

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A CONCEPTUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

There has been a divergent view regarding the concept and philosophy of African Traditional Religion. Some have seen Africans as not having the capacity to reason on the concept or the philosophy of God. This led them into giving all forms of derogatory names to African Traditional Religion. This paper examines the concept and philosophy of African Traditional Religion from the viewpoint of Africans. It presents the worldview, philosophical nature and foundation of African Traditional Religion. It also shows that the worship of God in African Traditional Religion is through sacrifices, offerings, singing, dancing and prayers. The paper also considers the concept of evil, ethics, justice and time in African Traditional Religion. It concludes that Africans knew God before the coming of the missionaries to Africa.

(Key Words: traditional religion; philosophical; belief; concept; God).

INTRODUCTION

The fact that Africans are notoriously religious is no longer an issue for debate among scholars today. This is because various peoples of Africa own a religious system and a set of beliefs and practices which bind them together to their Ultimate. This is why A. C. Leonard argues that

The religion of these natives [Africans] is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principle on which their law is dispensed and morality adjudicated. The entire organization of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it. Like the Hindus they eat religiously, drink religiously and sing religiously. (1966: 429).

This fact of the intertwining of religion and secularity in Africa has created a problem when trying to understand the thought and reasoning of Africans. This is why the process of establishing a well thought-out philosophy in Africa for Africa by Africans has taken a long time in becoming widely accepted, though so many African Philosophers such as Mbiti, Onyewuenyi, Asouzu, Omoregbe, Wiredu and so many others are doing their best.

Philosophy has been defined etymologically as the love of wisdom. Ozumba explains that philosophy “has been variously defined as the handmaid of clarification, as the search for the ultimate meaning of sentence, and it is also seen as consisting in critical thinking, reflection and analysis of concepts” (2007: 71). Hopper adds that philosophy tries to give the analysis of the various concepts making sure that these concepts are used properly. As such philosophy can be seen as conceptual analysis (1976: 1).

Since there are no sacred books on which to base the study of African traditional religion except on the proverbs, folklores, oral tradition, ethics and morals of African societies, we shall, in this study, critically analyze some major concepts of African traditional religion in order to establish how Africans reason about the world around them, especially in reference to their religion. This paper shall concentrate on African cosmology (world view), the philosophical nature and foundation of African traditional religion, the concept of time and the worship of God in African traditional religion. We shall finally analyze briefly the concept of evil, ethics and justice in African traditional religion.

AFRICAN COSMOLOGY (WORLDVIEW)

Etim, E. Okon has seen cosmology as “the sum total of people’s opinion concerning life, happiness, fears, purpose of life, death and after-life. It is the fundamental commonalities of a given culture such as folkways, mores, language, human productions and social structure” (2006: 4) Emefie Ikenga-Metuh in Okon describes a people’s worldview as “the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature, structure of the universe and the interaction of its beings with particular reference to man” (2006: 4).

There are two major categories of worldview namely, the material worldview and the religious worldview. The material worldview sees the cosmos as a product of chance which has no meaning and has no end. For those who adopt this kind of world view, every occurrence, whether sickness or natural disaster is a product of chance. On the other hand, the religious worldview sees the cosmos as having a great meaning and purpose, therefore every happening is interpreted based on what the people perceive as its meaning or purpose. Redfield in his description of worldview adumbrates:

Of all that is connoted ‘culture’, worldview attends especially to the way a man, in particular society sees himself to all else. It is the properties of existence as distinguished from and related to the self. It is in short, a man’s idea of the universe it is that organization of ideas that answers to a man with questions: ‘Where

am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things?’ (1952: 31).

From Redfield’s explanation we can deduce that African worldview is purely religious. This corroborates Shorter’s view when he said “...Africans are notoriously religious” (1978: 49). Since African worldview is a religious one, it therefore means that religion and religious practices are their waking thought. This is why their entire culture is permeated with religious practices. Mbiti has this to say about African culture intertwining with religion.

Religion permeates into all the department 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 (1969: 1).

In corroboration with Mbiti, Ezeanya agrees that in Africa “life is religion, and religion is life” (1980: 324). This means that religion could not be explained away in Africa. Whoever tries it will be seen as a stranger to Africa.

With the above issue of African worldview in mind it becomes easier to understand the philosophy of African traditional religion. It is the philosophy that deals with how Africans see the world around them. It is a religious world where every life happenings are traceable to a particular spirit which must be appeased.

Africans see the universe as created by the Supreme Being. This Being is the same as the Christian God and is known by various names in Africa. These names were adopted by Christians when translating the name of God into African languages. They do not agree with the chance perception of those whose worldview is materialistic nor do they agree with the big-bang-theory of the universe. This can be seen in various myths and creation stories in Africa. In some accounts according to Mbiti “God made the heavenly part of the universe first, and then, standing on it, he created the earth (1975: 32). Some myths believe that God created the earth first, and then, standing on it, he created the heaven. Mbiti narrates that in some myths, “the entire universe was created in one act” (1975: 32).

As regards the nature of the universe, many African societies believe that the universe is made up of the visible (material) and the invisible (immaterial). In other areas, some

African societies see the universe as being made up of three partitions or “three-tier creation namely: the heavens, the earth and the underworld, which lies below it” (1975: 32).

The Africans see man as the center of the universe. This concept of man as the center of the universe may be found in other religions and so could serve as a theme for comparative study with other religions. He is the Priest that links the universe with God who created and sustains it.

PHILOSOPHICAL NATURE AND FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

We have examined the worldview of Africans and have found out that their worldview is a religious one and that they see God – the Supreme Being as the creator and sustainer of the universe with man at its center. In this part of the paper, we shall consider the nature, features and foundation of African traditional religion with the view to understanding what the religion is truly made up of.

PHILOSOPHICAL NATURE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The first question which we are set to answer in this paper is what is African Traditional Religion. Is it the same as Animism? Does it share the same nature with Christianity, Islam and other Asian religions?

J. Omosade Awolalu, in his work “Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion” writes

When we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is “written” everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples’ myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young and old (1976: 275).

The above passage serves as a clear picture of the nature of African Traditional Religion. We shall therefore analyze it to show the true nature of the religions of Africans.

(a) The above statement by Awolalu makes it clear that African Traditional Religion is a revealed religion. When the word ‘revealed’ is used here in reference to African Traditional Religion, we are not saying that it came in the same way Judaism, Christianity or Islam was revealed. It is rather revealed in the sense that it came into existence as a result of human experiences of the mystery of the universe. (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 27). As the forebears of Africans reflected on their experiences, they responded rather intuitively to the situations that surrounded these experiences. These responses which happened to different peoples of Africa in different ways and at different times became their religion. This is why we have many forms of among different tribes in Africa.

This religion has no founder like Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity; rather it evolved slowly through a long period of time, and experienced a situation of continuities and discontinuities (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 27).

(b) It is a traditional religion. When we use the word traditional in reference to African religion, we are not stressing its primitive nature as some opine nor are we stressing that it is a fossil religion – a religion that is incapable of adapting to changes.

African religion is traditional for the following reasons:

(i) It is a religion that evolved from the personal experiences of the peoples of Africa.

(ii) It is a religion that links the people who now live it and practice it with their forebears.

(iii) It is regarded as traditional because it originated from the peoples’ environment and on their soil (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 28).

(iv) African religion is traditional because Africans were not converted into it like Christianity or Islam and others. It was not imported into Africa neither was it preached to Africans rather “each person in Africa was born into it, lives it, practices, and is proud to make it his own” (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 28). The word Traditional is therefore meant to distinguish it from other religions that came into Africa through missionary zeal and propagation.

(c) This religion has no written scripture like other religions but is orally transmitted from one generation to another through songs, liturgies, proverbs, short sayings, myths, and others. This makes it prone to experience exaggerations, modifications and distortions yet the kernel of the religious beliefs and practices remain intact.

(d) Sources of studying this religion are through oral tradition. Idowu explains that these oral traditions which serve as the vehicle for studying African Traditional Religion

Constitute the scriptures as well as the breviaries of African Traditional religion: therefore, no one can expect to see the religion from the inside unless he proceeds through him. They are, in fact, probably of more value to the student than some printed scriptures and common orders, because they are indeed 'living and active' (1973: 83).

For a study of African Traditional Religion to be successful, the scholar must carefully study the myths of the people for there-in lies their philosophy of origin of the universe. This is because:

A myth is a vehicle for conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man's experiences in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man's relation to the supersensible world. It endeavors to probe and answer questions about origins and meanings and purposes. These answers are naturally clothed in stories which serve as means of keeping them in the memory as well as handing them down from generation to generation (Idowu African Traditional Religion... 1973: 84).

Aside from myths, there are liturgies which prescribe forms of ritual for public worship. This serves as the vehicle of communication between man and the Divine Being.

Another source of studying this religion is through songs. As songs are so much in Africa which enrich African heritage; these songs are employed in worship, in naming ceremonies, in wedding, in funeral, in wrestling, during cultivation of farm, in working, in going to war, in praising the ruler, in rocking babies to sleep and so many other activities. They express joy, sorrow, assurances, hopes and fears of the future and life after death. Thus in songs according to Awolalu and Dopamu, the peoples' doctrinal and philosophical outlook are expressed (1979: 31).

Another source of studying African Traditional Religion is through a body of organized or systematic recitals connected with the cult of the oracle divinity. This is most common among the Yoruba of Nigeria. These recitals contain names, attributes, explanations about the nature and character of God and divinities. Awolalu and Dopamu further explain that these recitals "proffer material of immense value on the peoples' philosophy, theology and history" (1979: 31). Other sources include pithy sayings, proverbs, adages, epigrams and riddles which are formulated from human experiences and reflections from time immemorial.

These oral traditions can be found or preserved in “arts and crafts, symbols, shrines and sacred places” (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 32).

From the foregoing, it is clear that a study of African Traditional Religion is a study in the totality of the peoples’ way of life. This therefore means that the philosophy of African Traditional Religion does not exist in well articulated body of knowledge as it is in the Western Philosophy, but is interwoven in the religion and culture of Africans.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Bolaji Idowu (Olodumare, 1962: 137-202) has enunciated five component elements of African Traditional Religion. These five elements he called the structures of African Traditional Religion, while Awolalu and Dopamu see them as the features of West African Traditional Religion (1979: 32-35). In this work we shall look at these five elements as the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion. These five features or foundation are, belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in the ancestors and belief in the practice of magic and medicine.

These five elements are the philosophical pillars on which the study of African Traditional Religion rest. Apart from the study of the nature of the religions of Africa, these five elements form the central tenets of African religion and philosophy. We shall do a brief summary of these pillars

(a) **Belief in God:** The concept of belief in God in Africa forms the bedrock of every religious worship and ceremony. It is an idea that is fundamental to African religion. Africans believe in the existence of a supreme primordial being, the Lord of the universe. He is the Supreme Primordial Being, the author and father of other gods. He is known in Africa by the names given to Him. Ekeopara explains that “the names by which God is called in Africa are descriptive of his character and the reality of his existence... to Africans and convey in clear terms the religious [and philosophical] thinking and experience of the Africans” (2005: 16).

The myths in Africa show his creative power, his ability to sustain, protect and guide his creation. His attributes are seen in the names given to their children such as Chidinma in Igbo meaning “God is good”, Olorunfemi in Yoruba means “God loves me”, Onyemachi meaning “Who knows God?” depicting God’s unknowability. God cannot be fully known or explained.

(b) **Belief in divinities:** These are divine beings that derive their being from the Supreme Being. They are created to serve God’s will and sometimes manifest his

attributes. They are messengers of God and so serve him in the monarchic theocratic control and maintenance of the universe. They also serve as intermediaries between God and man (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 34).

(c) Belief in spirits: Spirits usually make natural phenomena their place of habitation though these things may be destroyed without destroying the spirits. This is because they have the power to incarnate into anything at will. They are separate and separable entities and the material objects they inhabit are but channels through which the spirits are approached. These spirits are ubiquitous and so are feared by people. So many channels can be used to appease them such as sacrifices, offerings, and others.

(d) Belief in the ancestors: Ancestors are spirits of dead Africans especially those who died at ripe good old age and who lived a worthy life while on earth and left a legacy before their death. Mbiti calls them the “living dead” while others see them as ‘our dead fathers’, ‘dead forefathers’. Dopamu in Ekeopara explains that “belief in ancestor-ship depicts the African life as that of an unending fellowship in the community of one’s kit and kin who had gone before into the world beyond” (Qtd in Ekeopara, 2005: 22).

(e) Belief in the practice of Magic and Medicine: In African environment, there are certain forces that fight against man’s progress in life. This is why the use of magic and medicine became very expedient in order to help man conquer and subdue his environment. They are either used for good or for bad. The practice of magic and medicine enables an African to procure what cannot be obtained in the ordinary way. Among those who use their magical powers for harm include such people as the sorcerers and witchcrafts, while those who use their power for good include medicine people who treat people for various ailments and those who exorcise spirits out from those who were possessed.

WORSHIP OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The days when some scholars and early Christian Missionaries assumed that God is not worshiped in African Traditional Religion have gone. For instance, Dierich Westerman stated that God to the Africans is not “the object of a religious cult and is of small or almost no significance in practical religion” (qtd in Offiong, 2001: 14). According to Idowu, this impression is borne out of the fact that God is not worshipped directly by the Africans and nowhere is there a place of worship set aside for God (qtd in Offiong 2001: 14).

African peoples respond in many and various ways to their spiritual world of which they are sharply aware. This response generally takes on the form of worship which is eternalized in different acts and sayings. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or

extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed (Mbiti, *African Religions...*, 1969: 58). He also adds that African worship is being regulated by both immediate needs and inherited practice. Worship is 'Offered' rather than meditational, in the sense that it is expressed in external forms, the body 'speaking' both for itself and the spirit (58). It is in this assertion that Quarcoopome in Offiong, has defined "Worship" as the spontaneous expression of man's experience of the divine being who is considered to be the ultimate reality (qtd Offiong, 2001: 14).

Though in some African languages there is no word for worship as such, rather we find other words like 'to pray', 'to sacrifice', 'to perform rituals', 'to make an offering', and so on. These words describe things and actions which are directed towards God and spiritual being (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 1975: 54). He therefore defines Worship as "a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world". They (African people) perform acts of worship to keep alive the contact between the visible and invisible worlds, between men and God (1975: 54).

SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS

Some of the many ways Africans worship the Supreme Being is through sacrifices and offerings. Sacrifices and offerings are important elements of worship and are the essence of every religion. Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religion* postulates that, the practice of making sacrifices and offerings is found all over Africa. By this practice material or physical things are given to God and other spiritual beings. This act marks the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet, and shows man's intention to project himself into the invisible world. People make sacrifices and offerings of almost any animal or object (1975: 57). Mbiti in his book *African Religions and Philosophy* also opines that, sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples (1962: 58). In the same vein, Idowu explains that sacrifices and offerings are means of contact or communion between man and the deity. Sacrifice and offering are the means by which man maintains established relationship with his object of worship (*Olodumare*, 1962: 120).

Making distinction between sacrifices and offerings, Mbiti writes: "Sacrifices involve the shedding of the blood of human beings, animals or birds; offerings do not involve blood but concern the giving of all other things, such as foodstuffs, water, milk, honey or money" (*Introduction to African Religion*, 1975: 59). The kind of situation that calls for a sacrifice may include drought, epidemics, war, raids, calamity, insect pests, and destructive floods (59). For examples, the Akamba, and Gikuyu people of Kenya make sacrifices on great occasions, such as at the rites of passage, planting time, before crops ripen, at the harvest of

the first fruits, at the ceremony of purifying a village after an epidemic, and most of all when the rains fail or delay. The Gikuyu use sheep of a particular colour; but the Akamba use oxen, sheep or goat of one colour. The Akan and Ashanti people of Ghana have altars in their homesteads at which they make offerings of food, especially eggs and wine. These are made to God, with prayers for the wellbeing of the people (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 1969:59). Sacrifices and offerings are made by people in order to draw the attention of God to their needs. The major purpose of sacrifices and offerings is to maintain right relationship with God.

SINGING AND DANCING IN WORSHIP

God is often worshipped through songs, and dancing and African people are very fond of singing. Many of the religious gatherings and ceremonies are accompanied by singing which not only helps to pass on religious knowledge from one person or group to another, but helps create and strengthen corporate feeling, identity and solidarity. Some of the songs are used in pacifying or hushing babies, in marking the birth, initiation, marriage or death of a person (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1975: 67). Through music, singing and dancing accompanied by clapping of hands and beating of drums, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship. The music and dancing penetrate into the very being of the worshipping individuals. Afterwards people feel satisfied in spirit. (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 1969: 61).

PRAYERS, INVOCATIONS, BLESSINGS AND SALUTATIONS AS MEANS OF WORSHIP

(a) **Prayer:** Is the most common act of worship among African people and most African prayers are short, extempore, and to the point, though there are also examples of long and formal prayers. It is also worth noting that majority of prayers and invocations are addressed to God, and it is also important to note that Africans' prayers are not formally recorded. Few examples to illustrate the concepts and content of African prayers are as follows: the Bachwa Pygmies of the Republic of Congo pray when there is sickness, and before undertaking a journey or going to hunt, asking God to heal the sick, prosper the traveler and give game to the hunter. The Bambuti Pygmies also of Republic of Congo also pray in difficulties, especially when there is a thunderstorm of which they are terrified. Prayer in the event of a thunderstorm goes like this:

Grandfather, Great father, let matters go-well with me, for I am going into the forest;

Or, if they are already in the forest when it arises:

Father, Thy children are afraid; and behold, we shall die! (Mbiti, *African Religions...*, 1969: 62).

b) **Invocations:** These are common versions of prayer used by Africans. Invocations are short and spontaneous form of prayer asking God to intervene for a particular purpose. They may be in the form of: ‘God, give us rain!’; ‘God give you fruit!’; ‘Help me o God’ (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1969: 65).

c) **Blessing:** Pronouncing and requesting of formal blessings play an important role in the social and religious life of African peoples. Hence, formal blessing is another form of prayer. The person who gives the blessing is always older or higher in status than the one who receives the blessing. The blessings take such form as ‘May God go with you’, ‘God preserve you and keep you until you see your children’s children’, ‘May God help you’, ‘May God bless you’.

d) **Salutations:** Greetings and farewells take on the form of prayer in a number of societies. For instance, among the Banyarwanda people of Rwanda and Barundi people of Burundi when two people are parting, one says, ‘Go with God!’, to which the other responds ‘Stay with God!’ (Mbiti, 1969: 66).

The Concept of Evil, Ethics and Justice in African Traditional Religion

The Concept of Evil in African Traditional Religion

The concept of evil in African Traditional Religion is the notion of ‘taboos’ or what is ‘morally wrong’. According to Mbiti, in every African indigenous society, there exists many laws, customs, set forms of behaviour, regulations, rules observances and taboos which constitute the moral code and ethics of a given community or society. (1969: 205). There are many things held to be morally wrong and evil, such as: robbery, murder, rape, telling lies, stealing, being cruel, saying bad words, showing disrespect, practicing sorcery or witchcraft, interfering with public rights, backbiting, greedy or selfishness, breaking promises and so on. Whoever does them is considered to be a bad or evil person (Mbiti, 1975: 178).

Taboos may, however, be religious, social, economic or political, or a combination of one or two or even all of these classifications at once. Udo in Bassey E. O. Udo explains further that, the Ibibio people believe that if the taboos (divine prohibitions) were not

observed, the earth would be unable to give forth her increase, either in crops or in children. Consequently, if a woman, for instance, committed adultery, the ancestors would be offended. This could result in the death of her husband if he condoned her unfaithfulness, or the death of the woman during child birth, or the death of her children. The reasons, according to him, is that the offence was felt to be committed not against the husband alone but against the great mother earth and it was the duty of the ancestors to avenge the woman's sin (2008: 10).

The Concept of Ethics in the African Traditional Religion

The concept of ethics in the African traditional religion is based on the notion that man is never alone. Thus, society according to Opoku, is a series of interrelationships in which each one contributes to the welfare and the stability of the community, and avoids that which is disruptive or harmful to the community's life (1978: 168). Mbiti affirming this communal dimension of African ethics asserts, "I am because we are, and because we are, I am" (*African Religions and Philosophy*, 1969: 8). This communal nature of African ethics is further encapsulated by Omonzejele in Udo, that African ethics is based on communal living in the sense that it fuses the society into one big whole. "In African Traditional Society, there is no 'me' but 'us'; no 'My' but ours'. It is within these perspective and context of no 'me' but 'us' no 'my' but 'ours' in a given traditional African society that African ethics has been formulated" (2008: 95).

In the same vein, Idowu in Udo, elaborating on the concept of immorality in African Traditional Religion, posits that since the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately, every member of the community is expected to act in such a way as to promote always the good of the whole society. It is held that whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen also to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual (2008: 6). This is why, according to him, "as character makes for good social relations, it is laid upon every member of community to act in such a way as to promote always the good of the whole body" (Udo, 2008: 6). Ethics in African traditional society-what a person does in accordance with the established norms-contributes to the welfare of the whole community. At the same time, his misdeeds, however, can bring calamity to his immediate family, extended family, his lineage and the entire community (Opoku, 1978: 168). To avoid the shame that his misdeeds will bring to his community every African tries to live a good life. In supporting this assertion C. A. Dime further contends that African relation holds that man must watch strictly his conduct so that it does not bring nor cause calamity for him or for the society at large (1986: 38). F. M. Mbon on his part writes

that if an individual member of the community violates any of the traditional ethical norms and taboos, such as adultery or stealing, the consequences of his/her violation would affect not only him/her but also his immediate family, extended family, lineage and the entire members of the community (1990: 189). It is in this sense that Popkin and Stroll define ethics as “a code or set of principles by which men live” (1981: 1). It therefore means that the concept of ethics in traditional Africa is in living to avoid shame in any family or community.

The Concept of Justice in African Traditional Religion

The conception of justice in African Traditional Religion is influenced by the consequences that usually follow any violation of an ethical code and also by how the society viewed deviant behaviours. According to A. J. A. Esen, the major crime in African traditional society included homicide, stealing, adultery, witchcraft, and all forms of treachery. There were other crimes related to breaches of religious or traditional codes, the violation of the codes of secret societies and so on (1982: 110). He further maintains that suspected cases were carefully examined by the council of elders to avoid punishing the innocent. In an event where guilt was established, the sanctions were very severe. One Ibibio proverb summarizes the philosophy behind the concept of crime and their approach to the administration of justice: “*Odo edue ukot akpa iton*” translated, he who misses a step, his neck goes for it” (1982: 110).

The analogy used in the proverb above is that of a whole people marching together in step along the path of life, with every member of the group keeping in step. As long as this rhythm is kept by everyone, there is harmony, peace, order, happiness, and progress in the community. But as soon as one individual goes out of step deliberately or otherwise, disharmony and confusion occur, and the people’s march is slowed down or disorganized. When either of these is done, he pays or suffers severely for his misdeeds, not always necessarily in the physical sense, but sometimes, the criminal or offender had to die if his crime merited death. More often, he/she pays for the misdeeds economically through heavy fines, or socially through ostracism or banishment, or through deprivation of personal freedom in various forms including consignment to slavery. Therefore, Africans concept of justice is a mechanism put in place to maintain peaceful co-existence and to promote strict adherence to ethical values and taboos within the society.

The Concept of Time in African Traditional Religion

The concept of time in African traditional religion has been a misunderstood concept by Europeans and Americans and other early missionaries because of their ignorance of what

time is to Africans. They tried to apply their linear and chronological concept of time to Africa and in so doing see Africans either as lazy people or as late comers to appointments. A proper understanding of the concept will help to explain certain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation such as political, economic, educational or church life.

The concept of time is not an issue for debate among Africans because to them “time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (Mbiti, 1969: 17). According to the traditional concept, time is mainly a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. In the Western thought, time is reckoned with an indefinite past, present and infinite future. These are practically foreign to African thinking. To the Africans, the future does not really exist because the events which lie in it have not occurred and therefore, cannot constitute time.

Africans reckon time for specific and concrete purpose. It is always done in connection with events, and for that reason, people cannot and do not reckon time in the vacuum. To the Africans time is not an abstract phenomenon which is reckoned for its sake but is meaningful at the point of the event and not at the mathematical moment.

Africans reckon time-movement in a cyclical fashion instead of the linear chronological fashion of the Western world. This cyclical format is perhaps derived from the agricultural cycles and seasons. “The seasons of the year repeat in an eternal cycle. The agricultural season begins with the rainy season and ends with the dry season” (Ekeopara, 2005: 63). This is why time in Africa is perceived in the movement of natural phenomena, the eternal order which governs the universe.

This concept of time being reckoned with the natural phenomena is seen in the naming of months. Africans do not name the months using the Gregorian calendar which starts from January and ends in December. They rather use the lunar month and name them according to the various events that occur-in those periods. Among the Latuka people of Sudan, for example various names are given to different months based on the natural phenomena that occurred and on the agricultural seasons. October is known as ‘The Sun’ because the sun is very hot at that time. December is called ‘Give your uncle water’. This is because during that period water is very scarce and people become thirsty readily. February is known as ‘Let them dig’ showing that it is the time to prepare for planting, since the rainy season is about to set in. May is popularly called ‘Grain in the ear’, showing that grain has started bearing. June is called ‘Dirty Mouth’, because it is the time of eating grain and

children's mouth get dirty in the process. July is called 'Drying grasses', depicting the end of rains and the ground begins to harden causing grasses to begin to wither. August is 'Sweet grain', when people harvest and eat 'Sweet grain'. September is called 'Sausage Tree' because at this time the sausage tree (*Kigalia Africana*) begins to bear fruit (Mbiti, 1969: 21).

To an African the day is reckoned according to its significant events such as a particular market day (Nkwo, Eke, Ori, Afor among the Igbo of Nigeria). It is also reckoned according to the position of the sun. This is why you hear of the rising sun, the sun at its seat and the going down of the sun. The rising sun should be between 5.30am and 8 am. When one says in Africa that the sun is climbing to its seat, it is about 9am-11am while 12 noon to 2 pm is regarded as the sun on its seat. Ekeopara sees time as being humanized in Africa while Ogbu U. Kalu sees time as "peopled with events in the lives of the family, clan and village-groups and socio-economic events such as market days and remembrance days/seasons" (qtd in Ekeopara, 2005: 64).

The traditional African month is the lunar months as we stated earlier. Its recognition is based on the events or the natural phenomena and not on the mathematical length. This is why the month in Africa may last for up to between 25 to 35 days depending on the event the month is named after.

The year in traditional Africa is likewise composed of events with a wider scale than those which compose either the day or the month. The mathematical length is also irrelevant. Mbiti explains that,

Outside the reckoning of the year, African time concept is silent and indifferent. People expect the years to come and go, in endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning and waxing of the moon. They expect the events of the rain season, planting, harvesting, dry season, rain season again, planting again, and so on to continue for ever. Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past (1969: 21).

This means that beyond a few months from the present, African concept of time is silent and indifferent showing that the future is virtually non-existent as actual time, apart from the relatively short projection of the present up to two years hence.

In many African societies, a person is not regarded or considered a full human being until he has accomplished the whole process of physical birth, naming ceremonies, puberty and initiation rites, and finally marriage. This is because an African's life is full of events. These initiation processes are what reveals his age and by extension his time on this earth.

When eventually the individual dies, he has entered another phase of existence. In this phase of existence Mbiti explains that “he is not really dead: he is alive, and such a person I would call the living-dead” (1969: 25). He is seen as living-dead because though physically dead, yet he lives in the memory of those who knew him and is always remembered thereby placing him in a state Mbiti calls “personal immortality” (1969: 25).

The concept of time in African traditional religion permeates the entirety of the life of the Africans. The study of this concept is the study of the life of the Africans.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of African traditional religion is embedded in the people’s beliefs and practices. Since there are no written documents such as sacred books of the African religion, a study of the religion as to understand their philosophy is the study of the oral tradition, the myths, proverbs, liturgy, and short sayings of the people. We have submitted in this paper that African cosmology is a religious cosmology. This means that religion is their waking thought. The line of demarcation between sacred and secular in Africa is so thin that it is almost impossible to seek to differentiate between the two. This makes it difficult to think of a body of systematized philosophy in Africa without studying the peoples’ religion.

This work has taken time to analyze the philosophical nature and foundation of African Traditional Religion. We explained that the religion of Africans is a traditional religion in the sense that it grew from among the people, which is from their soil. It was not imported to them through missionary zeal. We have also explained that this religion is a revealed religion in that it evolved from the experiences of the people. Furthermore, this work has revealed that the philosophical foundation on which African Traditional Religion thrives are, belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors and belief in the practice of magic and medicine. We submitted that without these philosophical foundations, African Traditional Religion will lose its vigor and vitality as the religion of the Africans. When scholars who studied the religions of Africa did not consider these foundations, they ignorantly concluded that Africans did not have the concept of God in their reasoning.

Again, this work considered the concept of worshipping the Supreme God and submitted that Africans do not worship God the way a Muslim, Hindu, Christian or a Jew will worship their God. No one should use their method in judging Africans that we are not worshipping the Supreme Being. We said that Africans worship God through prayers, songs, dancing, sacrifices and offerings.

We also looked at the concept of evil, ethics and justice explaining that evil in Africa is taboo and the concept of ethics is based on the stability of the community and avoidance of shame, and not necessarily on the individual alone.

Finally, we presented the concept of time in Africa stressing that “African time” does not mean lateness to appointments or laziness as some believe, but that Africans are time conscious. The only difference with African concept of time with that of the West is that while the West dwells more on the mathematical time and linear and chronological time, Africans see time as peopled with events. This is briefly the philosophy of African Traditional Religion.

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