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RAINMAKING IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA: TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR WEALTH IN ANCIENT TIMES AND MODERN PROSPERITY

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Plateau State has documented the diversity of indigenous ritual life among its constituent ethnic nationalities, but it has not systematically analysed mountain-based rainmaking as a political-economic institution, nor situated it within a comparative framework alongside the weather-prayer traditions of Pentecostal Christianity and Islam that have largely succeeded it. This is the problem the present study addresses. Three objectives guide the research: first, to document the cosmological and ritual structure of mountain-based rainmaking among the indigenous peoples of Plateau State, north-central Nigeria; second, to analyse the socioeconomic implications of controlled rainfall and its cessation for wealth accumulation, land tenure, and community power in pre-colonial and colonial-era Plateau communities; and third, to compare traditional rainmaking with Pentecostal and Islamic weather-prayer practices in order to identify continuities and discontinuities in ritual structure, religious authority, and theology. The study adopts a qualitative, historical-descriptive design, synthesising ethnographic accounts, oral history, and anthropological and theological literature on Plateau communities. The analysis finds that rainmaking functioned simultaneously as a spiritual and an economic institution: the rain priest's authority was bound to land tenure, harvest tribute, and inter-community trade, so that rainfall, wealth, and political power were mutually reinforcing. Colonial land reform and Christian missionary opposition undermined the institutional basis of rainmaking, yet the anxieties it addressed persisted, and now find expression in Pentecostal prayer meetings and Islamic Salat al-Istisqa, both of which reproduce many of rainmaking's structural features while abandoning its territorial, covenantal theology. The paper's contribution is a documented account of Plateau rainmaking as a political-economic institution and a comparative framework for understanding how its social functions persist within contemporary religious practice.

Keywords: Rainmaking, Indigenous Religion, Mountain Ritual, Wealth, Agriculture, Pentecostalism, Islam,

Introduction

The statement "Water is life" is not merely a poetic declaration; it is a geological, agricultural, economic, and spiritual truth that has shaped the destiny of civilizations from the Nile Valley to the Jos Plateau. Anthropologists have long observed that societies whose survival depends on rainfall they cannot control tend to develop specialist ritual offices charged with petitioning the powers believed to govern it; the classic accounts of the Azande and the Dinka remain

foundational reference points for this broader comparative literature (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Lienhardt, 1961). Across the African continent more generally, such rain-petitioning offices have typically been embedded within, rather than separate from, the political order of the societies that maintained them (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Mbiti, 1969). In Plateau State, north-central Nigeria, the question of rainfall has never been merely meteorological. It has been profoundly theological, politically charged, economically decisive, and socially significant. The communities of this highland region; the Berom, Ngas, Anaguta, Afizere, Mwaghavul, Tarok, Challa, and dozens of other ethnic groups developed sophisticated ritual systems for engaging with the spiritual forces believed to control the heavens. Chief among these systems was the practice of rainmaking: the art and science of petitioning the gods of the land to release or withhold the rains.

This paper approaches rainmaking not as superstition or primitive science, but as a complex cultural institution embedded in a worldview that understood nature, divinity, community, and economy as inseparable, a position consistent with the wider anthropological literature on African weather ritual (Krauss, 2009). In this worldview, the mountain was not simply a geographical feature. It was a threshold, a place where the human world and the world of ancestors, spirits, and cosmic forces converged. When the priests and custodians of rain climbed the mountains of Plateau State to perform their rituals, they were not engaging in theatre. They were acting as intercessors, diplomats between the human community and the unseen powers that held the fate of harvests and by extension, the fate of life itself in their hands.

The implications of this practice for wealth and prosperity were both immediate and systemic. Controlled rainfall meant reliable harvests. Reliable harvests meant food surplus. Surplus meant trade. Trade meant accumulation. Accumulation meant power. The rainmaker, therefore, was not merely a spiritual functionary. He was a linchpin of the economic order, and in some cases, the political order as well. The one who could make it rain or stop the rain held a form of power that transcended the merely human.

In the centuries that followed colonization and Christianization, the old institutions of rainmaking did not disappear overnight. They retreated, adapted, went underground, or in some cases, were absorbed into new religious frameworks. Today, Plateau State is one of the most religiously diverse regions in Nigeria, home to millions of Christians (primarily Catholics, Pentecostals and mainline Protestants), a significant Muslim population, and a smaller but culturally significant community that continues to practice or honour elements of indigenous religion. The question of whether modern religion can produce the same results as the ancient rainmakers is, therefore, not merely an academic one. It is a live theological and practical question in communities where rain still determines whether families eat or go hungry.

Despite this rich body of ethnographic documentation on individual Plateau ethnic groups (Magaji, 2011; Danfulani, 1995; Jafaru, 2001; Musa, 2006), the existing literature has not produced a focused synthesis of rainmaking as a political-economic institution, nor has it placed traditional rainmaking in systematic comparison with the weather-prayer traditions of Pentecostal Christianity and Islam that have largely displaced it. This gap is the specific problem this paper addresses: without such a synthesis, the socioeconomic significance of

rainmaking risks being treated as a historical curiosity rather than as a documented institution whose social functions have measurable contemporary analogues.

This research is guided by research questions: (i) how was mountain-based rainmaking cosmologically framed and ritually enacted among Plateau communities? (ii) What socioeconomic functions did rainmaking perform in relation to wealth, land, and power? (iii) In what ways do Pentecostal and Islamic weather-prayer traditions in Plateau State continue or depart from the structural logic of traditional rainmaking?

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to document and analyse mountain-based rainmaking among the indigenous peoples of Plateau State as a spiritual and economic institution, and to situate its historical decline within a comparative account of the weather-prayer traditions that have inherited its social functions.

Literature Review

Empirical Literature on Plateau Rainmaking

A body of empirical scholarship has documented rainmaking and related ritual practice among specific Plateau ethnic groups. Magaji (2011) provides the most detailed ethnographic account of Berom rainmaking rites, describing the hereditary rain priesthood, its associated shrines, and its integration into the Nzem Berom harvest festival. Danfulani (1995) documents divination practices among the Ngas, Mupun, and Mwaghavul that intersect with rain-related ritual, while Jafaru (2001) situates rainmaking within the broader dynamics of ritual authority in Northern Nigerian communities generally. Musa (2006) contributes an account of indigenous weather knowledge across Plateau State that emphasises resistance and adaptation under colonial pressure. Krauss (2009) extends the empirical base beyond Plateau State, offering a continent-wide anthropological survey of African weather ritual against which the Plateau material can be compared. Taken together, this literature establishes the ethnographic detail of individual rainmaking traditions but stops short of a synthesis that treats rainmaking as a single institution with definable economic and political functions.

Theoretical Literature and the Emergent Framework

Two theoretical traditions inform this study. The first is the functionalist approach associated with Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), which reads ritual offices such as the rain priesthood as integrated components of a community's political structure rather than as separable religious add-ons; on this view, rainmaking cannot be understood apart from questions of land tenure, tribute, and authority. The second is the symbolic-cosmological approach exemplified by Lienhardt (1961), Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973), and Turaki (2000), which treats rain as embedded within a layered cosmology of ancestors, nature spirits, and a distant Supreme Being, so that rainfall becomes legible as a moral and covenantal transaction rather than a mere transfer of material benefit. Bourdillon and Fortes (1980) supply a complementary account of sacrifice as the ritual mechanism through which such covenantal transactions are enacted. This study draws on both traditions to construct a hybrid theoretical framework: rainmaking is treated as a symbolic-cosmological institution (explaining why rain was understood as a covenantal gift contingent on communal morality) that simultaneously performed identifiable

political-economic functions (explaining why control over rainmaking was tied to land, tribute, and power). This framework, rather than either tradition alone, structures the analysis of ritual, economy, and religious change that follows.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-descriptive design suited to a research problem that is interpretive rather than statistical: understanding how rainmaking was cosmologically framed, ritually enacted, and economically consequential. The design is comparative in its final stage, setting the reconstructed traditional institution alongside contemporary Pentecostal and Islamic weather-prayer practice.

Data for the study are drawn entirely from secondary sources: published ethnographic and anthropological monographs and journal articles on Plateau State and comparable African societies, historical and theological literature on colonial and missionary encounter in the region, and documented oral-historical accounts reported in this secondary literature. No new primary fieldwork, interviews, or survey instruments were undertaken for this study; the analysis is a synthesis and reinterpretation of existing documented material rather than an original ethnographic report. This reliance on secondary sources is a limitation of the study, and the conclusions offered here should be read as an interpretive synthesis that would benefit from confirmation through further primary fieldwork among specific Plateau communities.

Analytical Method

The material was organised thematically around the hybrid symbolic-cosmological and political-economic framework set out in the literature review: cosmology and ritual structure; the socioeconomic functions of the rain priesthood; institutional disruption under colonialism and Christian mission; and structural comparison with modern religious weather-prayer traditions. Within each theme, sources were read for descriptive detail (ritual sequence, sacred objects, offerings), for institutional detail (succession, tribute, land tenure), and for evidence of change over time (colonial-era disruption, contemporary syncretism). Where sources conflicted or offered only partial detail, this is noted in the discussion rather than resolved by conjecture.

Plateau State: Geographical and Historical Overview Physical Geography and Ecological Significance

Plateau State occupies a central and elevated position in the Nigerian landscape. Sitting atop the Jos Plateau a vast tableland rising to between 1,200 and 1,800 metres above sea level, it enjoys a climate markedly different from the sweltering plains of the Nigerian lowlands. The Jos Plateau is the watershed of multiple river systems, including the Benue, the Gongola, and several tributaries that feed into the Niger. This hydrological centrality gave the region immense ecological and economic significance long before the advent of colonial administration.

The plateau's climate is characterised by a bimodal rainfall pattern, with a major wet season running from April to October and a dry harmattan season stretching from November to March. Annual rainfall averages between 1,300 and 1,500 millimetres in the central plateau zones, making it one of the most agriculturally productive regions in the north. The relatively temperate climate such as cool evenings, rare frosts at higher elevations, and abundant mist enabled the cultivation of diverse crops including sorghum, millet, yam, groundnut, and in more recent centuries, Irish potato and other temperate vegetables.

The mountains of Plateau State including the Shere Hills, Rayfield Hills, Pankshin Hills, Wase Rock, and numerous unnamed peaks are not merely scenic. They are spiritually charged landscapes in the indigenous imagination (Magaji, 2011; Musa, 2006). Many of these elevations serve as boundary markers between communities, habitats of sacred animals, repositories of ancestral memory, and sites of ritual communication with supernatural forces. The mountain, in this cultural context, is where heaven and earth are closest.

Indigenous Peoples of Plateau State

Plateau State is home to more than forty distinct ethnic nationalities, making it one of the most ethnically diverse states in Nigeria. The major groups include the Berom (who are the most numerous and historically dominant in the central plateau), the Ngas (Angas), Afizere (Jarawa), Anaguta, Mwaghavul (Sura), Tarok, Goemai, Pyem, Challa, Rukuba, Rindre, Irigwe, and many others (Gunn, 1953; Wente-Lukas, 1985). Each of these groups developed its own language, cosmological system, social organization, and set of ritual practices yet all shared certain structural similarities in their relationship to the land, the ancestral world, and the forces of nature.

Pre-colonial Plateau communities were organized primarily around clans and lineages, with authority vested in clan heads (known variously as Gwom, Ogom, or similar terms depending on the language), rain priests, war leaders, and age-grade associations (Gunn & Conant, 1960; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940). The relationship between political authority and ritual authority was often close but not identical. In many communities, the rain priest held authority that even the political leader was bound to respect, because the prosperity of the whole community depended on his efficacy.

Historical Context: Pre-Colonial Political Economy

Before the arrival of British colonial administration at the turn of the twentieth century, Plateau communities were largely self-sufficient agricultural economies. The plateau's altitude provided natural defense against the slave-raiding expeditions of Hausa-Fulani jihadist forces that had swept across the lowland regions of northern Nigeria from the early 1800s. This relative isolation allowed indigenous cultures to develop with less external disruption than many other Nigerian communities experienced.

Trade networks like iron smelting did exist in areas like Shen and Pankshin which connected plateau communities to broader regional markets, and agricultural surplus was exchanged through market systems but the foundational unit of economic life remained the farming household, dependent on seasonal rain for its livelihood. In this context, anything that could

influence rainfall was not merely of religious interest. It was of the highest economic and political importance.

Cosmological Foundations of Rainmaking in Plateau State Indigenous Cosmology: The Structure of the Spiritual Universe

To understand rainmaking in Plateau State, one must first understand the cosmological framework within which it operated. Indigenous Plateau cosmologies, while diverse in their specifics, share a common structural logic. The universe is understood as layered and populated: there is the world of the living, the world of ancestors, the world of nature spirits, and above or beyond all of these, a Supreme Being known in Afizere as Adakunom, and by various names in other languages who is the ultimate source of all life and all natural phenomena (Mbiti, 1969; Idowu, 1973; Turaki, 2000).

Adakunom, or the equivalent Supreme Being in other indigenous traditions, is generally understood as transcendent too distant or too elevated for direct human petition in ordinary circumstances. The practical spiritual universe is managed by a hierarchy of intermediary beings: the ancestors of specific lineages, nature spirits associated with specific rivers, rocks, trees, and mountains, and totemic animals that embody the relationship between a community and its spiritual environment. Rain, in this cosmology, is not merely water falling from clouds. It is a gift or a withdrawal from these spiritual powers, contingent on the moral and ritual state of the community.

The Spiritual Significance of Mountains

Mountains occupy a uniquely important place in the cosmological systems of most Plateau communities. Elevated terrain is understood as closer to the celestial realm, and the mist and clouds that frequently crown plateau peaks are seen as evidence of this proximity to the spiritual world. Many communities have origin myths that locate the first ancestors as having descended from or emerged at specific mountain peaks. Mountains are therefore ancestral homes as well as geographical features.

The Shere Hills near Jos, for instance, have been associated with ancestral spirits in Berom tradition for generations. Similarly, Wase Rock in Wase Local Government Area of Plateau State a dramatic monolith rising sharply from the surrounding plains is regarded as a sacred site by local communities. Pankshin and Mangu areas have multiple peaks that serve as ritual sites for various groups. These are not arbitrary designations. The topography of the spirit world, as understood in indigenous Plateau cosmology, maps directly onto the physical topography of the landscape.

When a rain priest or ritual specialist climbed a mountain to perform rainmaking ceremonies, he was understood as physically entering the zone of maximum spiritual potency. The mountain was a natural altar an elevation that brought the human petitioner into the immediate presence of the ancestors and nature spirits who managed the rainfall. The altitude was not simply metaphorical proximity to the heavens. It was experienced as actual spiritual proximity, a thinning of the boundary between the seen and unseen worlds.

The Rain Deity and Its Representatives

Many Plateau communities identify a specific deity or ancestral spirit as the master or custodian of rain. Among the Berom, traditions speak of specific clan ancestors who had power over rain and whose shrines or sacred groves became the loci of rainmaking ritual (Magaji, 2011). Among the Ngas, rain is associated with specific spirit powers connected to particular hills and water sources. The Mwaghavul tradition similarly identifies ancestral spirits whose goodwill is essential for seasonal rainfall (Danfulani, 1995; Jafaru, 2001).

In most cases, this spiritual custodian of rain is not a singular universal deity but a localized ancestral presence the founding ancestor of a specific lineage, or the spirit of a particularly powerful figure from the community's history who, in death, acquired dominion over the natural forces of the territory. This understanding means that rainmaking is inherently territorial. The rain priest who can call rain for one community cannot necessarily do so for another, because he is in relationship with the specific ancestral spirits of his own territory. This has important implications for understanding the political geography of rainmaking.

Mountain-Based Rainmaking Rituals: Ethnographic Account The Office of the Rain Priest

The rainmaker known by different titles in different languages (Gwom Aret among the Berom, or similar designations elsewhere) was not a self-appointed figure. The office was hereditary in most cases, passed from father to son within a specific lineage that claimed descent from the ancestral spirit associated with rain. (Magaji, 2011; Krauss, 2009). Succession was not always automatic; the incoming rain priest had to demonstrate spiritual fitness, undergo initiation rituals, and receive the acknowledgment of the community. In some cases, the selection was confirmed through divination.

The rain priest was set apart in various ways. He was subject to a range of ritual prohibitions (taboos) that governed his behaviour, diet, sexual life, and interactions with others. These prohibitions were understood as maintaining his ritual purity and the integrity of his relationship with the ancestral powers. Violation of these taboos was believed to have consequences not just for the priest himself but for the entire community things like drought, flooding, or failed harvests could result from the priest's moral or ritual lapse.

In many communities, the rain priest also served as a custodian of community memory, an arbiter of disputes, and a moral authority. His role was understood as inherently intercessory: he stood between the community and the spiritual forces that determined its fate, and the community's welfare depended on his faithfulness to both the human and the spiritual parties in this relationship.

Ritual Preparation: Purification, Fasting, and Community Readiness

Before ascending the mountain or sacred site to perform rainmaking ceremonies, both the priest and the community underwent a period of preparation. This preparation typically involved communal purification rituals, the resolution of outstanding social conflicts (since

unresolved communal discord was believed to obstruct the flow of spiritual blessing), fasting or abstinence from specific foods or activities, and the preparation of ritual offerings.

The offerings prepared for rainmaking ceremonies varied by community but typically included specific agricultural products (grains, roots), fermented beverages (especially sorghum beer, called burukutu or pito in the region), livestock (often chickens, goats, or in more significant ceremonies, cattle), and ritual objects with specific symbolic meanings. Blood sacrifice was a central element in most rainmaking ceremonies, understood as the primary medium of communication and covenant between the human and spirit worlds (Bourdillon & Fortes, 1980; Krauss, 2009). This is similar to Prophet Elijah‟s prayer for rain on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18:41-45 after a severe three and a half year drought. The rain came immediately following the public sacrifice to the Lord and the elimination of the false prophets. Prayers for rain in Plateau communities also undergo purification process with immediate results in almost all occasions.

The timing of rainmaking ceremonies was closely governed by the agricultural calendar. In most Plateau communities, the major rainmaking ceremony occurred at the onset of the planting season typically in March or April when the community needed the rains to begin. Secondary ceremonies might be held if the rains were late, if they stopped prematurely, or if flooding threatened crops and a rain-stopping ceremony was required.

The Ascent: Mountain Ritual in Detail

The actual ascent to the mountain or sacred site was itself a ritually charged act. In many communities, the procession to the mountain was organized according to specific protocols; those who walked first, what objects were carried, what songs or chants were sung along the way. The journey from the village to the mountain was understood as a transition from ordinary human space to sacred space, and the rituals performed along the way helped to effect this transition. (Magaji, 2011; Musa, 2006).

Upon reaching the mountain summit or the designated ritual site on the mountain which might be a specific rock formation, a grove of trees, a pool or spring, or an ancestral shrine the rain priest would begin the ceremony proper. The ceremony typically unfolded in several stages: an invocation of the ancestors and nature spirits, an account of the community's need and the reasons for their petition, the presentation of offerings, the sacrifice of animals, and finally the core petition for rain.

The form of the petition itself is significant. In most accounts collected from Plateau communities, the rain priest did not simply ask for rain he reminded the ancestors of their responsibilities, cited precedent (previous occasions on which rain had been given), appealed to the covenant relationship between the lineage and the spirit powers, and sometimes issued veiled threats if rain was not given, the people would have no food, and a hungry people could not honour the ancestors with the proper rituals and offerings. This negotiating posture reflects a worldview in which the relationship between the human and spirit worlds is not one of passive supplication but of dynamic covenant, with obligations on both sides (Lienhardt, 1961; Mbiti, 1969).

Sacred Objects and Ritual Technology

Rainmaking ceremonies across Plateau State communities involved a range of sacred objects whose symbolic and ritual significance was carefully guarded. These included ancestral staffs or scepters that encoded the rain-making lineage's authority, sacred stones (often meteorites or unusually shaped rocks believed to have fallen from the sky or to contain concentrated spiritual power), clay or iron pots used to contain water or offerings, specific feathers or hides from animals associated with rain or water, and in some cases, musical instruments particularly drums whose specific rhythms were believed to communicate with spiritual forces.

The water itself was central. In many ceremonies, water from a specific sacred source a particular spring, stream, or pool on or near the mountain was used as part of the ritual. This water was understood as already spiritually charged, as a manifestation of the rain deity's presence in the physical world. To use it in ceremony was to invoke and amplify that presence. In some traditions, the rain priest would sprinkle this water in the cardinal directions as part of the petitioning ceremony, symbolically extending the request for rainfall across the entire territory.

Rain Stopping Ceremonies

Just as important as the ability to call rain was the ability to stop it. Excessive rainfall could be as devastating as drought in the Plateau context flooding, soil erosion, destruction of crops already planted, and landslides were all possible consequences of uncontrolled precipitation. Communities therefore also maintained ritual resources for stopping rain when necessary.

Rain-stopping ceremonies were generally understood as more dangerous and more difficult than rainmaking ceremonies. The logic was that stopping rain required overriding a natural process already in motion, whereas calling rain was petitioning for a gift. The priest who stopped rain needed to be particularly powerful and particularly pure, and the community's need had to be urgent and clearly articulated. In some communities, specific sacred objects particular stones, pots, or arrangements of ritual items were understood as 'rain-stoppers' and were brought out only in extreme circumstances.

The existence of rain-stopping practices is particularly significant for understanding the political economy of rainmaking. A community whose priest could reliably stop rain had a form of power over neighboring communities who might be at the mercy of floods. Conversely, there are traditions of rain priests being accused of using their powers aggressively against rival communities a form of weather warfare that complemented conventional military conflict in the pre-colonial political landscape. (Krauss, 2009; Jafaru, 2001).

Socioeconomic Implications: Rainmaking, Wealth, and Power The Agricultural Foundation of Plateau Wealth

To understand the economic significance of rainmaking, one must appreciate how completely the pre-colonial Plateau economy was organized around agricultural production. In an economy without mechanized irrigation, chemical fertilizers, or modern seed varieties, the

single most determinative variable in agricultural output was rainfall its timing, its quantity, and its distribution. A well-timed early rain meant that planting could begin on schedule, giving crops the maximum growing season. A late or insufficient rain meant reduced yields. Drought meant famine.

In this context, the rainmaker held a position of direct economic power. His ability or perceived ability to influence the timing and quantity of rainfall had a direct and measurable impact on communal food security and, by extension, on the capacity for wealth accumulation. Communities that consistently produced good harvests could build up grain stores, support larger populations, engage in more extensive trade, and develop more complex social institutions. Communities that suffered repeated drought or crop failure were forced into dependency, migration, or conflict.

The Rainmaker as Economic Actor

The rainmaker's economic significance was also direct and personal. In most Plateau communities, the rain priest received a portion of the community's harvest as tribute a kind of tithe that acknowledged the role his spiritual intercessions had played in producing that harvest. In good years, these tributes could be substantial. In some traditions, the rain priest also received gifts from neighboring communities who sought his services, effectively turning rainmaking into a form of regional spiritual commerce (Magaji, 2011; Schatzberg, 2001).

This created a complex relationship between the rain priest's spiritual authority and his material wealth. He was expected to be generous to host communal feasts, to support the poor, to use his resources for communal benefit but he was also permitted and expected to accumulate enough wealth to maintain the trappings of his office, including the ritual objects, the livestock for sacrifice, and the household size appropriate to a community elder of his status.

In some communities, control over rainmaking was explicitly linked to control over land. The lineage that held the rain-making power was also, in many cases, the lineage that held foundational land rights in the community the 'owners of the land' in the most literal spiritual sense. Land ownership, in indigenous Plateau cosmologies, was not primarily a legal or economic category but a spiritual one: the family that had made the original covenant with the land's spirits was its custodian in perpetuity. Rainmaking was both a consequence and an expression of this spiritual land tenure.

Rainfall and Community Wealth Cycles

The relationship between rainmaking and communal wealth operated in cyclical patterns that could reinforce or undermine social hierarchies over time. When a rain priest's ceremonies were effective and the community enjoyed good harvests, his prestige and wealth grew, his lineage's political position was strengthened, and the community could invest in longer-term wealth-building activities like livestock accumulation, iron production, and inter-community trade. Success bred success in a virtuous cycle.

Conversely, prolonged drought or erratic rainfall could undermine a rain priest's authority with devastating speed. If his ceremonies failed to produce results, questions arose about his

spiritual fitness, his ritual purity, or the validity of his lineage's claim to the rain-making office. In some cases, this led to the installation of a rival candidate; in others, it opened the community to the influence of itinerant ritual specialists who claimed superior powers. The political instability that could follow from agricultural crisis thus had its roots in the spiritual-ritual order as much as in purely material conditions.

Inter-Community Trade and the Economics of Rain

Rainfall patterns in Plateau State were not uniform. Some areas received more reliable or more abundant rain than others, depending on elevation, aspect, and proximity to orographic features. This natural variation created opportunities for inter-community trade in agricultural products and, indirectly, a kind of political economy around rain expertise. Communities in rain-favoured areas accumulated more food surplus and therefore more trade goods. Communities that suffered more variable rainfall were more likely to seek outside spiritual assistance, creating a demand for the services of particularly powerful rain priests.

There are oral historical accounts of rain priests from particularly prestigious lineages being invited to perform ceremonies in distant communities a practice that constituted a form of spiritual diplomacy as well as economic exchange (Musa, 2006; Jafaru, 2001). The host community would provide substantial gifts and hospitality, and the visiting rain priest's influence would extend beyond his home territory. These networks of spiritual-economic exchange were part of the broader web of relationships that knit together the diverse communities of the Plateau.

Disruption and Decline: Colonialism, Christianity, and the Transformation of Rainmaking

The Colonial Encounter

The arrival of British colonial administration on the Jos Plateau in the early twentieth century brought profound disruptions to the indigenous political and spiritual order. The British pacification campaigns that subdued the plateau communities between 1900 and 1910 systematically dismantled the authority structures both political and ritual that had organized social life for generations. Clan heads that cooperated with the colonial administration were maintained in attenuated positions of authority; those who resisted were removed, imprisoned, or killed. The ritual specialists, including rain priests, were not initially targeted directly, but the disruption of the political structures that supported and validated their authority had inevitable consequences.

The imposition of taxation and the creation of a cash economy also transformed the relationship between the community and the land. Land that had previously been held in sacred trust by founding lineages was reclassified as 'Crown Land' under the 1910 Land and Native Rights Proclamation, which vested ownership of all land in the Governor-General (Turaki, 1993). This legal transformation struck at the heart of the spiritual land tenure system that undergirded the rain priest's authority. If the land no longer spiritually belonged to the founding lineage, the basis of their covenant with the land's spirits and their exclusive claim to mediate with those spirits was called into question.

Christian Missionary Activity

Missionary activity on the Jos Plateau intensified from the 1900s onward. The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), the Church of the Brethren Mission (Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria, EYN), and later the Sudan United Mission (SUM) established stations across the Plateau and undertook systematic evangelization of the indigenous communities. (Kastfelt, 1994; Walls, 1996). By the mid-twentieth century, a large majority of the plateau population had converted to Christianity.

Christian missionaries were explicit in their opposition to indigenous religious practices, including rainmaking. These practices were categorized as 'paganism', 'animism', or 'devil worship', and converts were expected to renounce them entirely (Chah, 2005; Hillman, 1993). The sacred objects associated with rainmaking such as shrines, altars, ritual pots, and ancestral staffs were often destroyed in dramatic public acts of renunciation by new converts, and the authority of the rain priest was transferred, at least in the religious sphere, to the new pastor or evangelist.

This did not mean that rainmaking disappeared immediately or entirely. In many communities, elements of rainmaking practice persisted in modified or clandestine forms (Nwankwo, 2013). Some rain priests converted to Christianity outwardly while maintaining their ritual roles privately. Others simply aged out of their roles without successors, as the younger generation found the Christian community's social and economic networks more advantageous than the traditional path. Still others continued to practice openly, maintaining the loyalty of community members who had not converted or who retained dual religious identities.

Persistence and Syncretism

The persistence of rainmaking practices even after widespread Christianization reflects the depth of the need they addressed. In the absence of modern irrigation infrastructure, the farmers of Plateau State remained as dependent on seasonal rainfall as their ancestors had been, and the anxiety that had always surrounded planting season did not diminish simply because one had changed religious affiliation. Many communities developed syncretic practices in which Christian prayer for rain was offered at the same time as, or in addition to, traditional ceremonies a hedge against spiritual uncertainty that persists in some communities to this day (Chah, 2005; Nwankwo, 2013).

The theologian and Plateau scholar Yusufu Turaki has documented the way in which indigenous religious structures were absorbed into Christian institutional frameworks rather than simply disappearing (Turaki, 2000). The communal, intercessory, and sacrificial elements of rainmaking found new expression in Christian prayer gatherings, harvest thanksgiving services, and revival meetings in which the community collectively petitioned God for natural blessing. The form changed; the underlying anxiety and the communal response to it did not.

Comparative Analysis: Traditional Rainmaking and Modern Religious Traditions The Question of Efficacy

Can modern religious traditions specifically Pentecostal Christianity and Islam, the two largest religious communities in Plateau State produce the same results as traditional rainmaking? This question is at once empirical, theological, and philosophical, and it requires careful handling. The empirical question is whether documented instances of rainfall following modern religious prayer are comparable in frequency, reliability, or mechanism to the outcomes associated with traditional rainmaking. The theological question is whether the divine or supernatural agency invoked in modern prayer operates on the same principles as the ancestral and spirit powers petitioned in traditional ceremonies. The philosophical question is whether the categories of 'same results' can even be meaningfully applied across such different cosmological frameworks.

We should note at the outset that both traditional rainmaking and modern religious prayer operate largely outside the domain of controlled empirical verification. The scientific consensus is that rainfall is determined by atmospheric physics, temperature, humidity, air pressure, and oceanic circulation patterns and that human ritual activity does not alter these physical variables. However, this consensus does not resolve the theological and experiential dimensions of the question, which are of primary importance to the communities involved.

Pentecostal Christianity and Weather Prayer

Pentecostal Christianity, which has experienced explosive growth in Plateau State since the 1970s and particularly since the 1990s, maintains a robust theology of divine intervention in natural phenomena (Marshall, 2009). The Pentecostal understanding of prayer is explicitly petition-oriented and expects concrete, material answers to spiritual intercession. Major Pentecostal organizations operating on the Jos Plateau including the Assemblies of God, the Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel), and numerous independent charismatic congregations regularly include prayer for rain, good harvests, and natural blessing in their worship programmes.

The structural similarities between Pentecostal prayer meetings and traditional rainmaking ceremonies are striking, even as the theological content differs profoundly Marshall, 2009; Krauss, 2009). Both involve communal gathering in a designated sacred space, invocation of a supernatural power believed to control natural phenomena, verbal petition accompanied by physical gestures and emotional intensity, an expectation of response, and communal interpretation of subsequent weather events as evidence of divine favour or disfavour. The mountain, for traditional practitioners, has an interesting parallel in Pentecostal culture: many major Pentecostal prayer sessions, particularly during revival periods, are deliberately held on elevated ground or in open-air settings understood as particularly conducive to divine encounter.

Documented accounts of specific weather responses to Pentecostal prayer exist in the popular religious literature of the plateau region, though these are naturally subject to the same interpretive questions as traditional accounts. Stories circulate in Pentecostal communities of

prayer meetings that were followed by rain after extended drought, or of prayer that was credited with stopping floods. These accounts function as testimony evidence of the living God's active engagement with the community's needs in much the same way that accounts of successful traditional rainmaking functioned as validation of the rain priest's spiritual authority.

Islam and *Salat al-Istisqa*: The Prayer for Rain

Islam has a formal liturgical tradition of prayer for rain known as *Salat al-Istisqa,* which is recognized in classical Islamic jurisprudence and is practiced by Muslim communities worldwide (Yusuf, 2009). This prayer, prescribed in hadith literature as a practice of the Prophet Muhammad, involves a communal gathering in an open space (ideally outside the mosque), a specific form of prayer with two units (*rak'at*), a sermon in which the community acknowledges its dependence on God for rain, and an act of communal repentance understood as removing spiritual obstacles to divine provision.

Among the Muslim communities of Plateau State concentrated particularly in Shendam, Wase, Kanam, and parts of Jos *Salat al-Istisqa* is known and occasionally practiced, particularly during severe dry seasons (Danfulani, 2005; Yusuf, 2009). Islamic theology is explicit that rain is a gift from Allah, controlled entirely by His sovereign will, and that prayer is the appropriate human response to need. The Quranic verse that declares 'We send down rain from the sky in due measure, and We cause it to soak into the earth' (Surah 23:18) is frequently cited in discussions of rainfall and divine provision.

The Muslim tradition's approach to weather prayer shares important structural features with traditional rainmaking. The communal gathering, the public acknowledgment of need and dependence, the formal liturgical structure, the expectation of divine response, and the communal interpretation of subsequent weather as evidence of God's will; all of these elements have clear parallels in traditional ceremony. What differs is the theological framework: where traditional rainmaking invokes specific ancestral spirits bound to a particular territory, Islamic prayer addresses the universal, transcendent God of all creation, and the petition is framed in terms of submission and acknowledgment of absolute divine sovereignty rather than covenant negotiation.

Continuities and Discontinuities

A careful comparison of traditional rainmaking and modern religious weather prayer reveals both significant continuities and significant discontinuities. On the side of continuity: both operate on the premise that supernatural power controls natural phenomena; both employ community-wide gathering as the appropriate ritual response to agricultural crisis; both use specific linguistic and physical forms understood as the proper mode of communication with the supernatural; both involve an expectation of concrete material response; and both serve social functions beyond their ostensible weather-related purposes they build community solidarity, distribute anxiety, provide a shared narrative for understanding crisis, and reinforce the authority of the ritual specialists who lead them.

On the side of discontinuity: the nature of the supernatural agent petitioned is fundamentally different the God of Christianity and Islam is universal, transcendent, and morally

unconstrained, while the ancestral spirits of traditional rainmaking are local, immanent, and bound by covenant obligations; the authority of the modern religious leader is derived from institutional ordination or charismatic recognition rather than hereditary lineage; the ritual objects and sacred sites of traditional practice are absent or replaced by spaces understood as sacred by virtue of gathered community rather than intrinsic spiritual charge; and the explicit theological content what is said and why differs profoundly across the traditions.

Perhaps most significantly, the modern religious traditions lack the explicit territorial dimension of traditional rainmaking. The rain priest's power was tied to a specific land and its spirits; he was, in a quite literal sense, the human representative of a covenant between a lineage and a place. Modern religious leaders do not claim this kind of territorial spiritual authority. Their prayer is addressed to a God who is equally Lord of all places, and the implicit claim is that this universality makes their intercession potentially more powerful, not less but it also means that the specific, intimate relationship between a community and its particular ancestral landscape is necessarily dissolved.

Related Cultural Practices and Broader Implications Water Governance and Sacred Water Sources

Rainmaking rituals were part of a broader system of water governance in Plateau communities that extended to the management of rivers, springs, pools, and watercourses. Many of these water sources were understood as inhabited by spirit entities (often serpentine water spirits, known by various names across the plateau region) whose goodwill was essential for the continuity of the water supply. Regular propitiatory rituals were performed at these sites, typically by designated lineage representatives, to maintain the relationship between the community and the spirit of the water.

This sacred water governance had practical ecological functions. Taboos against fishing, washing, or cultivating near certain water sources during certain seasons effectively created protected zones that maintained water quality and aquatic biodiversity (van Beek & Banga, 1992). The spiritual authority that underpinned these taboos was arguably more effective as a conservation mechanism than any legal regulation, because it was backed by fear of supernatural consequence rather than merely human enforcement. The decline of this traditional water governance has contributed, some scholars argue, to the degradation of water sources in parts of Plateau State in the post-colonial era.

Seasonal Festivals and Agricultural Ritual Cycles

Rainmaking was embedded in a broader cycle of agricultural rituals that governed the rhythm of the year in Plateau communities. These cycles included planting ceremonies (petitioning for successful germination), first-fruits rituals (acknowledging the spiritual source of the harvest before consumption), harvest festivals (communal celebration and redistribution of agricultural surplus), and dry-season rituals (maintaining the community's spiritual vitality during the agriculturally fallow period).

Among the Berom, the most important of these festivals was the Nzem Berom a harvest festival that remains practiced (in modified form) to the present day. (Magaji, 2011). Originally a comprehensive religious and social ceremony involving sacrifice, communal feasting, dancing, and the reaffirmation of social bonds, it has been adapted in the Christianised context into a form that retains the communal and agricultural thanksgiving dimensions while replacing the sacrificial and ancestral invocation elements with Christian prayer and worship. This adaptation is a striking example of the way in which the deep structure of indigenous ritual practice persists even as its theological content is transformed.

Drought, Conflict, and Displacement

The connection between rainfall failure and social conflict in Plateau State is not merely historical. The Jos crisis of 2001-2010 and the ongoing farmer-herder conflicts that have intensified in the post-2010 period have deep roots in competition over water and arable land resources whose distribution is directly linked to rainfall patterns. (Ambe-Uva, 2008; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005) As climate change alters historical precipitation patterns in the region, the communities most vulnerable to rainfall variability are also those most likely to experience conflict over scarce resources.

In this context, the ancient institution of rainmaking takes on a new relevance. The traditional rain priest served not only a spiritual function but a conflict-prevention function: by maintaining the community's ritual relationship with the forces believed to control rain, he provided a mechanism for addressing agricultural anxiety that was communal, participatory, and non-violent. The decline of this institution, without adequate replacement, has left communities with fewer cultural resources for collectively managing the anxieties associated with rainfall uncertainty.

The Rainmaker in Oral Literature and Artistic Tradition

The cultural significance of rainmaking is also preserved in the oral literary traditions of Plateau communities in proverbs, songs, myths, and folktales that encode traditional wisdom about the relationship between human communities, spiritual powers, and the natural world. Among the Berom, there are proverbs that link communal moral conduct to agricultural outcome, reflecting the traditional understanding that the community's behaviour determines whether the ancestors will look favourably on their petitions for rain.

Musical traditions associated with rainmaking ceremonies specific drum rhythms, call-and-response songs, and chants have partially survived in the musical heritage of the plateau communities, even as the ritual contexts in which they originally functioned have been transformed. Ethnomusicologists studying the music of the Jos Plateau have noted the persistence of rhythmic patterns and melodic forms whose original function was ritual communication with spiritual forces, now recontextualised as folk music, entertainment, or cultural heritage performance.

Synthesis: Memory, Modernity, and the Persistence of the Sacred What Rainmaking Reveals About Plateau Identity

The institution of rainmaking, examined in its full complexity, reveals several foundational dimensions of indigenous Plateau identity. First, it reveals a deeply relational cosmology a world understood not as a collection of inert objects governed by impersonal physical laws, but as a community of beings (human, ancestral, spirit, and divine) in active, ongoing relationship, with mutual obligations and shared stakes in the flourishing of the whole (Mbiti, 1969; Idowu, 1962; Turaki, 2000). This relational cosmology is not simply 'primitive' pre-scientific thinking; it encodes genuine wisdom about the interdependence of communities and their environments that resonates with contemporary ecological thinking.

Second, it reveals a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between spiritual fidelity and material flourishing. The traditional view was not that rain was purely a divine gift arbitrarily bestowed; it was that rain was a consequence of the community's maintenance of right relationships with its ancestors, with its land, and with its own internal moral order. This understanding is strikingly consonant with biblical and Quranic traditions that link obedience to covenant obligations with agricultural blessing (see Deuteronomy 11:13-17 and Surah 71:10-12), suggesting that the deep structure of Plateau indigenous religion and the Abrahamic traditions have more common ground than the historical opposition between missionaries and traditional practitioners would suggest.

The Rainmaker as Prophet, Priest, and King

The three-fold office of the rain priest spiritual intercessor (priest), communal moral authority (prophet), and territorial custodian (king) has striking parallels with the typological frameworks of both Christian and Islamic political theology. The rain priest was, in a real sense, the embodiment of the community's covenant with the divine, the guarantor of its material prosperity, and the representative of its spiritual identity. This three-fold role does not disappear when communities convert to new religions; it gets redistributed, with pastoral, prophetic, and kingly functions being taken up by new institutional leaders who may or may not be aware of the ancient roles they are, in effect, filling.

Authority vested in clan heads (known variously as Gwom, Ogom, or similar terms depending competition between religious leaders Christian and Muslim, mainline and Pentecostal for community loyalty and authority is partly a competition to fill the vacuum left by the decline of traditional authority structures. (Ellis & Ter Haar, 2004; Adekunle, 2007). Understanding this competition in historical and anthropological terms, rather than purely in theological or political terms, may help to illuminate pathways toward more constructive inter-religious dialogue and more equitable political arrangements.

Climate Change and the Return of the Rain Question

Climate change is making the rain question as urgent as it has ever been. The Jos Plateau, like much of the West African savanna zone, is experiencing more variable and less predictable rainfall than historical norms, with implications for agricultural productivity, water availability,

and food security. In this context, both traditional and modern religious resources for addressing rainfall anxiety are being mobilized.

There is a small but growing movement among cultural heritage advocates and some traditional rulers in Plateau State to rehabilitate and document traditional ecological knowledge including the knowledge embedded in rainmaking rituals as part of a broader response to climate change (Zaria, 2014). This is not necessarily a call for the resumption of traditional religion; rather, it is a recognition that the detailed empirical observations about weather patterns, ecological indicators, and land management practices that were encoded in traditional ritual systems may contain practical wisdom that modern communities can draw on as they adapt to changing climate conditions.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the traditional and cultural practices of rainmaking among the indigenous peoples of Plateau State, Nigeria, tracing their cosmological roots, their ritual forms, their socioeconomic implications, their disruption under colonial and missionary influence, and their complex relationship with the modern religious traditions that have largely replaced them. Several key conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, traditional rainmaking was not superstition but a sophisticated cultural institution that integrated cosmological belief, practical knowledge, social organization, and economic necessity into a coherent system for managing the community's relationship with the natural world. The mountain-based rituals at the heart of this system were not merely ceremonial; they were functional expressions of a worldview in which spiritual fidelity and material flourishing were inseparable.

Second, the socioeconomic implications of rainmaking in pre-colonial Plateau communities were profound and multidimensional. The rain priest was not only a spiritual specialist but an economic actor, a political authority, and a custodian of communal memory. His effective management of the rain question had direct consequences for agricultural productivity, wealth accumulation, inter-community trade, and social stability.

Third, the decline of traditional rainmaking under colonial and missionary pressure did not resolve the underlying need that the institution addressed. The anxiety around rainfall, the desire for communal strategies to address it, and the connection between spiritual fidelity and material blessing persist in the religious culture of contemporary Plateau communities, expressed now through Pentecostal prayer meetings, Islamic *Istisqa* ceremonies, and syncretic practices that blend Christian and traditional elements.

Fourth, the comparative analysis of traditional rainmaking and modern religious weather prayer reveals significant structural continuities alongside profound theological discontinuities. Both traditions mobilize community, invoke supernatural agency, employ specific ritual forms, and expect concrete material responses. What differs is the nature of the supernatural agent, the locus of ritual authority, and the territorial specificity of the spiritual relationship.

Finally, the ancient institution of rainmaking has contemporary relevance that goes beyond historical curiosity. In a region facing the dual challenges of climate change and inter-religious conflict, the wisdom encoded in traditional rain practices about communal responsibility, ecological stewardship, the social management of anxiety, and the deep connection between community morality and environmental health offers resources for reflection that deserve respectful engagement rather than dismissal.

Plateau State stands at the intersection of multiple spiritual, cultural, and ecological histories. Understanding rainmaking in its full complexity is not only an act of cultural respect for the ancestors who developed these practices. It is an investment in the wisdom resources that this generation and future generations will need as they navigate an uncertain climate and a complex religious landscape. The rain still falls. The question of how to receive it and how to deserve it remains as vital as ever.

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