



The Pitfalls of Foreign Investigators on African Traditional Religion

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Abstract. It is obvious that the pioneer investigators on African traditional religion were the Westerners. It is believed that it is from these writers that the indigenous African scholars took over from. Despite this, these earliest investigators were faced with many pitfalls. They were many in the course of this; such as missionaries, travelers, colonial administrators and European explorers each have claimed authentic interpreters of African religion. Thus, some of these foreign investigators came with pre-conceived and ethnocentric ideas and refused to see anything good about the Africans, their religion and culture. The study relied majorly on secondary sources (published materials). Findings reveal that the pitfalls of the earliest investigators on African religion is due to misconception of the world-views of the Africans.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Pitfalls, Foreign investigators, The True Nature of African Traditional Religion.

1. Introduction

Proper knowledge of the Africans from the inside is fundamental to understand their religion and culture; because a people's culture and religion speak volume of their beliefs and practices. African traditional religion is a distinct religion with its distinct features in the sense that it has no historical founder nor its tenets defined and codified as the case with other world religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam which bear the object of systematic studies.

African traditional religion is so cherished by African peoples in the sense that it is this religion that connects the living descendants with their forebears. It is so knitted with the people that it pervades and permeates all dimensions of human existence. This explains why it becomes difficult to demarcate between the sacred

and the profane or between the spiritual and material spheres of life.

As Mbiti, (1969) Succinctly puts it:
Wherever the African is, there he is with his religion. He carries it to the fields where is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university. If he is a politician, he takes it to the House of Representatives (p.2).

The pervasiveness of African traditional religion, therefore, makes it difficult to have a strong grip on the subject. This essay, therefore, intend to discuss the pitfalls besetting the earliest investigators on African religion.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 African Traditional Religion

Ekwunife (1990) defines African traditional religion as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions such as myths, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pity-sayings and names/sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities (p. 1).

Furthermore, it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears

of the present generation of Africans (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p.26).

2.2 The True Nature of African Traditional Religion.

The religion is traditional in the sense that it originated from the peoples' environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported from outside to them. Africans are not converted into it; they are born into it. It serves the purpose of distinguishing African Religion from any other religion that has been brought to Africa through missionary and Islam propagation. It is based on oral tradition for its transmissions. It has no written literature, sacred scriptures or creedal forms. It has no reformers, preachers or missionaries that bring about a change in the religion from time to time as we have in other world religions (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 22).

Further, Africans believe in God. The people's idea or the concepts of God are derivable from His relation or disclosure of Himself through the created order as perceived by each society in Africa. That is why people call Him by different names in African societies depending on what they think He does. Among the Igbo He is Chineke (The God that creates) (Peters, 2009, p. 36). Among the Yoruba, He is Olodumare (The King or Chief Unique who holds the scepter, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth and he is at the same time permanently unchanging and reliable). Among the Edo, He is Osanobua or Osanobwa (the one who sustains, under pines and supports, the universe), among the Nupe, He is Soko (immense, great or the highest Deity that resides in heaven (Tasie and Ofuru, 2013, pp. 21-22). Among the Akans of Ghana, He is Nyame (The bright, majestic, splendid God who rules the universe). For the Africans, God is not only real but He is also believed to be known and worshipped (Metuh, 1987, pp. 77-82). Belief in divinities is also unshaken, divinities according to Awolalua and Dopamu (1979) are gods with small letter "g", believed to possess divine attributes since they are emanations from the Supreme Deity. They are said to be brought into being by the Supreme Being, hence they have no separate existence, but their existence is as permitted by the Supreme Deity, who cause them into being. As for their position and duties, the divinities were brought into being for a definite purpose, and the purpose of which is to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the universe. In other words, the divinities serve as intermediaries between God and man. The divinities, therefore, become channels through which sacrifices, prayers, and offerings are presented to the Supreme Being. They have temples, shrines and devotees with priests

and priestesses. So they are means to an end and not an end in themselves (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As for their census and names, the divinities are many and their numbers vary from locality to locality. Among the Yoruba, for instance, the number varies between 201, 401, 601 and 1700. With regards to their names, each divinity has a name, sometimes, the names are descriptive in the sense that they describe the true nature, character and functions of the divinities. For instance, in Yoruba, Jakuta, the divinity responsible for wrath, i.e. one who fights with stones is known in Nape as Sokogba, meaning God's axe (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As Imasogie (1981), pointed out, the Supreme Being having created the universe, appointed the divinities to the various departments of nature to carry out its purpose; hence there are, for instance, a divinity in charge of human procreation, a divinity responsible for death, another in charge of food production, yet another charged with the responsibility for bodies of waters, etc. According to hint, these divinities have full authority over their respective areas of influence, subject only to the power of the Supreme Being (p. 34):

Tasie and Ofuru (2013), observe that the divinities are highly personalized. Some as they noted, are conceived in gender terms as male or female. According to Tasie and Ofuru, the Ashanti, for instance, not only consider the earth to be a female divinity and second to God, but also observe Thursday as her day. Also, the Igbo, as they remarked also regard the earth to be God's daughter who protects people and helps with crops. Some of the divinities according to them are further conceived as having spouses as humans do. For Tasie and Ofuru, a telling example among the Yoruba are the goddess Osun and Oya both of whom are believed to be the wives of Sango, the divinity of thunder and lightning. They further noted that there are other divinities that are believed to be androgynous, possessing male and female characteristics. They pointed to the Egba and the Ewe who conceive Buruku in this manner (p. 43). Apart from this, the belief in spirits is also strong among the Africans.

Spirits, as Anyacho (1994) pointed out, are invisible beings which are capable of assuming different shape and form when they want to reveal themselves to man. According to Anyacho, they are believed to be created by God and as such are subordinate to Him (p. 247). In much the same vein, Omoregbe (1999) notes that spirits are believed to appear sometimes to people in human form (p.66).

As for their nature, spirits are not only abstract (i.e. they can take any form or shape and nature, but also ubiquitous in the sense that there is no area of the earth, any object or creature which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Spirit possesses, complex nature and attributes depending on the order in which it is being spoken of but generally, spirit is said to possess vital influence and force or power. As for their abode, spirits are believed to inhabit natural objects such as (trees, mountains, rivers, forests, etc and they are believed to be sacred, there are good and bad spirits. The good spirits are responsible for giving fortunes to people while the bad spirits include: *Ogbanje* born to die spirit) and ghost spirits which are spirits of those who died “bad death” and were not properly buried. Their spirit becomes wanderers and haunts the living (Peters, 2009 pp. 4 1-42). Thus, Africans also believe in the ancestors. Mbiti (1969), sees the ancestors as the deceased members of their families who are still remembered and venerated by members of their families. Any wonder, he describes them as the “Living dead” (P. 83). In much the same vein, Tasié (2009) also sees the ancestors as those who lived a very good life while on earth and died “good death” at a ripe old age and were accorded burial rites befitting their status (P. 43). According to Anyacho (1994), “the ancestors are those who are believed to have acquired extra-human powers in the afterlife which enables them to intervene in the lives of the living members of their families” (P. 257). Thus, they are regarded as the benevolent forefathers; the nearest and closest to man (Ugwu and Uwueye, 2004, P.46). Also, the deceased departed are considered to have keen interest in the affairs of their living descendants which is why they are regarded as the watch-dog of their families or lineages (Benjamin, 1976, P. 126).

For Madu, (1964), the ancestors were human beings, who, having lived in this world, experienced the sufferings of humanity and died. By virtue of their death, according to Madu, they were ushered into the land of their forebears by full burial rites accorded to them here on earth, having suffered with humanity on earth, and having entered into the blessedness of the ancestral land, he is in better position to appreciate the suffering of man (P.66).

According to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), ancestors are the departed members of the family who still maintain close relationship with their survivors. Though, no longer physically visible, yet their participation in family and patrilineage matters of the group are practically felt (P. 120). According to them, there are two categories of ancestors in West Africa

namely, the living dead and the ghost. The former, according to them, are the group of departed members of the family and kin unit members that can be remembered by their names and survivors. They are normally numerous; yet, they are remembered by their names and physiognomy identity while the latter, according to them, are the departed people, whose identity is in the fast-fading memory of the living, or even forgotten. Those who know them have equally died. The names of this category of ancestors as they further noted can be remembered, but their physique cannot be inferred or described (P. 121).

As for their qualities, it is not all who have departed become ancestors rather, there are qualities or attributes that qualify the departed to be an ancestor. To become an ancestor first, one must have children (i.e. parenthoods), for Owete and Iheanacho, this is important because it is the children that perpetuate the ‘existence’ of the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc. According to them, it is not even merely having children, but at least a male child. This is why procreation as they further noted are almost norms for actualizing man’s physical essence, union and fulfillment in group life-family, kindred and community. According to them, perpetual bachelorhood is discouraged, abhorred and looked upon with disdain, as a condition that is capable of facilitating the extinction of a kin group and, an ancestral lineage (P. 121).

Following closely is advanced age. For Owete and Iheanacho (2009) the departed man must have lived a long life. Such longevity according to them is believed to be a manifestation of the individual’s good relation with the gods of the land. For them, this is against the background of the people’s belief, that death does not ordinarily strike, especially with young people as its victim. Death at such stage of live according to them, come as a result of sin committed against supernatural beings, or as a result of sorcery, and evil hands at work. Therefore, for one to live to an advanced age, as they further noted portend that he has not committed offence (s) against supernatural beings, and by extension is in good terms with his neighbours (pp. 121-122).

In addition to this is performance of burial rites. The funeral rites that precede ancestorhood, according to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), are in two phases; those performed before interment and the post interment rites, popularly called ‘second burial.’ For them, all are required for ancestorhood status. According to them it is a common belief among West African societies that it is the full performance of the second burial rites that send the departed ‘home,’ and in dignified peace.

Following this is good life. For them, this is important because a man who lived a bad life is not given not only normal and decent funeral rites, but also not propitiated as such. But in recent time, this factor according to them is somehow being played down on, as result of modern influences as the wealthy is always remembered and propitiated by his children, irrespective of his life. Even at that, it is the good according to them that is more often remembered and propitiated by the entire ancestral lineage, especially in the group and community assembly. In many West African societies, an ancestor as they further noted must not therefore, die of mysterious disease, suicide and many other circumstances that are abhorred by the given community. Above all, a complement to good life as they finally noted is 'good death' (pp. 122-123).

With regard to their relationship with the living, they are believed to be closely related to their families and kindred, retaining their status and responsibilities as heads and parts of the institutions as they were while living as human beings on earth. Here, it follows that death is conceived as a mere extension of life on earth, to the hereafter as spirit. In this new state, communication and communion, with the ancestors are only possible at the spiritual realm; while in the spiritual world, the ancestors still show concern and interest in the affairs of their living members. Equally, the living members still see them as older people from whom their life on earth began and have meaning. Also, the ancestors are not only close to their relations, they are also aware of things that will bring progress to their people and those that could be in the contrary. Here, the new state of being, place the order relatives who have departed, closer to God and other spiritual entities. Here, the living used them, and they readily act as intermediaries between them (the living), and the spiritual world which embrace all spiritual forces including God.

Ancestors also feed the living back with information from the unseen supersensible world. The departed are therefore the closest link the living people have to the network of communication at the spiritual level of man's absence. In addition to giving the departed full burial rites, the living relations, try to appease and heed to their instructions. Yet, they are remembered and invited at gatherings, to come, share, and commune with the living, especially when the summon is at the ancestral shrine while the living try to know from them the 'state of things' through divination, the forebears could seize, somebody to prophecy their wish and resolve on family or kindred issues.

They also reveal themselves through other manifestations and signs, like in dreams and totems. Some medicine man claims to have received knowledge of medicine and healing from ancestors through this process (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, P. 124). As for their names, they are called different names in different African societies. They are called *baba-nla* in Yoruba, they Igbo called them *ndiiche*, and they are called *samanfo* in Akan (Ghana). Also, in Kalabari they are called *duen* and in Ashanti of Ghana, they are known as *asamanfo*. For the Isoko they are known to be *esemo* (Tasie, 2009, P. 43).

As for whether the ancestors are worshipped or venerated, here, they are not worshipped, rather they are venerated. To the West African people, the reason for this is that death is not the end of one's interaction with his relatives, rather it is a change to "another being" different from the living, yet, maintain, participate and share in the activities of their kins-family and kindred. They have departed, yet, are "practically felt" by their survivors. It is in this light that ancestors are recognized, respected, and venerated. As for the reason for the veneration of ancestors, here, the veneration of ancestors among West African societies encourages and strengthens unity among the living members of their families and patrilineal kingship group. For instance, one's ancestral lineage, according to Owete and Iheanacho, (2009) is a binding force for them, people born to such kin group are "brothers and sisters". No matter the degree of quarrel between members of kindred, assembly before their ancestral shrine as they further noted can never be affected.

Explaining further, people under one ancestral lineage as they noted share in common-legends and myths; sacred days; totems; agricultural seasons; as well as land and timber (pp.128-129). Apart from this, the annual sacrifice (obligatory sacrifice) to commemorate the beginning of the ancestor festival in many West African communities brings kinsmen and relations together for a re-union. To the living, sharing the flesh of the annual sacrifices together for them is like being fed by one mother with on dish and spoon.

Kinsmen in the diaspora, those at home, and the departed as they noted come together this day, at the ancestral shrine. Having come together, dialogue is possible as the living dialogue amongst themselves on one hand while the living join voice to speak to their departed members on the other hand. This flow of communication is characterized by recall of memorable events, and reference to the life and history of the lineage, in which both the living and the departed are embraced. In addition, the blood of the

sacrificial victims poured before ancestral shrines which is a symbol of bond reaffirms the living's commitment to maintaining the values of the lineage. Thus, it also serves as renewal of covenant- of cordial relationship between the living and the departed (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, pp. 128-129).

3. The Pitfalls Besetting The Foreign Investigators on African Traditional Religion

The earliest investigators on African tradition religion never had a thorough investigation about the people and their religion due to number of factors. First, there were many in the course of this. Such as missionaries, travelers, colonial administrators and European explorers each have claimed to be authentic interpreters of African religions (Chukwuma, 2009, p. 21). It is obvious, that it is from these writers that we have most of our information even at that some of them had never been to Africa while many of these scholars who visited never stayed long in Africa so they were not acquainted with the underlying reality of the religion (Mbiti, 1969, p. 6). Thus, these early writers were full of bias in their work as they (especially the missionaries) described Africa as a dark continent administered by the devil while their mission being to liberate it from the control of the devil (Tasie, 2008, p. 12). Apart from this, some investigators on the other hand were not willing to learn from the people they considered to be inferior to them and so they ended up comparing their religion with that of the so called natives. This false consciousness earned them with the outcome of accepting appearance for reality. As (Mbiti, 1969) succinctly puts it:

Since they could not find many things in the religion that resembled their own magnificent temples, written scriptures, ministers of religion of their own caliber they concluded rather erroneously that African religion was not a religion (p.9)

This bias description and study of African religion reduced African patterns of life to object of mockery. Affirming this Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) assert:

Then come the question could the God of African imagination be the same God as known in the western world? The answer to this question leads conclusively to the various errors of terminology or mistaken identity or obnoxious labels to which the foreign investigators have always treated themselves (pp. 12 – 13).

Another cogent factor for the inability of the foreign investigators to make a thorough investigation on the African religion is the vastness of the size of African

continent and its complex culture. Africa is a large continent inhabited by people with different religious beliefs and practices. This makes it the more complex for these foreign investigators to come out with plausible investigations on African religion and culture. They based their research on the culture and traditions of few African tribes and this not only made it difficult for foreign investigators to understand African culture and religion but also led to sweeping generalization and distortion of the beliefs and practices of the African peoples (Ajayi, 1981, p. 16).

Thus, lack of proper knowledge about the true nature of African religion is another factor why foreign investigators did not make a concise investigation on the people and their culture. That is why these early writers described Africa as a home of divinities. These foreign investigators never understand the relationship between God and divinities, and that of the divinities and man. They did not also know that divinities are emanations from the Supreme Deity and were brought into being for a definite purpose, and the purpose is to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the universe. In other words, the divinities serve as intermediaries between God and man, and frequently worshipped through them and they receive day-to-day sacrifices. They have temples, shrines and devotees with priests and priestesses (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 19).

Added to the above factor is the misconception and misinterpretation of the world-views of the Africans. Some of these foreign investigators who visited Africa, came with pre-conceived and ethnocentric mind sets. With these tendencies, they refused to see anything good about the Africans. For them, everything about the people is false and their religion unpleasant. To describe the Africans as a physically and spiritually a dark continent where nothing interesting could be found, a people bereft of culture and any social institution is the height of this misconception of the world-view of the people of Africa. According to Kalu (1980), world-view “is the unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concept which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of individuals and communities in them” (p. 39). In much the same vein, madu, (1996) explains it to mean “how the world is conceived, contemplated, and perceived by people who live in it especially within the ambit of human environment” (p. 1). Throughout the world, no world-view is the same and can never be the same. The African peoples are hospitable, tolerant and their religion accommodating. A telling example here is that before the coming of Christianity and Islam African religion has been in existence. When these two religions came, it

accommodates them and co-existence side by side with them on the same environment without friction (Ekwunife, 1992, p. 19). Thus, proper knowledge of a people's world-view is key to understand the people, and their religion. In addition to this is that those who came to Africa did not come to study scientifically but came to verify information they had already gathered from books. Apart from this, they had the constraint of not understanding local languages. As a result, local idioms eluded them and consequently, they could not interpret African religious phenomena. Furthermore, as earlier pointed, they were not prepared to learn from African people whom they had concluded were inferior. They merely came to compare their religion with that of the Africans and as such went back home with shallow ideas and wrong concepts about African peoples (Olumati and Tasié, 2009, p.1).

4. Findings

The findings from the study revealed that:

The earliest investigators on African Traditional Religion never had a thorough investigation about African peoples and their religion. This is a truism because they were many in the course of this exercise, such as missionaries, travelers, colonial administrators and European explorers, each of whom see it from different perspectives. For instance, the missionaries described Africa as a dark continent administered by the devil while their mission being to liberate it from the control of the devil.

Some of the investigators who really visited African peoples to undertake a study of their religion and culture, came with pre-conceived and ethnocentric ideas. This explains why they were not prepared to learn from African people whom they have concluded as inferior and as a result they refuse to see fact on ground as the ought to be

They merely came to compare their religion with that of the Africans. This is a fact because since they did not find any resemblance in African religion compared to their own magnificent temples, written scriptures, ministers of the rank of their religion, they concluded rather erroneously that Africans have no idea of God and that in African there was no religion.

5. Conclusion

Proper knowledge of the Africans from the inside is key to understand the people and their religion. This is fundamental to avoid bias and misconception of a people's beliefs. Thus, however, explains the reason why the foreign investigators on African religion had pitfalls on the course of this exercise. These foreign

investigators came with pre-conceived and ethnocentric mindsets and so refused to consult the people to know about their religion and culture. The true nature of African traditional religion worthy of note, here is that the belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is sacrosanct among the Africans. Though it is worshipped and approached through his intermediaries (divinities). Although the paper acknowledges the input of these earliest investigators as the pioneer scholars to undertake the study of African traditional religion in the sense that it is from these scholars that we have most of our information about the religion.

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