

The Refutation of the Disguised Denial of the Existence of God among the African People: A Philosophical Appraisal

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Abstract

Religion plays a prominent role in the conceptualization of God. Various attempts by different religious groups to establish and propagate their local conceptions of God and to uphold the sovereignty of the Absolute God have resulted in serious crisis which sometime leads to complexities. There are many problems in the field of Philosophy of Religion as to finding a perfect definition or conception of God. There are various responses to the question "What is God"? Some religions notably Christianity and Islam, tires to define the concept of God based on their various beliefs. God is described anthropomorphically in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. God in classical philosophy is portrayed as eternal, immutable, impassible, self-subsisting, self-sufficient and perfect being. Also God is conceived as the sovereign, evolving, developing being by the process philosophers. These various conceptions and interpretations can be etymologically traced to the cultural variants or divergences of the people. To these effects, each culture defines God according to its view of reality. In other words, a people's culturally conditioned view of reality determines its conception of God. To this end, the paper argues that the conception of God among the Africans is incontrovertible as the people have a well ordered and organized system of belief which centred on their perception of God.

Keywords: Refutation, Existence of God, African People, Philosophical Appraisal

1.0 Introduction

There is no language or culture without the word God, every human being uses the word God either in affirmation of His existence or denial. God is described like a peg on which different connotation can be legitimately hung. What then is the meaning of the word God or who is He? How does the human race conceive him? All these mind bogging philosophical questions have their answer deeply rooted in the traditional and cultural milieu of the people. Each people and society has its' own conception of God and so in essence there is no universal accepted definition of God.

However, it has to be noted that God is conceived in terms of being the creator of the universe. In other words, it boils down to the fact that those who affirm His existence say so having in mind that he is the sole creator of the universe while those who oppose or deny His existence do so with the conception that He is not the 'creator'. Summarily, Runes (1976:127) defines the concept of God thus:

As a name for the highest, Ultimate Being, assumed by theology on the basis of authority, revelation or the evidence of faith as absolutely necessary, but demonstration as such by a number of philosophical system, notable idealistic, monistic and dualistic ones.

The general belief of the West is that African concept of God is nothing but abstract being. They believe that the African God is:

...a remote and withdrawn God, totally unconnected with the daily affairs of man in particular, and the created world in general (Quarcoopome, 1987: 52).

Contrary to the above view concerning the African conception of God, the names and attributes of God in African belief, however, indicate that he is a reality and not an abstract concept (Quarcoopome, 1987: 52). To support the reality of God in African society, Idowu (1973, 149-150) says that "He (God) is one with whom man can enter into communion and communication at all time".

Many of the Western writers and scholars alike have written derogatorily about the African God. Claiming that mode of worshipping God by Africans is idolatry if at all they have this conception. Oluwole (1992:79) clearly shows that the West is derogatory when she observed that:

...in contra-distinction to 'supreme religions', African modes of worship are seen as idolatry, a belief in magic...because the African mind can only think in concrete terms, it is incapable of having a notion of God as an abstraction.

Various researchers in African studies have come up with the real fact about African God. They have proved most of the Western claims, not only factually wrong but also rationally unjustified deductions (Oluwole, 1992:79)). The West still further claim that African believe in the existence of well over four hundred deities taking the example of their claim from the Yoruba and Edo concepts of God, these numerous gods' shows that the Africa God result to the worship of idols.

Idowu (1962) and many other scholars have argued that this fact does not preclude the Yoruba (Africans in general) from believing in the existence of one Supreme God. To support this view (Omoregbe,

1999: 64) makes us understand that:

Like many other religions, African traditional religion is a monotheistic religion...A liberal monotheism, which allows that God be approached through subordinate beings that are his servants.

This assertion clearly shows that the Africans believe in a monotheistic God who is Supreme and has absolute power. He is referred to as the absolute controller of the universe who received direct worship in the past but who is now largely worshipped through the divinities and the ancestors. He is approachable. He can be approached on all occasions in life, from the cradle to the grave, as demonstrated in the detailed account of the Yoruba and Akan concepts of God (Quarcoopome, 1987: 52). Considering the above argument, Omoregbe argued that God in African indigenous religion is the Great Monarch, the Monarch of Monarchs... The Africans approach God through his chiefs (divinities) as they approach their monarch in socio-political life (Omogegbe, 1999:65). This explains why Africans do not worship God directly. He is worshipped indirectly through his divinities.

Some Western writers, prominent among whom are Leo Frobenius, Emil Ludwig and so on, claimed that God is neither worshipped nor considered in any other way (by Africans) but leads an entirely platonic, mythological existence. The point here is that many African scholars objected the views of these Western writers about belief in God. Idowu, (1962:141) asserted that:

God, the Almighty is known as unique, superlative and incomparable and possess divine attributes. Such includes, One who cannot be found out by searching, the invisible and ever-present one. The Yoruba cannot conceive in what form the deity of such attributes could be represented in images.

1.1 African Traditional Concept of God

In traditional African societies, the concept is very much alive like their counterpart in other parts of the universe. However, before discussing philosophical issues about God in Africa, there is need to isolate Africa from the other parts of the world. What we should do is to look at African traditional concept of God alone, without putting it in the robe of Judeo-Christian and Islamic faiths. With this, there would be philosophical judgment of issues that arise in the discussion of God in African traditional society.

The first question to be tackled is whether Africans have the conception of God. It has been widely read that Africans did not have any conception about God until their colonizers came to them. There have been lots of discussions in the issue of whether or not African have the conception of God and it has been clearly proved, that all society in African has the belief in the power and existence of God. This is clearly shown above. Africans believe that God is the giver of life and experience. It has to be noted that Africans like any other human race do have 'divine' and 'spiritual' experience and not only that go out to question the source and the giver of those experience. The African man get fascinated by the marveling natural things he sees around. The mystery of life is therefore the Africans to see, and they question mystery, this is turn leads to a more fundamental questions.

What is the mystery? The word 'mystery' has a great connection, and one can see how great the world is. In Gabriel Marcel's definition of God, he says that God is simply 'mystery'. So one can therefore, say that with the abundance of mysterious things around, Africans cannot but have the concept of God in their traditional set up. This can be seen in there folkloric experience and activity. The African concept of God is clearly shown in the folklores.

Anyanwu, (1986:56).writing on the life and experience of the Africans says that:

There is a divine power manifested itself in everyone and everything. In the universe, he asked who is giver of this experience. Who is the divinity whose power is experienced in the universe? Who is the author of the experience of divine qualities? The search for the author or giver of divine qualities leads to the belief of the existence of a 'divinity' or 'God'.

This shows that the African experience of the mysterious would make them to seek for the answer to questions that arise from these experiences.

It is also possible to prove that Africans had the conception of God before the so-called evangelists came, through the names given to God in African societies. It would not be easy to give a comprehensive or a single name for God among the Africans due principally to diversities in cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences. However, we shall make Nigeria to be our case study, but we should note that, despite the fact that we are limiting ourselves to Nigeria, we are still faced with the problem of diverse cultures and languages.

In spite of all odds however, we shall now try to examine some of the names given to God in Africa and then analyse these names, to justify that Africans have the conception of God like other continents. These names show not only the attributes of God but they also show the respect, adoration and obedience the Africans give to their God. The Yorubas are situated in South Western part of Nigeria. They are an important group in terms of number, historical significance and contemporary influence.

1.2 The Yoruba Names for God

The Yoruba name for the 'Supreme God' is '*Olorun*', '*Olodumare*' *Olorun* appears to be the more common

name of the present time but there is reason to think that this, popularity, is relatively recent, the name clearly means “owner of the sky”. For its clarity, many suggest that it is not very ancient and its monotheistic implication makes it acceptable to Islam and Christian. It should be noted however, that ‘*Oloun*’ is not identified with the sky in literal way but is understood as “association with the world beyond, to which the sky is the gate”.

Olodumare is a more mysterious name for God; it seems to be older Yoruba name for God. A possible meaning is;

One who has “*Odu*” child of *Ere* can refer to the features, in the *Ifa* divination system, *Ere* can mean python” or “boa” and *Olodumare* may then mean “*Olodu*, child of python” thus- the name may be associated with the cosmic serpent” *oshumare*, of whom the rainbow is also a manifestation (Idowu, 1962:20).

From the name *Olodumare*, it is possible to see the attributes of greatness, incomparable majesty, external and reliability of God.

The Igbo on own part, describe God has *Eze ndi elu* as he who dwells in heaven or the king of heaven. This description together with *Olorun* shows the uniqueness of God. He is distinct, he controls heaven and earth, but from the village point of heaven. It is the belief that God dwell in heaven. This eventually leads us to another issue, and the issue is not that of the remoteness of African God, it is said in certain quarters that the African God is “*Dues Incertus*” “*Dues remotus*”.

The above assertion is wrong, and this becomes fundamental when one considers the metaphysical position of the Africans. The Africans believe that the whole universe is made up of a “force” and the names given to God by the Africans or the Yoruba are essentially descriptive of the character of God and emphatic of the fact that he is a reality and not in abstract phenomenon (Quarcoopome, 1987:52-53).

The African world view is believed to be encapsulated in a “force” and God is not exclusive and this “force” is in hierarchical order and inter-woven. This force is described as a “spider-web” to show their inter-connectedness. Therefore, there is no way God can be regarded as “*Dues remotus*”. The Africans are in constant touch with their gods and this is even explained better by the numbers of sacrifices the African make.

1.3 The Attributes of African God

Since it has been stated that Africans have the conception of God from the time immemorial, it is now very imperative to show the attributes and qualities of the Supreme God among the Africans. God to the Africans is real and this has been explained by the Yoruba name of God. The fact that Africans observe the mysterious and changing phenomena of the world, allows a good interpretation of their experience to mean the existence of God (Momoh, 1988:76).

God among the Africans is *unique*. He is unfathomable, incomparable, indescribable, incomprehensive etc. This is the reason why Africans do not have a picture of image of him. The fact that he is the one with absolute sovereignty emphasizes His *uniqueness*; he is a unique kind of king. In Yoruba, the term “*Oba awon oba*” means King of kings.

It is noteworthy that Africans have the belief in a universal God. It is believed that God is the creator of the universe and all things therein. Another Yoruba name for God which explicitly explains this is “*Eleda*”. Yorubas usually refer to him as *Eleda Orun oun aye*, that is, Creator of the heavens and the earth. “*Eleda*” meaning “He who creates being”. He is believed to have created the entire existing things in the universe. Moreover, the Igbo describe him as “*Eze n di olu*”, that is, he who dwells in heaven or the king of heaven. The Yoruba call Him “*Olorun*”. He is identified with the sky which is His ‘mat’ and thus, is the “one whose Being spread over the extent of the earth; the owner of the mat that is never folded up” i.e. “*Eleni-ate-ika*”. The sky covers the whole universe and therefore, the African God is believed to sit on this mat which spreads across the whole universe. God is also called “*Oba aterere kale aye*” meaning “the king that spread all over the world. However, it has been noted that though Africans belief in a universal God, they however, do not see him as sharing common attributes with other gods outside their domain. Idowu however, is of the view that “the invention of a God in Africa is a derogation of His greatness and dignity” (Idowu, 1962:30, Awolalu, 1979:33). This assertion is wrong, because the Africans really hold God in high esteem and respect; they do things, which shows their respect and obedience to God.

Furthermore, it is important to know that the Africans belief in God that ‘infinitely perfect’. God does everything to perfection. The Yoruba call Him “*Oba-Asekan maku*” meaning king that do everything to perfection leaving nothing to chance. There may however, be controversy about the imperfection in the world. Since it is the belief of the Africans that God is perfect, how then do they explain the imperfection of things in the world? The Africans would promptly answer that all these imperfections are due to the handiwork of his ministers, these ministers are the divinities that heads each of the departments of the world and they are given full power by the Supreme Being. In addition, the imperfections in the world are attributed to the malevolent forces in the world and these are championed by the *Ajogun*, and or *Omoaraye*, who are the malignant forces in the world. In Igbo area of Nigeria, *Amadiora* is the minister for science and technology, while, in Yoruba area,

Sango, the god of thunder is the minister for lightening, Ogun the god of Iron heads the ministry of steel while “*Orisanla*” was entrusted with the task of creating the world and the things therein (Bascom, 1969: 125). The power of “*Orisanla*” for instance is manifest through the deformed, cripples, dwarfs, Albinos e.t.c. These are not mistakes but evidences of *Orisanla*’s power. They are called *Omo-Orisa*, the children of *Orishanla*.

The existence of ministers of God and their powers explain the frequencies of sacrifices that take place in Africa. It has to be pointed out that Africans do not worship idols as is often claimed in many quarters. However, the divinities are means to an end and not an end in themselves. Their powers are given to them by the Supreme Being (Nwosu, 1989:36).

1.4 Evaluation of African Belief in the Existence of God

It is apposite to evaluate our discussion on the plausibility of the conception of God among the African people. According to Appiah (1987:45), the Africans and particularly, the Yoruba hold God in high esteem and regard him as the Ultimate power that sustains and maintains the universe as well as controls everything within it. In addition, they have a tacit understanding that God created the universe out of nothing, that is, *ex-nihilo* and this for his own purpose and glory. The evidence of this can be seen in most of the folklores, songs, poems and aphorisms which they are affianced in. The African folklores then show God as the creator. The teaching which the African folklore has handed down is that the cosmos had a beginning and that God is the only Supreme Being that brought the universe into being by the unaided power of his word. To this end, they refer to him as *Oba a wi be, se be*, that is, the King who says and does what he says.

Another fact about the belief of the Africans about God’s existence is that through their folklore which they put into practice, we get to know God as the sustainer of all that he has brought into being. Far from the arguments of some Western writers that God is an absentee personality, who made the world and then left it to run itself, the Africans believe that God is not detached and remote from his creation. God continues to work on the creation at all time. Also, the Africans believe that God is intimately involved in the running of the universe and the forces of nature and also to them; God is in overall control of governments and communities. As such, the Africans believe that God is in ultimate control of all that he has created (Mbiti, 1967:167). Through the African folktales, sayings, songs, etc. it has clearly been shown that African man is physically dwarfed by the immensity of his surroundings.

Considering the attributes of God that have been discussed above, the Africans believe that there are certain aspects of Gods’ being that are *unique* to him and cannot be shared with any other being. For instance, we have the attributes discussed earlier are enough evidence to show that God among the Africans is a real God. The Africans believe that God is everywhere. That God is an *omnipresent* being. What the Africans belief in God is that he is the creator of nature and therefore, we should not confuse him with nature by taking pantheists position. At the same time, the Africans do not make the mistake of separating God from his creation (nature and man) and think of him as absent by taking deists position.

Africans also believe that God is powerful (Omnipotent) as we can see in the instances given above concerning the Yoruba believe in God. The African, believe that God’s power is shown by his role as the creator of all things, the judge of all men, and the one who will subdue all the forces of evil.

Africans also nurture the belief that God knows everything (Omniscient). The Africans believe that God’s knowledge follows from the universal presence. This is due to the fact that the folkloric experience of the Africans makes them sentient that God fills the heavens (*Orun*) and earth (*Aye*). Therefore, all things are open to his view and knowledge (Momoh, 1996:68).

Finally, the African believe that God has power over space and time (he is eternal and unchanging). The Africans conceive God as first and the last. God to the Africans has always existed, and he owes his existence to no one. The attributes of God which the Africans has shown, is reminiscent of some idealists within the western circle. The idea of God as conceived by the Africans is part and parcel of the enterprises of the idealists. The important thing to note is that the African conceptions of God showcases the idealist metaphysics and general philosophy which could be traced to the words of a pre-Socratic philosopher called Xenophanes who perceived God as follows:

- God is motionless
- God is ungenerated
- There is one God, great among gods and men
- God is not anthropomorphic
- God thinks and perceives as a whole
- God moves things by the power of his mind
- God is morally perfect.

1.5 Conclusion

However, since we have established that Africans believe in God and that their God is real going by his attributes which we have discussed, then we need to ask, whether God is spiritual or physical in form? This is necessary because when Africans speak of God; they call him names which portrays him both as a 'spiritual being' and a 'physical being'. There are traces of anthropomorphic conception of God in Africa. He is a king that gives order and expects obedience; he can hear the pleading of His worshippers.

The Africans also believe that God is spiritual, He is regarded as the "Highest soul" and the Yoruba would say "*Emi l' Olorun*" meaning soul is God or God is spirit. This explains the reason behind Anyanwu's comments that 'the Africans goes beyond the visible to an invisible but He is real and exists' (Anyanwu, 1984:56). Therefore, to the Africans, God is one with whom man enters into a covenant or communion within any place and at any time, one that is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable in mystery, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging constant, and reliable.

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