

THE PRESENT STATE OF AFRICAN RELIGION

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Introduction

Religion in general is a complex of beliefs, cultic practice, and ethical demands in a system related to God or gods. We have diversity of religions, for example, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and African Traditional Religion. Today, the term “African Traditional Religion” is a familiar one. The subject is studied in many African Universities, Colleges, and Christian Theological Seminaries. In recent times many Western Universities have separate Institutes for the study of African Religion and Culture. In this way, we find that there is increasing global interest in African Tradition Religion today.¹

However, despite the growing global interest and increasing volume of literature available on the subject of African Traditional Religion is still viewed or treated with bemused disdain by many people including educated Africans. Implicated in this disdainful attitude are preconceived ideas about the religion, complete ignorance and faulty understanding of it. All these can be addressed by correct information. This paper is an attempt at a synopsis of African Traditional Religion and its present state in Nigeria.

WHAT IS AFREL?

African Traditional Religion comprises the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans which has been in existence from time immemorial, and are still adhered to today by many Africans. It is the indigenous religion of the Africans which has been handed down by their forbears. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it.²

In speaking of African Traditional Religion, the following points clarify its fundamental belief systems. First, African Traditional Religion is a revealed religion, but it has no historical founder like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Confucianism. The religion is revealed in the sense that it came into existence like any other religion, as a result of human experience of the mystery of the universe.³ In an attempt to solve the riddle of the mystery of the universe, man everywhere has asked questions, searched for answers to these questions, and came to the conclusion that this mystery must be a supernatural power to whom belong both visible and invisible.⁴ This type of experience is equally true of the forbears of the Africans.

But it is the nature of man to respond to such human experience. Thus, from the beginning the forbears of the Africans had reflected upon the experience and responded rather intuitively to the situation that encompassed their experiences. It must be noted that each African people must have responded independently to the experiences of their immediate environment.

¹P. A. Dopamu, *Towards Understanding African Traditional Religion (A Seminal Paper) in Religious Understanding and Co-operation in Nigeria*, ed. by I. A. B. Balogun(Ilorin: University of Ilorin Publications, 1978), 115.

² Ibid.

³ P.A. Dopamu, 120.

⁴ Ibid

For this reason, we must expect to find both similarities and differences in African Traditional Religion. So also must we realize that ideas and practices which could not adequately provide the spiritual needs of man must have passed away in the process of intellectual, cultural, and spiritual growth.

Secondly, African Traditional Religion is traditional. The word “traditional” may connote something that came into being long ago, something that belonged to the era of “primitivity”. But African Traditional Religion is “traditional” not because it is fossil, static and incapable of adaptation to new situations and changes, but because it is a religion that originated from the peoples’ environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported by them. Africans are not converted into it. Each person is born into it, lives in it, practices it and is proud to make it his own. Thus, the word “traditional” severs the purpose of distinguishing African Religion from any other religion that has been brought to the people through missionary zeal and by propagation.⁵

Thirdly, African Traditional Religion has no written literature or sacred scriptures or creedal forms. It is an essentially oral tradition. All we know of the religion, therefore, comes to us through oral traditions: myths and legends, stories and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies and rituals, proverbs and pithysayings, adages and riddles. Some of these oral traditions are preserved for us in arts and crafts, symbols and emblems, names of people and places, shrines and sacred places. Works of arts are not merely for entertainment or for pleasing the eye. But they usually convey religious feelings, sentiments, ideas or truth.

To the Africans, these oral traditions are veritable vehicles of transmission of knowledge. They are our only means of knowing anything at all of the peoples’ interpretation of the universe and the supersensible world, and what they think and believe about the relationship between the two. ⁶It must be noted that oral traditions are sometimes subject to additions and subtractions and distortions, exaggerations and confusions to the effect that we find it difficult to separate truth from fiction. In this case information passed on orally may not be a safe bet for accuracy. But despite the limitation of oral tradition, it is certain that the basic and relevant message of African Traditional Religion has been passed on unhampered from one generation to another by words of mouth.

A critical question however is whether we speak of a unified African Religion, or whether it would be more appropriate to speak to speak of African Traditional Religions. We are aware of the fact that there is a diversity of beliefs and practices among the various ethnic groups in Africa. Even within a given ethnic, we have significant differences. For example, divinities among the Akan of Ghana are not as pronounced as among the Yoruba of Nigeria. And among the Yoruba, the divinities prominent in one area may be given little or no attention in another area.

Despite these differences, there is an underlying identity in the traditional religion of the Africans that enables us to say with conviction that African Traditional Religion is a unified religion. There is a regular rhythm in the general pattern of the peoples’ beliefs and practices. This regular rhythm is the universal belief in the Supreme Being as an integral part of African

⁵ P.A. Dopamu, 121.

⁶ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), 6ff.

world view and practical religion. We find that in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces. This is the heart of African Traditional Religion. It is on this ground especially- this identical concept, that we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular.⁷

It is incontrovertible that Africans have their own living religion. Whatever might have being the various attitudes of foreign investigators therefore and whatever might have being their errors of identity, it has been established to the contrary that Africans have a concept of God and that this is expressed in their religion. Those who have approached the study of African peoples with caution, reverence, imaginative, sympathy, appreciative understanding, and perhaps experienced some of what they studied, have come to realize that Africans are “incurably religious”. It does not need any apologetics to prove that religion permeates African life and activity. From womb to the grave, religion it is which governs everything. “Religion is the keynote of the life of Yoruba; it forms the foundation and all governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity..... Through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is Deity who is in control”⁸. Indeed, wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated he takes religion to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.⁹ Every member of each locality is inescapably bound up with the religious systems of the community. And it is hard to think of any African community were we have irreligious people. This is why, when Christianity and Islam were brought to the African peoples, the two world religions were readily accommodated and integrated into the pattern of life. The Africans needed no “sermon” to establish the fact of the existence of God.¹⁰

THE SALIENT BELIEFS OF THE AFRICANS

The detailed description of African Traditional Religion is beyond the scope of this short paper. However, the following is a succinct fundamental beliefs of the Africans:

God’s names and Attributes

Throughout Africa, there is the belief in one Supreme Being. Each ethnic group has a name for the Supreme Deity. We have Olorun among the Yoruba, Chukwuamon the Igbo, Soko among the Nupe, Nyame among the Akan, Osanobua among the Edo, Unkulunkulu among the Zulu, to name a few.¹¹ The fact that Africans have names for God according to their locality indicates that God is not merely an abstract concept, a vague entity, but a veritable reality. Such names of God are pregnant with meaning. They tell us about the people’s concept of God. They describe the nature and character of God. In them, many of what we know about God- His attributes, His works, His purpose, His relationship to man and to divinities are found. For example, the Igbo name for God, Chineke, means “the source Being who creates all things”,

⁷ E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Oxford Press), 104.

⁸ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, 5.

⁹ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 2.

¹⁰ P. A. Dopamu, 125.

¹¹ P. A. Dopamu, 126.

while the Edo name for God, Osanobua, means “the source of all things who carries and sustains the world or universe”.

There are also attributes of God which show, unmistakably, that God is a reality to the Africans. These attributes are words and phrases ascribing traits, properties, qualities, or characteristics to the Supreme Being.

The Worship of God

Many foreign investigators gave the impression that God is not worshipped by Africans and not an object of practical religion.¹² Certain aspects of African beliefs and practices apparently lead to this view. Firstly, there are stories telling of God’s withdrawal from the affairs of the world. Secondly, divinities feature prominently in African Traditional Religion. Everywhere we have their temples and shrines, images and emblems, priests and priestesses. People pray to them from time to time and they receive regular sacrifices. But this is not almost the case with regard to the Supreme Deity. Many African societies neither have images of God nor dedicate temples to Him, and priests of God are hard to come by in many localities. In consequence of this, organized worship of the Supreme Being is not common.

But Africans have reasons for these apparent testimonies. Firstly, the Supreme Being is not represented by an image because he is unique and incomparable. In the African thought, we cannot liken Him to anything.

Secondly, people do not build temples for God’s worship because they think of God as omnipresent. And since He is everywhere He cannot be localized. That is why the Yoruba describe God as *Atererekaye*, “He who spreads over the whole extent of the earth”. This means that Deity is so great, and so majestic that He cannot be confined within space.

Thirdly, the divinities who receive the day-to-day sacrifices are only approached as intermediaries who are only ministers of the Supreme Being, and have no absolute existence, power or authority. That is why every act of worship or ritual before any of the divinities, has an ultimate reference to the Supreme God who must sanction it. The Yoruba, for example say *Ase*, “May it be sanctioned by God” at the end of every petition before any of the divinities. However, it is wrong to say that God is not worshipped by Africans. Africans communicate with the divine through prayers and offerings which are two essential elements of worship.

Divinities and Ancestors

The divinities are spiritual beings. They share aspects of the Supreme Being in consequence of which they become gods with small letter “g”. That is why it is not correct to say they are created. It will be correct to say that they emanated from the Supreme Deity, or that they were engendered by Him, brought forth by Him, or came into being in consequence of Him. In other words the divinities have attributes, qualities, or characteristics of the Supreme Being, and they are in consequence off-springs of God.

¹² A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples* (Chapman and Hall, 1894), 36.

The ancestors are regarded as spirits in the sense that they are no longer visible. But they are not spirits in the sense that they are like divinities or God. Africans distinguish between ancestors, divinities and God. “Deity and the divinities are distinctly, **out- and- out**, of the supersensible world while the ancestors are related to the living community in a way that cannot be claimed for Deity or the divinities who are definitely of a different order”.¹³ In other words, the ancestors are still regarded as heads and members of their earthly families, ever present among the families to which they belonged while they were living human beings. Thus, “a cardinal fact of African life and thought is that the living and dead together form one community whose members are mutually dependent upon each other.”¹⁴ That is why Mbiti¹⁵ has described the ancestors as the “living dead”. Africans think of the ancestors as having the same emotions as the living members of the community.

The Moral Order

It is no longer in doubt that Africans believe that God is the creator of the universe and that he brought the divinities into being to help him in the theocratic government of the world. Africans, however believe that for the orderly maintenance of the world, divinities and ancestors have laid down norms and set patterns or codes of conduct. They know that in order to sustain the wellbeing of human society, certain things which are morally disapproved by the Deity must not be done. These are what the Yoruba call *EEWO*- “Things forbidden, things not done”.¹⁶

These norms and codes of conduct can be seen as moral values. From the beginning God has put His law in man’s heart, and has endowed man with the sense of right and wrong. Man’s conscience has always instructed him on this. Such things which must not be done are taboos.

Taboos can be interpreted as prohibited actions, the breaking of which is followed supernatural penalty. The breaking of taboo is regarded as sin. Some investigators thought that either Africans have no concept of sin or they only have an imperfect notion of it. For example, J. K. Parratt discussing the sense of sin and morality among the Yoruba said: “The concept of sin among the Yoruba, if any, is nothing comparable with the developed ethical conception of sin which is to be found in both the Old Testament and New Testament.”¹⁷ This statement is neither true of the Yoruba nor other African peoples because Africans have always had the sense of sin. This may even be seen in the various stories of creation we have in Africa. These stories give the impression that there was once a kind of “Golden Age”, something of a “Garden of Eden” when in the Yoruba tradition,¹⁸ everybody could make a journey to the spiritual world and back as he liked, having immediate, direct contact with God; when according to the Mende, man could ask God for anything and have it.¹⁹

¹³ E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 184.

¹⁴ M. J. Veigh, *God in Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 29.

¹⁵ J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: S.P.C.K, 1970), 179.

¹⁶ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, 146.

¹⁷ J. K. Parratt, *Religious Change in Yoruba Society* (Journal of Religion in Africa, Vol. 2, 1969), 118

¹⁸ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare*, 21.

¹⁹ E. W. Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 278f.

The Here-after

Africans believe that life here on earth is not interminable. They know that the inevitable phenomenon called death will come upon man, who only is a sojourner on God's earth. No matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end.

But the people believe that death is only a transition- a means of passing from the world of the living to the world of the spirits. The people hold the view that when death occurs, the soul of a man who had lived well to a ripe old age, and died a good death, will return to the Supreme Being and continue existence in the abode of the ancestors.

There are good and bad deaths. Bad deaths include those who are killed by thunder or small-pox, those who die in water and those who die during pregnancy. Usually these are not given full funeral rites.

As to what happens to the deceased in the afterlife, we have different concepts among African peoples. Some consider that the afterlife itself is not as important as the present life. Some believe that the good people will reincarnate while the bad people will be banished or become ghosts that haunt desolate places. In most cases the notion of afterlife has meaning only in concrete terms in relation to the present life of the community. That is why the ancestors are usually referred to as "father" or "mother", such titles as they bore while still human beings.

On the whole, it appears that many African peoples think of the hereafter as having similar features to those of the present life. They believe that for the good people the quality of the afterlife is an enlarged copy of the life we live here on earth without its labor, sorrows and toils. The community of the ancestors is organized in a fashion similar to earthly society, but with exquisite amenities for peaceful enjoyment and happiness. The real picture of the life after death is, therefore, life of an unending fellowship in the community of one's kith and kin who had gone before into the world beyond.²⁰

THE MEETING OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

The foregoing, admittedly, has set out in general outline what African Traditional Religion is.

Humanity as a whole is dynamic. Societies and religion cannot be static, even though a change may not come in a perceptible form for a long time. This is true of Nigerian societies as well as the religion practiced by the people of these societies. Great changes have taken place in Nigeria and these have affected the peoples socially, morally, politically, spiritually and educationally²¹. The question can then be asked: with the progress made by Western education, Islam and Christianity, and the emergence of urbanization and industrialization, is the eclipse of African Traditional Religion imminent? Does it have any future?

²⁰ P. A. Dopamu, 144.

²¹ J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Macmillan, 2005), 327.

It is difficult to give a final answer to these questions. Perhaps, a two-sided answer will be helpful. In the first place, from all appearances, one would fear that African Traditional Religion will soon go into oblivion or the limbo of dead memories, for the following reasons:

- I. The religion is becoming increasingly outmoded, especially among the educated people. Many people who have been exposed to foreign culture think that it is “primitive” and should not be encouraged. They contend that the religion is full of barbaric acts and practices which should not have been allowed to remain on the face of the earth.²²
- II. Alien cultures have forced changes upon African Traditional Religion. As a result of external contact with the external world, a new way of thinking and a new appraisal of social and ethical consciousness have occurred. For example, traditional regulation and taboos are no longer highly prized. Un-chastity, which at a time was a grievous crime now appears to be the order of the day.
- III. Unlike some other world religions (for example, Christianity and Islam), African Traditional Religion has no propaganda machinery. Except in the case of migration, when travelers introduce system of worship in their new settlement, the religion is not preached from place to place. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive.²³
- IV. The incursion of Christianity and Islam on the religion is tremendous. These religions, acting as a social force, have played down the the significance of traditional religion. As a result, certain customs have died a natural or forced death, while many traditional practices have either crumbled or disappeared. In some cases, important aspects of the traditional religion are taken over by the new religions. An example is seen in the West African names of God and certain concepts of God, which have been adopted by the new religions. But they are often modified or given new interpretations and significance in the light of new teachings to suit the theology of the new religion.
- V. It should also be pointed out that while in the traditional religion, devotees in the same society may and do have several divinities to whom they show loyalty, and through whom they seek access to God, the new religions offer source of new life and promote in the people the spirit of oneness and togetherness since they have one intermediary through whom they reach God.
- VI. The Independent African Churches pose a threat to the African Traditional Religion. These churches are numerous, and they include the Apostolic Church, the Church of the Lord, the Cherubim and Seraphim, and the Celestial Church of Christ. These churches have taken over the functions of the traditional religion, thus making it redundant. Many of the ancient practices and customs are seen in them. Some of these can be briefly examined.

Spirit possession is a feature of African traditional religion. The same is true of many churches. Inspirational ecstatic practices are the characteristics of these movements. Prominence is given to singing, clapping, drumming and dancing. And those possessed sometimes fall into ecstasy and give utterances which may not be intelligible to those around them.

²² Ibid.

²³ J. O. Awolalu, “Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion” in *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 44/2, 1976, 295.

Another feature of African traditional religion is the seeking of salvation in a world in which men feel the need for supernatural help.²⁴ The pursuit of life and wholeness which defines Africa's social and religious quest reflects, and is partly determined by, Africa's present communal configurations²⁵. The dominant orientation of these communities is mostly toward *surviving*. This is another preoccupation of these new Christian groups. The functions of the magician or medicine man have been largely taken over by them. They can be described as essentially thaumaturgical movements, because they have manifested the characteristic traits of thaumaturgical practice.²⁶ They claim to give oracles and perform miracles. Prophets among them give visions and interpret dreams. Their stock in trade includes holy-water, sacred-oil, ashes, candles and incense to heal and prevent diseases. The cross has acquired a power which is almost magical. They offer prayers with persuasive, evocative and emotive language.

In a sense, they point to contemporary evils which they regard as the immediate discomforts of man. They also point to the need for salvation from such evils which include sorcery, witchcraft, illness, bereavement, barrenness, misfortune, ill-luck, trauma and psychic pain. They offer protection against evils, immediate assuagement of ills, and the acquisition of a wholly new superior way of life.²⁷ They reassure people that they will add cubits to their stature, security and longevity to their lives and in a society where there are social tensions and disruptions, men will always look for a supernatural action to overcome them. And since the spiritual churches are fundamentally magical in their techniques, they have a large following, and have successfully captured the minds of many men.²⁸

Furthermore, moral values take a prominent place in the new movements. As in the traditional religion, some attention is given to ethical prescriptions. They preach humility, steadfastness, truth, faith, co-operation, obedience, sympathy, respect to elders, and love. They condemn adultery, theft, murder, hatred, and cheating. They also impose ritual taboos- eating of pork, wearing of shoes in the church and preventing women from entering the church during menstruation. They usually dress in white, like most traditional priests.

The following are in addition to the foregoing reasons:

- I. In many localities, genuine votaries are dying out. Where priesthood is hereditary, those who are to become priests or priestesses are sometimes not available because they have either gone to school or learnt a new trade. Old men are left to take charge of the cults. This constitutes a big set-back for traditional religion.
- II. There is an underlying influence of modernization and industrialization. People are far removed from the security of the village, and many traditional rites are often not attended to. Town life has brought great moral laxity and the neglect of traditional morality. Besides, the oral nature of the traditional religion has contributed to its decline. As already pointed out it has no literature, which can be studied, applied and advanced within the comforts of one's homes. As a result of this, new social values have replaced such values that endeared traditional religion to our forebears; and as such traditional

²⁴J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, 326.

²⁵RandeeIjatuyi-Murphe, *Africa Social and Religious Quest* (Jos: Logos Quest Publishing, 2011), 5.

²⁶J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, 327.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

values are being eroded, more emphasis is being placed on material well-being in the name of money economy.²⁹

Moreover, people are becoming accustomed to the application of scientific methods in solving some human problems. Many hitherto inexplicable diseases can now be treated in the hospital. Many things that were formerly attributed to the realm of mystery no longer pose as mysterious, because of technical knowledge. In effect, traditional religion has taken second place, and tended to be limited to the times of difficulties or distress. Everywhere there are dynamic responses to changing circumstances.

But while we have made all these observations, we still need to recognize the fact that African traditional religion may yet persist for the following reasons:

- I. The indigenous religion is so deeply entrenched in Africans that they find it difficult to sever connection with it. In consequence of this, there is divided loyalty, if not syncretism. Many adherents of other religion including Christians and Muslims, owe allegiance to both the new religion and traditional religion.
- II. Magical practices are still applied to new circumstances. For example, magical objects of all kinds are sold all over the places. People can still be seen wearing magical objects, hanging them in their stalls, or burying them in their homes. Thus magic and medicine are used side by side with Biblical and Qura'anic texts for protection and security.
- III. Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery continue. People still regard them as veritable channels of misfortune, and they seek protection in the functional way against them. Even though the spiritual churches offer such protection, some people still believe that they are better protected by traditional magical means. Some will even seek for protection from both the magical and the prophet/*marabout*.
- IV. Many people will still resort to the traditional religions in times of crises. When all is well, they follow the new religions with gusto, but let there be any problem or crisis, people forget all about the new religions which they believe cannot give them the much needed protection, and they seek after the diviners or magicians, whom they believe can give them guidance.
- V. Some traditional practices still persist among the people. For example, naming ceremony, marriage rituals, funeral ceremonies and other rites and customs are observed by the adherents of the traditional religion as well as Christians and Muslims. It is the practice in many Nigerian communities today that after a Christian wedding in the church, the bride still has to go to the parents' home to have the traditional blessing of her parents when the ancestors are invoked and libation is poured. To omit such an aspect, the people believe, is to incur the displeasure of the ancestors and to bring calamity upon the marriage.
- VI. Moreover, kings and chiefs continue to be important in the social order of things. Whenever Christians or Muslims are appointed as leaders of their people, they are duty bound to observe all the traditional rites that should be performed. Otherwise, they will fall into disfavor with their subjects.

²⁹ J. O. Awolalu and P .A. Dopamu, 329

- VII. Everywhere, there is the quest for cultural revival. The 1977 festival of arts and culture held in Lagos, Nigeria is a living testimony. Not only that, the study of traditional religion has appeared on the curriculum of Universities and even Christian Theological Seminaries, as earlier noted. There is a new awareness among Africans for the need to retain essential traditions of their forbears.

Radio and Television also help in the preservation of traditional religion. Religious festivals are covered and shown on the television. Worshippers are interviewed about the importance of the religion, and this is relayed over the Radio and Television. Traditional religion is also discussed in papers.

- I. Certain religious festivals are of national concern. In such cases, they are celebrated by people of diverse faiths in the community- Christians, Muslims, and Traditionalists. One may be reminded of the Yoruba common saying, *Igbagbo koni ki a ma soroile*: adherence to the faith does not prevent us from worshipping the gods of our home (traditional faith).
- II. There is also global interest in African Traditional Religion today. Many European and American Universities have separate institutions for the study of African religion and culture. Moreover, the Afro- Americans who are of African origin but whose forbears were taken as slaves to the North and South Americas and West Indies continue to worship the gods of their fathers, thus embracing the African Traditional Religion.³⁰

Conclusion

African religion has passed through a number of onslaughts that are capable of sending the religion on extinction, but religion still survives. Despite the aghast the religion is still forging ahead. The religion is gaining more ground in the present time and the world at large is paying more attention to it. The cultural revival and the modernization have brought about transformation in all dimensions of African religion.

³⁰J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, 329.

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