

Abuses And Misconceptions In African Traditional Religion

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Abstract: Like societies, cultures and actors of sub-Saharan Africa, African traditional religion has been misunderstood, misrepresented and subjected to outright stigmatization. Western scholars with no understanding of African religion and culture, influenced by a feeling of having a better culture and way of life, intentionally portrayed the African way of life in negative light. Using sociological and anthropological yardstick, they passed harsh and unfounded judgement on African religion and culture. This work seeks to identify and explain some of these misconceptions. To achieve this, the historical method of research was adopted, it connotes the use of the secondary method involving written literatures and internet sources. The paper seeks to examine the concept of African traditional religion, the derogatory terms used by biased Western scholars to qualify it, and an attempt to understand why it was so, thereby enabling the 21st century Africans to defend, understand, and appreciate the values of the African heritage which has been erroneously bastardized by arm chair scholars and some Western authors.

Keyword: Africa, Religion, Traditional, Culture, Derogatory

I. INTRODUCTION

“For centuries, African Traditional Religion have been subjected to the same misrepresentation, underestimation and basic stigmatization which has been reserved and continues to be reserved – for the societies, cultures and actors of sub-Saharan Africa in general” (Mezzana 1). While this classification is suffered by most third world nations, the impact seem to be more devastating to Africa. Omoregbe sustains:

It is quite unfortunate that the degrading classification effects of the third world nations has more impact on African continent than other third world nations outside Africa. This perception has affected African belief system and the entire African philosophy One of these error is descriptive of African religion as “African Traditional Religion”, which connotes a “derogatory epithets: paganism, idolatry, primitive religion, animism, fetishism, polytheism, etc” (3).

Yet, these writers lack a basic understanding of African religion worldview. For the African, religion permeates every aspect of his life. This is so because

Africans have long associated the wonder of nature with religion. In Africa tradition anything that seems to be shrouded in mystery has tended to evoke a sense of the religious, and the natural world is filled with beauty and mystery. For African people, the whole universe is filled with religious spirit. In African religion all element of the universe are regarded as symbols of the divine. The sacred space of the universe has three parts. Above the earth is the sky, or heaven, the home of the Supreme Being. Below the earth is the realm of the spirits, which keeps humanity connected to the land. In the middle is the earth, the world of humanity (Lugira 96).

For the African, a building is not termed sacred by its name, size or beauty, but by the manifestation of the spiritual through ritual contact that takes place there. Therefore, a better and more in-depth study and appreciation of African Traditional Religion and culture must be Afrocentric not Eurocentric. Over time, a Eurocentric approach has led to vague and inaccurate understanding of Africa. Beyers avers

Western thought on this led to the creation of a category named ‘primal’ or ‘traditional religions’. This category was used to group religions together that showed similarities in

structure. The premise to this categorization was the acceptance of the evolutionistic development of religions. The earliest religion in 'original' form could be discovered by studying religious practices of contemporary tribal societies. The assumption was that some religions progressed in development and others did not. The underdeveloped religions were pejoratively referred to as primal, traditional, primitive or even tribal religions (1).

Western scholars are guilty of attacking and defining African Traditional Religion from their cultural and historical context with a glaring tendency to either "westernize" or "Christianize" African traditional religion and culture. They were guilty of using Western philosophy as criteria for the definition of African religion. "The climax and aggravation of derogatory descriptions of African came from Western ethnographers who variously described the traditional religion of Africa as primitive, native, tribal, savage, pagan, polytheistic, fetish, animistic, idolatrous, heathenistic and worship of the ancestors" (Etim Okon 2).

II. THE CONCEPT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Mbiti in the opening sentence of the very first chapter of his book, African Religions and philosophy, summarized the traditional religion's attitude of African when he said:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities of both traditional and modern life... Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned (1).

For the African, life is religion and religion is life. It is unimaginable for the African, following his traditional environment and culture, to think of human life divorced from religion. For the African, there is nothing like a person becoming converted to embrace a religion because life is impossible for anyone who is not religious from birth. There can therefore be no existence, or positive growth in life if one divorces himself from religion (Ezeanya 10). Seeing how the life of every Igbo was permeated by religion, Bishop Shanahan concluded thus: "The average native was admirably suited by environment and training, for an explanation of the faith. He is not materialist. Indeed nothing was farther from his mind than a materialistic philosophy of existence. It made no appeal to him" (Jordan 115). For the African, no individual or society can survive without religion, because

The constant and general foundation of African tradition is the spiritual view of life. Here, we have more than the so-called "animistic" concept, in the sense given to this term in the history of religion at the end of last century. We have a deeper, broader and more universal concept which considers all living being and visible nature itself as linked with the world of the invisible and the spirit. In particular, it has never considered man as mere a matter limited to earthly life, but recognises in him the presence and power of another spiritual

element, in virtue of which human life is always related to the afterlife (Pope Paul VI 8).

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 (Awolalu 1). For the African, religion permeates every aspect of their daily life that it cannot be studied in isolation. In studying the religion, you must also study those who practice it.

By African Traditional Religion we mean the traditional beliefs and practices of African people which include various traditional religions. Generally, these traditions are oral rather than scriptural. They include its belief structures, belief in a Supreme creator, belief in spirit beings, veneration of the dead, use of magic and traditional medicine. African traditional religion "is not written on paper, but in peoples' heart, mind, oral history, rituals, shrines, and religious functions" (Awolalu 2). African traditional religion is 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 practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslim or Christian.

The term "African Traditional Religion" can be used in two complementary senses. Loosely, it encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered religions but neither Christian nor Islamic. The expression is also used almost as a technical term for a particular reading of such beliefs and practices, only that purports to show that they constitute a systematic whole – a religion comparable to Christianity or any other "world religion". In that sense the concept was new and radical when it was introduced by G. Parrinder in 1954 and later developed by Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti. The intention of these scholars was to protest against a long history of derogatory evaluation of Africans and their culture by outsiders and to replace words such as "heathenism" and "paganism". Thus,

African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous or autochthonous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts, society and so on. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the worldview of African people (Olupona 7).

For him traditional African religions are less of faith tradition and more of live tradition, less concerned with doctrine and much more so with rituals ceremonies and live practices. These religions are not stagnant, but highly dynamic and constantly reacting to various shifting influence such as old age, modernity, and technological advances.

The word religion is used in the singular, this is deliberate. Scholars are conscious that Africa is a large continent with many nations who have complex cultures, countless languages and myriads of dialects. But there also exist many basic similarities in the religious systems. All over Africa there exist clearly the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities, and/or spirits; and beliefs in the ancestral cult. Individual locality

have their own local deities, its own festivals, its own name or names for the Supreme Being, the pattern is the same.

III. PECULIARITIES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

African traditional religion comes with its unique peculiarities and practices:

- ✓ This religion is based strictly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper, but in people's hearts, minds, rituals, shrines, religious function and oral history, through recantations.
- ✓ It has no founder like Christ, Mohammed, Gautama the Buddha, etc. It is not a religion of one hero.
- ✓ It has no missionaries, or the desire to propagate itself. But the adherents wherever they are, are loyal worshippers.
- ✓ It is uniquely African, though with its strands in the Americans and the Caribbean's.

IV. DEROGATORY TERMS USED FOR AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Over the centuries, European missionaries, colonial administrators, and scholars consciously described African traditional religion in derogatory terms. Below are some of them.

PRIMITIVE

The new Webster encyclopedia dictionary defines primitive as "pertaining to the beginning or origin; original; first; old fashioned; characterised by the simplicity of old times." The dictionary meaning makes it clear that the word is not appropriate for describing the religion of a people, in this case of Africa or whoever practice the said religion. In what sense can a people be described as old fashioned or their religion as simple. Western scholars by using the word 'primitive' mean the religion has failed to develop and has lost its original form (Okon, 2). Bolaji Idowu opines

Primitive cannot be appropriate in certain contexts in which it is being currently applied. With reference to any people in the world today, 'early', 'ancient', 'original', or primary does not apply. Primitive man in the sense conveyed by the word quoted, disappeared from this world thousands of years ago (109).

Arguing further he holds that religion as a cultural phenomenon is encapsulated in tradition with a long history of continuity and discontinuity:

There are religion which may be more closely related to what is known about their early forms than other religions, depending upon the historical circumstances of those who practice Every religion is a new religion everyday, that is, as long as it is a religion practiced by living people who are being affected by the inevitable factor of change which is the lot of all on this earth. Stagnation is as alien to nature as it is to history. Things may appear stagnant but sooner or later they

will manifest the signs either of progress or retrogression (110).

It is especially wrong to speak of the religion of any living people as primitive. "Primitive in most western writing is a derogatory term and therefore obnoxious. Therefore, it is not only inappropriate but also offensive to describe African traditional religion unreservedly as primitive." Geoffrey Parrinder strongly opposed the use of the word. He sustains:

Primitive religion means either religion as it appeared in its earliest form among mankind or else religion that has remained in the lowest stages even in modern times. Neither of this is true of the West African groups Even in the most refined religions, some lower features, magic and superstition, may linger, though these are frowned upon by purer worshippers. Similarly in West Africa some totemic ideas remain, and human sacrifice occurred not so long ago in some places, but by either gradual disappearance these religions show a development and a purification (7).

It seems the motif behind the use of the word is engendered by racial pride. The Western scholar investigating wanted to distinguish between his society (which he saw as civilized) and other societies which for him are uncivilized but old fashioned just because these societies do not have or adopted the same norm as that of the investigator. African traditional religion like other religion is dynamic. Over the years it has undergone changes and remodification; it cannot therefore be described as original. These changes include but not limited to its place of worship, items for sacrifices as well as the dressing codes of the devotees.

SAVAGE

The dictionary meaning of the word savage is: "pertaining to the forest or wilderness, wild, uncultured, untamed violent, brutal, uncivilized, untaught, rude, barbarous, inhuman." Savagery is the opposite of civilization. It is an anthropological and sociological term, and does not define a religion. You cannot use people's lifestyle to define their religion. Idowu vehemently opposed this description of African traditional religion. "No people should be called savages simply because they are technologically backward or because their own ways of reverting to the raw 'natural state has not yet acquired scientific justification and technological polish" (114). Every human being has an element of savagery and it should not be made the exclusive trait of a particular people.

FETISHISM

Derived from the Portuguese word *fetico* meaning "man-made religious object" or any work of art. It was a name given by Portuguese to charms and amulets worn by Africans. This is similar to the French word *fetich*. 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. Fetishism therefore, is the worship of, or emotional attachment to, inanimate objects."

Edward Tylor explores its historical origin thus;

Centuries ago, the Portuguese in West Africa, noticing the veneration paid by the Negroes to certain objects, such as trees, fish, plants, idols, pebbles, class of beast, sticks and so forth, very fairly compared these objects to the amulets or talismans with which they themselves were familiar and called them '*fetico*' or 'charm', a word derived from the Latin '*Factitius*' in the sense of magically artful. Modern French and English adopted this word from the Portuguese and spelt it fetish... (143).

Idowu however dismissed Tylor's views for him "All these show inadequate grasp of the fundamentals of African worship, and betray the error of taking appearances for reality, the shadow for the substance. It is, in fact, the frontier between what is sweepingly called 'idolatry' and what is generally designated 'fetichism' is still ill defined.... (126).

Therefore

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 (Rattray 5).

To describe the religion of Africans as fetishism is wrong. In the day-to-day life of Africans element of fetishism may be found, but it is incorrect to describe all of it as such. Even the usage of the word is random, inconsistent and indiscriminate.

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 priest 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 rite (Awolalu 8).

IDOLATRY

Etymologically derived from the Greek word *eidolon*, it refers to worship of an image, or representative image of a deity. It is therefore the worship of a false god, or that which is not real. The word idol is used to describe the object which is a symbol of that which is worshipped by the Africans. It could be a piece of wood or of iron, or a stone. The objects are very symbolic and has meaning beyond themselves. The symbols point to the object of worship, but not worship themselves. "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 it symbolizes" (Awolalu 8).

Symbolic representation is not unique to African traditional religion. It is found in most religions of the world. It is an aid to man's concentration at worship and a remainder of the divine presence. It is therefore wrong and completely out of place to describe a symbol as an idol. It shows the lack of depth and gross ignorance of some Westerners of African traditional religion.

JUJU

The word has a French origin – *joujou*. It means a little doll or toy. Its application to African deities was perpetuated by English writers. P. A. Talbot devoted three chapters to juju among the Ibibio people in his life in Southern Nigeria. He also discussed various divinities among the people. One is forced to wonder aloud, how divinities, however, minor they may be are being described in such low and condescending terms as toys or dolls.

Juju is therefore, one of the derogatory and misleading terms used by Western investigators out of prejudice and bias to describe African traditional religion. It is not a description of the religion of a people.

POLYTHEISM

Polytheism is the belief and worship of more than one god. Parrinder brought about these descriptions of African traditional religion when he said "in West Africa, 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 animist, but polytheist, since they worship a variety of gods" (24). In trying to discourage the use of the term animism to describe the religion of Africans by Parrinder, he added to the lexicon of derogatory word used by scholars to describe the religion of Africa, he created another problem by suggesting the term polytheism.

In a proper practice of polytheism, the gods are all of the same rank and file. But the structure of African traditional religion is completely different. Here the Supreme Being is not of the rank and file of the divinities. Divinities come into being by the power of the Supreme Being who is unique and faultless and owes his existence to no one. He cannot be represented in form of an image as divinities are. Parrinder mistakenly claimed that the Supreme God or creator is "sometimes above the gods, sometimes first among equal" (12).

Kofi Opoku disagrees with Parrinder and posited that "a religion cannot be said to be polytheist merely because there exist many divinities in that religion". For him:

God or the Supreme Being is outside the pantheon of gods. He is the external creator of all the other gods, and of men and the universe. This makes him absolutely unique and he is differentiated from the other gods in having a special name. This name is always in the singular, and it is not a generic name, like *bosom* (Akan) or *Orisha* (Yoruba) (5).

It is therefore wrong to describe African religion as polytheistic

ANIMISM

The English anthropologist Edward Tylor in his work primitive cultures strongly advocated the theory of animism. The word 'animism' is from the Latin word '*anima*' meaning 'soul'. Tylor defined animism as the "theory of the universal animation of nature." It is attributing a living soul to inanimate

objects and natural phenomena. "The belief that objects and natural phenomena are inhabited by souls or spiritual beings. So hills, trees, rocks, streams, all have their resident soul" (10).

It is wrong to categorize the whole religion of a people as animism. This concept is not a uniquely African one. Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is really present in Holy Communion. Jews believe that Yahweh inhabited Mount Horeb. Muslims venerate the Sacred Stone, the Ka'ba in Mecca while on pilgrimage. Even among the Hindus and Jains, it is believed that spirits inhabit natural objects (Omogbe, 32). To say that African traditional religion is animistic is not correct.

V. CONCLUSION

The outright disregard for, abuse and derogatory status given to African Traditional Religion and culture by Westerners has remained with us. Modern scholars of African Traditional Religion like Mbiti, Parrinder and Idowu have individually and collectively fought to change this conception of Africa with little success. This brings to fore question about the attitude of Westerners, be they missionaries, scholars, or administrators toward African religion and culture. Why did they sermonize the African religion and culture even when they did not understand it? Why was the African culture not allowed to grow hand in hand with our religion? Why did they not make a conscious effort to study and understand the religion and culture?

European sociologists/anthropological studies of Africa presented a very distorted and bias view of the continent. Many arm chair scholars in the comfort of their libraries and homes in Europe, deliberately presented Africans as "abnormal sub-species" of the human race. Some literary called Africans monkeys, who live on trees and lack the capacity to reason. African Traditional Religion and Culture suffered the greatest of abuses, misconception and misrepresentation.

There is no culture without its limitations, African culture is no exception. African culture should have been allowed to grow along with its religion. But because the European came with a bias, Africans were seen and treated as an uncivilized people that need to be civilized. Their religion and culture was described as primitive. They therefore concluded that everything about Africa was to be modernized according to Western standards and values. We can therefore make bold to say that the Europeans came with their show and high spectacle in addition to their missionary and administrative endeavour. Many abuses and misconceptions of the religion and culture of African people, the derogatory terminologies used in describing them have no religious connotations at all. They were rather sociological and anthropological terms. We make bold to affirm and rightly so, that Africa culture has its

ethical values and virtues which has over the centuries help to stabilize the African people in morality, economic, political and social relationship and engagements.

The African religion and culture would have fared better if the Europeans had made a conscious effort to study and understand it. Her contribution to world religion and humanity would have been better too. In spite of these, it is the responsibility of contemporary scholars of African Traditional Religion and Culture to redouble their efforts in correcting the mistakes, be they intentional or ignorant that were made over the years. It is also their responsibility to give Afrocentric terminologies to African Traditional Religion.

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