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## The Need to Re-Conceptualize African 'Traditional' Religion

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### Abstract

*Reality is a universal philosophical problem that people try to explain its underlying principle from their subjective perception. Religion is one of those ways to explain this unknown principle with spiritual connotation. In this connection, Africa as an entity looks at reality in a different perspective, which in this work we term African Religion. But as this work observes, a misconception about African Religion gave birth to a contraption called 'African Traditional Religion'. On this note, this work sets forth to re-*

*conceptualize a misinformed religious view about the African people. It is the belief of this work that African Religion is more appropriate and should be separated from different African cultural practices that have no continental acceptance even among the African people.*

## **Introduction**

It is quite unfortunate that the degrading classification effects of the third world nations has more impact on African continent than other third world nations outside Africa. This perception has affected Africans' belief system and entire African philosophy. Unfortunately Africans have come into terms with this error. One of these errors is description of African Religion as 'African traditional religion' which connote a "derogatory epithets: paganism, idolatry, primitive religion, animism, fetishism polytheism, etc" (Omogbe, 1993). This inaccurate assessment of African belief even affects the definition of African religion. This work tends to defend African Religion in its right perspective and correct that prejudiced impression about African people and their belief. On this note, we will try to look at a few definitions of religion, point out the areas of misconception about African religion and highlight on the problems of establishing the Africanness through African traditional religion. From that point, we will try to solidify our position in defending African Religion with nothing 'traditional' attach to it. At this juncture we will give a brief appraisal of our position and draw a conclusion.

## **Definition of religion**

Religion, like any other philosophical concept does not have a universally accepted definition. That does not mean that scholars have not come out with their subjective definitions. They do. William James (1902) defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine". The inclusion of the word divine in this definition presupposes that the subject (man) has that understanding of a Supreme Being higher than him that must be revered. But, to extend the concept of divine to include "any object that is godlike whether it be a concrete deity or not" by William James (1902) opens up the idea of religion to anything. It is a definition like this that makes every individual to come out with every big and small object, whether tree, stone, bird or animal to be worshipped as deity. As Omogbe (1999) rightly observed, religion as a dialogical relationship is not such that is between equals, but the one an

individual feels he is engaged in a relationship with a Being superior to him. On his part, Omoregbe (1999) defines religion as “interpersonal relationship between a man and a transcendent personal being believed to exist”. Just like any other definition of religion, the word belief remains essential core element a believer of religion cannot do without. That does not make a belief in “communism, socialism, humanism, money, pleasure, etc” (Omoregbe, 1999) religious.

Etymologically, religion, as expressed in an Anglo-French word *religium*, is a “state of life bound by monastic vows, conduct indicating a belief in a divine power” (Harper, online). Cicero equally derived the meaning of religion from *relegere* which means to go through again, read again” (Harper, online). This definition gives us an insight that a religious life and vows are made to a Being who has divine power beyond human control. And that this Being has a condition over His creatures, and there is a special conduct of life expected from them. Here man needs to read and practice a given set of instructions. Even in our cultural settings, we know that to obey instruction from the superior authority, it requires personal discipline from the subject. This is where religious piety sets in. And where one is not submissive to those instructions, it attracts punishment from the Being. It is these divine instructions that are mostly referred to as moral laws in religion.

At this point, we therefore define religion as a relational belief in a transcendent Being who reveals Himself either through a general sense or specific sense to His creature(man) through which a personal worship relationship is established. The question is who is this Being that gives all these moral instructions? In Christianity this Being is called God, the Creator of all that is. “He loves and is approachable. In Judaism, He is known as Yahweh (Jehovah) – the existing one. Buddhism denies anything of deity, while Muslims believe in a powerful but unknowable God” (Adamson, online).

In African society, like the Efiks, in Nigeria, God is known as “*Abasi Ibom*” (the Almighty God), the Creator of all things. As John Mbiti further listed the African peoples and their names of God, we see few of them: Abaluyia (Kenya): *Wele* Acholi (Uganda): *Iwek or Jok*; Adjune (Cote d’Ivoire): *Nyam*; Bachwa (Congo): *Djakomba*; Bamera (Mali): *Jalang*; Bamileke (Cameroun): *Si*; Basuto (Lesotho): *Molimo*; Binawa (Nigeria): *Kashin*; Ekoi (Cameroun, Nigeria): *Osawa*; Fanti(Ghana): *Nyame, Nyankopon* (online). The few names for God in the different ethnic groups are a proof that Africa

practices monotheism. For African people, God is one and has no equal. He is known as the most perfect being above everything He has created. This implies that polytheism is an imposition on Africans. If the concept of God is expressed in all the African cultures, it means that religion forms parts of African culture but not all African cultural practices are religious.

### **The misconception about African religion**

Man generally is given to misconception especially in the midst of conflicting ideas or contending issues. That is the case concerning issues about Africa and its religious life. This misconception is borne out of prejudice or probably out of impatience of the researchers to look at the universal meaning of the terms they used to describe the religious life of the African people. Omoregbe (1993) has painstakingly explained the root meanings of those words used to describe African's religious world view. Firstly, is the word '**pagan**' which is derived from the Latin word '*paganus*' which means 'village dweller.' In a derogatory manner this word is used to "describe those who do not belong to one's religion". Omoregbe (1993) further stressed that this word is synonymous with the word 'infidel' or 'unbeliever' which connotes inferiority. We can infer from here that everybody is a pagan as long as he belongs to one religion and not the other.

Secondly, is the word '**idolatry**' as derived from the Greek word *eidolatria* meaning worship of idol (Harper, online). According to Alex Jebadu (2006), idolatry "is the worship of the creature instead of the Creator, and creature worship is made by man who is himself a creature (online). This is where African religious practice is misunderstood. But the truth is when an African "prays before a statue, he is not talking to or worshipping the statue in question but the divinity(the Supernatural Being) symbolically represented by that statue"(Omoregbe, 1993). This is equally the Roman Catholic practice – praying before Virgin Mary's statue, dead saint statues, etc. Will Roman Catholics accept that they are worshipping idols? We do not think so. According to Jebadu (2006), there are three reasons why African ancestral veneration should not be seen as idolatrous: (i) "African ancestral veneration does not consist of the worshiping of lifeless images or *eidōlon* or idols of emptiness. Instead, it primarily consists of venerating, honouring and loving human life" (Jebadu, 2006). (ii) "African ancestral veneration is not of worshipping demons hiding in images – statues, paintings or sculptures – as often claimed by the early fathers of the Church when talking about the danger of idolatry. Instead, it is of veneration of the living spirits of the dead.

They are not demons or evil spirits and are distinctly different from demons and evil spirits” (Jebadu, online). According to Jebadu (2006), an ancestral carved image conveys the basic character of the ancestor the image is made to represent. This should not be difficult for us to understand having known the method of African philosophy. (iii) “African ancestral veneration is not of the worshipping of creatures in place of God, since the living souls of the dead are never viewed, approached or treated as God. Instead they are viewed as special human beings, having achieved a higher status, a status of being closer to God, and from this status of advantage, accordingly, they are believed to be able to play an intermediary role between God and the living – a belief which is also very central in the Judeo-Christian faith, especially in the Catholic Church and Orthodox Church” (Jebadu, 2006). The question that readily comes to mind is, is African ancestral veneration not a religion itself? Jebadu (2006) answer is no. For him, “African ancestral veneration is never a religion in itself. It is only one aspect of a complex religious system that usually has God as an Absolute Being” (online).

Thirdly is the word **animism** which the missionaries and anthropologists described African religion with. An English anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917), defined animism (from Latin *anima* – life, breadth, soul) as the "theory of the universal animation of nature" (Harper, online). There is nothing African in this concept, hence Roman Catholic belief that Jesus Christ is present in the Holy Communion. In Judaism it is believed that Yahweh inhabited mount Horeb. In Islam, Muslims venerate the Sacred Stone, the *Ka'ba* in Mecca when they go for pilgrimage. Even among the Hindus and Jains, it is believed that spirits inhabit natural objects (Omeregbe, 1993). In the society of wars, revolutions, slave trade, oppressions and suppressions, hunger and deaths, etc, there is that human tendencies for one to think of establishing his identity and actualizing his own way of life be it religious or social. It is on this ground that when a run-away slave or war victims escape into safety, and happen to see a big cave to hide for safety, they will attribute that to divine providence, which is correct. But the cave itself is not God; the object divinely provided will remain historically significant for such people in African culture. Such object serving as a reference point is not therefore seen as object of worship by the Africans. Every culture has its historical artifacts.

Fourthly is the idea of **fetishism** which African religious practice has been referred to by both anthropologists and missionaries. This word is said to be derived from the Portuguese word ‘feitico’ meaning charm. According to

Omoregbe (1993), this practice is not peculiar to Africans. Catholic Christians wear *medas* or put inside their vehicles to be saved from accident; they also use rosaries, crucifix among others for protection. These are all charms. The use of charms by other people does not make it right for Africans to use it. It is part of those cultural practices that infiltrated into African cultures and should not necessarily be seen as a practice in African religion.

The question is, how and when did African people themselves began to misconceive the truth about African Religion and veered into some practices called African traditional religion? There may be no straight cut answer but wisdom demands that with a sense of logic, we should ask a question here: if Africans that generally believed in God as Supreme Being with none greater than Him, what did God reveal to them as a symbol to represent His revealed knowledge, His glory, character and His will (Wilson, online) to them? There is none. But the idea, of man being religious presupposes that man had the original knowledge of God, hence God has no alternative image to replicate His being.

In almost every African society, we witness sacrifices which are purely for atonement for the wrong done. This gives us the idea that the African religious thought rhymes with Christian thought that when the first created man Adam sinned, God promised mankind salvation at the observation of certain rites of worship. That implies that the animal meant for sacrifice is not to be an object of worship but a means of opening a door of fellowship between God and man. It is from here that as the society began to grow and expand man veered from monotheism into polytheism and idolatry. This not peculiar to Africans but to the entire depraved humanity. The reason for this is very clear. From the point of view of Wilson, “abstract faith is difficult. It is so much easier to believe what we see, to have faith assisted by sight” (online). The thinking of something being an object of our faith, does it actually prove that we believe in that thing or those things exist. There are so many things we do not see yet we believe they exist. Apart from that most of the things we know that exist, do we represent them by objects?

There is nothing wrong associating God’s attributes to sun, moon, stars, sea, sky and many other great creatures of God. Of course none could have created them but God. But the worshipping of those creatures of God is not what Africans do, since they know that such practice will “minimize divine dignity” (Wilson, online).

## **The Problem of Establishing the Africanness through African Traditional Religion**

The problem of the so-called African traditional religion lays in an attempt to establish African identity or the Africanness through their religious practices. It is this effort to establish the “Africanness” that brought about the inclusion of the adjective ‘traditional’ in African religion. When something is said to be African, what does it mean or imply? Different opinions are associated to this which needs to be examined. As Ahmadou highlighted, some of those opinions include: The blackness of the Africans; coming from a country of African continent; having particular opinion or culture; ethnicity and tradition; having heightened sense of family and community; having shared history of oppression and domination; being marginalized; being inferior to other so called developed, etc (online).

The idea of blackness seeing as relative to African continent brings to question about other blacks in other continents like Jamaica. An even in Africa, we see white people in both the Northern and Southern parts of Africa. Are they not Africans? So all the above assumed characteristics of ‘Africanness’ are not peculiar to Africa alone. Other cultures outside Africa are also feeling oppressed and marginalized, etc, yet they are not Africans. These are parts of the things that make biased minds to described African religion as ‘traditional’ religion in that most of the practices as they assumed, are peculiar to Africa. This may not be true because other world blocs do practice the same thing. For instance, Hinduism is Indian religion that believes in karma, caste, re-incarnation, *mantras*, *yantras* and *darsana*. It is a well known fact that Hinduism is not practicing monotheism (Ahmadou, online). So the infiltration of some of the belief systems in Hinduism into African world-view cannot therefore make African religious expression traditional having known that culture is dynamic. The thing that filters into one’s culture today may be expunged tomorrow.

Another problem comes from the definition given to African traditional religion as “any type of religion practiced in Africa before the arrival of Islam and Christianity” (Wikipedia, online). This definition creates a false impression as if these religions came to reveal God to Africans. Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the Africans have had the knowledge of God as a Creator. Africans have known God to be all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving who is greater than the works of man’s hand. If at the advent of Christianity and Islam some Africans were met practicing witchcraft, such

could not have been regarded as traditional religious aspect of the African. In some Western countries witches are licensed to practice witchcraft provided the practitioners pay their taxes. This practice does not make the Western religion traditional religion and it does not make the Western world Africans. So if few Africans are practicing witchcraft, it has nothing to do with African religion or it's Africanness.

A brief reflection on history shows that the period of Anglo-Saxon England (410-1066CE) paganism, different deities were worshipped including "wooden, Thunor, Tiw and frige" (Wikipedia, online). It was this period we heard of Anglo-Saxon witches (witch of Ailsworth, witch of Berkeley, witch of Ely, witch of Ramsey and the witch of Queen Aelthryth (Wikipedia, online). The authority of that time refused to include this evil practice as a general cultural practice of the people hence the practitioners were punished. So, it is completely unacceptable for anybody to include same to form a traditional religious practice of African people. The African society also punishes witches. Among the Efik people, the punishment was severe because the accused person was given *esere*-bean to eat. This was the practice the Colonial masters met and stopped it, that it was a cruel process of capital punishment. It is unacceptable then to use witchcraft as an aspect of African religion and her identity.

Still in the Western society, there was practice they referred to as "cunning folk" which they punished the practitioners hence such practice was not included in the real religious life of the people. So the "cunning folk" refers to professional or semi-professional practitioners of magic acts" (Wikipedia, online). These practitioners cover northern, western, central, and Southern Europe. In Northern Europe, Johan Erikson of Knutby was sentenced to seven gauntlets because of superstition in 1690. Brita Bion of Gotland was sentenced in 1722 and 1739 for claiming to heal after coming out of underworld (Wikipedia, online). This 'cunning folk' was purely witchcraft activities which rhymes with it Anglo-Saxon root name 'Wicca' (witch) meaning the 'craft of the wise' (Wikipedia, online). The point of emphasis here is that there is nothing African in this evil practice. It was not also a cultural practice that involved everybody, but religion was and is still a common practice by Africans. It is possible that most of the leaders in African societies lacked the power as of then to stamp out witchcraft practices, superstitions completely from the cultural life of the people. If they were not able to do it that time, that does not mean that it can never be done now.



The clumsy religious practices called the African traditional religion is nothing but a deliberate attempt to ridicule the people of Africa as if they were not created by God like any other race. In fact, the continuous derogatory reference of African religion as a traditional religion should henceforth be seen as **racism**. Whosoever must have come out with that name must have been hasty in his generalization. On the basis of the above we have to re-conceptualize the 'African traditional religion' and come out with 'African religion' based on the following. Firstly, religion is an aspect of people's identity. Hence, borrowed cultural practices that are inimical which may be abandoned later should not be included as part of the religious life of the people. For instance, human sacrifice in the name of religion is not generally accepted even within a given culture. A lot of people may not want to be identified with such evil practice. Secondly, religion serves as a vehicle of social mobilization. And the goal for the mobilization defers as per culture. It becomes a problem in annexing the entire continent together. This is what gave birth to multi-cultural practices but the universal understanding of the concept of God remains central. A given cultural society enhances inculturation. That is why "our ideas are shaped by what we see around us...our concepts of time, space, and religion are all tinted by our ecological glasses" (Sarpong, online). Thirdly, religion ordered a society through its moral laws. African moral laws forbid murder, immoral affair with somebody else wife, stealing, disregard to parents, and disrespect to elders, biased judgement, etc. This goes to show that irrespective of diverse cultural practices, yet their religious world-view remains the same. Fourthly, religion can equally be used to incite people to war against the perceived enemies. Many cultures condemn war as a means of settling conflict, unless like in the case of the Efiks when they fought the war of survival with the Adadia people in 1400 (Asukwo and Etta, 2012). Fifthly, religion serves as a means of maintaining values in a given society. Though what a society values is purely relative but when it comes to divinely enjoins values like the sacredness of human life such is uniformed. Sixthly, religion transmits heritage from generation to generation. Irrespective of changes in the language of the time the idea transmitted remains. Seventhly, religion is the expression of the peoples' world-view. We do admit that world-view changes and grows hence the infiltrating influences and modernization of the society; this notwithstanding, the religious truth about God's existence remains.

From the above, it becomes obvious that what is called African traditional religion does not befit Africa as an entity hence the need for replacement with African Religion.

### **In Defence of African religion**

There are concepts, ideas, values and world-views that are common to every component units of African society. So is the concept of God which is the basis and source of religion. This is a universal concept. There is a general awareness among the Africans that “religion is the virtue by which men pay to God the worship and reverence which they owe Him as the ‘first’ principle of the creation and government of things’ (Copleston, 2010). It is believed that the natural laws that govern human beings in the society are revealed by God. Just as scientific laws being discovered laws as enshrined into the system, so also moral laws that enable man to be virtuous. On this note, the Africans see religion as ground of “man’s relationship to God, as creature to Creator, as subject to Lord” (Copleston, 2010). The African man sees religion as a vehicle or the medium through which God can be worshipped or related to and be appreciated. In that respect there is no single uniformed image agreed by the Africans to represent God. That is, there is that general acceptability, consciously or unconsciously that the God is a spiritual Being that cannot be quantified or measured. Africans do not have many Gods as speculated but only “one God who is the Absolute Creator, owner and ruler of all things and the Father of all mankind (Omoregbe, 1993). For instance, the Yorubas do not have plural name for God (*Olodumere*), Efik people do not have plural name for God (*Abasi Ibom*), neither do Igbo people have plural name for God (Chineke). This concept runs through Africa.

Apart from that, Africans believe that the government of the people, monarchical or democratic is ordained by God. Hence, the honour is usually ascribed to Him as He that gives power. This informs why the Efik people see God as *Akara Ekondo* (“The Ruler the world”). Since He rules the world, he delegates power to human agents to lead the people. There is no African culture with inanimate object as their ruler. Human agents (rulers) for the Efiks are *abasi isõñ* (God’s representatives). There are not to be deified or worship but to be respected as ones standing for God.

African religion, as observed by Mezzana has been represented “based on the so-called common sense of Western countries” (online). According to Mezzana, “the representation of Africa as a country devoid of its own profound spiritual dimension ... is made up of unfounded generalizations and

distorted or omitted information” (online). It is false pictures that the missionaries and anthropologists hastily created that put African religion in a bad light. Some of those cultural practices described as religious but now being jettisoned because of modernity tells us that the Africans know the value of religion and its requirements. For instance, among the Efiks, the superstitious killing of the twins was described as a religious practice which was not. Does it mean that the stopping of that practice has excluded the Efiks from practicing religion? How about the human sacrifices practiced by some cultures, and now no more?

Again some biased Western researchers as quoted by Mezzana, described African traditional religion “as being the most primitive stage of the spiritual evolution of peoples, featuring practices it terms derogatively as animist, fetishist, pagan, totemic, idolatrous” (online). The word primitive as derived from Latin word *primitivus* means original ancestor (Harper, online). This shows that every given society has its primitive stage in its development or a founding father they can make reference to. So, primitivity affects entire humanity hence it should not be attached to Africans in such a derogatory manner. If the Africans worship anything they put in place to signify the presence of the Supreme Being, as the Ark of God signified the presence of God among the Jews, such should be condemned because that is a deviation from the known African practice. It is academically ridiculous that a culture that has trained all the known ancient western philosophers from Thales to Aristotle and even beyond to still be referred to primitive is not fair.

African religion should not also be seen and interpreted from “local or specific practices which are generalized without reason” (Mezzana, online). A certain practice within a cultural domain should not change the definition or the outlook of African Religion. In Christianity, we see a lot of infiltrated practices which the Holy Bible even condemned yet Christianity remains with its definition, likewise Islamic religion. Many different practices from splinter groups are coming up, yet Islam remains with the original definition. As Mezzana rightly observes, “no one for example, would define the essence of Christianity by the excessive devotional practices towards a given saint found in rural areas...” (Online). There are a lot of things that influence cultural practices. It could be the dynamic nature of the culture itself, where some mores infiltrates into another culture imperceptibly through interactions. Equally some bad cultural practices and customs have been done away with as stated earlier but African religion cannot be done away with. Neither can the concept nor the idea of God be removed from the

religious perception of the Africans. That is why is hard to hear of African atheism

### **Appraisal and conclusion**

Given, that the human development gives room for unscientific speculations, just as the pre-Thales' society tried to explain the cosmos either from mythological perspective or by mystical explanation before a better scientific explanation came. The unscientific explanation of reality should not be seen as primitive, fetish and idolatrous therefore the religion of the people. For instance, the Efik people have the concept of '*akpa-obot*' (first coming). This concept is about the reincarnation which they believe. A child that looks stupid is viewed as his first coming into the world. But today, what the Efiks knew as *akpa obot* in their mythology has now been discovered scientifically as a Down syndrome (Asukwo & Etta, 2011). If this understanding has cleared an age long ignorance, does that mean that the Efiks religious life has been torn apart? Or they don't practice religion again? We don't think so.

If we remove the scientific era completely, every other race will be like Africa which has been ravaged by wars, revolution, colonialism, imperialism, famine, high mortality rate among others. The Efiks say that '*owo udöñö isimeke nka*' (implying that "a sick person cannot meet up with his peers"). So, after the destruction of the first Egyptian civilization that attracted most of the Western Ancient philosophers to study in Egypt, Africa should not be castigated as idolatrous continent. At the collapse of African civilization, many things were lost including the art of writing. So if the Africans chose to enshrine their philosophies into songs, arts, dance, etc, such should not be seen as fetish.

In conclusion, the point we need to state is that Africa has come to the age of understanding or knowing what misinformed the people to do what they did which should be separated from the real concept of religion of the people. There is no genuine denying that Africa has the concept of God, believe in all His attributes; accept Him as a Creator of all beings. Africans believe that God hears the cry of the people.

We cannot exonerate most African cultural practices from historical fact. Some of the artifacts have historical significances to the related African cultures (which may not be peculiar to Africans alone). The problem is that whenever the world-view is build on something without immediate

alternative, dubious interpretation may be given to that world-view to deceive unsuspected minds. For instance, a story is told about *Olumo* rock in Abeokuta, Ogun State, which “is an historical monument, which served as a shelter and fortress to the Egba people during the Yoruba intercity wars. By 1830, the main body of the Egbas had already settled at the site of the *Olumo* rock and the refuge provided by the rock marked the end of their wanderings and struggles for existence” (Babatunde, online). *Olumo* rock is a divine providence that God made available to the Egbas in time of needs. The name *Olumo* means ‘what God molded’ in Yoruba language. It is possible for some ignorant people to sacrifice to that rock as if the rock appeared on its own. But most people believe that God is the provider, who alone should be worshipped. When worship is given to lesser entities that God created to serve man’s need like sun, moon, sea, animals, caves, etc. that becomes idolatry. We see this being practiced everywhere even within the leading religions of the world.

This also applies to the founding fathers of African societies where ancestors are venerated. Africans should recognize that even though a departed ancestor should be respected for a life well lived, none of them should be deified. The concept of metaphysical evil as advanced by Gottfried Leibniz opines that since God cannot create Himself, it means everything He creates is lower than Him in perfection (qtd. by Asukwo, 2009). This must have informed God instructing the Jews that “thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them ...” (Exodus 20:4-5). They were not to make images for worship. That did not mean that they could not make historical reference to Aaron’s rod, the Mount Sinai, the pot of manna, the Ark of God, etc. Those things were physical which were made reference to, but not to be worshipped. The analysis here is clear that any worship given to any imperfect creature is idolatry. At this point we draw a line between African religion where Africans worship the true God and idol worship which of course did not start from Africa. It would not be out of place to admit that the advent of Christianity played a very important role in correcting some of the wrong cultural practices of the Africans which almost beclouded the right way of worshipping their Creator. On that note, African traditional religion being imposed as a religious world-view of the Africans is not a right identity that should be given to Africans, hence its condemnation. In that respect this work wishes to inform the world that African religious

world-view should now be known called and address as **African Religion**. On that we stand.

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