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A comparative study of anointing in the New Testament and indigenous religions of Evo, Rivers State, and Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the concept and practice of anointing as found in the New Testament and in the indigenous religious traditions of Evo (Rivers State) and selected cultures in Northern Nigeria. Anointing in the New Testament is closely associated with divine commissioning, healing, consecration, and the empowerment of individuals for spiritual tasks. It is rooted in a theistic worldview centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, with symbolic use of oil representing the Holy Spirit. In contrast, indigenous practices in Evo and Northern Nigeria often employ anointing in ritualistic contexts for protection, initiation, healing, and invoking ancestral or spiritual forces. This study utilizes theological, anthropological, and comparative religious methodologies to explore similarities and differences in symbolism, purpose, medium, and religious significance. The findings highlight both convergence in the spiritual symbolism of oil and divergence in theological foundations and worldview orientations. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of religious continuity, contextual theology, and the inculturation of Christian practices in African contexts.

Keywords: Anointing, Evo Religion, New testament

Introduction

Anointing, as a religious act, is a significant ritual found across many cultures and spiritual traditions. In the Judeo-Christian context, especially within the New Testament, anointing is closely linked to divine commissioning, healing, consecration, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. It holds deep theological

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meaning, especially as it relates to the person of Jesus Christ, who is referred to as the "Anointed One" (Greek: Christos). The New Testament records various instances where oil is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit in healing (James 5:14), in consecration for ministry, and in demonstrating God's presence. Similarly, in African indigenous religious traditions, particularly among the Evo people of Rivers State and various ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria, anointing is also practiced, albeit with different interpretations and purposes. It may involve the application of oil, herbs, or other substances during rituals intended for healing, protection, initiation, or spiritual empowerment. These practices are deeply rooted in the community's cosmology, involving ancestral spirits, divinities, and a strong belief in the unseen spiritual realm.

Despite their differing theological foundations, both traditions regard anointing as a powerful spiritual act. However, the meaning, medium, and intended outcome of anointing in these contexts vary significantly. While Christianity views anointing through the lens of monotheism and the redemptive work of Christ, African traditional religions often operate within a polytheistic or animistic worldview. The interplay between Christianity and indigenous African religion has led to both conflict and syncretism, particularly in areas where Christianity has become dominant but traditional beliefs remain influential. Understanding the similarities and differences in the concept of anointing can provide insight into the processes of religious transformation, contextual theology, and cultural integration of religious practices.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore and compare the theological, cultural, and ritualistic dimensions of anointing in the New Testament and in the indigenous religious practices of the Evo people and selected Northern Nigerian cultures, particularly the Mupun and Ngas people of Plateau state. Such a comparative approach is essential for fostering a deeper appreciation of religious expressions within African contexts and for developing more culturally sensitive theological perspectives.

The Historical Antecedents of Anointing

The term “anointing” traces its origin to a Hebrew word *masah*[3] This conveys the idea of applying oil by rubbing (Isa 21:5), smearing or spreading (Jer 22:14) on both animate (persons) and inanimate objects. In the pre-Old Testament era, the practice of anointing was primarily done on health grounds due to the belief in the potency of oil to heal. Similarly, in the works of Josephus (Antiq. Xvii, 172 [vi. 5]) Herod the Great was said to be bathed with oil during his last illness as a means of restoring his health. The progression of time, however, was marked by

[3]Oderinde Olatundun Abosede “The Theological Significance of the Concept of Anointing in
Contemporary Churches in Nigeria “Oguaa Journal of Religion and Human Values 5 (1) 2019, 119-126

more advanced patterns of its usage as it was employed as a means to mark hospitality, honor, as well as preparation for social events.

Hence, the Old Testament is replete with passages that attest to the practice of anointing in different forms and for varied purposes. Some of these passages are: (Ex 28:41; 1 Sam 9:16; 10:1; 15:1, 17; 1 Sam 16:3; 1 Kin 1:34, 39, 45 1916 2 Kin 11:12). Religious objects such as the altar of burnt offering and all its vessels (Ex 40: 10); the laver and its stand (Ex 40:11) were all anointed during the dedication of the tabernacle. Correspondingly, the cakes, unleavened bread, and wafers were anointed with oil, possibly for preservative reasons.[4]

In the Biblical history, anointing is said to have first been performed by Jacob, who anointed the stone that he used for a pillow while he dreamed at Bethel (Gen 28:10-18; 31:13). Subsequently, oil was used under the divine command to anoint the altar and other objects that were used for worship in the sanctuary (Ex 30:26-29; Lev 8:10-11). In the same vein, we have records of the anointing of priests (Ex 28:41; 30:30; Lev 8:12), prophets (1 Kin 19:16), and kings (1Sam 9:16; 15:1; 16:3, 12) who were consecrated for various religious tasks. The primary purpose of this practice was to set aside persons or objects for holy use, thereby endowing them with a unique authority for service to God. Aside from the religious practices of anointing, people rubbed oil on themselves for aesthetic reasons- to beautify themselves, and soothe the skin. The Hebrew word that is usually employed to describe this is *suk* "to grease oneself with oil" (Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam 12:20; 14:2; 2 Kings 4:2; 2 Chr 28:15; 28:15 Mic 6:15; Dan 10:13. Worthy of note is the use of Gr. *aleipho* in the Septuagint to describe these instances as well.

A Contextual Analysis of Anointing in the New Testament

The concept of anointing in the New Testament (NT) carries both literal and deeply theological meanings. The Greek word commonly translated as anoint is "chrío" (χρίω), from which the title "Christ" (the Anointed One) is derived, and "aleiphō" (ἀλείφω), which is typically used in more practical contexts such as applying oil for grooming or healing. In James 5:14, the Greek term that is used for anointing is *estheneo*. In the real sense of its usage the term *astheneo* assume a binary of meaning; it can be employed figuratively to denote weak in faith (Rom 4:19; 14:1; 2 Cor 11:29) or literary to refer to physical sickness, calamity, incapacity or weakness (Matt 10:8; John 11:1; Acts 9:37; Phil 2:26). However, its contextual usage in James seems to favor the latter.

The term Christos (Χριστός) means "the Anointed One," identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies. In Luke 4:18, Jesus declares, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..." (cf. Isaiah 61:1), signifying divine commissioning and empowerment for his redemptive

[4]Daniel Berchie & Elijah Baidoo, A Reading of "Oil" (James 5:14) in the Ghanaian Christian Ministry "Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies 7 (1), 2017, 37-50.

mission. Some Scholars affirm that this passage reflects Jesus' messianic identity and his role as the Spirit-empowered servant.[5] The NT describes anointing in the context of healing and care. James 5:14 instructs the elders of the church: "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." This ritual act signifies both physical care and spiritual faith in God's healing power. A school of thought further posits that while oil may have had medicinal uses, its symbolic function as a conduit for divine healing was primary.[6]

Similarly, Mark 6:13 describes the disciples driving out demons and healing the sick, "anointing them with oil." Scholars interpret this as an extension of Jesus' ministry, using oil as a visible sign of the Holy Spirit's work. The act of anointing also appears in burial practices and expressions of honor. In Mark 14:3-9, a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. Jesus interprets this as preparation for his burial. This act demonstrates devotion and foreshadows his death. R.T. Francenotes that the woman's act is both prophetic and priestly, acknowledging Jesus' suffering and divine mission.[7]

Beyond physical oil, the NT presents anointing as a metaphor for spiritual empowerment. 1 John 2:20, 27 speaks of believers having an "anointing from the Holy One," referring to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, which teaches and affirms truth. F.F. Bruce argues (1981) that this anointing signifies the believer's union with Christ and ongoing sanctification by the Spirit.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is symbolic Interactionism. This is a sociological theory that examines how individuals and groups assign meaning to objects, behaviors, and experiences through social interaction. Originally developed by George Herbert Mead and further elaborated by Herbert, the theory emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in objects or actions but is constructed and reconstructed through communication and interpretation within a cultural or social context.[8] In religious studies, Symbolic

[5]Craig Keener S. The Gospel of John: A Commentary (Vol. 1 & 2). Baker Academic, 2009; Wright, N. T. How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels. HarperOne, 2012.
[6]Moo, Douglas J. "The Letter of James" Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans. Witherington III, 2000), 234; Ben Witherington . Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude. IVP Academic, 2007.
[7]France R. T. The Gospel of Mark (New International Greek Testament Commentary). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 234.
[8]George Mead H. Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Edited by Charles W. Morris. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934) 88; Blumer, H. Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 98.

Interactionism is particularly useful for analyzing rituals, symbols, and sacred practices, such as anointing, that function as carriers of communal meaning. The act of anointing, whether with oil in the New Testament or with native substances in indigenous African religions, operates not merely as a physical act but as a symbolic gesture that conveys spiritual realities such as healing, consecration, divine favor, or empowerment.

According to Peter Berger in "The Sacred Canopy," religious symbols and rituals help construct a socially shared "sacred cosmos" through which individuals interpret their experiences and relationship with the divine.[9]Cliffordalso highlights that religion is a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence.[10] In applying this to anointing, the symbolic act becomes a means of communication: between human and divine, and among members of a religious community. Also, ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus support the idea that ritual symbols, such as oil, create theological meaning and reinforce social identity.[11]

Understanding how different cultures construct meaning around anointing through ritual and symbolism. Interpreting the socioreligious role of anointing in both the New Testament and African indigenous traditions. Analyzing how anointing mediates the sacred and organizes religious life through shared interpretations and actions. This theory provides a valuable tool for comparing how anointing is used not just as a physical act, but as a symbolic expression of spiritual truths across cultural and theological boundaries.

Cultural Contextualization and Practices of Anointing

Anointing, biblically rooted, is not a practice limited to Christian theology. In many cultures, including African societies, it carries deep cultural and spiritual significance. This paper explores how anointing is understood and practiced in the indigenous religious contexts of Evo in Rivers State and among a select ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria, offering a foundation for comparison with the New Testament perspective.

In traditional African religion, anointing is closely associated with spiritual empowerment, healing, initiation, and protection. Oils, herbal mixtures, animal fats, and sacred powders are applied during rituals to symbolize a connection with ancestral spirits, deities, or the spirit realm. Hence, among the Evo people, anointing rituals often accompany rites of passage, healing ceremonies, and protection against evil forces. Substances like palm oil, red camwood, and

[9]Peter Berger L. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 89.
[10]Clifford Geertz, C. The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 234.
[11]James Watts W. Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 78

native herbs are believed to possess spiritual potency. Traditional priests, diviners of the shrine, and religious specialists use these in consecrating individuals, tools, or spaces. The act of anointing is both a blessing and a safeguard, invoking ancestral approval or spiritual reinforcement.

Consequently, in Northern Nigeria, especially among ethnic groups such as the Hausa (in pre-Islamic traditional contexts), Gwari, and Tiv, oils and perfumes are used as part of ritual cleansing, healing, and divination. Also, this aligns with African Indigenous Religious practices, particularly among the Mupun and Ngas people of Plateau, in which the act of sprinkling with water solution or blood of slaughtered animals is used for various ritualistic purposes.[12] The priest is said to dip a bunch of leaves into the water or blood and sprinkle the same on the doorpost or walls of a house or any property. This is done as a means to ward off some evil or demonic spirits and provide protection for individuals. Furthermore, the ritual is carried out for exorcism and purification reasons. In some cases, traditional healers anoint clients with specially prepared oils believed to contain spiritual power or protection from malevolent forces. These rituals are often tied to cosmological beliefs involving spirit beings, fate, and community harmony.

Cultural Symbolism and Religious Worldview

The cultural symbolism of anointing in indigenous African religion is holistic. It does not distinguish between physical and spiritual healing. The anointed person is believed to undergo a transformation, becoming spiritually fortified or set apart for a divine or ancestral purpose. This worldview reflects a strong belief in the spiritual interconnectedness of all life, where natural elements like oil and herbs serve as conduits of spiritual power.

Symbolism and Religious Meaning of Anointing

Anointing is a ritual act rich with symbolism, embedded deeply in both biblical and indigenous religious traditions. Whether practiced in the New Testament or within African traditional religions, anointing serves as a symbolic medium through which divine power, sacred presence, and spiritual identity are expressed and understood. This paper explores the symbolic and religious meanings attached to anointing across these traditions. Thus, in the New Testament, anointing is a symbol of divine election, healing, consecration, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The term Christos (the Anointed One) signifies Jesus' divine commissioning as King, Priest, and Prophet (Luke 4:18). Anointing thus symbolizes God's selection and empowerment for a sacred task. In James 5:14, anointing the sick with oil signifies physical and spiritual healing. The oil is not merely medicinal but is a sign of faith and divine intervention. In 1 John

[12]Danfulani U.H.D (2012) 'Kum:Traditional Religion' in U. Habila, D. Danfulani & S.U Fwatshak, eds, Celebrating Njinkook: Studies in the History and Culture of the Mupun of the Jos Plateau in Nigeria, vol. 1, 84-141. Lynx Communation: Kaduna

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2:20, believers are said to have "an anointing from the Holy One," pointing to the internal, spiritual enlightenment given by the Holy Spirit, marking them as God's own. Anointing is also symbolic of honor and preparation for death, as in the case of Jesus' anointing by the woman at Bethany (Mark 14:3–9).

In African traditional religions, such as those of the Evo people and Northern Nigerian cultures, anointing carries multidimensional symbolic meanings, closely tied to their cosmological beliefs. Oils, herbs, and animal extracts are used to anoint individuals to protect them from evil spirits, ward off curses, and ensure spiritual safety. Anointing signifies the setting apart of individuals for particular roles, such as priesthood, kingship, or initiation into spiritual societies, much like the biblical concept of consecration. Anointing acts as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, invoking blessings from deities or ancestral spirits. Anointing substances are applied during healing rituals, fertility rites, and even agricultural ceremonies, symbolizing renewal, life, and well-being.

While both traditions use anointing to express sacredness, empowerment, and transformation, their theological foundations differ. In Christianity, anointing points to a personal relationship with the triune God, mediated by the Holy Spirit. In African traditional religion, it often involves mediated power through ancestors, spirits, or divinities, rooted in communal cosmology. Nevertheless, both understand the act as a visible sign of invisible spiritual reality, giving it a profound role in shaping faith and spiritual identity.

Contextualization in African Christianity

Thus, with the spread of Christianity, many African converts retained the symbolic understanding of anointing while adapting it to biblical theology. In many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches across Nigeria today, anointing oil is used not only for healing and consecration (as in James 5:14), but also for breakthroughs, protection, and spiritual warfare, echoing indigenous beliefs. This adaptation demonstrates a process of contextual theology, where biblical teachings are interpreted through cultural lenses. While this can enrich Christian practice, it also raises concerns about syncretism, the blending of incompatible belief systems.

Contemporary Relevance and Influence of Anointing

The practice of anointing, while ancient in origin, remains a dynamic and influential religious phenomenon in contemporary contexts, especially in Africa. It is employed in diverse ways, ranging from spiritual healing to socio-political identity formation, and is shaped by both biblical and indigenous interpretations. Scholars across theology, anthropology, and religious studies have offered insights into the modern implications of anointing. Anointing oil has become central to Pentecostal and Charismatic expressions of faith. According to Gifford, anointing is frequently used in deliverance sessions,

healing crusades, and personal prayer for a breakthrough.[13] He further states that the use of anointing oil in African Pentecostalism has evolved into a sacramental object, symbolizing the tangible power of God and often sold commercially as a point of contact for divine intervention.[14] Thus, Meyer suggests that in Sensational Movies, Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana that Pentecostal media has helped popularize anointing oils, creating a marketplace of spiritual commodities that blends Christian doctrine with indigenous ritual logic.[15] Hence, it has been observed that in African Charismatics, current developments within independent indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana, many African believers see anointing as an act that is a culturally resonant form of spiritual security, replacing or adapting traditional protective rites.[16]

More so, anointing in African Christianity has undergone a process of inculturation, where biblical practices are interpreted within local cultural frameworks. Accordingly, Kwame Bediako explains that Christianity in Africa, through The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion, argues that African theology must take indigenous religious symbols, like anointing, seriously if it is to produce an authentic and rooted Christian expression.[17] Furthermore, Stephen Bevans in Models of Contextual Theology emphasizes that all theology is contextual, and the reinterpretation of anointing within African communities reflects a legitimate process of expressing the Gospel in culturally meaningful ways.[18] This inculturation leads to hybrid religious forms that blend biblical meaning with ancestral ritual logic, contributing to the growth of African-initiated churches and a culturally embedded Christian spirituality.

In contemporary African societies, especially rural areas, anointing practices play a vital role in public health, spiritual wellness, and psychological support. Consequently, Langwick in Bodies, Politics, and African Healing discusses how healing rituals (including anointing) in Tanzania serve not only medical but also social and spiritual purposes, especially where biomedical services are limited.[19] Some scholars also observe that anointing rituals provide psycho-social stability in communities affected by poverty, conflict, or trauma. The rituals affirm community cohesion, hope, and spiritual agency.[20]

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[13]Gifford P. Ghana's new Christianity: Pentecostalism in a globalizing African economy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). 143.
[14]Ibid
[15]Meyer, B. Sensational movies: Video, vision, and Christianity in Ghana. (California: University of California Press, 2015), 165.
[16]Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. African charismatics: Current developments within independent indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana. (Leiden: Brill Publisher, 2005), 158.
[17]Kwame Bediako Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion. (Edinburgh
University Press, 1999), 234.
[18]Bevans, S. B. Models of contextual theology (Revised ed.) (NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 58.
[19]Stacey Langwick *Bodies, Politics, and African healing: The Matters of Maladies in Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 218.
[20]Esterline, D. V., & Kalu, O. U. *Shaping beloved community: Multicultural*

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Anointing remains a marker of spiritual and cultural identity. For many indigenous communities, the continued use of anointing substances (such as palm oil, shea butter, and herbal oils) serves as a form of resistance to Western religious homogenization. Peel in Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba describes how ritual symbols like anointing are arenas of religious negotiation between Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion. In modern interfaith dialogue, anointing serves as a common cultural expression through which Christians and traditional practitioners can engage one another on shared spiritual values, even when theological interpretations diverge. Further, Scholarly discourse affirms that anointing remains deeply relevant in contemporary African life. It acts as a bridge between past and present, tradition and modernity, local identity and global Christianity. Its evolving use reflects the adaptive nature of religious practice and its power to speak into diverse social, spiritual, and psychological needs.

Conclusion

This study has explored the concept and practice of anointing through a comparative lens, drawing from both the New Testament and the indigenous religious traditions of Evo in Rivers State and Northern Nigeria. The findings reveal that while anointing is contextually practiced in distinct ways, it consistently symbolizes divine presence, empowerment, healing, consecration, and spiritual protection. In the New Testament, anointing carries Christological significance and theological depth, often representing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the commissioning of individuals for divine service, and the enactment of God's healing and redemptive work. In indigenous African traditions, anointing similarly signifies a connection with the spiritual realm, ancestral power, and communal identity, with oils and herbs functioning as sacred media. Symbolic Interactionism and contextual theological frameworks reveal that both traditions use anointing not only as a ritual but also as a symbolic act imbued with spiritual and cultural meaning. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how contemporary Christian practice in Africa reflects a fusion of biblical theology and indigenous spirituality, leading to vibrant and culturally resonant expressions of faith. Thus, anointing serves as a theological and cultural bridge, connecting people to the divine, their community, and their heritage. It continues to shape religious identity and practice, affirming its relevance in both ancient scripture and modern spiritual life.

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theological education. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 210.