


Examining theological gaps where African traditions intersect Christian doctrine

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Background: South Africa's diverse Christian denominations reflect varied theological perspectives, worship styles, and cultural practices. This diversity creates challenges as churches navigate differing doctrinal interpretations and communal practices. This research investigates the United African Apostolic Church (UAAC) as a case study.

Objectives: This study examined inconsistencies between African tradition and Christian doctrine using a selected church.

Method: This qualitative study employed document analysis of published academic literature, church historical records, and ethnographic studies. Data sources included scholarly articles on African Initiated Churches (AICs), UAAC historical documents, and studies on Vhavenda cultural practices. Thematic analysis identified patterns in how the church integrates traditional practices with Christian beliefs. Ethical considerations included respectful treatment of religious beliefs while maintaining critical academic analysis.

Results: The study found that incorporating traditional healing practices within Christian structures creates both opportunities and tensions. Four major themes emerged: Cultural perspectives on religion and interaction, the dual nature of prophetic healing, the resilience and adaptability of African religions, and the role of polygamy within the African church. While the church successfully bridges traditional African cultural elements with Christian practices, significant theological tensions arise from this integration, including criticism from traditionalist Christian factions viewing such practices as syncretistic or unorthodox.

Conclusion: This study highlights innovative ways in which the church bridges traditional African cultural elements with Christian practices, while revealing theological inconsistencies that challenge conventional perceptions of doctrinal purity. The incorporation of cultural identity into spiritual practices enhances worship experiences but raises questions about the limits of theological adaptation and the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy.

Contribution: This inquiry enhances understanding of Christianity's evolution in diverse contexts while acknowledging inherent theological tensions, offering nuanced perspectives for dialogue among South African Christian traditions.

Keywords: African Initiated Churches; cultural practices; Christian doctrine; religion; United African Apostolic Church.

Introduction

This study employed a qualitative document analysis approach to examine the theological inconsistencies between African traditional practices and Christian doctrine within the United African Apostolic Church (UAAC). The research design was exploratory and descriptive, utilising a case study methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of how one specific African Initiated Church (AIC) navigates the intersection of cultural tradition and Christian faith.

Data collection involved a systematic review of published academic literature, scholarly articles on UAAC, historical documents related to the UAAC and ethnographic studies of Vhavenda cultural practices. The analytical approach followed thematic analysis procedures, where data were coded and organised into recurring patterns and themes. Four major themes emerged from this process: cultural perspectives on religion and interaction, the dual nature of prophetic and healing practices, resilience and adaptability of African religious traditions, and polygamy within the church structure. The analysis maintained sensitivity to the religious beliefs and practices discussed while applying critical academic evaluation.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the topical collection titled 'The Challenge of Syncretism in Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism,' under the expert guidance of guest editors, Prof. Marius Nel and Prof. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle.

Limitations of this study include reliance on secondary sources and the absence of direct fieldwork or interviews with UAAC members. The findings represent an analysis of documented practices and beliefs rather than lived experiences of current church members. In addition, focusing on one specific church limits the generalisability of findings to other AICs, although it provides detailed insight into the specific case under examination.

Background

Religion plays a significant role in shaping identities and providing support in times of uncertainty, particularly in Africa, where Christianity encompasses a diverse range of beliefs and practices. Christianity is fragmented in Africa, with churches divided into different belief systems (Anderson 2023). Religious institutions are categorised as Traditional, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Protestant and Catholic (Adeboye 2005). The differences are mainly the result of the nature and the culture of the place of origin, although they can be passed from one nation to another. As people face uncertainties in life, religion becomes the anchor for support when people fear death, misfortunes, poverty, sickness and many other life-related challenges, and they can find solace in their spiritual beliefs. Sometimes, people may shift from their beliefs when other belief systems offer competing solutions to their uncertainties.

This study is descriptive, and it is based on a case of one traditional African church in South Africa that incorporates culture and religion in its worship and healing practice, called the UAAC. African religion from this context refers to the system of beliefs and practices integrated into the culture and worldviews of African peoples in South Africa regarding their perception of God, as alluded to by Mbiti (2015) and Kgatle (2023). African Initiated Churches are churches founded by Africans in Africa and without direct links to missionaries (Atabongwong, Lütz & Austin 2023). According to Frost, Öhlmann and Gräb (2016), as quoted by Atabongwong (2023), AICs, such as the Zion Christian Church, comprise around 45% of the population in South Africa, and with millions of members, this church plays an important role in shaping the attitudes, values and ethics of its membership. Roy (2020) argued that an estimated 10 million members of the African Independent (or Instituted) Churches in South Africa. The church selected for this study has attracted many worshippers in Africa and has churches in almost all villages in the rural Limpopo area. Although divisions forming new, smaller groups have occurred over the years, the groups reflect similarities in practice.

The exploration of inconsistencies between African tradition and Christian doctrine offers a compelling lens through which to understand cultural and religious dynamics. It is important to recognise that African traditional religions are deeply rooted in the historical, social and cultural contexts of various communities across the continent. These traditions often incorporate beliefs in ancestral spirits, the significance of rituals and the communal nature of spiritual life. In

contrast, Christian doctrine tends to emphasise individual faith, salvation through Christ and adherence to specific scriptural teachings.

By selecting a particular church, such as one that is situated in a predominantly African traditional context, one can observe the ways in which congregants navigate the tension between their inherited cultural beliefs and the teachings of Christianity. For instance, practices such as ancestor veneration may be at odds with Christian teachings that promote the worship of God alone. Examining the sermons, community practices, and theological understandings within this church reveals how leaders and congregants interpret and reconcile these differences. Some churches may incorporate aspects of African tradition into their worship, potentially leading to a syncretic form of Christianity that reflects local customs while still adhering to core Christian beliefs. However, this integration raises critical questions about theological consistency and the boundaries of orthodox Christian practice.

The historical imposition of Christian beliefs often led to the marginalisation of indigenous practices, creating a complex relationship between the two. Understanding this can shed light on contemporary efforts by some churches to reclaim and integrate traditional practices as a way to promote a more inclusive form of worship that resonates with local identity, while also acknowledging the theological challenges such integration presents.

Literature

Zion Apostolic Church of South Africa

The church was established in the late 19th century, marked by the emergence of several African leaders who dissociated themselves from missionary-instituted churches to form new denominations that emphasised a distinctly African theology and a renewed appreciation for African customs (Ranwedzi, Nesamvuni & Van Niekerk 2022). One of the earliest schisms occurred in 1917 when Elias Mahlangu founded the Zion Apostolic Church of South Africa. Concurrently, Daniel Nkonyane initiated the Christian Catholic Apostolic Holy Spirit Church in Zion. Nkonyane's contributions to worship practices have significantly shaped the identity of Zionism, incorporating elements such as white robes, bare feet, holy sticks and Old Testament symbolism. However, these innovations met resistance from figures such as Le Roux and other white Pentecostals, who objected to using such symbols (Roy 2020). These churches combined Christian beliefs with African approaches to religion.

Hence, the founder of the case selected is Matsea Paulos *Mureri*, interchangeably *Miriri*, who is a traditional healer and herbs specialist. *Miri* is a Venda word for tree, and *Mureri* was a nickname for Paulos, the child of a healer who became a powerful preacher; hence, *Mureri* means the preacher (Ranwedzi et al. 2022). Currently, the church headquarters are at Ha-Mavhunga village in Venda, South Africa, and it is one of the churches with the most prominent followers, as

nearly every town has a church. The church is called the African Apostolic Church, today called the UAAC, and was founded in 1912. Although AICs express more traditional elements, it was found that there are new Pentecostal groups (Ranwedzi et al. 2022).

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative document analysis approach to examine the theological inconsistencies between African traditional practices and Christian doctrine within the UAAC. The research design was exploratory and descriptive, utilising a case study methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of how one specific AIC navigates the intersection of cultural tradition and Christian faith.

Data collection involved systematic review of published academic literature, scholarly articles on AICs, historical documents related to the UAAC and ethnographic studies of Vhavenda cultural practices. Primary sources included works by Ranwedzi et al. (2022), Anderson (2003), and other scholars who have documented African Independent Churches. Secondary sources comprised broader literature on African Christianity, religious syncretism and postcolonial theological studies.

The analytical approach followed thematic analysis procedures, where data were coded and organised into recurring patterns and themes. Four major themes emerged from this process: cultural perspectives on religion and interaction, the dual nature of prophetic and healing practices, resilience and adaptability of African religious traditions and polygamy within the church structure. The analysis maintained sensitivity to the religious beliefs and practices discussed while applying critical academic evaluation.

Limitations of this study include reliance on secondary sources and the absence of direct fieldwork or interviews with UAAC members. The findings represent an analysis of documented practices and beliefs rather than lived experiences of current church members. In addition, focusing on one specific church limits the generalisability of findings to other AICs, although it provides detailed insight into the specific case under examination.

Ethical considerations

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

Results

The following four themes resonate from engagements with data on theological inconsistencies in the intersection of African traditions and Christian doctrine: Cultural perspectives on religion and interaction, the dual nature of the prophetic and healing, resilience and adaptability of African religions, and Polygamy within the African church, all leading to appreciative inquiry.

Themes emerging from the study

Cultural perspectives on religion and interaction

The UAAC, since its inception, has stood on the intersection between cultural perspective and religion. The complexities of cultural interactions, for the UAAC, are profoundly shaped by differing practices and interpretations of respect and reverence. These attitudes not only overlook the complexities of African religiosity but also contribute to an ongoing cultural discord, where the validity of African practices is often questioned through a Eurocentric lens.

Amoah and Bennet (2008) have argued that one crucial area of difference is the expressions of respect. In the UAAC, the culture, such as among the Vhavenda, kneeling or lowering one's gaze when addressing an elder is a profound expression of respect and humility. This is practised by both men and women. Although men may squat, women may lie on the ground or kneel with their knees; all these practices are to show respect. The same culture is infused in the church, and the belief is that God is supreme, and people cannot pray to him standing or walking, but they should show respect in a way understood by the cultural group. This form of communication is deeply embedded in the cultural context, reflecting a hierarchy that values age and wisdom.

However, these differences often lead to misunderstandings and misrepresentations between Euro-Western contexts, as the missionaries taught that worshippers should stand in reference to God. This creates a fundamental tension between cultural expression and inherited Christian practice. The recognition of the independence of the UAAC religious movements from Euro-Western control, highlighted by their self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting characteristics, marks a significant assertion of cultural identity and spiritual autonomy. As of 2021, over a million church members in South Africa and beyond underscore this vitality and growth within these communities (Ranwedzi et al. 2022).

Scholars added the notion that Euro-Western protocols typically emphasise direct eye contact and a standing posture as signs of honesty and confidence (Ranwedzi et al. 2022). Unfortunately, for the Vhavenda people, direct eye contact has always been a sign of being rude to the elders, and when they speak to elders, they are supposed to face down. This divergence can create a significant gap in understanding religious practices. Another example is how an African avoids eye contact during a conversation; a Westerner may interpret it as dishonesty or a lack of confidence rather than as a culturally appropriate expression of respect (Ranwedzi et al. 2022).

The practice of showing reference by kneeling and avoiding eye contact plays a role in UAAC, as people kneel down when they pray instead of standing upon walking, which is directly

linked to practices observable within Vhavenda tradition, where UAAC originated. While this demonstrates cultural continuity, it also raises questions about the theological implications of adapting Christian worship to local customs.

Exploring the dual nature of the prophetic and healing within the United African Apostolic Church

The phenomenon of UAAC in South Africa encompasses a rich tapestry of spiritual beliefs and practices rooted in the continent's cultural and historical contexts. The church serves as a vital space for African communities seeking spiritual fulfillment that resonates with their identity, addressing communal and individual needs (Moyo 2001). At the heart of UAAC, like many African churches, lies a profound emphasis on prophecy and healing, often intertwined with traditional practices passed down through generations.

The rituals conducted in UAAC, often characterised by their unique spiritual methodologies, serve significant purposes beyond physical healing (Moyo 2001). Prophetic utterances are regarded as a form of divine communication and play a vital role in building social cohesion within communities. They provide guidance, hope and a strong sense of belonging among congregants. Individuals with prophetic abilities possess the unique capability to foresee future events or reflect on past occurrences, often delivering insights that transcend scientific explanations. Furthermore, healing rituals address various physical and psychological concerns while simultaneously reinforcing community bonds.

However, there have been times when the popularity of these healing practices raised critical discussions about safety and efficacy. The tragic case of the woman who died at the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) serves as a haunting reminder of the potential risks inherent in unregulated spiritual practices. The woman, together with her husband, was flogged under the claim of mental healing, and although the husband survived, the woman died (Muleya 2022). While the pastor claimed consent, the ethical implications of using flogging as a healing method highlight the necessity for accountability and informed consent in healing rituals. This example is used because UAAC and ZCC are similar in being prophetic and sharing healing rituals, although different in what they use. The two churches had similar histories as their founders were the same members, although separated at a later stage.

The use of unconventional healing substances by UAAC is a vivid example of how traditional materials and methods can be integrated into contemporary spiritual practices. Elements such as coloured salts, candles, river sand, water, wool and herbal mixtures are steeped in cultural significance; however, their safety and effectiveness often remain undocumented. But the methods continue because of the inherent benefits and the testimonies of the practices. Unfortunately, these types of healing practices were marginalised, often wrongfully categorised as witch doctors, signalling a broader societal issue regarding the recognition of different forms of healing.

The resilience and adaptability of the United African Apostolic Church

The UAAC has historically played an indispensable role in supporting and caring within various African communities (Anderson 2003). Even among those who identify as Christians, many individuals turn to these practitioners, indicating a complex interplay between traditional belief systems and contemporary religious affiliations. This is affirmed by Bach (2013), who argues that South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid has marginalised traditional healers and promoted secrecy around their practices. She observes that approximately 80% of South Africans identify as Christian, yet many still consult traditional healers. However, some individuals fear being judged by born-again Christians, who may disapprove of their beliefs or practices, or may be seen as primitive or uneducated. The merging of traditional healing with the UAAC then reduces the stigma as traditionalist uses the approach of a church.

Key rituals celebrating life transitions, such as childbirth, burial rites, and family gatherings, where worshipping ancestors is essential, indicate the contestation between religion and Christian doctrine. United African Apostolic Church recognises and facilitates this spiritual expression, allowing members to engage deeply with their cultural and spiritual roots while navigating the complexities of modern religious landscapes. Most AICs, including the case for this study, use the same ancestral spirits for the prophesy and healing. This means that the same ancestral spirits traditionally used for healing can be redirected to serve within the church, and the individual will then be referred to as a prophet. This suggests that ancestral spirits traditionally associated with healing practices can be recontextualized within Christian frameworks, transforming the practitioner's role from traditional healer to prophet.

Although ancestral worship contradicts Christian beliefs as it is unbiblical, scholars (Anderson 2003) contested that the prevalence of ancestor rituals in the personal lives of members of the older 'mission churches' and some independent churches would suggest that the view is that there exists no actual conflict between the practices and Christian beliefs. Here, it is believed that the ancestor rituals are exclusively African (and personal) affairs that can legitimately exist alongside Christianity. He argues that the practice belongs to two different worlds, yet they can also be reconciled. However, it should be observed that reconciling the two contradicts the teachings of the Old and the New Testaments in the bible. Instances arise where, instead of using prayers for healing the sick, some members of UAAC interchangeably choose to use dice that are used for traditional healing. The calling of the spirits and names of the ancestors is performed to ensure that there will be intervention and revelation from the spirit.

The healing practices that resonate with those of traditional healing from the UAAC include *Muthuso wa vhana*, a cultural practice encompassing a series of rituals performed

for newborns within various African communities. This process is traditionally facilitated by healers who draw upon indigenous knowledge systems and, within the system of the UAAC, employ similar methodologies. The primary objective of these rituals is to safeguard the child from perceived malevolent forces, such as witches and sorcerers. In traditional healing, herbal remedies and medicinal ointments are often utilised as protective measures against evil forces and childhood sicknesses. Conversely, UAAC also employs sacred oils, blessed water and specific binding materials such as wool to fortify the child against spiritual threats.

Polygamy in the United African Apostolic Church

The practice of polygamy among the Vhavenda people can be attributed to a complex interplay of socio-cultural and economic factors. Historically, polygamous unions have served various functions, including the promotion of economic emancipation, the prevention of adultery, the management of labour migration and the expression of cultural identity. In addition, polygamy has been seen as a solution for issues related to infertility and as a means of providing sexual outlets within the community. Despite these traditional practices, recent trends indicate a decline in polygamous marriages, primarily influenced by the growing reach of Evangelical Pentecostal movements, economic strains and Western ideologies.

The UAAC has always practised polygamous marriages and relationships. Paulos, the founder of UAAC and a central figure within this discourse, exemplifies the intersection of traditional practices and modern religious beliefs. Previously having been a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa, he operated within a polygamous family structure, having married three wives. His experiences highlight the nuanced relationship between individual cultural practices and broader religious ideologies (Ranwedzi et al. 2022).

However, this practice presents significant theological challenges, as polygamy directly contradicts New Testament teachings on marriage and church leadership. The rise of independent churches, which UAAC forms a bigger part of, as argued by Munyai (2007), reflects a broader discontent with mainstream religious institutions. These independent movements emerged in response to the perceived failures of established churches to address their congregants' spiritual and cultural needs. Many converts felt that their African cultural heritage was devalued and, at times, depicted as primitive or demonic within the structure of the dominant religious narratives.

Critical assessment

While the UAAC demonstrates remarkable adaptability in creating a culturally relevant religious experience, this study reveals several areas of concern that require careful consideration:

Positive contributions

The church successfully preserves African cultural identity within a Christian context, provides inclusive community support, and addresses holistic human needs. The church's emphasis on spiritual rather than material wealth creates an egalitarian environment that serves marginalised communities effectively.

Theological challenges

However, the integration of traditional practices creates genuine theological inconsistencies. The use of ancestral spirits for prophetic revelation directly contradicts Christian monotheism and biblical teachings about the source of spiritual authority. Similarly, the acceptance of polygamy conflicts with New Testament standards for Christian marriage and church leadership.

Safety and accountability

The unregulated nature of some healing practices raises legitimate concerns about participant safety and informed consent. The documented case of harm in similar churches highlights the need for proper oversight and accountability measures.

Conclusion

The examination of the UAAC of South Africa serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges Christianity faces in Africa, where diverse theological perspectives coexist. This study reveals both the innovative potential and the genuine tensions inherent in adapting Christianity to African cultural contexts. While the church successfully bridges traditional African cultural elements with Christian practices, creating a sense of belonging and identity among its members, it also generates significant theological inconsistencies that challenge conventional perceptions of doctrinal purity in Christianity.

The church's approach demonstrates that spirituality can thrive in diverse cultural contexts but raises important questions about the limits of theological adaptation. The incorporation of cultural identity into spiritual practices has indeed led to a more fulfilling and resonant worship experience for many members, promoting both communal cohesion and individual expression. However, this success comes at the cost of theological consistency, particularly regarding core Christian doctrines about the nature of God, the source of spiritual authority and moral teachings.

This exploration underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how cultural and religious dimensions intertwine, while acknowledging that perfect solutions may not exist. The UAAC's experience illustrates that the relationship between universal religious claims and particular cultural contexts involves genuine trade-offs that cannot be easily resolved. As African Christianity continues evolving, it will need to navigate these tensions carefully,

seeking approaches that honour both cultural heritage and theological integrity without compromising completely.

The study contributes to a broader understanding of how Christianity can evolve and thrive in diverse contexts, while also highlighting the theological challenges such evolution presents. It offers a basis for honest dialogue and mutual respect among different Christian traditions in South Africa and beyond, recognising that such conversations must address real disagreements rather than minimising them. Ultimately, the UAAC's story reflects the ongoing negotiation between universal religious claims and particular cultural contexts that characterise much of contemporary global Christianity.

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Author's contributions

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Data availability

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