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SUBJECTING SOME RITES OF PASSAGE AMONG THE NGAS OF PLATEAU STATE TO THE LENS OF JEWISH RITES OF PASSAGE

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative analysis of religious rites of passage of Jewish and Ngas people of Plateau State. Rites of Passage are sets of ceremonies or events that mark important stages in one's life. It is a formal procedure for transition into the next stage of life. The paper buttressed the rich Jewish and Ngas heritage that are seamlessly passed from one generation to the other without showing any superiority or inferiority complexes to any particular culture as seen in most of the Eurocentric missionaries. Findings from this paper revealed that most of the rites among the Ngas people of Plateau state are similar and are very much like the Jewish though with mark dissimilarities. Methodology used is a descriptive and comparative approach. The paper aimed at re-awakening the cultural heritage and the pride of holding firm to what Jews and Ngas have and to also enlighten and broaden knowledge that not everything cultural should be discarded as primitive and fetish.

Introduction

Every culture is embedded with religious beliefs and practices. The research x-rays the various religious beliefs and practices among the Jews and Ngas people of Plateau State. The practice and interpretation of these rich cultural heritage makes a lot of senses to a typical Jewish and Ngas ethnic groups. Some of the religious rites of passage are highlighted and noticing the similarities and dissimilarities for human development. Man, by nature is a social being and every given people have their religious practices embedded in the culture. Religion is a



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communal thing, it's a social institution in which it brings people together. The Jewish people like the Ngas are socially inclined.

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage are integral part of every community. The importance of these rites is not only to the individuals but to the entire community. Any community that doesn't practice rites of passage to individual members and at the community level as well is regarded as a non – existence society or community. Elizabeth Onyii Ezenweke in her book, *Rites and Rituals in African Ontology in Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, defines rite of passage as “sets of ceremonies or events that mark important stages in one's life. It is a formal procedure for transition into the next stage of life” (23). Some of these rites of passage are highlighted below.

Purification Rites (Post-Partum cleansing) – Lev 12:1-6; Luke 2:22-24

The Jewish injunction in purification after child birth is clearly defined with different numbers of days for seclusion for a boy child from a girl child. 7 days of impurity for a male child and 33 days of isolation before going to the priest with a prescribed sacrifice required for cleansing. For a girl child, 14 days of impurity and 66 days of isolation from touching or coming into sacred place of worship also with a prescribed animal, depending on the capability of the spouse are to be brought to the Priest for sacrifice of cleansing before the woman is regarded as cleansed and fit to resume religious functions. Mary and Joseph went to the Temple after 40 days of the birth of Jesus Christ to fulfill the prescribed period of isolation and purification by presenting two doves to the Priest for sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24). James L. Cox in his article, *Rites of Passage: African Rites*, observed that, “Purification seeks to remove legal uncleanness so that the purified individual may resume normal activity in the society.” Cox further states that, Rites of purification in the Bible are of different types and degrees: Simple ablutions and temporary quarantine (Lev 11:25; Deut 23:12). There are purification accomplished by letting a determined period of time pass and then offering a prescribed sacrifice (Lev 12:6-9), or by ablutions, laps of time, and the offering of such a sacrifice (Lev 15:13-15) (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/rites-of-passage/african-rites>).

This is quite similar with most of the African cultural practices. Even though, the way and manner it is practice from one tribe to the other may differs, the concept of uncleanness after child birth is a well-known phenomenon in Africa. In *A Harvest of Peace: An Ethnological Survey of Plateau State*, CAPRO affirms that,

Among the Ngas people, when a child is born, the baby and the mother remain in the room for seven days for the umbilical cord to fall off. After the naming rite on the seventh day the woman is free to come out with her baby. Also, a woman is traditionally contaminated after delivery, so does not freely associate with people. Three days after



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delivery, a purification rite is performed to sanctify her. Therefore, a new gate is opened through the back yard for her movement until the seven days are over (239).

Also, from the day of birth, the woman remained indoor for three months and the husband is expected to stay away (conjugally) from the woman (in a separate room), never to eat her food or any delicacy made by the woman until the prescribed months are completed. Meanwhile, there is a specified form of daily bathing with hot water, cooked herbs, special delicacy serve to the nursing mother and several other rituals must be observed (by elderly women). The period of uncleanness could be one of the reasons for polygamy among the Africans to contend the possibility of staying away from the conjugal right if a woman puts to bed for such a long period of time, having other wives take care of that thereby avoiding extramarital affairs. This implies that Ngas people have a great regard of sanctity for marital home. Multiple wives help in post-partum seclusion and cleansing of the women and is in a way, is to avoid adultery and fornication among men which is similar to the biblical injunctions of keeping the marriage bed undefiled because fornicators and adulterers will be judge by God (Heb 13:4). In regards to chastity, CAPRO states clearly that:

Adultery is traditionally forbidden among the Ngas society and people caught in the act were fined guinea-corn, goats, and local beer (*Mwos*). The quantity or amount sometimes varies from one area to another e.g. in some places seven goats are paid. This fine is used for purification rite to appease the gods and to restore blessings to the land (243). Neiers adds, "A man guilty of adultery is excluded from participation in religious rites" (96).

Rites of Circumcision (*Brit Milah*)– Gen 17:10-14; Lev 12:3; Luke 2: 21

Circumcision is the cutting away of the fore skin from the Penis, from the Bible point it was the sealing of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. From the initial, Abraham in his old age was circumcised; the instructions followed that if a male child is born after eight days should be circumcised in compliance with the Abrahamic covenant with God and only the male child is to be circumcised. F. F Bruce in his book, *The New International Bible Commentary*, asserts that, "Circumcision thus symbolized not a social kinship but an obedience to God's commands" (127).

In the African perspective, different cultures do it differently. Some until the child is twelve years; in some places it could be less or more. More so, in some African culture's circumcision is not only done on the male child alone but even girl child as well, this is also known as genital mutilation or Clitoridectomy (female circumcision). Circumcision is a very important rite of passage from one stage to the other in a person's life cycle. Among the Ngas people, unless a male child is circumcised, he is regarded as a 'female' (regardless of his age) and the moment the rite is performed, it is a huge moment of celebration and a welcoming of a male person into the society of male dominance. Though females are not circumcised in Ngasland, it is a taboo for an uncircumcised male to see "*Nwongmwa*" (masquerades) and so it is a unique moment in the life of a male child to be circumcised. Any male child, who is uncircumcised cannot migrate to adulthood or even be in a



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decision-making body of the village because he is regarded as an incomplete person. This implies that all male children must undergo this important rite of passage if not their lifecycle is incomplete or truncated and of course people make jest of them, even among their equals and at the time the man is supposed to marry, no girl will agree to marry him except and unless the man undergoes the essential rite no matter how old the person may be. Rite of circumcision is also known as puberty rites in the Ngas culture. In Ngasland, every 6 or 7 years, boys of 7 years and above are gathered in the bush for circumcision. They are circumcised, treated and sacredly till the wounds heal and then brought back home. Traditionally, a boy wore a loincloth tied to the waist (*bente*) only after circumcision. Circumcision lasts for about two months, depending on when the wounds heal. Then feast is organised in honour of the circumcised boys. Circumcision among the Ngas is a key transition or a migration among the young children. Female child is not circumcised (Clitorectomy) among the Ngas people as is done in some places. Circumcision among the Ngas are similar to that of the Jews. Among the Ngas, this rite is a moment of teaching moral values to the young adults to become responsible men in the near future.

Naming Rites – 1Chron 4:9

In Ngasland, during the naming an honorable patriarch speaks on behalf of the clan or family to the gods. Sometimes the naming depends on the instruction of the seer. The child is either named based on events or circumstances that surround its birth or after an ancestor of good reputation. If it is a male child, prediction are made with prayers offered on behalf of the baby. To the male child, they say, “You will be hard-working in the farm, a good dancer and hunter with courage which characterize excellence in the society.” Then a hoe and spear are given to the child, symbolizing his lot in life (farming and hunting or war). The same procedure is followed for a female child with different predictions and without a hoe and spear, then mahogany seed oil (*Mai madachi* in Hausa) mixed with red oxide is rubbed on the forehead or chest of the baby, mother and participants for protection against evil. Porridge and probably local beer (*Mwos*) are given to the few participants. Twins are treated with care and respect lest they afflict people. Special names are given to them according to their order of birth: either males or females or mixed (CAPRO 239).

Corroborating with the above view, Gonet avers that, *Gurm* refers to human being (*Gurm mwa* (pl)). Every person has a specific name given at birth. Some of the names is based on the circumstances surrounding the birth of each person as exemplified by the birth of twins or those with six fingers (*Yol*) etc. man is seen as the livewire of the society. *Gurm* is believed to possess the power to manipulate the environment. But the strategy of man can be countered by other forces such as gods, spirits etc. Gonet further stressed, Therefore, the important of everything is determined in relation to the value it adds to human beings (50). Nearly all names have meanings. The naming of children is therefore an important occasion which is often marked by ceremonies in many societies. Some names mark the occasion of the child’s birth. A naming ceremony takes place a few days after the birth. The parent of the child invite friends, relatives and well-wishers to the ceremony. The child receives a personal name



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which marks his ritual entry into the family. Prayers are offered and libations poured on the ground for the ancestors (*Kumwa*) or Mother Earth. Visitors and Guests bring presents to the child's parent. Some names describe the personality of the individual or his character, or some key events in his life. C.N Nwadioko and others in their article, *Rites of Passage: African Traditional Religion*, avers that, "there is no end to the giving of names in many African societies so that a person may acquire a sizable collection of names by the time he becomes a grownup person" (www.ijern.com 44). Examples are *Kamshinen* (meaning 'Lean on God'), *Leritshimwa* (meaning 'God bless them'), *Gershimwa* (meaning 'My Pride'), *Panmwa* (meaning 'Take care of them') etc. Naming is a big celebration among the Africans and particularly among the Jews and Ngas people. Several things normally occasion the naming of a child like the Biblical example of Jabez in 1Chron 4:9. He was named because the mother bore him in pains, he practically changed the circumstances that led to his birth by praying to God and he became more honorable than his brothers. Bruce asserts that, "Jabez prayer in the 1Chron 4:9 emphasized that direct prayer can alter the fortunes of life for God listens to the prayer of the trusting persons" (445). Sometimes naming among the Jews and Ngas people are prayers, proverbial message, an expression of displeasure, expression of gratitude, description of the circumstances of the spouses/family etc.

Marriage Rites (*Kidushin*) – Gen 24:1-4; Exo 22:16; John 2:1-11

Marriage to Ngas people is a requirement for every adult male or female as painted below by Nwadiokwu and others in their article, *Rites of Passage: African Traditional Religion*, asserts that, "Marriage is a complex affair. For Africans, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return" (46). The Jewish and Ngas people's perspective of marriage is for procreation, and anything short of that makes it incomplete. Marriage is a social affair bringing families together (cohesion). Nwadiokwu and others further observed,

Finding of partners are done differently, in some societies the choice of the partner is made by the parents. A fairly widespread practice is the one in which the parents and relatives of a young man approach the parents of a particular girl and start marriage negotiations. If either the girl or the young man very strongly and firmly rejects the prospective marriage partner, then the negotiations are broken down; although there are cases where force or pressure is applied to get the reluctant young person to marry the partner chosen by the parents or relatives (46).

This is similar to the Jewish people as seen below.

Gunter Stemberger in his book, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, avers that, "The Hebrew word *Ketubah* (Exo 22:16) is both the marriage contract and the amount it assigns to the woman in case of divorce or her husband's death" (113). The scenario between Abraham and his servant whom he sent on errand to get a wife for his son Isaac from among his kindred is similar to the Ngas way of getting a wife (Gen 24:1-4). In the case of Isaac's wife, there was no force



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but it was on mutual ground as his steps were ordered by God and it led to a successful married life between Isaac and Rebecca. Typical among some tribes in Africa is the arranged marriage or forceful marriage without the consent of sometimes both parties i.e. the man and the woman. Mostly accompanied with dancing and blowing of bone with drums (*Bangak*) and other costumes', Ngas marriage rites normally exceed a day just like the Jews. In, *The Miracles of our Lord*, Charles Caldwell Ryrie opines that, the Jews normally take about a week in marriage rites (14), a typical example is the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus, His mother and His disciples were invited and at long run ran out of wine, resulting to the first miracle of Jesus (John 2:1-11). Jesus placed an important premium in attending marriage rite and by implication it is not bad to plan or arrange marriage rites in one's culture and tradition. Shortages of foods and drinks are part of every rites and celebrations as noted in the above Bible text. Ryrie argues that, "Jesus' presence at the wedding at Cana negate any suggestion that an ascetic life is preferable for a believer" (14). Again, "In doing his first miracle at a wedding, the Lord gave full approval to the institution of marriage. He foreknew that later some in the church would despise marriage" (13). It is true that that there are a lot of misconception about marriage in different quarters. Among the Ngas, in the past, childhood engagement was practiced. Firewood, tobacco and a bangle were given to establish a relationship. The firewood is used for warming water and lighting fire for the baby girl and the tobacco or firewood is used when parents of the girl have given their consent. After this, Guinea corn, *acha* and other items are yearly given to the girl's family for seven years or more and when the suitor is of age, he or his parents also cultivate and harvest crops for them. Finally, two goats, slaughtered and prepared and one life goat are given to request for the bride. Then the girl is released for the pre-marriage visits during which she spends at least seven days with the suitor's family without any sexual intercourse after which, no other man approaches her for marriage. In some communities to show her good character, the girl sweeps the suitor's compound with surroundings every morning and in addition does the same to that of the village or ward head. After the seven days she is sent back to her parents and then begins to prepare for her final release. Chastity is a high premium among the Jewish and Ngas cultures. Supporting this fact, CAPRO holds that,

A special deity called *Garmu* kept by clans, represented by a pot and other sacred objects. It protects the people within the clan while *Kuchuk*, which watch over unmarried young girls to keep them pure is kept by each ward with its shrine in the bush. It enforces the law of "no pregnancy before marriage" as deems proper for every lady. Every immoral girl is charged a fine for purification rites and if she does not pay it, she is afflicted by the cult. It provides children, therefore honoured and seriously feared by women (251).

Coronation Rites – Exo 29:1-9; 1 Chron 29:18-23

Coronation is part of every culture. Cephas Agbemenu in *Academic Journals*, opined that, every community has their own way of installing leaders or kings/queens or village head/chief as the case may be. Sometimes the leadership positions are inherited. Those from the royal family are set apart by the king makers or ancestors as leaders with exotic celebrations and rituals. We have several of these rites in the Bible with several instructions clearly spelt out to be done in



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consecrating or anointing kings and priest into their administrative positions. “Coronation ceremonies are traditional rites to formally install kings to the throne of their forefathers as community leaders who are symbol of authority between their people and the outside world” (<https://www.academicjournals.org/JFSA>). Among the Ngas, people of reputed testimonies or well standing are consecrated as leaders, anyone with a dented image cannot be appointed as a ruler in any community because such a person is unfit to lead others, this is in tandem with the scriptural guidelines in choosing leaders in the church to be people without reproach (1 Tim 3:1-7). In some communities, before a new king or chief is installed, several rituals are observed. To some extent kings normally serves dual purposes among the Ngas people; they serve as administrators (judges) in terms of settling cases and at the same time an overseer on spiritual matters of their various communities. They are highly revered and esteemed in their capacities.

Similarities and Dissimilarities of Jewish and Ngas Rites of Passage

Circumcision among the Jews and Ngas people are similar except for the days, eight days among the Jews for male child while Ngas people circumcise young children of 7 years and above male. Both the Jews and Ngas do not circumcised female child as practice among some ethnic groups in Africa and other continents. The naming of a child among the Jews and Ngas people can be occasion by many things. A person can bear more than one name because naming of a child among the Jews and Ngas people are also prayers, sometimes, naming a child is also proverbial message to mockers or perceived enemies among Ngas people. Another similar rite among the Jews and the Ngas people is post-partum cleansing after child birth, among the Jews depending on the sex of the child, it takes from 33-66 days before the woman undergo purification rites, while among the Ngas is about 7 days, until the umbilical falls before doing purification rites. The difference is in the length of days. The Jewish marriage rites and that of the Ngas people are very much similar in terms of the numbers of days taken (7 days) for the feast and the purity attached to the pre-marital processes. Chastity is a high premium among the Jewish and Ngas cultures, Jews and Ngas people are communal by nature during festivities. The only difference is that the Ngas have a deity (*Kuchuk*) which watches over young girls to make sure they maintain chastity before marriage and sanctions awaits defaulters, the Jews do not have any deity for chastity and have sanction for unchastity.

Conclusion

Rites of passage are integral part of Jews and Ngas people. Jewish rites are seen everywhere in the Bible in which most of them are very similar to the ones of Ngas people than even some of the Eurocentric rites imported to the African soil by the early missionaries. Ngas people see life in cyclic form rather than linear. Celebrations are the heritage of the Jews and Ngas people and should be held unto and been mindful of the practices that contravene the Bible (super-culture). It is also evident from this article that most of the rites and celebrations among the duo (Jews and Ngas) are marked with similarities and dissimilarities.



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