

The impact of the Catholic Church on the local Beliefs and Practices in Matany

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Pastoral Background

Brief history of the Catholic mission

Matany parish which was initially a chapel of Kangole Parish, some 17kms away became a parish in 1967. Its first parish priest was Fr Ciapetti Elia, a Comboni Missionary. In July 1969, a community of Comboni Sisters started a maternity centre in the area. This was gradually upgraded to a hospital which is now a flourishing haven numbering over 250 beds and offering extensive services both for remedial care and outreach community health. In addition, it offers nursing and midwifery training. Members of the Comboni missionary community i.e. Brother Pedrinsti built the hospital and Brother Fortunati the church. African Traditional beliefs are still practised here. Their places of worship being in the open air shrines located under special trees that are considered sacred.

Rationale and Preparations for the study

An approach was first made to the Missionaries in both the Parish of Matany and the Hospital to find out if such an enquiry (impact of the Catholic Church in Karamoja) would first of all be welcomed and secondly, feasible. Interest in the subject was originally generated by the researcher (myself) because of an academic need to explore the culture as part of input to a module on the Anthropology of Religion at Heythrop College London. This college, part of London University is run by the Jesuits and offers degrees in Philosophy and Theology.

The opportunity of getting primary data presented itself because of my long history of working within Karamoja and my contact with many of the missionaries and members of the community health care program. The academic aspect is still extremely important in the interest of obtaining primary research data. However, the pastoral implications and pastoral concerns together with this enable the findings to be seen in a more holistic way. Thus, the academic and pastoral data will be integrated. It is hoped that the findings may be of help to the parish pastoral team in their work of evangelisation.

Planned Approach

The first step was to have an in-depth discussion with the Parish Priest himself both a Ugandan and a Comboni missionary to find out the potential for undertaking this research and of finding out if it would be practical. The proposal was both accepted and welcomed by him and an exploration was made to identify the methods appropriate for collecting data. It was quickly identified that a series of focus group discussions would be a good starting point. This was for two reasons: first the Karimojong are well used to sitting in groups and discussing issues. Secondly, it was difficult to find a starting point for the enquiry and focus group discussions are useful for identifying some areas to explore, at least to begin with.

Using this method also means that nobody is excluded from voicing their opinions if they are non-literate. From this general approach, it was hoped that some overarching themes might emerge allowing a more extensive line of enquiry to be followed when a more detailed enquiry is made. The plan then, was to identify the most important aspects that emerge from the various discussions and to use these consistently in a series of meetings. These may in turn reveal factors that stand out as commonalities across all aspects of the community.

Positive impact of church teaching

The themes are as follows:

Prayer and the sacraments, Social aspects, Education and health care, Customs and practices, Violence, Gender issues

Prayer and the sacraments

It was obvious from the start that the Karimojong have a strong sense of God and are spiritual. Prayer is a normal activity for them and they do not really see any difference between praying at their shrines and praying in church. They acknowledge that it is the same God. The teaching of the commandments has congruence with many of the moral codes within their own society (at its best that is) where murder, adultery etc... considered sinful. There is a ready acceptance of Baptism, which is greatly valued.

This would seem to be associated with acquiring a new name and having a sense of belonging. They believe that the sacrament transforms them into being fully human and gives them a sense of belonging. Anointing is important to them and the sacramental symbolisms are understood because of their own custom of anointing. However, they consider that cow dung is more precious than oil for this and their own use of dung, which is considered of great value. Other sacraments are not so

universally valued. Marriage for example should, many say be banned as it does not work well in Karimojong society. Polygamy is still favoured though this is lessening. When asked specifically about this, they believed that it is still needed in order to beget more boys and to keep up the population of the Karimojong so that the tribe is not extinct. When challenged about the ability to sustain such a system and still provide resources for health care and education for all the children, it was acknowledged that this was a big problem.

Social aspects

There was no doubt that the church had and still does provide invaluable health and educational services. There is an expressed need for more community contact with the elderly and those who are less mobile for example prayers at home and domestic help. Because of greater opportunities for education, the younger people are drifting to the urban areas which means that those in the villages are bereft of people to do manual work like cultivation etc... The church is helping with providing more contact by the catechist visiting the villages and a recent development is the formation of small teams to go and combine evangelisation and health advice.

Health care and Education

The church has a big impact in these areas and people go to the hospital for advice and treatment (health care) of mothers and babies. Together with the active community, health education programs and vaccination are very beneficial and greatly appreciated. Formerly, people first went to the witch doctors and when this failed, came to the hospital. Now, there is a greater uptake of medical services; first, in the knowledge that much of the other approach is simply superstition and in any case does not work. There is appreciation of the work done by the church in the area of disabled people where when possible appropriate support is given to enable mobility etc...

Educational opportunities are recognised as being a big impact by the church through the provision of schools, teachers from the missionary groups and training of teachers. There is a real appreciation for the work done in this respect and for the help that is on-going in the area of sponsorship and school fees where there is hardship. Again, people expressed expectations for more and this was pointed out as being unrealistic, whatever the pattern of the past may have been. The downside of increased education is, as previous mentioned above, a drift away from the villages to the urban areas. An appeal was made for the church to provide more employment opportunities.

Customs and practices

Some customs and practices have changed due to the persistent teaching of the church e.g.

extraction of teeth for cosmetic purposes, insertion of lip plugs, use of traditional implements for severing the cord at birth which carried a very high risk of tetanus. These things are now well understood. Sacrificing of animals by the witch doctors for the purpose of healing has reduced but is still practised. In several of the groups, there were participants who had formerly practised as emerongs but with baptism, they had abandoned all their former practices and now view them as superstition.

Violence: Here, there was an immediate acknowledgement of the role of the church in the reduction of violence, which together with government action has made it possible to travel safely. The incidence of cattle raiding and general lawlessness has reduced. The positive and tangible evidence of this is the erection of a monument in the area denoting reconciliation. Here, tokens of peace and remembrance of the dead due to violence can be put. This indicates a change in mentality. However, the incidence of domestic violence is still a notable factor, although according to what came out in the discussions, has reduced. There is a definite link between consumption of alcohol and violence against women.

Gender issues: Women's' rights and dignity are an on-going priority for the church. It is recognised that there is a big impact in this respect with women given the opportunity to be educated, undertake money generating initiatives for support of their families. The church's on-going work in this aspect is very effective.

In Summary

The impact of the church was seen as beneficial and does not conflict in most respects with the spiritual beliefs of the Karimojong. There is much, which is common with their symbolism and moral perceptions.

Negative impact of the church

Any negative aspect of the church's impact is concerned not so much with belief but rather with social factors such as the problem of polygamy, natural family planning and with discord within the family when there may be a conflict of interests between such areas as religious practices and domestic responsibility.

- The teaching and example of the church encourages the formation of good attitudes among the people. For example, attitude towards the dead has changed and funerals are conducted with the body being treated with dignity and giving them a befitting burial.
- There is a change in the perception of marriage, from polygamy to monogamy. This still has a long

way to go but the process has already begun. Likewise, the attitude of men towards women and children is changing for the better.

- Socio-economic development and conflict transformation is being improved and this in turn is contributing to peace.
- The enforcement and foundations of public morality fosters reconciliation among families and neighboring tribes and cross-border tribes. There is a monument for people that died out of violence at Moru Matany. The people go there once a year to pray for peace and reconciliation and to remember the dead. This is one clear aspect of working for peace.
- Most people are encouraged to practice the Christian Faith and there are greater numbers of Christians than non-Christians.
- Due to the influence of the church, there is enhanced trust, friendship, group identity and dialogue among individuals and groups. This in turn has helped people to go beyond self-interest. An example of this is that every Sunday, there is a second offering collection for the poor besides some small Christian community initiatives in helping the poor in their villages.
- Christian Spirituality is encouraged with specific practices of prayer, worship and service in order to deepen communion with God in the communities, other specific aspects that emerged were as follows:
 - Attitude to sickness: in the past, there was a tendency for people to go first to the witch doctor when they were ill and only come to the hospital as a last resort. This trend seems to have reversed as superstition has lessened and the activity of the witch doctors diminished. This seems to be directly linked to evangelisation.
 - The Karimojong are a spiritual people and welcome the Christian message. The attendance at church has increased and the number of baptised people in the parish is greater than those who have not been baptised.
 - Many come forward for baptism and the other sacraments. Christian marriages in church are more common which suggests that the incidence of polygamy is lessening.
 - The understanding of honesty has changed over the years. Stealing among employed workers has reduced.
 - Violence has markedly reduced in the public sphere due to the combined efforts of the Church and the army. The roads seem to be safe to travel on.
 - However there is evidence of domestic violence between men and women.
 - Women are responding to being encouraged to take a more active part in decision making etc...and are involved at various levels such as increased uptake of education opportunities, involvement in catechesis work and women's groups.

Conclusion

This brief, initial enquiry identifies some of the areas for further exploration and may be helpful for the initiation of a more detailed dialogue on the impact of the Catholic Church within the parish of Matany. Such a study may be useful as an application for other parts of the diocese.