

# African Traditional Religion: A Religious Drama

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## Abstract

It is a fact, that African Traditional Religions are embedded in the Traditional life of Africans; therefore, there is a great difficulty on understanding it outside of the daily activities of the indigenous people; the reason why is simply, because religion enters into every aspect of African people's lives. Therefore, its study has to go in accordance with the study of the people who practise the religion. The following article presents ATR as an existential reality to be understood out of the wrong ideas created in the past, rather acknowledging first of all, essential features as carriers of its identity, as well its sense of belonging to the people who lives immersed in it.

**Keywords:** African traditional religion, African traditional life, Superstition, Animism, Fetishism, Ancestor worship, Magic or Fetishism, Heathenism.

African Traditional Religions (ATRs) will be discussed within the context of which it belongs to, the African traditional life (ATL). Let's begun by saying that ATR, refer to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of 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 Muslims or Christians. (J. O. Awolalu 1976).

## 1. WRONG IDEAS ABOUT ATR

The early Western world has a long history of possessing a denigrating attitude towards African peoples and their beliefs. This is revealed in the acknowledgement and rejection of the way the word civilization was used in the past as arrogant and ethnocentric as it was. Their assumptions were rooted in the idea of cultural characteristics, and even foods were borrowed from the outside world, not knowing about the great contribution of Africa to humanity. Nevertheless, Africa has been always in contact with the outside world; however, religious and cultural influence from this contact cannot have flowed only one way, there was always a giving and take process as African soil was fertile enough to produce its own new ideas.

Prior to WW II, most Western Christians equated Christianity with civilization; however, other religions were simply seen as demonic. Some missionaries believed they had to challenge these religions at their core, few saw the need to study the social and cultural systems of the people to whom they ministered and even fewer saw that God was revealing himself to the people through their cultural beliefs and practices.

Clearly, many of the derogatory and prejudicial ideas concerning ATR came and still come from ignorance and ethnocentrism. African religions were wrongly called ancestor worship. Africans do not worship their departed relatives; this is fruit of misinterpretation of those studying ATR. Africans show their belief that departed relatives continue to live and show interest in the living. Families may show their belief by building shrines for the departed and placing bits of food or drink on their graves. These are acts of respect for the departed and do not amount to worshipping them.

African religions were wrongly called Superstition. A superstition is a readiness to believe and fear something without proper grounds. In African religion beliefs are bases on deep superstitious beliefs and practices, but this is not the core or main part of their religion.

African religions were wrongly called animism or paganism<sup>1</sup>. Animism means the system of belief and practices based on the idea that spirits or souls inhabit objects and natural phenomena. It is true that African peoples do acknowledge that some spirits inhabit objects like trees, ponds or rocks. This is, however, only a small portion of the many beliefs held in African traditional religions. Paganism or pagan is sometimes used as a derogatory word to describe Africans who are not followers of either Christianity or Islam. Paganism originated from the Latin *paganus* – peasant, rustic or rural person. Later it took the meaning of a person who is not religious, meaning someone who is not a Christian, Moslem or Jew, as if these were the only religions of the world. It is a socially and racially derogatory term because it connotes that the Christians, Moslems and Jews have a superior religion whereas believers of African Traditional Religions have an inferior religion.(E. Bolajildowu 1973)

African religions were wrongly called magic or fetishism. Outsiders have mistakenly regarded Africans as simply believers in magic. It is true that magic, witchcraft and sorcery feature much in the traditional life of African peoples. But their religion is not constructed around magic. This is only part of their belief. Fetishism is a word which came originally from a Portuguese word *feticho* used by the early Portuguese travelers to describe

<sup>1</sup>Eduard Taylor popularized this term. He takes animism as given and defines it as the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general. He sees it as this great element of the philosophy of religion; it is this essential source, a minimum definition of religion and the belief in spiritual beings.

the charms or amulets worn by Africans on the West Coast of Africa. It is often used to connote something bad and primitive and the general belief and practices of an African religion. It is a misleading and inappropriate term to describe African traditional religion. Charms and amulets cannot be a religion. (E. Bolajidowu 1973)

Heathenism<sup>1</sup> originated from the German language, *heide*– wasteland, and thus the heathen are those who live in a wasteland, are irreligious, uncivilized, unenlightened. This too is an inappropriate and derogatory term used to describe African traditional religion. African religion is a major religious system in its own right. Like every other religion in the world, it has its own weaknesses as well as strengths. (E. Bolajidowu 1973)

## 2. FEATURES OF ATR

One of the features of ATR is *beliefs*; it shows the way people think about the universe and their attitude toward life itself. African religious beliefs are concerned with topics such as god, spirits, human life, magic, the hereafter, witches, etc. Another important feature is the linked to *practices, ceremonies and festivals*, because is here where religious practices show how beliefs are expressed in more practical terms, such us: prayers, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, etc. Festivals are generally festive occasions when people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event. For example, there are festivals to mark harvest time, the start of the rainy season, the birth of a child, and victory over enemies. (John S. Mbiti, 2015).

*Religious objects and places* are also set apart by the people as being sacred. They are not commonly used except of a particular religious purpose. Some are made, like shrines, amulets, talismans, and others are taken in their natural form (rivers, mountains, and groves) and set apart for religious purposes. Some belong to individuals and families, while others belong to the whole community in a given region. Similarly, *Values and Morals* are that part of religious that safeguard or uphold the life of the people in their relationship with one another and the world around them. They help people live with one another, settle their differences, maintain peace and harmony. (John S. Mbiti, 2015).

Finally, *religious officials or leaders* they are the people in any ethnic groups who conduct religious matters such as *ceremonies, sacrifices formal prayers and divination*. In many cases they are trained men and women. They know more about religious affairs than other people, and are highly respected by their people. They hold offices as priests, rain-makers, ritual elders, diviners, medicine men, and even as kings and chiefs. (John S. Mbiti, 2015).

## 3. AFRICAN HERITAGE

ATR is the product of the thinking and experiences of the forefathers and mothers of former generations going back thousands of years. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and their communities.

The earliest records of African history show that the people of ancient Egypt were very religious people and up to today Africans who live according to their traditional ways are also very religious. Throughout the ages, religion has been for Africans the normal way of looking at the world and experiencing life itself. It is so integrated into the different areas of life that most of the African languages don't have a word for religion itself. They only have words for religious ideas, practices and objects or places.

## 4. BELONGING TO THE PEOPLE

African religion is not one thing, but something that belongs to each particular ethnic group so that we need to speak of African religions, Ghanaian religions, Ashanti religions, and Dagonba religions. It is African religions which gives its followers a sense of security in life (Search for Meaning, M. J. Field). Within that religious way of life they know who they are and how to act in different situations and how to solve their problems. African religion functions more on the communal than an individual basis.

ATR are found in rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people, in shrines, sacred places and religious objects, in art and symbols (adinkra symbols, *GyeNyame*), in music and dance, in proverbs, riddles and wise sayings. ATR are also found in God's providence, Aboaaonnidua, Nyame ne ôpra ne ho, (It is God who chases the fly's away for an animal without a tail), Nyame ma wo yare a, ômawoaduru (If God gives you an illness he also gives you medicine), Nyankopôn ankum wo na ôdesani kum wo a, wunwu. (If God does not kill you and a human being kills you, you will not die).

ATR are found in names of people and places like Nyamekyâ – Gift of God, Wumbedoo, Chentiwuni – Let's give it to God. In myths and legends, Why God is far away from humans? How God is the giver of destiny? (Two bundles of rubbish, one small and one big, big one full of woes and miseries of life), in beliefs and customs – God, spirits, birth, death, magic, witchcraft, etc. In all aspects of life, If God wills ... I will (we) will ... By

<sup>1</sup> M. B. Boas says that Pagan must be distinguished from the common usage which makes it synonymous with heathen taking it literally also means rude or uncultivated.

God's grace ...

## 5. CONCLUSION

RELIGION is fundamental, perhaps the most important, influence in the life of most Africans and African of the Disapora, yet its essential principles are too often unknown to the general public which make themselves constantly liable to misinterpretation of the African worldview and beliefs. ATRs enter 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. As it has been said earlier within the ATL, the individual is immersed in a religions participation which starts before birth and continuo after his death. For him therefore and for the larger community of which he is part to leave is to be caught in a religious drama.

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