

A Review of the Concept of Origin and Founder of the Indigenous African Religion

Alexander Hackman-Aidoo
Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast
Email: brynefit@yahoo.com

Abstract

There is widespread certainty in African scholarship that African religion is a revealed religion. This religion, according to many scholars, has no founder. The other side of the argument is that the religion is purported to have originated or born out of the experiences of our African forefathers. Proponents of such assertion include John S. Mbiti, Awolalu and Dopamu among other scholars. Using a critical reflection tool, this paper attempts a re-examination of the issue of origin and founder of the African Traditional Religion. Contrary to the view of many scholars, the paper finds as logically inconsistent, the notion that African Traditional Religion has no founder though it is perceived to be a revealed religion. It further argues that the attempt to trace the origin of the religion to the experiences of African forebears makes the religion largely experiential and must be given a second look. The paper concludes that African Traditional Religion has founders and the founders are Africans themselves.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, revealed religion, founder.

Introduction

Every culture, irrespective of the level of 'civilization' prevalent among its people, is guided by a certain religious worldview. It is in this worldview that people find the essence of their existence in the world, its purpose and certain realities of life. The beauty about this is that, it is culturally specific even though there may be areas of similarities among cultures on the issue of worldview. This implies that Western or European religious worldview is, to a large extent, different from African religious worldview. The point being made is that Africans have had a system of religious beliefs, ritual practices and utterances which constitutes a worldview; a concept that perfectly reveals their notion of the creator of the universe and humans. That worldview is nothing but "...an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place".¹ Having established this fact, it would therefore be misleading to agree with Emil Ludwig who is reported to have said, 'How can the untutored African conceive God?...How can this be?...Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing'.² Obviously such a scholar could not see beyond his own culture to think that cultural groups other his own could have their own understanding of the world and its purpose. The African traditional society even before its contact with the western world knew a self-existing God believed to have created the world. They had answers to questions as to who created humans, why humans suffer and what happens to us when we die? The experiences of life such as death, famine, births, earthquakes, rain, sun shine,³ etc taught Africans that there is a Being higher than humans who superintends over over the affairs of the world. The implication is that Africans also have a religion that helps them find meaning in the naked reality of life. In the subsequent paragraphs, we shall take a look at the nature of the indigenous religion of the African and proceed to look at the concept of God in the religion.

What is African Religion?

The indigenous religion of the African has variously been named. It is commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion.⁴ Some scholars for the sake of precision call it Indigenous African Religion. Others call it African Primal Religion.⁵ Whichever name we adopt, African traditional religion refers to the faith that reveals the religious beliefs and practices of the people of sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ Perhaps we face the difficulty in getting a precise name for the religion because the practitioners themselves have no specific name for their religion.⁷

¹ See Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures in Psycho-Analysis*, New York: W. W. Norton & company, Inc., 1933.

² Smith, E.W., ed., *African Ideas of God*, 2nd ed., London, Edinburgh House Press, 1961, p.1

³ Agyemang, Y. S. 2013. *The Religious Quest for Meaning in Life*. (Unpublished lecture notes).

⁴ Quarcoopome, T.N.O. *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: African Universities Press, 1987, p. 9.

⁵ Turner, H. W. 1981. *The Way Forward in the Religious Study of African Primal Religions*. In *Journal of Religion in Africa XII*, 1.

⁶ Quarcoopome, *ibid*, p.12

⁷ Agyemang, *ibid*,

The term **African** is used first, to suggest that it was founded and is practised by Africans and second, to distinguish it from other religions such as Christianity and Islam which are dominant in Africa today.¹ The religion has been part and parcel of African life. It is **traditional** because it is that which has been handed down from one generation to the other through oral means² for that is the proper meaning of the term. It is coined from the term tradition which in its strictest sense refers to those cultural features which are, in situations of change, 'to be continued or handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost'.³ The term traditional does not suggest that that the religion is ancient and does not have contemporary relevance. The religion continues to provide meaning in life for Africans. The mode of worship, articles for worship and rituals performed are strictly African. This assertion is to be taken with a great exercise of caution as one is likely to assume that the indigenous religion of the African does not make room for borrowing religious ideas from other religions. It does, however, even the borrowed ideas are indigenized to suit the African context.

The point must be made that African religion is more communalistic rather than individualistic. It is that which involves the whole community. Religion permeates every aspect of life be it politics - such as chieftaincy; economics- such as hunting, trading, fishing, farming etc. Thus, to the African, it is difficult to separate life and religion. From birth to death religion controls every stage of life.⁴ On this one scholar states, "*African Traditional Religion is the foundation of humanness in African society*".⁵ It is therefore not surprising that earlier scholars who took time to understand the African and his way of life concluded that the African is religious. Whilst Geoffrey Parrinder describes Africans as 'incurably religious people',⁶ John Mbiti says 'Africans are notoriously religious'.⁷

Can the origin and the founder of African Traditional Religion be known?

Awolalu and Dopamu assert that African Traditional Religion is a revealed religion. Yet both agree that the religion has no founder. While recognizing the intellectual audacity that inspired these eminent African scholars to make such an assertion, the issue is misleading and makes the argument logically inconsistent; a point to which I shall return later. The explanation these scholars offer for their claim that African Traditional Religion is a revealed religion, is that the religion "came into being as a result of human experience of the mystery of the universe".⁸ Even though the scholars do not specify the group to whom the reference of 'human experience' is made but let us assume that since the discussion is about Africans, it is made with Africans in mind. Another claim that needs clarification is the sense in which the term mystery is used but let us again assert that the sense implied in its use here retains the original meaning of the term and could refer to one of the following definitions by the an online dictionary:

1. 'One that is not fully understood or that baffles or eludes the understanding' or
2. 'A religious truth that is incomprehensible to reason and knowable only through divine revelation'⁹

The first definition would apply more correctly in the assertion of the two scholars. If the deduction made out of the above is correct, the assertion does not answer the question of origin of the indigenous faith. A much more misleading and yet confusing claim is the fact that it has no founder yet it is claimed to be a revealed religion. If it is a revealed religion, revealed to who, the Africans? through whom, the divinities or the ancestors?

Mbiti¹⁰ like Awolalu and Dopamu¹¹ attempts a discussion of the nature of religion in general. In his argument, he claims that religion can be seen in five main parts namely the beliefs; practices, ceremonies and festivals; religious objects and places; values and morals; and religious officials or leaders. According to Mbiti, no 'part by itself constitutes the entire meaning of religion'.¹² Thus, for African Traditional Religion to pass as a religion it must exhibit all five parts. Surprisingly none of these parts as outlined by Mbiti has direct reference to experience yet the issue of experience constitutes the foundation upon which Mbiti builds the argument of origin

¹ Mbiti, J.S. *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed., Oxford, Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991, p. 10.

² Awolalu, J. O. What is African Traditional Religion? *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Spring, 1976). World Wisdom, Inc. Retrieved from www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

³ See Graburn, N. H. H. What is Tradition? *Museum Anthropology* 24(2/3): American Anthropological Association, 2001, p. 6-11.

⁴ Mbiti, J. S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Oxford., Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989, p. 1

⁵ See Aylward Shorter, 'Secularism in Africa: Introducing the Problem'. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/42729537/Africans-Are-Notoriously-Religious>

⁶ Mbiti, 1989, p. 1

⁷ Mbiti, 1991, p. 16

⁸ Awolalu, J.O. and P.A. Dopamu *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979, p.27.

⁹ (Retrieved from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/mystery>, June 2013).

¹⁰ Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *Introduction to African religion*. London: Heinemann.

¹¹ Awolalu, J.O. and P.A. Dopamu *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979, p.27.

¹² Mbiti, 1975, p. 10.

of the indigenous faith. To quote him directly;

African Religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers. 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 his community.¹

In the study of African Traditional Religion, Idowu² warns African scholars not to be tempted to 'glorify the dead past of Africa' especially in the wake of nationalism. Unfortunately, many scholars have fallen to this temptation. It would seem that over the years, there have been attempts by African scholars to lift African Traditional Religion to the world stage in order to prove its existence and worth. These attempts have been occasioned by earlier description of Africa as a dark continent. The belief in African scholarship is that Western attitude to the African and his way of life, particularly his religion, has been non-recognition of the African religion and what his religion can offer. The description of the African Religion with derogatory terms such as barbaric, backward, heathen, idol worship, ancestral worship, stone veneration among others by Western writers is believed by African scholars as a deliberate attempt not to recognize the African religion. A critical evaluation of Western attitude to African religion reveals misrecognition rather than non-recognition of the African religion and culture. The former has the capacity to cast permanent damage on the personality of the individual. Misrecognition is not just evidence of lack of due respect but that which has the potential to 'inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred'.³

The enthusiasm to paint a good picture about African religion has inspired many to exaggerate and therefore made statements that are factually inaccurate and logically inconsistent. The above argument could not have been put better than the way Kofi Appiah puts it;

As pioneers in this field, many of the African scholars felt a strong need to defend the integrity of the African and the African way of life as such. In their apologetics they were disposed to the very western categories of thought with which Africans and their way of life had previously been dismissed as backward. This often led to certain observations that sometimes tend to be incoherent, and reactionary or romantic.⁴

The difficulty, in my opinion, many African Traditional Religion scholars face is that they have not been able to identify and even if they have, they assume the idea of a founder must be limited to an individual. Part of this problem is mainly because many of these scholars having received a western type of education still look at their indigenous faith with a western theoretical framework. What they profess to know about their religion is what outsiders (non-Africans) have said about them. In short the picture Africans paint of themselves as Africans is a carbon copy of a Western African picture which has been internalized.⁵

It would not be a sign of dishonesty to the academia, if as Africans we admit that we do not have records of the first man (African) who began having intuition with the divine. To make the point a lot clearer, one cannot identify the first African who began to give religious interpretation to the experiences of life but certainly it must have begun with someone and later the entire society became involved. Africans must have shared experiences together. They must have had questions to which they sought answers.

Foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam claim to be revealed religions and they have specific founders associated with the religions. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) is to Islam as Jesus Christ is to Christianity. The implication is that a revealed religion would always have the 'revealer' (the divine) and 'the revealee' (in this case the recipient of the revelation) who later becomes the founder of the revealed religion. If African Traditional religion is a revealed religion, the assertion that it has no founder is misleading and therefore defies logic.

To say that the religion is born out of the experiences of Africans defeats the first assertion that it is a revealed religion. It further implies that African religion is largely experiential, which is just one aspect of the six dimensions of religion that Ninian Smart outlines.⁶ Granted that the assertion is factually accurate and logically consistent, it would seem to suggest that the absence of life experiences equals absence of religion. Thus when the sense of life experiences is taken away, the African has no religion. This obviously is misleading. Yet as misleading as this assertion may be, these eminent scholars give us suggestions that Africans have always

¹ Mbiti, 1975, p.12.

² Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction*. London: SCM Press Ltd.

³ Taylor, C. 1992. The politics of recognition. In Gutmann, Amy. (Ed.). 1992. *Multiculturalism: Examining The politics of recognition*. New Jersey, United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, p. 26.

⁴ Appiah, S. K. 2000. *Africanness, Inculturation, Ethics: In Search of the Subject of an Inculturated Christian Ethic*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Pub Inc., p. 3.

⁵ Appiah, S. K. 2013. Continuity and Discontinuity in Traditional African Narrative Ethics. In *International Institute for Science, Technology & Education*. Vol 3, No 5.

⁶ see Agyemang, 2013.

responded to their immediate environment. What is worrying is that we must not be tempted to assume that all of Africans' responses to life experiences were religious.

The thesis of this paper is that the indigenous religion of the African has founders and the founders are our forebears. If the religion is largely experiential, there ought to be an 'experiencer' (or 'experiencers'). These experiencers are none but Africans themselves and they double as the founders of the indigenous faith. African Religion is more communal than individual. This is because according to Mbiti 'its beliefs are held by the community; and therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all these beliefs'.¹ If this assertion is correct, we can talk about founders and not a founder. These founders are none but African forebears themselves.

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