leaders. As "sensitive needle" (Ngugi, 14) of they employ arts in unmasking the other side of religion. For example, Wole Soyinka earlier in his *The Trials of Brother Jero* launches a biting diatribe and poignantly condemns religion as a goldfield for corruption and exploitation. According to Patricia Mireku- Gyimah, Soyinka:

Launches a diatribe on hypocrisy, selfishness, mischief, roguery, deceit, charlatanism, corruption and other vices that have become so wide spread, by exposing harshly those who dabble in them, particularly under the cloak of religion. (270)

Soyinka uses the character of Brother Jero, whose idea of the work of God is to fill his stomach, and will stop at nothing, even when it hurts others. Jero sees his members as customers and confesses that: "I always get that feeling every morning that I am a shop keeper waiting for customers" (20). Soyinka, in this little play, explores the oppressive nature of religion on the psyche, its creation of anomalies and its fostering of hypocrisy and deification (Elliot Ziwire, 20). The folly inherent in religion is succinctly dramatized, through humour and satire. The religious leadership under the piety and sanctity of their religions and commit serious crimes against humanity.

Their materialistic trait of realism seems to have followed a template laid down by the colonialists in their consolidation of power in Africa. Citing Graft-Johnson, Claude Wutherm concludes that "the church was recognised as a pillar of the state, so that to propagate the Christian faith was at the same time to consolidate imperial power...religious propaganda for imperial expansion was the policy" (210). This agrees with Akung's views that: ". the gospel was used for imperial expansion and the church accepted all forms of brutalities on Africans just to civilise them and also accepted slavery as an act of God" (98). Thus, this paper vehemently buttresses the fact that religion has been a source of despair for Nigerian humanity. Against this backdrop, Soyinka points out that:

Tragically neglected is what we should learn to designate spiritual. Those who organised and carried out the outrage on innocent lives in Nairobi are carriers of the most virus of corruption imaginable- corruption of the soul, corruption of the spirit, corruption of that animating essence that separates us from predatory beasts...As their claim to faith, they invoke divine authority solely as hypocritical cover for innate psychopathic tendencies. Their deeds profane the very name of God or Allah...those who arrogate to themselves the right to dispose of innocent lives at will, belong within the sane moral universe...without a moral universe, humanity exist in limbo. (98)

Soyinka seems to say that religion has turned humanity into a nature akin to that of a predatory beast and thus, he calls for synergy "in stemming the tide of religious atavism and human retrogression...blight of bigotry, religious sophism and spiritual toxicity" (99). The study locates within the two novels instances and scenarios that suggest that religion has failed humanity.

Religious Charlatanism in Beneath the Rubble

Beti's *Beneath the Rubble* succinctly exposes religion as an instrument of disintegration, disorganisation, polarisation and destruction. Instead of serving as an instrument through which humanity obtains succour and relief, religion has become a rough ground, filled with stumps that cut humanity as keen as knife. It is a cult of hypocrisies, contradictions and apprehensions. In this narrative, the crisis that engulfs a fictitious Agigah community revolves around two religious leaders whose self-interests and inordinate quest for supremacy throws the once peaceful village into a cataclysm that consumes many lives even beyond what the two leaders had expected. Utsu Agaba, the village head, controls the land mode of worship while Ugandilgbal, the chief priest, Ikwanumbue, the water religion. Locked in the war of doctrinal supremacy, both leaders create a heinous altar where their blind followers are slaughtered.

Following an act of incest committed by the children of Awhobette, the king that reigned before Utsu Agaba, incidences of mysterious deaths and disappearances begin to occur in the community. For example, Ikpe's seven-year old daughter, on her way from the farm, mysteriously disappears into a big gutter by the road side. "Papa, Papa something is pulling my leg. With the quickness of a man, Ikpe dashed to rescue his daughter. She eluded him and wriggled like a cat fish into the big gutter by the road side" (Beneath20). In another instance, Akpabue's wife, Ingieadah goes to the stream to wash her beans, and her pot mysteriously disappears in the river. Out of fear, she runs home to report and passes through Igbang's compound, who calls her and returns the pot with the beans intact. Following these ugly occurrences, the need for a propitiatory sacrifice becomes necessary to avert more serious calamities. This time around, the gods insist on a human sacrifice. "...yes... our gods have chosen to unleash their vengeance on us. Like death we cannot escape but stand to give answer. The oracle demands... the sacrifice of man" (Beneath23). To guarantee the efficacy of this sacrifice, the oracle forbids using innocent captives of war as it used to be, and insists on the use of a scion of the village. Here the chief priest emphasises:

We planted the evil, from among us a man must come... Who would eat a vulture when there are wholesome birds? The oracle clearly demands the scion of the soil, for such would wash

better where strangers cannot even dust. Give the oracle unclean meat and let the land continue to rage in ill. (Beneath24)

To acquire this sacrificial "goal", a curfew is mounted at night and there is an unanimity of opinion that whoever is caught at a forbidden hour of the night will be used for the sacrifice. The chief priest further emphasises:

Yes, from the time the owl begins to cry to the first cockcrow my people, whoever is caught will become our sacrificial goat...That hour when the gods, spirits and evil forces execute their busy trade, then shall the eye of night be open to trap the feet of any mortal who runs into the arms of death (Beneath 25).

A twist in the events of the story ensues as Ishabo, the crown prince of Agigah, is apprehended by the head hunters while returning from Adornimye's house at that period of the curfew forbidden for humans. On realising who he is, the head hunters try to negotiate for his escape, but he will not. He offers himself to be used as the sacrificial item to bring peace to the restive society.

The apprehension and imminent sacrifice of Ishabo to the gods does not go down well with Utsu Agaba and the entire chieftaincy. The development simply reduces the village into two polarities. Loyalists of land religion, of which Utsu Agaba is the leader, see the development as a ploy by the chief priest, who is also the leader of water religion, to usurp the royalty of Agigah. Those in the water religion also see this as an opportunity to prove to the Chief who is actually in control of Agigah. Thus, he will not just idle on the throne and see his only son sacrificed to the gods. He will do everything within and beyond his power to ensure that Ishabo escapes the noose set by his enemies to unlock his grip of power. This is very representative of the religious situation in Nigeria. There is a mutual distrust between followers of Islam and Christians. Every step taken by any of the religion is seen as a conspiracy aimed at usurping supremacy, prestige, power and privilege against the other. Tundelruonagbe asserts that: "with the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, (ethnic, cultural and religious) there is always the tendency for members of each religion to maintain some parochial views on social, economic and political issues to the detriment of national unity and stability" (27)

Utsu Agaba eventually exploits his position as the village head and leader of land religion and whisks his son away from paying the ultimate price of regenerating his society. This is revealed on the day of the sacrifice. The crier, as usual, has summoned everybody to the village square to witness this ultimate price paying. As the sacrifice is about to commence, Adornimye, Ugandilgbal's granddaughter and Ishabo's girlfriend, emerges and disrupts the process. "Before they could make out what was happening and bring her to order, the girl, venting a maniacal cry launched herself on the cloaked victim. The impact of her unmasked him completely but she was disappointed" (112). Ishabo is nowhere to be found. He has been secretly replaced with a stranger. The pandemonium that ensues becomes a controlling force that later plunges Agigah into a precipice. "The two divisions in the village playground felt alike, but only in different ways. Whereas the royal sympathisers experience the true emotions of pity and fear, the traditionalists felt a kind of betrayal and the suspension of the release of their fatal emotion of sadistic hate" (Beneath113). Following this, a serious crisis breaks out and:

The village was like a piece of cloth that had been outstretched from both sides only to have it torn in gaping fault in the middle... the age-old quarrels and suspicions, the tension and pent-up violence broke forth like an eruption of the active volcanoes (Beneath 113).

Although the two leaders who orchestrate this crisis know that, within their minds, there is a canker of self-interest and a struggle for supremacy kept from their followers, "the cause and obvious bloody nature of the crisis was not inseparable from the modes of worship which even had their genesis in dissent. Wasn't the Earth cult revolt from Water cult?" (162). In fact:

If there was anything that lurked in the unconscious recesses of the minds of everybody who took part in the village crises, it was their zealous and puerile affinity to their modes of worship. The sensitive nature of the matter of religion defied any mortal comprehension; for it was as though the humans were commissioned by the deities to fight His cause since he had become powerless before the sheer amount of human stupidities (Beneath153).

ItishaBisong further reveals that the different worship systems in Agigah, other than the refusal of the king to allow his son to be used as a sacrificial goat, are the root cause of the pogrom. He bares his mind thus:

My brothers, do you sincerely think it was because the chief would not submit his blood for sacrifice that the village is now divided against itself? The truth I must say it is the different worship systems we have in the land. These two religions do not listen to each other. They do not want to understand themselves (Beneath, 115).

Quite indisputably, most of the crises plaguing Nigeria today are traceable to the dichotomous relationship between the two major religions in the country. According to Ngele, "religious riot has remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and has continued to threaten the continued coexistence and habitation of the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country" (3). It has also dealt a devastating blow on Nigerian sustainable development.

Of course those that are pushed into the war front are the innocent masses who do not really know that behind the war, there is a struggle for supremacy. This is a huge contradiction that eludes all those taking part in the war. They are merely fighting to help their leaders gain control of the community. One of the warriors confesses thus: "All of us have fought for what I don't even know. In fact, I wonder why I ever went to the war at all; I feel like a goat led by the tether.... True, I fought but I did not and still do not know why or what I fought for" (161). This is the dilemma of religious fanatics who allow emotion overwhelm reason in their practice of religion. In Nigeria, so many Muslims who take part in a jihadist war do this without asking the rationale behind such war. All they hear is: take arms and smite all the infidels. Sometimes...certain individuals have often acted as demagogues, exploiting deep seated prejudices for personal benefit especially in terms of the Nigerian body polity which invariably have destabilised the civil society and increased deepening antagonism between Christians and Muslims (Tunde Charles). In Beneath the Rubble, the narrator asks a fundamental question that exposes the senselessness of religious fanaticism. "The question I

want to ask is this: What has the water or earth cult got to do with Agigah or even Bebuande as a village or clan" (160). This could equally be applied to the Nigerian situation. What has Islam or Christianity got to do with the Nigerian nation? Why should the nation be sacrificed on the altar of religion? A sincere answer to these questions will buttress the point that religion cannot be compared to the unity and peaceful coexistence of the Nigerian people.

UkandiAshieta expresses serious concern about this unfortunate divisive tendency of religion thus: "Truly this problem of worship worries anybody who cares about the problem of our land. My son was telling me the other day that one of our big politicians has promised to build a school for the children Ikwanumbwe cult (Beneath115). This excessive patriotism to religion at the expense of the unity of Nigeria has been the reason the country is degenerating. If Nigeria is to grow politically and economically and sustain its development, there must be a stop to politicisation of religion. The narrator reveals that the issue of worship and religion should be personal and should not interfere with the unity of the land. "Why don't us abandon the cults be it water or earth... let us not let a private personal matter create a bloody division between us and the land" (Beneath, 160). This agrees with the position of Femi Ajayi when he writes that:

We are aware of the fact that religion is essentially and primarily an individual affair. Some may argue that religion is a communal affair. However, I will assert that it is only in religious extremism that domination, discrimination and persecution is placed (6).

It is only when the country harnesses her differences as a nation that the country will experience unity and development.

Religious Charlatanism in the Cradle on the Scales

In *The Cradle on the Scales*, the novelist is also critical of religion as a source of hope and for humanity. Akung avers that "the institution of religion has become man's own. machination to abuse and mislead humanity" (96). The story revolves around two major characters; Andoukye and Unimke who are deprived of love and care by a Catechist, a supposed "man of God", and through this, Betiang portrays religion as scam, and lacking the potential to provide hope where there was none.

Upon the death of her mother, Andoukye's father, Ukandi Agba takes her to Catechist Isaac Igbang's house. As a Catechist, Andoukye's father has always believed that the moral and educational development of his daughter is guaranteed by sending her to be raised by a Catechist who is also a teacher. But this is not to be, as Andoukye suffers serious maltreatment in the house of the Catechist. The Catechist's wife, Madam Ungieubua, also known as "Madam", reduces her to a slave and always insist she eats burnt soup "whose pungent smell she could not stand for a minute while her biological children bask on the delicacy of fried fish in ugbamu soup with apu, a treat she will never trust with the house girl" (*The Cradle*, 8). She is constantly beaten and humiliated. The narrator graphically describes her ordeals in the Catechist's home thus: "In the catechist home, it had become a regular routine; an offence was committed, a loud cry in the morning or night, the click of the door key and dreadful bashing and wailing" (4). This is antipodal to the Biblical teachings which enjoin sincere love for one another. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour" (Romans 12:9). The novel thus castigates religious leaders as chameleonic and hypocritical,

hiding behind the piety of their religions to commit crimes against humanity. Andoukye does not only suffer maltreatment in the Catechist's house, she is also raped by the Catechist's son, Akomage. The rape results in pregnancy that produces Unimke, but Andoukye dies in the process of giving birth. Thus, Unimke and Andoukye represents (sic) the other side of humanity that is deprived of love and care. While the Catechist and his children are the direct opposite of this same humanity" (Akung101).

Unimke's birth and childhood does not only crystallise the fate of motherless children who live in foster homes but also shows how hypocritical religious leaders are. The narrator puts it thus: "Growing up in Catechists household, it seemed as if he almost took over the existence of his mother. Madam hated him" (8). To further deride him, the Catechist's children consistently refer to him as a bastard "a child picked from some kind of gutter" (The Cradle, 59) "You think my mother is your mother? She is not your mother. You have no mother, you are a bastard" (The Cradle, 59). This situation does not only provide a point of reference and on the pain and suffering that can be part of growing up as a foster child, but also poignantly portrays religion as a basket of contradictions. The Catechist's house is a symbol of failed humanity. Thus, the situation set the stage for Unimke's inevitable escape from the horror that is the Catechist's home to an equally horrible life with armed robbers, prostitutes and other street urchins.

Madam Ungicuba's maltreatment of Unimke is seen as a ploy to cover up the paternity of Unimke because she knows that if it is known that her son, Akomaye is responsible, it will attract some cheap gossips thereby dragging the name of the family in the mud. So, maltreating Unimke is a ploy to protect the family's name. The Catechist is also an accomplice of Unimke's maltreatment because he has a skeleton in the cupboard. He has a urinary problem that takes away his manhood and fears that Madam could use this as a blackmail if he tries to intervene for Unimke. Thus, Madam Ungicuba rules like a maximum ruler and also uses the Catechist's condition as alibi to keep extramarital affairs. She is in secret relationship with the market union chairman and chooses to make love in a small room in the market square. "This small room had become a paradise for her everyday these past years since Catechist's secret problem that took away his manhood" (The Cradle 102). The narrator reveals thus:

It was this time she began to meet chairman more freely. The market became for her a trip to paradise which the cold comfort of her home could not provide. And what was more, she already was carrying something for him. With that loud and open signature, how could anybody know the skeleton that lived in the Catechist's home cupboard (46).

The husband losing manhood brought her some form of sadistic pleasure, because it provided for her opportunity to continue her sexual exploits with the chairman of the market union. As a proof of her promiscuity, the narrator hints that "Ungicuba also had a new baby that was as white as albino; a new source of silent tension in the home because the Catechist could not remember any ancestral trace of albinism in her family" (178).

The hypocrisy and contradiction inherent in religion also play out during the encounter between Nneka, a godly and pious person and the beggar girl. Nneka claims to be a born-again but enjoys carnal relationship with Ugar, hiding behind the name of a brother-in-

Christ. Her reaction to the beggar gid leaves the narrator wondering if he was the same Nneka of the Redemption Crusade" (101). She calls the beggar all sort of derogatory names just because she has asked her for money. "How dare you touch me, rotten imp? 01). She cannot part with a kobo to the beggar, yet she consistently sees vision of how God wants her to marry brother Ugar, preaches morality and professes Jesus Christ. Ugar, in the same vein, attends the Scripture Union, yet he routinely sleeps with almost every girl on campus, including sister Nneka whom he describes as a "dumb fellow...an old weather-beaten over-sampled hag" (The Cradle33). He further describes sister Nocka, his "sister-in Christ" thus: she's cheap, she is worn herself out from excess sampling... (The Cradle, 33), yet this is one of the leaders of the Scripture Union. Ugar attends the Scripture Union not to serve God but to have a taste of all the female members. The scenario has also unmasked how debased and profanereligion is; a typical case of "the more you look the less you see"

Like Madam Ungieubua, the Catechist's wife, Esther, Pastor Kikwa's wife, also thrives in immorality. On the surface, she looks pious and, in many occasions, preaches in the church, and thus, earns her husband's absolute trust. Instead of justifying this trust, Esther exploits it to her advantage. She keeps many men outside her marriage, and sometimes invites them into her matrimonial bed. She does this confidently knowing that her husband has unshakeable trust in her until Akpetel decides to expose her:

For a long time the village has become sated with the double life Esther lived and began to take her for granted. Esther on her part was determined to exploit her husband's trust to best advantage...this unfortunate day Akpetel who delighted in practical jokes saw Esther's nocturnal visitor enter her house as soon as Pastor left. Akpetel quickly climbed on his bicycle and went to search for Pastor Kikwa. As soon as he met him he told him his wife Esther had seriously taken ill and his presence was required immediately. Pastor was taken in by the serious import of the message and he started for home to rescue his dear wife. But to his greatest consternation, he met his wife with a strange nocturnal visitor, right on the holy matrimonial bed. What Pastor Kikwa did was simple. Confident of the backing of decalogue.he took his penknife and cut off the adulterer's offending instrument (The Cradle, 172).

This happens because people often allow emotion, instead of reason, to detect their practices of religion. This agrees with the position of Akungthat "All these happened with both Catechist and Kikwa blinded in faith and trust. It is worthy to note that 'Kikwa' is a Bette word for fool, which also means that religious leaders who rely only on faith without reasoning are fools just like Pastor Sam Kikwa and Catechist Isaac Igbang who live in illusion" (107).

The scene involving a condemned armed robber waiting on a stake to be executed and the Reverend Father who is standing by to pray for the repose of his soul is revealing of how money conscious and materialistic some acclaimed "men of God" are. In this scene, the criminal, while waiting to be executed, is asked by the Reverend Father to say his last words before he offers the last prayers for him, and instead of confessing his sins:

The man at the stake beckoned the minister's ear close to his mouth. which the minister willingly did. When the ear was close enough, the man on the stake seized the minister's ear in his mouth and bit hard at it where do you think I got all the money you encourage me to pour into your bottomless coffers? (128)

It is against the backdrop of this scenario that Akung maintains that "this man at the stake only represents a mince percentage of the notvery lucky ones. Many like the church ministers steal using holy books while others use gun and pen" (107). Betiang makes mockery of the situation thus: "the soul that sins and get caught shall die by the stake. The soul that sins and never gets caught shall preside and indeed pass judgement on the rest of the horde" (The Cradle 130).

Akomaye, Catechist's son, runs to the city after impregnating Andoukye, and when he realises his sins and the need for atonement, he meets a pastor who turns around to exploit him. He encourages Akomaye to steal for him from his work place as a means of paying for his sins. It leaves one wondering whether it is scriptural to monetise penance. The Pastor keeps him perpetually under guilt, and while he steals for him, "he kept praying for me that I may not get caught" (The Cradle 145). Through a letter he sends to his father, Akomaye confesses that: "the Pastor actually sodomized me. It was then I was convinced there must be something wrong in this newfound church I chose to attend" (The Cradle 145). Many acclaimed pastors just walk around exploiting their members claiming to speak the mind of God when they are very far away from the purposes of God. "And one begins to wonder if the so-called men of God truly understand the mind of God" (The Cradle 106). This agrees with the argument of an online source that:

These Preachers show very high traits of personality disorder and schizophrenia. When they mount their pulpits, they constantly lie to their congregations that God told them so and so, when God has not told them anything and they claim and made sure it was God (4).

It is this failure to seek and understand the true mind of God that has kept religious organizations shrouded in mischief (Akung 107). Following this, Akomaye concludes that "Organised religion is as manipulative as evil because it's another human construct designed to place crosses on the shoulder of the poor. Man himself has become more evil and tainted in the cage of multiple religions" (*The Cradle 106*).

Following the horror that is the Catechist's home. Unimke escapes into the street, and through the help of Iyaji gets initiated into a criminal gang known as "Big O". The occasion of his initiation buttresses the fact that religion has not only failed humanity, it has derailed completely from the path of honour. It is disheartening that a pastor who is supposed to minister words of comfort to people now administer oaths of allegiance to criminals. Unimke takes the oath clutching the Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. This is the exhortation of the Pastor to the newinitiates:

Mark you! am not condemning you for we have all sinned and come short of the glory. I want to reassure you, to is to pray. Do your work well whatever work you're given to do. But if you develop a bad conscience in the course of your work come to us with the first fruits of your work like

father Abraham to the priest Melchizedech. Sow a seed with the sweat of your hands and like a mustard seed, it shall grow tall and big and provide shelter for other brethren to rest in. Come to me when you have sinned and on behalf of the Lord I shall forgive your sins and you shall be washed white as snow if your sins were scarlet. Bring forth your loot into the clinic of the organisation and I shall sanctify it unto the Lord. (The Cradle 113-15).

This is the height of decay plaguing religious institutions. Many times the gospel is crassly watered down or trivialised to soothe some religious leaders who have become inordinately materialistic. This informs why Akung concludes that "The uncritical acceptance of religious utterances by self-appointed guidance of the temple of truth has become the plague ruining humanity" (96). They are bereft of conscience and do not seem to see anything wrong in turning religious institutions into a cesspool of corruption and exploitation.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to unmask the paradoxes inherent in religion through the perspectives extrapolated from Betiang's *Beneath the Rubble* and *The Cradle on the Scales*. It has established that instead of providing solace, promoting unity and enhancing societal cohesion, religion has been a source of despair to humanity. In Nigeria, religion has brewed suspicions, reduced the country into two polarities and heightened dangerous ethnic consciousness among the people. Thus, it is obvious that there is a lacuna between the provisions of the preachments of religions and how religious adherents practice them. The paper has in no way questioned the existence and sanctity of the Godhead, but frowns at the adherents, especially leaders of religions, who exploit, abuse and trivialise the sanctity of religion to their advantage, at the expense of humanity.

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