

# PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE NATURE AND SOURCES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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## *Abstract*

*African Traditional Religion like other religions of the world has its own meaning, nature and sources. There are negative perceptions that exist regarding African Religion. This paper examines the meaning, nature and sources of African traditional Religion and points out some of the derogatory terminologies directed towards African Religion. The study adopts descriptive approach and relies on secondary sources. The study reveals that, African traditional religion has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African people. To understand the religious life properly, one has to know their language. It is important because, worship, prayers, sacrifices, offerings, blessings, curses, etc. are all done in the local language by men and women who are trained for that purpose. These pass on their knowledge to people in general and through training others to carry out the religious life of their community. Even though certain derogatory terminologies are used in referring to the African Religion, such are works of those who lack the knowledge of what African religion is or know just a little about it. Thus, the paper argues that there is need for objective and phenomenological approach to African Religion. This helps in understanding better the religion of the African peoples.*

**Keywords:** African, Religion, Nature, sources, meaning

## **Introduction**

African traditional Religion like other religions of the world has its own meaning, nature and sources. There are negative perceptions that exist regarding African Religion. Traditional religion is part of African culture. Unlike in other world religions, traditional religion has no one founder. It can be said to have arisen from the way of life within the traditional African society. Thus, African Religion is based on oral traditions which are handed on by word of

mouth from one generation to the other. Members of the society learn the tenets of the religion through practical examples from generation to generation. This religion can also be learnt through myths, folklores, informal stories about gods, goddesses, proverbs, songs, conversational music and dance. This paper intendsto give an epistemological approach to the subject matter by examining the meaning, nature and sources of African Religion and to point out some of the derogatory terminologies directed towards African Religion.

### Meaning of African Religion

African Religion also called African Traditional Religion is the Indigenous Religion of the African people. Adasu subscribes to this line of thought by reiterating that African Religion is the Religion of the African people and that it is qualified by the word traditional which refers to indigenous. He further explains that a thing which is indigenous is that which is aboriginal, foundational, or handed down from generation to generation.<sup>1</sup> For Awolalu, African Traditional Religion is the Religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the Religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities, by a large number of Africans; including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians.<sup>2</sup> It therefore means that African Religion is still being practiced by men and women today as the Religion of the forebears. It is not only a heritage from the past but also a living reality today. This being the case, Adasu maintains that for most Africans, Religion is part and parcel of life; an ontological phenomenon, dealing with existence of being. Thus, for the African and the community to which he/ she belongs, to live is to be caught up in a Religious drama.<sup>3</sup> African Religion is the term used to describe the Religion that was founded by the forebears of Africans, the term traditional is the most comprehensive title that best explains all the Religious experiences and Religious features that were articulated and conserved by the founders of various ethnic groups in Africa. African Religion is therefore not a borrowed religion from any of the world Religions; rather it is a distinct religion with distinct features which evolved gradually through the years from the practices and experiences of the forebears.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adasu, M.O. *Understand African Traditional Religion*. Part One. England: Dorset Publishing, 1983. 14

<sup>2</sup>[Awolalu, J.O. \*Studies in Comparative Religion\* Vol. 10, No. 2. Spring, 1976. 1](#)

<sup>3</sup>Adasu 14

<sup>4</sup>Anyacho, E.O. *Essential Themes in the Study of Religion*. Ibadan: Niger Link, 2005. 242

While African Religion is not a Religion of the books like the Koran or the Holy Bible; it is nevertheless written on the hearts of Africans and can be seen in other sources which include: songs, myths/legends, idioms, wise sayings and in arts/symbols. Various aspects of African religion include the beliefs in God. This God is eternal, omniscient, holy, just, merciful, faithful and transcendent. However, the perception of God and his attributes varies from one ethnic group to the other. There is the belief in spirits, deities, Ancestors, magic, witchcraft, traditional medicine etc.

**The Term 'African':** African Religion is called 'African' due to certain reasons. First, it is called 'African' because it is indigenous, aboriginal, foundational, or handed down from generation to generation.<sup>5</sup> Again, the religion is part and parcel of African life. It was founded by the Africans and is handed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth. The religion has been in existence long ago before the advent of Islam and Christianity on the African continent. Furthermore, it is only practiced by the Africans. The Africans are "incurably religious people".<sup>6</sup> Mbiti believes that since there are a thousand and one ethnic groups in Africa and each group has its own religion, African Traditional Religion should be talked to in the plural.<sup>7</sup> However, many other scholars of African Traditional Religion have disagreed to this pointing to the fact of the similarities in beliefs and acts of worship including the concept of God which cuts across all African nationalities.

African Religion is said to be 'traditional' due to many factors. African Religion is Traditional because it is a religion and culture that is based on the life of the Africans. This pattern of life has been handed on from their fore-fathers from generation to generation. Its mode of worship, articles of faith, materials used for worship in temples, shrines and holy places are all from the African local environment. The religion was founded by the Africans and it is practiced by the Africans on the African soil. It is a community affair and not limited to an individual. Religion is part and parcel of life in traditional African society. Religion permeates all aspects of life be it politics, economics, education, etc. Thus, to be an effective member of the community, one must belong to the religion of the land. Right from birth to death, religion controls every aspect of life of the individual.

### **The Nature of African Religion**

African Religion was born as a result of man's experiences and interaction with his

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<sup>5</sup>Adasu 15

<sup>6</sup>Parrinder, E.G. *West African Religion*. London: Epworth Press, 1969. 9

<sup>7</sup>Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969. 1

environment. People wondered at the mysteries surrounding creations; the living rocks, trees, rivers, plants, etc. They assumed that created things have an order and life itself seems to have a pattern, the mystery of birth, growth and death. In seeking answers to these mysteries, people came to realize that there is a Supreme Being somewhere who is in charge of all these. He is all powerful, controller, and creator of everything. African Religion has no founder and does not need a reformer because the religion emanated from the answers to the needs of the African society.<sup>8</sup> Religion is a fundamental, perhaps the most important influence in the life of most Africans; yet its essential principles are too often unknown to foreigners who thus make themselves constantly liable to misunderstand the African worldview and beliefs. Religion enters into every aspect of the life of the Africans and it cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in-hand with the study of the people who practice the religion.

When mention is made of African Religion, it means the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians.

### **Sources of African Religion**

There are many questions that need answers as to the practice of African religion. Some of the questions are: what are the sources of African religion? Where can we find African religion? These questions form the crux of this work. African religion has no sacred writings coded in one document as its source as do other world religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, etc. Mbiti notes that there are possible three explanations of its origin. First, people come to believe in God through reflecting on the universe. They reflected on the enormity and continuity of the earth and the heavens. It seems to them that the universe must have someone who looks after it, keeps it and sustains it. He must be the creator and without Him there could be no universe. Secondly, people realize their own limitation. Man saw how his powers and knowledge were particularly in the case of the face of death, calamity and the forces which man could not control. This easily made them to speculate that there must be someone greater than them and greater than the world, which has full control over it. Hence, people believe that they needed the help of this Supreme Being in their experiences of limitation and powerlessness.

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<sup>8</sup>Awolalu, J.O. *Studies in Comparative Religion* Vol. 10, No. 2. Spring, 1976. 35

Thirdly, Africans also observed the forces of nature. As African looked at the weather, storms, thunder, lightning and other phenomena such as day and night, sun and moon etc, the Africans began to associate the sky with a great God who is very close to man, supplying man's needs such as rain for his land to produce abundant fruit.

The Africans have no creed to recite; their creeds are within them, in their blood and in their hearts. Their beliefs about God are expressed through concrete concepts, attitudes, and acts of worship.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the sources of African religions come in many ways. Ikenga- Metuh explains that by implication, the full and authentic imports of African beliefs are best appreciated when they are studied in life situations. Nevertheless, non-literate societies have institutionalized devices for preserving and transmitting their norms, beliefs, and traditions. He therefore categorized sources of African religion into groups thus; Art Forms, Institutions, and Oral Traditions.<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, Shishima says that African religion “depends on the handing over of information from generation to generation by word of mouth or practice”.<sup>11</sup> According to him, oral traditions can be grouped under two headings: the material and non-material sources. On his part, Mbiti postulates that African religion is found in many sources such as rituals, ceremonies, festivals, shrines, sacred places, proverbs, objects, art, symbols, music, dance, riddles, wise sayings, names of people and places; myths, legends, beliefs, customs and all aspects of life.<sup>12</sup> The sources of African Religion could be further classified into physical and non-physical sources as follows:

### **Physical Sources**

These are materials of worship that can be felt physically. They are mostly emblems of worship found in places such as temples, shrines, groves, that form good sources for the study of religion. Ikenga\_Metuh in his analysis of the sources of African religion postulates that sacred institutions are contributory sources. He said that there are many of these institutions in every African society which have the imprint of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Some institutions like the sacred kingship, priesthood, chieftaincy titles, initiation rites, festivals and observances or taboos which are inspired and sustained by firmly held religious beliefs.<sup>13</sup> An example of the selection and initiation into the “Golden stool” of the Ashanti Kingdom would suffice. Also, the initiation of the Tor-Tiv among the Tiv of Central Nigeria

<sup>9</sup>Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 1991. 167

<sup>10</sup>Ikenga-Metuh, E. *African Religious in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation (Studies in Igbo Religion)*. Ibadan: PI, 1985.25

<sup>11</sup>Shishima, S.D. *African Religion: A Bird's Eye View*. Makurdi: Obetal Continental Press, 2014.66

<sup>12</sup> Mbiti ,19-27

<sup>13</sup>Ikenga- Metuh 29

after selection and before installation underscores the importance of institutions especially kingship as a good source of African religious belief. They tell stories that teach about the pattern of worship. Temples are used for worship such as the Ogboni society's temples unlike the shrines which are places for offering sacrifices.

Shrines are not necessarily buildings. As such, some belong to a family, such as those connected with departed members of the family or their graves. Others belong to the community and these are often in groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, certain trees and similar places. People respect such places and in some societies like the Tiv in the *ate iwa* (blacksmith hut) no bird, animal or human being may be killed if he or she is hiding in such places. No object is even taken out of the shrines or sacred places except the person that took it into the shrine or place. They are marked with objects of worship in line with their divinity. Shrines are usually found in groves and small clearings in the forests with open and inner sections. It is at the shrine and other sacred places that people make or bring sacrifices and offerings, such as animals, fowls, food, utensils, tools and money where prayers are also made in reverence to God. The people consider these places as holy as they meet God there. Some of the religious places are man-made while others are natural and may be large enough to look like a big house and are secluded as well as isolated from people's homes and fields.

Temples can contain shrines. Temples are small buildings of mud with two or three rooms, one for the priest and the others for the emblems or religious arts for the communal shrine. Only the priest can enter a shrine; worshippers normally stay in the outer part. Also, women, visitors, and children are not allowed into the shrine. Shrines and temples have different kinds of structure and furniture each of which reflects the beliefs and worship performed in them.<sup>14</sup> Altars are sacred spots where offerings and sacrifices may be placed or made. They are generally to be found inside the shrines or temples though they may be erected in the open.<sup>15</sup>

Religious articles and objects are very important physical sources of African religion. They are found in all African societies. Some are tied round people's necks, legs, and waists. Some are kept in pockets, bags, on house roofs, or gates leading into the home stead. Others are swallowed and thought to remain in the stomach, or they are dug into the ground in the houses and fields. There are other religious objects which people hide secretly wherever they may think most convenient. In shrines and temples, these are of different kinds, shapes, and colours.<sup>16</sup> Art and symbols are invaluable sources for the study of African religious beliefs. Often, these express religious ideas. Bascon expresses this thus:

<sup>14</sup>Ikenga- Metuh 27

<sup>15</sup>Anyacho 269

<sup>16</sup>Shishima, 67



Most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion, which pervades most aspects of African life. The religious genre include votive figures, which adorned shrines, reliquary figures, charms figures, stools used in initiation to the cults, the apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia.<sup>17</sup>

This agrees with the fact of religious ideas found in art and symbols. We find it on wood, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handicrafts, domestic animals, and human bodies. It is expressed in the form of masks and carvings on wood, ivory and stone. These oral crafts, paintings, carvings, moldings, engravings and artistic works in shrines and sacred places; each artistic work reveals the culture of a particular environment and its religious practices.

Symbols work hand in hand with artwork. There are many kinds of them. They are represented by insects, birds, animals, certain trees, figures, shapes, numbers and colours of all kinds, masks and carvings. Among some African people, for instance, the presence of a palm frond near a house or by the road symbolizes the death of a person, and in some areas, the presence of a chameleon on the road or inside the house is a symbol of bad omen or death. Different localities have their symbols and there are some that can only be interpreted by few individuals such as those used in initiation, divination and secret societies.<sup>18</sup> Generally, religious ideas have created many of the symbols and in turn the symbols themselves help to communicate and strengthen the religious ideas.

### **Non-physical Sources**

In the absence of writing, arts become necessary to employ oral traditions as means of preserving and transmitting cherished traditional religious beliefs and practices. These non-physical source forms include myths, legends, folklore, proverbs, names, riddles, festivals, prayers, blessings or curses, liturgies, recitals, formulae of invocations, music and dance, beliefs and customs, oaths, spells and so forth.<sup>19</sup> The reliability of these forms of oral tradition as vehicles of the authentic beliefs of people varies. In summary, the non-physical sources discussed here are music and dance, proverbs, riddles and wise sayings, names of people and places, myths and legends, beliefs and customs and in all aspects of life.

### **Music and Dance**

A lot of African music and songs deals with religious ideas and practices. The religious ritual ceremonies and festivals are always accentuated by music, singing, and sometimes dancing. Music provides leeway to the emotional expression of religious life, and it is a powerful means

<sup>17</sup>Ikenga-Metuh 27

<sup>18</sup>Shishima 67

<sup>19</sup>Mbiti. *African Religions*. 58-74

of communication in African traditional life. It helps ooze out their hearts to God, deities and divinities as expressed in fellowship and participation in life. Many musical instruments are used in this regard by African peoples. The music and dance symbolize the mood at the point in time. It could be sober mood as in times of death, anxiety and suffering; it could be joyous as in celebrating success in harvest or war, etc. This shows the power of music and dance in retaining and spreading religious ideas for a long period of time.

### **Proverbs, Riddles, and Wise Sayings**

There is a rich store house of proverbs in Africa enshrined in ancient wisdom, beliefs and accumulated experience of past generations. Proverbs are short sayings with semiotic relationship to African religion. They contain religious beliefs, ideas, morals and warnings. They speak about God, the world, man, human relationships, the nature of things etc. They are set within a cultural and social milieu of the people who have produced them and use them. Many people know a lot of proverbs and are skillful in using them.<sup>20</sup> Many of them go back to several generations since proverbs are easily passed on from one person to another. Some of the proverbs say if you want to tell God, tell it to the wind, God is in front, He is at the back, God drives away flies for a tailless cow, an enemy may sound the drum of your downfall, but God would not let it sound, etc. Riddles are used as a source of entertainment, and riddles stimulate people's thinking. Some of them also contain religious ideas. Wise sayings are often about the world in general, viewed from the religious and moral perspectives.<sup>21</sup>

### **Names of People and Places**

Many African names of people and places have meanings. The importance of names as sources of African religion derives from the significance and import of names among Africans. For Africans as for the Romans, *Nome est omen* (a name is an omen)<sup>22</sup> There is a strong conviction that there is a close connection between the person and his name. These meanings are often religious. These names mark religious ideas and experiences. In most African societies, it is generally believed that, if a person's real name is known, it will be easy to bless the person, or harm him/her by magic or it becomes easy to know the cause of his/her problem through divination. Some names may commemorate historical events in the family or country. Names may also express parent's state of mind, their anxieties, joys, fears and hopes. Others are affirmations of religious beliefs or expressions of prayerful wishes. There are many names all over Africa which have religious meanings. Therefore, we can infer that,

<sup>20</sup>Shishima 15

<sup>21</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction Afri.Rel.* 24

<sup>22</sup>Ikenga-Metuh 35



African Religion is found in names of people and places. This shows the influence of religion in the life of the people. It also shows that people with such names are in effect religious carriers. Among the Tiv, names like Aondohemba (God is great) Aondongu (God is present), Aondovavenga (God never sleeps) express the omnipotence of God in African religion.

It is worthy of note that, every African people have a set of beliefs and customs. Beliefs are not always essential part of religion. Customs are not always religious, but many contain religious ideas. Religion helps to strengthen and perpetuate some of the customs; and in turn the customs do the same to religion. Beliefs and customs often together cover all areas of life. Beliefs generally deal with religious ideas, customs deal with what people normally approve of and do. The beliefs are: beliefs in God, spirits, deities, divinities, ancestors, witchcraft, totems, practices of magic and medicine etc.<sup>23</sup> These beliefs form part of African religion, though religion covers more than that. These beliefs are handed down from generation to generation, sometimes with modifications, but embellished in the hearts of Africans. The beliefs and customs inspire Africans to the point that, even when they are converted to other religions, they still retain many of their former beliefs since it is hard to destroy beliefs. Therefore, it is good to understand people's beliefs well, because it is these beliefs which influence their behaviour. Other areas of belief are in politics, economics, science etc.

### **Wrong Nomenclatures and Derogatory Terminologies**

While we commend the effort of the foreign investigators for committing to writing their investigations about African Religion, we need to point out that a great number of them used misleading terms in describing the people's beliefs. Such terms include: primitive, savage, fetishism, juju, heathenism, paganism, animism, idolatry, polytheism and pantheism. Let us examine some of them.

#### **Primitive**

Primitive pertains to the beginning or origin; original; first; old fashioned; characterized by the simplicity of old times. It should be obvious from the dictionary meaning that this word cannot be appropriate in describing the religion of Africa or those who practice the religion.<sup>24</sup> In what sense can we describe the people as old fashioned or describe their religion as simple? The idea behind the use of such an expression is engendered by racial pride. The Western scholar making the investigation wanted to distinguish between his society (which is regarded as civilized) and the other society which is not civilized but old-fashioned-just because such a

<sup>23</sup>Anyacho 244

<sup>24</sup>Idowu, E. Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM, 2005. 94

society does not have or adopt the same norm as that of the investigator. Anthropologists and sociologists like to justify their use of the word on the ground that the culture is adjudged to be that which is original in the history of the human race (Shishima 24). African Religion has been evolving; there is in it the element of continuity as well as discontinuity. Since it is a religion practiced by living persons today, changes are to be expected. Thus, strictly speaking, African religion in its pristine form is no longer in existence. Every aspect of it cannot be described as original. Whatever happens, the use of the word primitive by Western scholars is derogatory and, therefore, obnoxious.

### **Savage**

This refers to what is 'pertaining to the forest or wilderness; wild; uncultured; untamed violent; brutal; uncivilized; untaught; rude; barbarous; inhuman.' In one word, savagery is the opposite of civilization. Our remarks are the same as we indicated under primitive. We should also add that there is an element of savagery in every one of us and it should not be made the exclusive trait of a particular people.<sup>25</sup>

### **Fetishism**

What does fetish mean? Linguists claim that the word is of Portuguese origin. The early Portuguese who came to Africa saw that the Africans used to wear charms and amulets and so they gave the name *feitico* to such things. This is the same word as the French *fetiché*. The dictionary meaning of fetish is any 'object, animate or inanimate, natural or artificial, regarded by some uncivilized races with a feeling of awe, as having mysterious power residing in it or as being the representative or habitation of a deity. Hence, fetishism is the worship of, or emotional attachment to inanimate objects. But Rattray corrected this wrong notion of the early investigators when he said:

Fetishes may form part of an emblem of god, but fetish and god are in themselves distinct, and are so regarded by the Ashanti; the main power, or the most important spirit in a god comes directly or indirectly from Nyame, the Supreme God, whereas the power or spirit in a fetish comes from plants or trees, and sometimes directly or indirectly from fairies, forest monsters, witches, or from some sort of unholy contact with death; a god is the god of the many, the family, the clan, or the nation. A fetish is generally personal to its owner.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear then that it would be quite wrong to describe the religion of Africa as fetishism. There may be an element of this in the day-to-day life of the Africans, but it is incorrect to describe it all as fetishism. Many writers used the word indiscriminately to the extent that prayers that are said during worship by Africans have also been described as fetish prayers; the

<sup>25</sup>Idowu 94

<sup>26</sup>Idowu 94

functionaries of a cult described as fetish priests and herbs prepared by African priests have been labeled fetish herbs not medical preparations, however effective such herbs may be; taking of oath has been described as fetish. The word fetish is a most ambiguous word, and the time has come for all serious writers and speakers to abandon it completely and finally.<sup>27</sup>

### **Paganism and Heathenism**

These concepts 'paganism' and 'heathenism' are considered together because the meanings applied to them are similar, if not identical. The word pagan is from the Latin word *paganus* meaning peasant, village or country district; it also means one who worships false gods; a heathen. But when the meaning is stretched further, it refers to one who is neither a Christian, a Jew nor a Muslim. A heathen is one who inhabits a heath or possesses the characteristics of a heath dweller. These words are not correct in describing the indigenous religion of Africa because the people are religious and they do believe in the Supreme Being. If the only religious people are the adherents of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, then, the other world religions become either heathen or pagan, and so, uncivilized.<sup>28</sup> Presumably, these terms are used in an attempt to distinguish between enlightenment and barbarity. What has this to do with religion? Such terms are more sociological than religious.

### **Animism**

The great advocate of the theory of animism was Tylor in his *Primitive Culture*. Many writers still describe the African Religion as animistic. This means attributing a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena. From the study of African Religion, there are unmistakably elements of animism. For example, the Iroko tree is not an ordinary tree; it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit; the Osun River (in Western Nigeria) is believed to be more than an ordinary river because the spirit (Osun) dwells in it and this makes the river efficacious in many respects, especially during barrenness.<sup>29</sup> Lightning and thunder are manifestations of the thunder god. But when we have said this, we also need to add that it would be wrong to categorize the whole religion as animism. Every religion has some beliefs in the existence of a spirit or spirits.<sup>30</sup> Even Christianity sees "God as Spirit, and they that worship him are to worship him in spirit and truth". In other words, animism is a partial definition of every religion. But to say that the African Religion is animistic would not be correct.

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<sup>27</sup>Idowu 94

<sup>28</sup>Shishima 27

<sup>29</sup>Mbiti

<sup>30</sup>Shishima 24

### **Idolatry**

Idol means false god; and so, idolatry is the worshipping of false gods or that which is not real. The word idol is used to describe the object which is an emblem of that which is worshipped by the Africans. The object may be a piece of wood or iron or stone. These objects are symbolic. Each of them has a meaning beyond itself, and therefore is not an end in itself. It is only a means to an end. If, for example, a piece of wood representing Obatala (a Yoruba deity) is eaten by termites, the worshippers of Obatala will not feel that their god has been destroyed by the termites, because the piece of wood is only a symbol, serving as a visible or concrete embodiment of that which is symbolized.<sup>31</sup> Symbolic representation is not peculiar to African Religion. It is found in most religions. It is used principally to aid man's perception and concentration and to remind the worshipper of the divine presence. If this is the object of the symbol, it must be wrong to describe it as an idol. But experience shows that material representation often becomes a danger in religion when the worshippers make the emblems an end in themselves. In this way, the difference between the material object and the reality represented by it becomes obscured.

African Religion is not essentially idolatrous, but it has a tendency to become so if the cult and the symbols of the divinities are so emphasized as to exclude the Supreme Being. The various divinities that are represented are in fact technically representatives or servants of the Supreme Being. It needs to be emphasized that the Supreme Being cannot be represented like the divinities. We must also point out that, to the Africans, the material has meaning only in terms of the spiritual. It is the spiritual that gives meaning and importance to the visible material object. The symbols or emblems may fall into disuse or crumble or be replaced, but the spiritual entity represented never changes.

### **Polytheism**

Parrinder holds the opinion that in West Africa:

Men believe in great pantheons of gods which are as diverse as the gods of the Greeks or the Hindus. Many of these gods are the expression of the forces of nature, which men fear or try to propitiate: These gods generally have their own temples and priests, and their worshippers cannot justly be called animists, but polytheists, since they worship a variety of gods.<sup>32</sup>

Here, while Parrinder was trying to discourage the use of the term animism in connection with the religion of Africa, he created another problem by suggesting the term polytheism. It

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<sup>31</sup> Shishima 24

<sup>32</sup> Parrinder 54

could be understood what the problems are. In a proper polytheism, the gods are all of the same rank and file. The difference between that type of polytheism and the structure of African Religion is that in Africa the Supreme Being is not of the rank and file of the divinities. The origin of the divinities can be traced; the divinities can be represented; they are limited in their power; they came into being by the power of the Supreme Being who is unique, wholly other and faultless and who owes His existence to no one. The Africans do not and cannot represent Him in the form of an image as they can do with the divinities.

Parrinder made this mistake because in his *West African Religion*, he claimed that the Supreme God or Creator is sometimes above the gods, sometimes first among equals. This is not correct because the Yoruba, for example, never rank the Supreme Being, Olodumare with the divinities (orisa), neither do the Edo confuse Osanobuwa with the divinities (ebo). The truth of the matter is that Africans hold the Supreme Being as a venerable majesty who has several servants (the divinities) under Him to carry out His desires. This is why it is not appropriate to describe the religion as polytheistic.

The best interpreter of African Religion is the African with a disciplined mind and the requisite technical tools with the view to discover what Africans actually know, actually believe, and actually think about deity and the supersensible world. There is a world of difference between this and what any investigator, at home or abroad, prescribes through preconceived notions that Africans should know, believe and think. It is also to find out how their beliefs have inspired their worldviews and mould cultures in general.<sup>33</sup>

### Recommendations

The paper recommends that:

1. African religion be recognized by scholars like other world religions.
2. Rather than giving African religion derogatory names, philosophical investigation be made in order to establish its true nature and practice.
3. African philosophers should endeavor to project the philosophy of African religion.

### Conclusion

From the foregoing, the paper establishes the nature and sources of African life that lead to the African religion. These lead us to conclude that it encompasses life in totality. African religion has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African people

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<sup>33</sup>Parrinder 54

throughout centuries past and in centuries to come. Being truly religious is a cultural heritage of the Africans and this is found in the local languages. Therefore, to understand the religious life properly, one has to know their language. It is important because, worship, prayers, sacrifices, offerings, blessings, curses, etc. are all done in the local language by men and women who are trained for that purpose. Such people pass on their knowledge to other people through training them to carry out the religious life of their community. Even though certain derogatory terminologies are used in referring to the African Religion, such are works of those who lack the knowledge of what African religion is or know just a little about it. Thus, the paper argues that there is need for objective and phenomenological approach to African Religion. This helps in understanding better the religion of the African peoples.

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