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What is African Traditional Religion?

by

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RELIGION is a fundamental, perhaps the most important, influence in the life of most Africans; yet its essential principles are too often unknown to foreigners who thus make themselves constantly liable to misunderstand the African worldview and beliefs. Religion enters into every aspect of the life of the Africans and it cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in-hand with the study of the people who practise the religion.

When we speak of African Traditional Religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians.

We need to explain the word 'traditional'. This word means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a "fossil" religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women.

Through modern changes, the traditional religion cannot remain intact but it is by no means extinct. The declared adherents of the indigenous religion are very conservative, resisting the influence of modernism heralded by the colonial era, including the introduction of Islam, Christianity, Western education and improved medical facilities. They cherish their tradition; they worship with sincerity because their worship is quite meaningful to them; they hold tenaciously to their covenant that binds them together.

We speak of religion in the singular. This is deliberate. We are not unconscious of the fact that Africa is a large continent with multitudes of nations who have complex cultures, innumerable languages and myriads of dialects. But in spite of all these differences, there are

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many basic similarities in the religious systems—everywhere there is the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities and/or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every locality may and does have its own local deities, its own festivals, its own name or names for the Supreme Being, but in essence the pattern is the same. There is that noticeable "Africanness" in the whole pattern. Here we disagree with John Mbiti who chooses to speak of the religion in the plural "because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system …"[1]

Peculiarities of the Religion

This is a religion that is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions.

It has no founders or reformers like Gautama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ, or Muhammad. It is not the religion of one hero.

It has no missionaries, or even the desire to propagate the religion, or to proselytise. However, the adherents are loyal worshippers and, probably because of this, Africans who have their roots in the indigenous religion, find it difficult to sever connection with it.

Foreign Theorists and Investigators

Before we had foreign investigators to give the world an idea of what the religious beliefs of the Africans looked like, there were theorists who have never been in Africa but who regarded it as the "Dark Continent" where people had no idea of God and where the Devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held sway.[2] These theorists had fantastic tales to tell about Africa. And one such tale was recorded in a Berlin journal which Leo Frobenius read before he ever visited Africa to see things for himself. Among other things it said:

> Before the introduction of genuine faith and higher standards of culture by the Arabs, the natives had neither political organization nor strictly speaking any religion ....Therefore, in examining the pre-Muhammadan conditions of the negro races, to confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and often cannibal customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols and their squalid homes[3]

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[1] J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heineman, 1969, p.1.

[2] E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, S.C.M., 1973, p.87.

[3] Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, Vol. 1, Hutchison, 1913, p.xll.

And similar to this was the dialogue that took place between Edwin Smith, who had gone out as a missionary to Africa, and Emil Ludwig, an eminent biographer. When Ludwig got to know that Edwin Smith was in Africa as a missionary he was surprised; and in his surprise he asked, "How can the untutored Africans comprehend God ? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing." [4]

These two quotations show the ignorance, prejudice and pride of these theorists. They did not know, and they never confessed their ignorance about, Africa and the Africans. Hence Professor Idowu aptly describes this period as the "period of ignorance and false certainty" in the study of African Traditional Religion.[5]

But, as a contrast to these theorists, we have genuine seekers after truth who showed their doubts as to whether there could be any people anywhere in the world who were totally devoid of culture and religion, especially with particular reference to the knowledge of the living God. Prominent among such people were Andrew Lang, Archbishop N. Soderblom,[6] and Father Schmidt of Vienna.[7]

Father Schmidt, for example, maintains:

> …the belief in, and worship of, one supreme deity is universal among all really primitive peoples—the high God is found among them all, not indeed everywhere in the same form or with the same vigour, but still everywhere prominently enough to make his dominant position indubitable. He is by no means a late development or traceable to Christian missionary influences.

Father Schmidt had earlier been working among the Pigmies of the Congo in Central Africa. Such revelations and declarations succeeded in changing the attitude of the Western world concerning the religious beliefs of the so-called pre-literate peoples of the world. At least, they raised doubts in the minds of those who might earlier have accepted the statements of the stay-at-home investigators and curio collectors. Thus, while there were some Western scholars attempting to write off Africa as a spiritual desert, "there were, undoubtedly, a few who had the uneasy feeling that the story of a spiritual vacuum for a whole continent of peoples could not be entirely true."[8]

While some scholars admitted that the whole of Africa could not be a spiritual vacuum, they raised doubt as to whether the God that the Africans believed in was the "real God" or their own

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[4] E. W. Smith, (ed.), *African Ideas of God*, Edinburgh, 1966, p.1.

[5] See Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p.88.

[6] See John Oman, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, C.U.P., 1931, p.485.

[7] See Evans Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 1965, pp.103ff.

[8] Idowu, *op. cit*., p.92.

God. They started coining expressions like "a high god", or "a Supreme God". A. C. Bouquet, for example, seemed to be expressing the Western mind when he said, "Such a High God hardly differs from the Supreme Being of the 18th century Deists and it is absurd to equate him with the Deity of the Lord's Prayer".[9]

Here we see that Bouquet is propounding a theory of many Supreme Beings in order to place the African God at a lower level than the Deity that he (Bouquet) met in Jesus Christ. This is an intellectual attitude complete with racial pride and prejudice.

But, thank God, there came on the scene a number of investigators who were interested in finding out the truth about religion in Africa. Even here, we should remark that not all of them took the trouble to make thorough investigations—some of them did their research part-time, e.g. the Colonial Civil Servants, the missionaries, the explorers and so on. Others were anthropologists and sociologists who examined religion just by the way. And yet others were theologians and trained, researchers. Several of them did their investigations as best as they could among the peoples whose languages most of them did not understand. Even when interpreters were used, one could not be sure that the interpretation would be accurate. Among the missionaries could be mentioned T. B. Freeman, T. J. Bowen, R. H. Stone[10] and N. Baudin,[11] and of the explorers, R. F. Burton[12] and T. J. Hutchinson.[13]

The noticeable fault among the missionaries was that they were particularly subjective, and they could not see anything good in African Traditional Religion. The impression they had of it was that it was not worth knowing at all and they expected that the religion would soon perish. But they were proved wrong.

The anthropologists were much less inhibited by the dogmas of Christianity than the missionaries. By and large they had a much better perception of African Traditional Religion and they saw the relevance of the system of beliefs for African traditional society. The most prominent were R. S. Rattray,[14] P. A. Talbot,[15] A. B. Ellis,[16] and S. S. Farrow.[17] The most successful of them all, perhaps, was R. S. Rattray whose extensive study of the Ashanti in

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[9] C. Bouquet, *Man and Deity*, Heffer, Cambridge, 1933, p.106.

[10] R. H. Stone, *In Africa's Forest and Jungle*, New York, 1899.

[11] Noel Baudin, *Fetishism and Fetish Worshippers*, New York, 1885.

[12] R. F. Burton, *Abeokuta and the Cameroons Nits*, Vol. London, 1863.

[13] T. J. Hutchson, *Impressions of Western Africà*, 1858.

[14] R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, O.U.P., 1927.

[15] P. A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, O.U.P., 1926.

[16] A. B. Ells, *The Ewe/Yoruba Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, Chapman, 1894.

[17] S. S. Farrow, *Faith, Fancies and Fetish*, London, S.P.C.K., 1926.

present Ghana was based on informed knowledge of their language and the willingness to learn from the people by actually participating in some festivals. One might also give credit to Farrow and Frobenius who did thorough research among the Yoruba of South West Nigeria.

Leo Frobenius refutes the statement made in the journal that he read in Berlin in 1891 (cited above) and said:

> I have gone to the Atlantic again and again ....I traversed the regions south of the Sahara, that barrier to the outside world…. But I have failed to find it governed by the insensible fetish. I failed to find power expressed in degenerate bestiality alone….I discovered the souls of these peoples, and found that they were more than humanity's burnt-out husks…[18]

In addition to these eminent men who have attempted a systematic study of African religion should be mentioned the most recent ones like S. F. Nagel who did pioneering work on the Nupe Religion[19] and E. G. Parrinder who has produced several works on African Traditional Religion.[20]

Whatever weaknesses and faults may be noticeable in the works of these foreign investigators and writers, Africans have to give credit to them for their ability to work under hard conditions and to express their thoughts in writings which the present generation of Africans can read, examine and improve upon. In actual fact, some of these early investigators were more careful than some modern ones who appear to know too much theoretical off-the-spot anthropology and sociology, and who just pick from the researches of other people or rush to Africa during the summer flight, interview one or two people and then rush back to produce volumes.

Misleading Terms

While we commend the effort of the foreign investigators for committing to writing their investigations about African Traditional Religion, we need to point out that a great number of them used misleading term in describing the people's beliefs. Among such terms can be mentioned; primitive, savage, fetishism, *juju*, heathenism, paganism, animism, idolatry, and polytheism.

We need to examine some of these words and bring out their connotations.

(i) *Primitive*: *The New Webster Encylopedic Dictionary* defines *primitive* as 'pertaining to the beginning or origin; original; first; old fashioned; characterized by the simplicity of old times.'

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[18] L. Frobenius, op. cit., p.xiv.

[19] S. F. Nadel, The Nupe Religion, London, 1954.

[20] E. G. Parrinder, African Traditional Religion, London, 1954.

It should be obvious from the dictionary meaning that this word cannot be appropriate in describing the religion of Africa or those who practise that religion. In what sense can we describe the people as old fashioned or describe their religion as simple?

The idea behind the use of such an expression is engendered by racial pride. The Western scholar making the investigation wanted to distinguish between his society (which is regarded as civilized) and the other society which is not civilized but old-fashioned-just because such a society does not have or adopt the same norm as that of the investigator. Anthropologists and sociologists like to justify their use of the word on the ground that the culture is adjudged to be that which is original in the history of the human race. African Traditional Religion has been evolving; there is in it the element of continuity as well as discontinuity. Since it is a religion practised by living persons today, changes are to be expected. Thus, strictly speaking, religion in its pristine form is no longer in existence. Every aspect of it cannot be described as original.

Whatever happens, the use of the word *primitive by* Western scholars is derogatory and, therefore, obnoxious.

(ii) *Savage*: The dictionary meaning is: 'pertaining to the forest or wilderness; wild; uncultured; untamed violent; brutal; uncivilized; untaught; rude; barbarous; inhuman.' In one word, *savagery* is the opposite of civilization.

Our remarks are the same as we indicated under *primitive.* We should also add that there is an element of savagery in every one of us and it should not be made the exclusive trait of a particular people.

(iii) *Fetishism*: Earlier in this paper, we came across Frobenius who claimed to have read a Berlin journal where it was stated that Africa was a place dominated by crude fetishism. What does fetish mean? Linguists claim that the word is of Portuguese origin. The early Portuguese who came to Africa saw that the Africans used to wear charms and amulets and so they gave the name *feitico* to such things. This is the same word as the French *fetiche.* The dictionary meaning of *fetish* is any 'object, animate or inanimate, natural or artificial, regarded by some uncivilized races with a feeling of awe, as having mysterious power residing in it or as being the representative or habitation of a deity'; hence *fetishism* is the worship of, or emotional attachment to, inanimate objects.

But Rattray corrected this wrong notion of the early investigators when he said:

> Fetishes may form part of an emblem of god, but fetish and god are in themselves distinct, and are so regarded by the Ashanti; the main power, or the most important spirit in a god comes directly or indirectly from Nyame, the Supreme God, whereas the power or spirit in a fetish comes from plants or trees, and sometimes directly or indirectly from fairies, forest monsters,

witches, or from some sort of unholy contact with death; a god is the god of the many, the family the clan, or the nation. A fetish is generally personal to its owner.[21]

We see, then, that it would be quite wrong to describe the religion of Africa as fetishism. There may be an element of this in the day-to-day life of the Africans, but it is incorrect to describe it all as fetishism.

Many writers used the word indiscriminately. Prayers said during worship by Africans have been described as fetish prayers; the functionaries of a cult have been described as fetish priests; herbs prepared by African priests have been labelled fetish herbs, and not medical preparations, however efficacious such herbs may be; and taking an oath has been described as undergoing fetish. This is ludicrous. Parrinder has remarked that the word *fetish* is a most ambiguous word, and the time has come for all serious writers and speakers to abandon it completely and finally.[22]

(iv) *Juju*: The word *juju* is French in origin and it means a little doll or toy. Its application to African deities has been perpetuated by English writers. For example, P. A. Talbot in his *Life in Southern Nigera* devoted three chapters to *Juju* among the Ibibio people and discussed the various divinities among them. How can divinities, however minor, be described as toys? Africans are not so low in intelligence as to be incapable of distinguishing between an emblem or symbol of worship and a doll or toy. *Juju* is, therefore, one of the misleading and derogatory terms used by investigators out of either sheer prejudice or ignorance.

(v) *Paganism and Heathenism*: We choose to treat paganism and heathenism together because the meanings applied to them are similar, if not identical. The word *pagan* is from the Latin word *paganus* meaning peasant, village or country district; it also means one who worships false gods; a heathen. But when the meaning is stretched further it means one who is neither a Christian, a Jew nor a Muslim.

Heath, on the other hand, is a vast track of land; and a heathen is one who inhabits a heath or possesses the characteristics of a heath dweller. A heathen, according to the *New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary,* is 'a pagan; one who worships idols or does not acknowledge the true God; a rude, barbarous and irreligious person.'

These words are not correct in describing the indigenous religion of Africa because the people are religious and they do believe in the Supreme Being. If the only religious people are the adherents of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, then all the other world religions become either heathen or pagan, and so, uncivilized! Presumably these terms are used in an attempt to distinguish between enlightenment and barbarity. What has this to do with religion? We think such terms are more sociological than religious.

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[21] R. S. Rattray, Ashanti, 1923, pp.24ff.

[22] E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p.16.

(vi) *Animism*: The great advocate of the theory of animism was E. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture.*[23] Many writers still describe the African Traditional Religion as animistic. This means attributing a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena.

From our own study of the African Traditional Religion, we find there are unmistakably elements of animism. For example, the Iroko tree is not an ordinary tree; it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit; the Oshun River (in Western Nigeria) is believed to be more than an ordinary river because the spirit (Oshun) dwells in it and this makes the river efficacious in many respects, especially during barrenness. Lightning and thunder are manifestations of the thunder god.

But when we have said this, we also need to add that it would be wrong to categorize the whole religion as animism. Every religion has some belief in the existence of the spirit. Even Christianity sees "God as Spirit, and they that worship are to worship in spirit and truth". In other words, animism is a part definition of every religion. But to say that the African Traditional Religion is animistic would not be correct.

(vii) *Idolatry*: Idol means false god; and so idolatry is the worshipping of false gods or that which is not real. The word idol is used to describe the object which is an emblem of that which is worshipped by the Africans. The object may be a piece of wood or of iron or a stone. These objects are symbolic. Each of them has a meaning beyond itself, and therefore is not an end in itself. It is only a means to an end. If, for example, a piece of wood representing Obatala (a Yoruba deity) is eaten by termites, the worshippers of Obatala will not feel that their god has been destroyed by the termites, because the piece of wood is only a symbol, serving as a visible or concrete embodiment of that which is symbolised.

Symbolic representation is not peculiar to African Traditional Religion. It is found in most religions. It is used principally to aid man's perception and concentration and to remind the worshipper of the divine presence. If this is the object of the symbol, it must be wrong to describe it as an idol. But experience shows that material representation often becomes a danger in religion when the worshippers make the emblems an end in themselves. In this way, the difference between the material object and the reality represented by it becomes obscured.

African Traditional Religion is not essentially idolatrous, but it has a tendency to become so if the cult and the symbols of the divinities are so emphasized as to exclude the Supreme Being. The various divinities that are represented are in fact technically representatives or servants of the Supreme Being. It needs to be emphasized that the Supreme Being cannot be represented like the divinities. We must also point out that, to the Africans, the material has meaning only in terms of the spiritual. It is the spiritual that gives meaning and importance to the visible material

[23] See E. Tylor, *Primitive Cultures*, Vols. I and II.

object. The symbols or emblems may fall into disuse or crumble or be replaced, but the spiritual entity represented never changes.

(viii) *Polytheism*: "In West Africa," said Parrinder, "men believe in great pantheons of gods which are as diverse as the gods of the Greeks or the Hindus. Many of these gods are the expression of the forces of nature, which men fear or try to propitiate: These gods generally have their own temples and priests, and their worshippers cannot justly be called animists, but polytheists, since they worship a variety of gods."[24]

Here, while Parrinder was trying to discourage the use of the term *animism* in connection with the religion of Africa, he created another problem by suggesting the term *polytheism.* We can understand what the problems are. In a proper polytheism, the gods are all of the same rank and file. The difference between that type of polytheism and the structure of African Traditional Religion is that in Africa the Supreme Being is not of the rank and file of the divinities. The origin of the divinities can be traced; the divinities can be represented; they are limited in their power; they came into being by the power of the Supreme Being who is unique, wholly other and faultless and who owes His existence to no one. The Africans do not and cannot represent Him in the form of an image as they can do with the divinities.

Parrinder made this mistake because in his *West African Religion* he claimed that the Supreme God or Creator is "sometimes above the gods, sometimes first among equals."[25]

This is not correct. The Yoruba, for example, never rank the Supreme Being, Olodimave with the divinities (*orisa*), neither do the Edo confuse Osanobuwa with the divinities (*ebo*). The truth of the matter is that Africans hold the Supreme Being as a venerable majesty who has several servants (the divinities) under Him to carry out His desires. He is in a class by Himself. This is why it is not appropriate to describe the religion as polytheistic.

Modified Monotheism

Can we find a precise term for this religion which believes in the Supreme Being under whom subordinate divinities serve His will? Present eminent African scholars, like Professor E. Bolaji Idown and Professor John Mbiti, have emphasized the fact that the world of the Africans is a theocratic one, ruled and governed by the decree of the Supreme Being. In order to administer the world, however, the Deity has brought into being divinities who are His ministers or functionaries. These divinities act like intermediaries between men and God.

The Supreme Being is given different names by different groups of people. When we examine the names, we gain a greater insight into the peoples' concept of God, as they are descriptive of His character and attributes. For example, among the Yoruba, He is called

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[24] E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p.24.

[25] E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion, London*, Epworth, 1949, p.26, 1969 edition, p.12.

Olodumare. By meaning and connotation, this name signifies that the Supreme Being is unique, that His majesty is superlative, that He is unchanging and ever reliable. He is also called Olorun (the owner of Heaven). and Eleda (the Creator) by the same people.

The Edo call Him Osanobuwa, and this means "God who is the "Source and Sustainer of the World". The Ibo call Him Chükwu, that is the Great Chi or the Great Source of life and of being. The Nupe call Him Soko, the Great One; He who dwells in Heaven; and they also designate him Tso-Ci meaning the Owner of us, the One to whom we belong. The Ewe-speaking people speak of Him as Nana Buluku (Ancient of Days), and this suggests His eternity. In Ghana, He is called Onyame, the Great and Shining One who is high and above all.

"In very precise language" says Professor Mbiti "The Bacongo describe the self-existence of God when they say, that 'He is made by no other, no one beyond Him is."[26]

We see, then, that the greatest emphasis is on the Supreme Being. The ultimacy, wherever you go in Africa, is accorded to God. This is why we are convinced that the religion is monotheistic. But the monotheism may need some modification; hence Professor Bolaji Idowu has suggested *diffused monotheism* because "here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from Deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in themselves"[27]

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion cannot easily be studied by non-Africans. The best interpreter of African Religion is the African with a disciplined mind and the requisite technical tools. And we agree with Professor Idowu that the purpose of the study should be:

> … to discover what Africans *actually* know, *actually* believe, and *actually* think about Deity and the supersensible world. There s a whole world of difference between this and what any investigators, at home or from abroad, prescribe through preconceived notions that Africans *should* know, believe and think. It is also to find out how their beliefs have inspired their worldviews and moulded cultures in general.[28]

[26] For further details see John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, S.P.C.K., 1970.

[27] E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, Longmans, 1962, p.202f.

[28] E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p.106f.