

## An Insight into the Ontological Structure of the Traditional African Religion

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### Abstract

*The study ontological conception of traditional African religion is said to be as old as their existence. This religion started between Africans as a descriptive encounter of some observable actions of the universe, the cosmos in relation to their understanding of the Supreme Being as observed and passed down from one generation to another by the ancestors. Applying an analytic method to this study, this study will in turn aimed at creating a balance in the structure and nature of the traditional African understanding of religion, while the objective of this study is create a balance connection between universal force, the African person and the society. Finally, our thesis here is that, religion in Africa serves as the beginning and end of being of things; this is because an African person is religion by nature. For them, religion is conceived as the finitude of man and his existence, making religion a part of the African cultural expressions.*

**Keyword:** *descriptive encounter, finitude, religious influence, structure and cultural expressions.*

### Introduction

African traditional religion is a fundamental and foundational to the being and belongingness of the African person, perhaps the most important influence in the life of the Africans and yet its essential principles are too often abstract to the none Africans who thus, make themselves constantly liable to misunderstand the African worldview and beliefs. This because they is little or no distinctive line between religion and the African culture, making religion deep rooted into every aspect of life of the African person both in politics, child birth, farm and even societal management. This implies that the subject matter of religion in Africa cannot be discoursed in isolation. The ontological study of religion in the traditional African setting has to go hand-in-hand with a background study of the people, their culture and realities surrounding the environment where the said religion is practice.

When we talk about the ontological structure of African traditional religion, we mean the foundation of the indigenous religious beliefs system and practices among Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans are motivated by how reality appears to them or their encounter with the Supreme Being in one way or the other and this religion among Africans is practiced today in various forms and various shades by a very large number of people inhabiting every part of the Africa continent. Thus, the word traditional means indigenous, which is aboriginal or foundational that is always handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by a set of people. Traditional in another term is seen as heritage from the past, which is not treated as a thing of the past but as the essence or stepping stone to that which connects the past, present with the future.

### **The Supreme Being as the Foundational Structure of Traditional African Religion**

When one is referred to the Supreme Being in the African traditional religion, this implies that one is simply referring to the living eternal Being who is the source of all living and whose essence perceived date. This Being is self-existed, self-created, first principle whose power sustains the universe. The Supreme Being is an all-knowing who knows and sees all things at the same time without any modern instrument. He even knows the end from the beginning. This is the more reason why Obi, C.A. in his work titled *African Philosophy of Power: An Igbo Perspective* argues that “The Supreme Being has revealed Himself to the human person in different forms and in different encounters. And in every of this encounters the said person will always feel a direct contact with his presence in quick response” (1). What Obi means here is that, this manifestation or revelation of the Supreme Being has brought about a living relationship between the Supreme Being and the African person lead to what is now known as African traditional religion. Man interaction with the greatness and royalty of the Supreme Being “God” has been described by many Africans and none African religious scholars and scriptures. In describing Being, Al-Ghazzali wrote:

God is the power and the kingdom, the glory and the majesty to Him belong all the created objects and creation itself, He is the ruler over all created entity, He alone is the giver of life; He is omniscient, for His knowledge encompassed all things, from the deepest depths of the earth to the highest heights of the heavens, from the smallest micro quale atom in the universe is known to Him. He is aware of how the ants creep upon the hard rock in the darkness of the night. He perceives the movement of specks of dust in the air. He beholds the thoughts which pass through the minds of men, and the range of their fancies and the secrets of their hearts, by His knowledge, which was from afore time (116 b).

This same idea of how the Supreme Being works does not preclude the traditional African ontological thought in expresses the same belief in the greatness of this great Being and the direct relationship that thus, exist between him and the universe. This implies that the Supreme Being should be revere for his greatness, for creating the universe, for his infinite love of sustaining humanity and many more. But this veneration of his greatness could not be achieved outside worship, and this worship can only be achieved through religion.

### **The Religious Attribute to the Operation of the Universe**

Following the African conception of duality as dialectics of the sky and earth, one will understand de-emphasizes the traditional African religious quest for upholding or ascribing the feasible option of the mode and model of operation of the universe to the Supreme Being. In supporting the African argument for the operation of the universe, Nyang in his article titled *Reflections on 'Traditional African Cosmology*, argued that “Africa was, and are still rich in cosmological idea of the nature of the universe” (2). Though the diversity of Africa's religious and cosmological heritage has been little known outside of the continent, the intensive researchers of Africanists around the world and the growing global interest in the African world have combined to draw attention to what could be the Africa's spiritual gift to humanity. This gift of how the universe moves is less understood by many Africans, even much less by the greater majority of non-Africans. Africa's traditional cosmology is diverse, but behind this diversity lays the core of shared beliefs of the Supreme Being as the first principle which spread across the continent. Thus, in this point of our conversation, this article does not plan to bring out the differences operation of the universe; rather, it seeks to construct a framework of analysis out of the body of ideas that researchers in the field have agreed upon as the common elements in the various cosmological and ontological systems among traditional Africans religion in their quest for understanding the way and manners the world operates in confirmation to the existence of the Supreme Being.

Obiechina in his work titled *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* is of the view that Tempels and Metu main principles of the African-centered worldview on the operation of the universe are “the interconnectedness of all things which they call vital force or the spiritual nature of human beings” collective individual identity; the collective/inclusive nature of family structure; the oneness of mind, body and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships to things as the act. For them, apart from the Supreme Being, other being that makes up this operation are differentiated from each other, reconstructing the African ontology in to various species according to their vital force and powers passed or their inherent vital ranks. Above all force is the Supreme Being

who has the power responsible in various actions in him-self. Those vital force gives existence, power to survive and power of increase, to other forces. Using the Supreme Being as relations to other forces, he is *he who increases*. After him come the first fathers of men, founders of the different clans. These arch patriarchs were the first to whom the Supreme Being communicates his vital force, with the power of exercising their influence on all posterity.

They constitute the most important chains binding man, forces to the universe. The forces occupy so exalted a rank in African thought system, that they are not regarded merely as ordinary dead. They are longer named among the means and by Africans they are called the vital force, beings belonging to a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine force. After those first parents comes the dead of the tribe, following their order of primogeniture. They form a chain through which the links of which the forces of the elders exercise their vitalizing influence on the living generation. Those after the dead, The living on earth rank, in fact the living belong in accordance with primogeniture and their vital rank, that is to say according to their vital power.

### **Nature of Vital Forces in African Traditional Religion**

Nothing could be writing about the ontology of the traditional African religion without first acknowledging the place of vital force. Vital forces as the hand made to the Supreme Being in Africa tradition, makes the central idea of vital force subject to the activities of the Supreme Being, because the Supreme Being in traditional African religion is none-descriptive, immortal and invisible entities that forms the foundations of the cosmos. The close similarities between the Supreme Being and vital force is that they both do not possess material body through which they could be seen but the Supreme Being have the ability to act upon forces in transforming their nonmaterial status into any material form, call it an object or a thing in order to manifest himself for reason or purpose. Allowing Africans in their numbers to however experienced the activities of the Supreme Being through vital force in many folk tells of spirits described inhuman activities and personalities, though sometimes, these descriptions are exaggeration created by the elders to teach special lessons or morals. Mbiti on this ground argued that “Since those vital force or Beings are invisible, their activities should be judged as that of spirits which are thought to be ubiquitous, so that a person is never sure where they are, or are not due to their ability to manipulate nature” (79).

For Mbiti, the Supreme Being just like African vital forces do not have any family or personal ties with human beings, and so cannot be regarded as the living dead. This is why African always regards the Supreme Being, although intrinsically speaking vital force are strangers, foreigners, and outsiders in the category of Beings. Ontologically, vital force as they are called are depersonalized and not a completion or maturation mode of existence. The spirit mode of existence as Mbiti argued in his book titled *Africa Religion* that:

The Vitality of the human spirit as a being is the withering of the individual, so that this personality evaporates the line of existence per say, at the point of death, the human person's name disappears into the line of memories and he becomes less or not more of a person; which means he can at that point be regarded as a thing, a spirit and not a man or a person any more (79).

His argument above gives credo to the vitality of the Supreme Being, which does not have death in his essence but immortality with the ability to act upon forces.

### **Religion as the Definition of the Personhood in Africa**

Africans articulate the fact that religion is a means of their identity, just like a name tag which is an authentic way or ritual expression that identifies a person without this name tag to a person, the said person remains nonentity due to the fact that; the person has no name. The implication of this position is that the individual person acquires a personal identity or character through the ritual of meaning within the societal norms which one can only obtain from religion which defines his person. The consequence of this is that, the person appears determines as it may not have a chance to be otherwise. Thus, the dynamic nature of an African person becomes compromised without a foundational religious background. But if religion is a part and parcel of those elements of African culture which makes an African person unique, then the religion can distinguish a person from another through the unfitness of characters attached to the said person.

The sacredness of religion in Africa is further linked to the fact that the living and the dead

are bonded in the religious practice, as a sign of creating a link between the world of the living and the death to form the chain of existence. Religion for Africans is nothing but a mirror that reflects reality of once existence in space and time. Victor Frankl on this ground argued that:

*Man's [sic] search for meaning of his existence is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning, and this meaning can only be driven from his religious view (120).*

This implies that the traditional African religion as a notion of identity has always been central to the human person's understanding of self and the relation of that self to the rest of the cosmos. The question 'who am I?' is fundamental to human existence and particularly so for persons of unity. Answers to this question have come from a wide range of disciplines; philosophers, theologians, scientists, sociologists and anthropologists have all sought to offer some insights. To be able to identify and place one's self within the universe is a crucial element of one's wellbeing. Ontologically, religion shapes the image we have of ourselves, as well as our relation to others, and ultimately informs our understanding of the place we understand ourselves to occupy within the whole of the cosmos.

Individualistic cultures are those that stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group as a whole. In this non-African culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous. Social behavior tends to be dictated by the attitudes and preferences of individuals. The ontological completeness of the African person is not by any means to be regarded as paralleled by social comprehensiveness. In the social context, the individual person is not completely autonomy of his self. To say that the human individual is self-complete in its being does not in any way imply that the person can be conceived as essentially without relations to other human individuals. Just as the society does not have a life of its own ontologically without attributing a religious value to it, so does the individual person have no life of his or her own socially. For even though complete in his or her nature, according to Mbiti "the human person has needs and hopes which can be realized only within the community of other individuals" (91). Socially, then, he or she remains incomplete. According to Menkiti one of the Akan philosophers, he states that:

The human individual is conceived as originally born into a human society, and therefore as a social being right from the outset. This conception is expressed in the fragment, "When an individual descends from heaven, he or she descends into a human society self-created" but descended to a world created by a being, and this idea can only be portray by a religion view (241).

However, the individual who descends into a human community cannot live in isolation, for it is naturally oriented towards other persons and must practice their beliefs and live in relation with them.

### **The Place of Sacrifices and Offerings in ATR**

Taking away Africans conceptions of sacrifices and offerings from their religious view is like taking a fish away from the water and expecting it to live; this is because in African traditional religious view, just like other world religion, the only way venerating the Supreme Being is through sacrifices and offerings. Sacrifices and offerings are essential elements of every religion in respective of their location. This becomes the major reason Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religion* postulates that:

The practice of sacrifices and offerings is found not only in Africa, but all over the world. By this practice material or physical things are given to Supreme Being and other spiritual beings or vital force as Tempel may say. This act marks the point of conversation between the two realms, 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 verities, in respective of the object of sacrifice (57).

Mbiti also opines out that fact that; "sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples (58). In the same vein, Idowu explains that sacrifices and offerings in African traditional religion are means of contact or communion between man and the deity or the Supreme Being. For him, Sacrifice and offering are the means by which man maintains established

relationship with his object of worship the *Olodumare* (120). In trying to make a distinction between sacrifices and offerings in the traditional African religion, Mbiti argues that:

Sacrifices involve the shedding of the blood of beings in respect of their status, a human person, animals or birds. While offerings in the other hand do not involve bloodshed, but concern itself with the giving of all other things or object, such as foodstuffs, water, milk, honey, prayers or money in the hope of expectations (59).

Mbiti stress further that, the kind of situation that calls for a sacrifice may include drought, epidemics, war, raids, calamity, insect pests, and destructive floods. For examples, the Igala's make sacrifices on great occasions, such as at the rites of passage *Otebegwu* a rite performed every year to connect with the Supreme Being, second burial of their loved one and the purification of a village after an epidemic most of when they is a delay in rain fall or drought. They use a black goat, a white rooster and yam for such ritual rite. Those sacrifices are made to the Supreme Being, with prayers for the people wellbeing the land. While the Igbos from the other hand make offerings at the new yam festival to celebrate the new yam harvest, a ritual done annually to celebrate life. Sacrifices and offerings are made by Africans in order to draw the attention of the Supreme Being to their needs. The major purpose of sacrifices and offerings in the traditional African religion is to create an alimant and a balance between man and the Supreme Being, in other to maintain a right relationship between man and the Supreme Being in from of a well extremism religion.

### **African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Justice**

The conception of justice in African traditional religion is influenced by the consequences that usually follow any violation of an ethical code of conduct attached to the society and also by how the society sets up a code of conducts which are foundational in the African community setting. In this light establishment of rules, A. J. A. Esenin his work titled *The Relevance of Proverbs in African Epistemology* as argued that:

The major crime in African traditional society included homicide, stealing, adultery, witchcraft, sorcery, and all forms of treachery, and others which were crimes related that breaches the religious or traditional ethical code of conducts, and any violation of the codes of secrecy in the society would be punished as marked (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. An Igala proverb summarizes the philosophy behind the concept of crime and their approach to the administration of justice: "*Enekechibiyenekojinwukileboalo*" translated, he who misses a step, his head goes with it". The analogy used in the proverb above is that of a whole set of people marching together in step along the path of life, with every member of the group keeping in tab of their self's. As long as this tempo is kept by everyone, there will always be harmony, peace, order, happiness, and progress within the frame work of the community. As soon as one individual goes deliberately or intentionally goes otherwise, disharmony and confusion occur, and the people's march toward harmony slowed down and disorganization steps in. When either of these is done, one suffers severely for his misdeeds or mischief's, not always necessarily in the physical sense, but sometimes, the criminal or offender had to be punished directly depending on the weight of his crimes, which could be death or sufferings. Therefore, Africans religious conception of justice is a mechanism put in place by the Supreme Being to maintain a balance of peaceful co-existence, security and to promote strict adherence to norms and ethical values within the African societal settings.

### **Conclusion**

Arising from our discus in our study is the understanding that the African traditional religion is an ontological concept, understood and marked in Africa by various phenomena, these phenomena as we have seen in their ways of impacting man as an ontological individual and as a member of a normative community, it is such that it regulate the activities man, embedded in the people's worldview, beliefs and practices; making religion a force to be recon on in the life of an African person.

It is understood in our wiled interactions and conversation of this paper, one will understand

that the African ontology of religion is foundational and culturally oriented in their understanding and relationship with their society, because the central idea of the Supreme Being overhauls' the entire makeup of the African cosmology. This means that African traditional religion is a waking thought or a rule of conduct that guards the African person in all of his doings. The line of demarcation that existed between sacred and secular in Africa traditional religion is so thin and faint that it is almost impossible to identify or differentiate between them. This makes it difficult to think of a body of systematized philosophy in Africa without studying the people's religion worldview in general. In conclusion, this paper strongly recommends the fact that the African person is naturally religious, making him to acknowledge the fact that they is a Bing responsible for his existence, and that consciousness in him exposes him to the veneration of that Being.

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