

The Conception of “God” in African Philosophy and African Traditional Religion



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ABSTRACT: The conception of “God” is universal albeit categorized in different expressions because of the uniqueness of every culture. This paper focuses on the conception of God in African Philosophy and in the cultural-religious worldview of African Traditional Religion. The paper makes a philosophical attempt to bring out the necessary richness in the African view of God. At the same time, it attempts to harmonize the African view with the Western conception of divinity. The beauty that lies in the way the African lives and relates to “God,” and the beauty that lies in the Greco-Roman conception of God ignites the need to operate a respect for cultures, highlighting the principle of intercultural exchange. God remains for all times: Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Love, Merciful etc. and an African worthy of the name can ascent to these categories through the worldview of African traditional religion, except when influenced negatively from the west.

INTRODUCTION

From a historical perspective, talk about African Philosophy is associated with three related happenings: Western Discourse on Africa, the African response, and more recently, the positive evaluation of non-Western cultures leading to the development of post-colonial African Philosophy. In the arena of Philosophy, scholarly interaction and interest in the possibility, existence and content of African Philosophy commenced when the Belgian Missionary, Placide Tempels published his *Bantu Philosophy* (1945). Ever since then, African Philosophy has undergone a journey in search of its identity and self-justification for a seat in the marketplace of Philosophies.¹ However, before delving into the African conception of God which is the objective of this paper, a few distinguishing remarks between Western and African Philosophy would not go amiss.

1. How not to Compare Western Thought with African Thought

Etymologically speaking, Philosophy is the “love of Wisdom”.² In a generic sense, this definition stands true, and reflects the human activity, made possible by the faculty of reason, of searching for ultimate answers to questions of man’s origin, situation and destiny. From this point of view, the act of Philosophizing is common to the entire human race regardless of skin colour or language. However, Philosophy in a stricter sense is no longer limited to its etymology. A current textbook’s definition would have Philosophy to be “*The science of all things naturally knowable to man’s unaided powers, in so far as these things are studied in their deepest causes and reasons*”.³

The evocation of “Science” in this definition asserts with clarity, that we are dealing here with a “*body of related data, set forth systematically, expressed with completeness, and presented together with the evidence that justify it as true*”.⁴ Thus, we see that Philosophy, once held to be the confrontation of ideas about life, death and wisdom at the Areopagus in Athens, is now an **organised body of knowledge**. In other words, it has been built into a **system**. It is precisely on the count of this systematisation of Philosophy that some have been quick to dismiss African Philosophy as not worthy of its name. Three preliminary remarks are necessary in this connection. In the first place, we must affirm that before the advent of the Scientific era, (and one may add the Metaphysical era), **all cultures** existed in prescientific outlook, wherein tough questions about reality and natural phenomena were explained by recourse to the activity of gods or mythical reasons. Therefore, Western anthropologies who are often scandalised or puzzled by the virtual ubiquity of references to gods and all sorts of spirits in traditional African explanation of things, are rather

¹ We have decided to avoid the long debate about whether there exists a genuine “African Philosophy” and what precisely “African” imports to the formulation.

² Cf. *Phaedrus* 278d2ff, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Ed.) Princeton, 1961, p. 524

³ Cf. Mario Antigas, *Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 5 ⁴ Cf. *Ibid*.

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guilty of being unfamiliar with the folk thought of their own cultures.⁴ Traditional African thought, (from which much on the African conception of God will depend), should not thus be compared to a system such as *Logical Positivism*, and then dismissed for its lack of syllogistic rigor, but rather be put to bear with the “mytho-theological” background of Plato’s dialogues for instance.

A second remark borders on the *philosophical worldview that shapes and differentiates the African and the Western thinker*. Alfred North Whitehead (reference needed) once remarked that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”⁵ This remark was made in particular connection to the fact that almost all Philosophers have subscribed into some version of a dualistic worldview. Jacques Derrida and others have tried with varying success to “deconstruct” Western thought from the polar opposites that pervade their concepts. These include the opposition between, good vs. evil, being vs nothingness, presence vs absence, identity vs difference, mind vs matter, man vs woman, soul vs body, life vs death, nature vs culture, speech vs writing, just to name a few.⁶ Although Traditional African thought does not share the anti-metaphysical stance of the so called ‘deconstructionists’, it has proven to surpass the dualism of Western thinking on many important counts. For the sake of an example, the human being, in African thought is not thought of as constituted by merely a body and soul, but rather three (up to five in some cultures) constituents. Besides the **body** and the **soul**, (life principle) important reference is made to the **spirit** (breath), and also the **shadow**, which does not occur in Western thought.⁷

Again, the pluralistic conception of man’s constitution separates itself from the characteristic dualism of Western thought.

Finally, the twofold cosmology of Western thought does not square with African’s conception of the universe. In the former, the universe is conceived as divided into two separate spheres. On the one hand is the **earth**, sphere of change, corruption and habitat of bodily and imperfect beings, whereas on the other hand is the **sky (or the heavens)**, the sphere of pure essences, and habitat of the spiritual beings. Traditional African thought admits of a gradation in these spheres, which accounts for the abode of the living-dead, or the ancestral world, which is neither the world of men, nor the world of the gods. These differences, as we shall see, influence the African conception of God in many respects. To prepare the way for the African conception of God to be viewed with its peculiarities, it would be necessary to examine, albeit briefly, the major lines of philosophy of God as put forth in the West.

2. Western Conception of God

2.1. Brief Survey of conceptions

The Western conception of God arises in the context of their philosophic project. This, as we have come to know is first of all the research of the absolute foundation of reality, of the definitive solution of the problem of being, of the response to the ultimate interrogatives posed by finite existents.⁹ These include the inquiry about the origin of things, the destiny of the man and the source of evil, just to name a few.

The attempt to have an ultimate answer to these ultimate questions of the human reason led various philosophers to varying conceptions and definitions of the ultimate being or reality responsible for them. In this light, the *arche* of the pre-Socratics, the *Logos* of Heraclitus, the *Being* of Parmenides, the *Number* of Pythagoras, the *Intellect* of Anaxagoras, the *Good* of Plato, the *Thought of Thought* of Aristotle, the *One* of Plotinus, the *Nature* of the Stoics – are the preludes to the personal God and Creator of the Christian message.⁸

In the Christian era itself, the terms vary, but not their implicit value: the *Incommunicable Truth* of Augustine, the *Super Ens* of Pseudo-Dionysus, the *Subsistent Being* of St. Thomas, the *most perfect being* of Descartes, the *Ens Realissimum* of Kant, the *Absolute Spirit* of Hegel, the *Matter* of Marx, the *Man as absolute project* of self of Sartre.

Behind these formulations lies the affirmation of the thinkers that there exists an Absolute reality, beyond which reason requests no more, and before which reason always remains uneasy while searching for it.

2.1.2. Important Features

Going through the aforementioned conceptions in particular and the history of Western philosophy in general, one arrives at some important observations.

□ *Ascent from Creatures to God*

The discourse about the Absolute has as its necessary starting point the particular existent. Speculation about God begins from the reality of sensible being. Two outstanding principles of Aristotle have come down to us through Mediaeval coinage and usage:

- *Nihil in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*. There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses.
- *Nihil in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in re*. Concepts are the effect, expression and revelation of real things.

⁴ Cf. Kwasi Wiredu, “How not to Compare Western Thought With African Thought”, in Emmanuel Eze, (ed.), *African Philosophy, An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, London, 1999. p. 193.

⁵ A. North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Free Press, 1979, p. 39.

⁶ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Margins*, 12, in Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 438

⁷ Cf. Emmanuel Eze, (ed.), *African Philosophy, An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, London, 1999 ⁹ Cf. Luigi Bogliolo, *Rational Theology*, p. 3.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 4

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□ “Objectivity”

With a few exceptions in Western thought, Philosophy aimed at a disinterested search for ultimate answers to the big questions of human existence. Philosophy, in this conception, was more or less “knowledge for its own sake”. It was lost in an “unconcerned objectivity”.⁹

This reference to objectivity’ inevitably brings to mind the recurrent opposition between ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’. In an attempt to render Philosophy ‘universal’ and boastful of unchanging ‘certainty’, authors since the Modern period have sought relentlessly to subject Philosophy to the methods of the empirical sciences. ‘Objectivity’, now refers to the spirit of facing reality as it is in ‘itself’, and distancing any personal influence from our tastes, sentiments, prejudices, or any other ‘subjective’ dispositions. More recently, Gaston Bachelard has described subjectivity as an ‘epistemological obstacle’. Apart from the practical difficulty of a total objectivity, one notices that the rigorous search for a disinterested ‘knowledge’ only makes for the impersonal character of much of Western Philosophizing.

Against this is the remarkable personal character of African approach to Philosophical questions. Here it is realised that the objects contemplated, the problems investigated, the way in which the questions are formulated, and the results obtained, reflect the fact that the quest is borne by and is determined by personal conviction. In this connection an African author remarks:

Among many African societies, the existence of the supreme Being is taken as a matter of course. It is rare, if not impossible, to come across a Yoruba who will doubt the existence of the Supreme Being or claim to be an “atheist”.

If there is anyone like that, further investigation will reveal that he has been exposed to nonAfrican cultural influences.

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This goes to show the nuances that exist between African thought and Western thought. Yet at this level, the research is still gaining speed. Our next stop will be to present the various attempts at constructing an African Philosophy of God.

3. Stages in the Systematization of African Idea of God

3.1. Placide Tempels’ “Bantu Ontology”: A Western Forerunner

The honour of having brought the first piece of literature concerning “Bantu (or African) Philosophy” into academic philosophical discussion is attributed to Father Placide Frans Tempels. His famous work, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, is based on his observation of the behaviour and study of the language of the Bantu people (the Shaba Baluba of Zaire) among whom he had worked for a number of years. Since Tempels was writing primarily for European readers, there are two things that he calls to attention. First, he notes that it is he, and not “Bantu” who is making an analysis of Bantu “philosophy”. By this he means that by analysing their observable behaviour and their language, he wants to expose the first general principles on which these stand, that is their ontology. Thus, whereas he is involved with philosophical *analysis*, it is the Bantu themselves who are the actors in the domain of ontological existence. The next remark, still addressed to the (predominantly) European readers for whom the work was intended, is that the concepts will be presented in Western philosophical terms for greater accessibility.¹¹

In Tempel’s conception, the fundamental principle that underlies the Bantu concept of life is that of the **life force or vital force** (in French *force vitale*).¹² The vital force is the invisible reality of everything that exists, but is supreme in man. And man can reinforce his vital force by means of the forces of other beings in the universe. Tempels avers that the Bantu speak of God himself as “the Strong One”, he who possesses Force in himself. He is also the source of the Force of every creature. ¹⁵ “Above all force is God, Spirit and Creator, the *mwine bukomo bwandi*. It is he who has force, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and of increase, to other forces. In relation to other forces, he is ‘He who increases force.’”¹³ Starting from this basic ontology, Tempels goes on to explain the interaction of beings in the universe, magic, fortune and misfortune, man and personhood, and even ethics from these notions. In a summary, he develops *Philosophy* of the Bantu peoples, as he saw it.

Tempel’s book created two camps: the Pro and anti Tempelsians. The former charged at Tempel for having made a preserve use of “Philosophy”. Among the African proTempelsians, there was a general feeling that Tempel’s ideas about the existence of a Bantu Philosophy were positive and defensible. Yet at the same time, Tempel’s book was regarded as essentially part of colonial discourse on Africa. According to this view, Tempel’s work was part of the West’s self-definition, which included attributes of science, rationality, logic and Philosophy and the denial of the same as the characteristics of others.¹⁴ For this reason, the pro-Tempelsians thought, there was need for a new African intellectual elite, with solid preparation in Philosophy and knowledge of the traditional thought to give Tempel’s hypothesis a better grounding. One of the first African scholars to undertake this task was Alexis Kagamé, to whom our attention is now turned.

⁹ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, London 1979. p. 3

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid*

¹¹ Cf. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Presence Africaine, Paris, 1969, p. 40.

¹² Cf. *Ibid*, p. 44. ¹⁵ Cf. *ibid*. P. 46.

¹³ Cf. *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Cf. D. A Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 84

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3.2. Alexis Kagamé’s *Philosophie Bantoue Comparée: An African Response*

Alexis Kagamé stands out as a giant of contemporary African thought.¹⁵ He enjoys first hand a privilege which a few of the other names share: he was born in the early twentieth century and grew when colonialization was triumphant, but also when African traditions were still vibrant. He was lucky to experience these two, and also gifted enough to conceptualize these traditions and make them known to both contemporary Africans and Europeans.

Unfortunately, his Philosophy has been trapped under a kind of ideology of ethnophilosophy, which has not only impeded the appreciation of other aspects of his work, but is almost a frustration of his philosophical project. The conviction of Kagamé is that “in a culture without writing, such as that of the Bantu, the philosophical conceptions are either incarnate in the structure of words, or condensed in some proverbs, or developed in one or another literary genre (tales, stories, narrative, poems) or finally mixed with religious doctrines or social institutions.”^{16,17}

At face value, this approach resembles the method of Tempel who sought the philosophical system of the Bantu by recourse to their folklore. This has met fierce criticism by Philosophers like Paulin Houtondji who have characterised such thought as “ethnophilosophy”, and as such not primarily philosophical. However, it would be a misunderstanding of Alexis Kagame to think that he ended at this level. On the contrary, the methodological and analytic differences that separate him from Tempels give him prowess.

- *An Advanced Methodology*

For one thing, Tempel’s account of Bantu Philosophy is based on one tribe, namely the Baluba of Kasai in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And this far it is only the *personal reflection of an author not Baluba Philosophy*. Kagamé, went a step forward, proposing a two step method:

- First, to take a determinate cultural zone and identify the Philosophical elements embedded in the language and institutions, in tales, narratives, and proverbs, avoiding those aspects which depend solely on ethnology.
- Secondly, to extend those researches to the whole Bantu area in order to verify whether the same elements can be found or not. The outcome should then enable one to establish either the real existence or non-existence of a Bantu Philosophy.

His two main books¹⁸ on Philosophy represent the aforementioned steps: *La Philosophie Bantu Rwandaise de l’Être, La Philosophie Bantu Comparée*.¹⁹

- *Bantu Philosophical Theology of the First Cause*

In his writings, Kagamé develops Bantu Philosophical Theology of God in two steps. First he argues that God is conceived as the **First Principle or First Cause**. He showed that the Rwandese called this “Being” who is cause of all things as **Imana**. He further undertakes a large inquiry into Kinyarwanda thinking about the concept **Imana**. From the analysis of 9 divine names related to it he goes on to discuss further attributes given to **Imana** in Kinyarwanda sayings, proverbs, and names to confirm that most Rwandan traditional cultures conceived Imana as first cause. Examples include

Iya-mbere: he who is before everything.

Iya-kare: he who is at the very beginning.

He then extends this inquiry to the whole Bantu region, successively comparing what he calls primary attributes given to the “Pre-existent”. Despite the great territorial extension of the Bantu zone, and great number of clans, he succeeds to show that the names of the Preexistent are few and the attributes given are often the same, the most important being

“Creator”, “the Great one”, “the Almighty”, “the Immortal”, all showing that **God is a Supreme being**. The Bantu concept of God, as brought out by Kagamé brings out the fact that some of the attributes serve as names of God, usually in way showing that **God is Worthy of Praise**, as in:

Rugira: he who acts par excellence.

Rugaba: the distributor of goods. *Rwagisha*: he who gives benedictions

Nyamurunga: he who puts together.

¹⁵ Born in Rwanda, May 15th 1912, he became a Catholic priest in 1941. He was a scholar, philosopher, priest, and his scientific work is diverse, encompassing poetry, literature, linguistics, history, anthropology, religion and spirituality. Cf. Liboire Kagabo, “Alexis Kagame (1912-1981): Life and Thought”, in

¹⁶ Alexis Kagamé in *Philosophie Africaine, Textes Choisis I*, Kishasa, Presses Universitaires du Zaïre, 1975, p.

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¹⁸ *La Philosophie Bantu Rwandaise de l’Être*, Bruxelles, Academie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956.

La Philosophie Bantu Comparée, Presence Africaine, 1976.

¹⁹ For this work, Kagamé is said to have gathered data on 180 languages, read more than 300 books on these languages, interviewed more than 60 informants. His research is certainly the most comprehensive that anyone has done on those languages. Despite this, the critics keep asking: where does ethnophilosophy end and Philosophy begin?

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One notices immediately that this **God is conceived as a Personal being**, as is noticed in the clauses “the one who...”, “he who...” An attempt has been made (see Appendix) to show, with respect to our Cameroonian languages, how “God” is conceived and named in our Traditions.

To a greater extent, thus, Kagamé fulfils his objective of showing that it is meaningful to talk of a Philosophy [of God, for instance] that belongs to the Bantu in general, based on concrete evidence, rather than on unproved generalisations as Tempels had done.²⁰

4. An Attempt at a Synthesis of the Contemporary Voices: Cameroon and Abroad

4.1. Origin of the Idea of God

Francis Collins in his work *The Language of God* recounts the experience of a white medical doctor doing voluntary service in a remote village in Nigeria. Having diagnosed and successfully treated a patient dying of a severe ulcer, he was stunned to see the patient’s family go down on their knees to thank God. Amazed by their faith and confessing to them the atheism of many of his fellow men, they could not understand how on earth some people could be unbelieving. They concluded that the white man’s countrymen were all probably blind, and deaf! No one with two eyes that see the beauty of creation and ears that hear wonderful deeds daily could fail in recognising God as the author of both these.²³

In this connection J. S. Mbiti outlines three possible sources of the belief in the existence of God, for Africans. In the first place, people came to believe in God through reflecting on the universe. Wonder at its immensity and beauty made Africans believe that it must have been created, and that that Creator is acknowledged to be God. Equally, the enormity and continuity of the earth and the heavens was enough reason for a reflective people to posit a God.

The next source of the belief is the realization of limitations. The African realised how limited his powers and knowledge were, and how weak he was. He experienced all these in the face of realities like death, calamity and the forces of nature. Being unable to control these, he came to the speculation that there must be someone who is capable of controlling all these things.

The third reason is akin to the above, and consists in the African’s marvel at the order in the world. The manifold ways in which the forces of nature manifested themselves – thunder, storms, night and day, moon and stars, as well as the alternating seasons forced the African traditional man to look beyond himself. He then attributed them to God and lived in awe of him.

4.2. Divine Names and Attributes

With regard to divine names, every African people has a word for God. Sometimes the names are descriptions, such as *Nzapa*, (Sango, C.A.R) *Imana*, (Kinyarwanda, Rwanda) *Zamba* (Beti, Cameroon), *Nyuy Ngambom* (Nso, Cameroon). These names are derived from the people’s idea of God, coming from their conception of his activity, their “pictures” of him, his nature and their relationship with him.

language of a people is a denoter of the *a priori* and not only of the referent which is the object of communication. So to say, how many native speakers have at the back of their minds “being with intelligence” when they say *muntu* or “first cause” when they say *Imana*? He asserts that language changes, losing or acquiring some components without subtracting or adding any new element of the peoples worldview. Some cultures, he goes on, could be aware of values, or metaphysical concepts about the world without necessarily having corresponding words in their language in which such values or concepts are reflected. This goes to say that exploring meanings and grammatical structure does not provide sufficient basis for drawing systematic conclusions. Philosophy must be grounded on something more than linguistic analysis. Cf. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, p. 100-102.

²³ F. Collins, *The Language of God*, New York, Free Press, 2006, p. 100.

As for attributes, there is somewhat coincidence in African classification as is in Western. Charles Atangana divides them into metaphysical and moral attributes.²¹ Under the former, God is conceived as **Almighty** (*Ngogo*), **Unique** (*Zamba*, *Mebeghe*, *Nkwa*), **Omnipresent** (*Yobo*), **Sublime** (*he who is in heaven*). Peak among the moral attributes is the **Justice** of God. He hates the wicked and strikes them with sickness in their youth. When they die, he sends them to the ghosts. On the other hand he loves good people, blesses them with old age and eternal bliss at death. J. S. Mbiti also adds to this list God’s **loving-mercy** to mankind and his **holiness** manifested in the strictness in performing rites of cleansing after crimes or abominations.²²

4.3. Images /Anthropomorphisms/ Symbols of God

The consequence of using human language to talk about God is that he is described in human terms. God is viewed as a **parent** who loves his children. **Speech** is attributed to him; he speaks, so as to communicate his will to humans. **Movement**, too, since he left the dwelling of men and went to heaven. God also loves, hates, he sits on his throne.

²⁰ An important critique of the above method has been raised by D. A Masolo. He admits, in any case, that language is a good store of people’s ideas about their environment and beliefs. But inquires just how the

²¹ Cf. Charles Atangana, *Yaoundé-Textes*, cited in Soter Azombo et Pierre Menyongo, *Précis de Philosophie pour l’Afrique*, Editions Fernand Nathan, 1981, p. 119.

²² Cf. J. S. Mbiti, *Religions et Philosophie Africaines*, Editions CLE, Yaoundé, 1972, p. 48.

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Besides these, there are also some symbols that evoke the presence of God. Water is seen as a symbol of divine strength and life source.²³ In some clans, families have certain observances that keep them ‘close’ to God. Some keep a bucket of water which God uses to bless their unions. Others keep small fires burning during the night; still, some keep a little aperture in the roof of the hut, through which, it is believed, God watches over the inhabitants and blesses them.²⁴

4.4. From Knowledge of God to Belief in God: African Traditional Religion

In Traditional African thought, there is much of an overlap between the knowledge of God and belief in God. The African’s Philosophy of God ushers him into his belief and relationship with this God. One can talk then of a mutuality between concepts and practice.

J. S. Mbiti once remarked that the African is notoriously religious, meaning by this, that religion permeates his whole being and life. By some estimation, this traditional religion has some similarities with Christianity, and in many ways had aspects which made the

African very disposed to welcome Christianity.²⁵

4.4.1. Ancestral World

Traditional African society goes a step beyond the strict Western dichotomy of the “living” and the “dead”. There exists another category of beings, known as the “**living-dead**” or more commonly as “**ancestors**”. The ancestral world is inhabited by the spirits of the exemplary members of each tribe. To be an ancestor, one must have died of old age, must have been a person of good reputation and lived an exemplary life. It is believed that from this ancestral world, these spirits follow up, in a certain sense, the course of life on this other plane. At the same time, they are closer to the world of the gods and can use this position of influence to pray for blessings and success upon the land. For this reason, their names are invoked during prayers and other rituals, and their memory is immortalised by giving their names to the newly born. In support of this Ancestral institution, Geoffrey Parrinder writes:

Africans are convinced that if one fails another will help. They do not debate as to whether ancestors are gods or can be prayed to or not, they know that having passed beyond the grave the ancestors have outsoared the shadow of our night, they have acquired new powers, those powers may help men, and so men make any sort of appeal that may get succour in time of need.²⁶

The concept of ancestors is thus important in our treatment of the African notion of God in the sense that the African believes that his God admits of intermediaries in relationship. It also shows the belief in a life after death and reflects the hope of seeing God after death.

4.4.2. Rites and Worship

There is a complex system of worship in every African society. There exist some religious institutions like the traditional priesthood, the “seers” as well as other societies which are more secretive and cultic.²⁷ The traditional priesthood as an institution ministers at royal and other traditional ceremonies of importance. At stipulated seasons, they offer prayers or sacrifices for peace, security, fertility and blessings upon the land. Their very lifestyles are often a picture of their message. When the “gods” are angry, or the land has been defiled by an abomination, they could lead the people in fasting and atonement.

Growth in traditional set-up is also accompanied by many rites. From birth, children are circumcised, named, and they follow a step-by-step initiation as they grow into adulthood. For one thing, these ceremonies help to handover the traditions of the tribe to the younger ones and give them direction. They create in them the awareness that life is a harmonious whole, wherein each one’s contribution fits in the tapestry. As Charles Atangana observes, the various rites are believed to purify individuals and prepare them to receive divine help.²⁸

In the life of the community there are harvest festivals, planting festivals, hunting and fishing festivals, victory festivals, coronation or accession festivals, and many others.²⁹ In places like Nigeria for example, one could find different types of festivals

²³ Cf. Vincent Mulago, *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme*, Presence africaine, 1962, p. 8 ff

²⁴ Cf. Ibid. Quoted in Soter Azombo et Pierre Menyongo, *Précis de Philosophie pour l’Afrique*, Editions Fernand Nathan, 1981, p. 125.

²⁵ Here one can mention the belief in a supreme being, the respect and celebration of life, the strong sense of solidarity, authority and tradition as moral standards. Just to name a few. Cf. Humphrey T. Mbuy, *African Traditional Religion as Anonymous Christianity*, p. 18-22.

²⁶ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, 67.

²⁷ Here we can mention the various “jujus” like *Nko’oh* and *Takumbeng* in Bafut, *Nwerong* in Nso, *Nyamkpe* and *Obasinjong* in Manyu, *Maleh* in Bakweri, just to name a few. Peculiar to these are the necessity of initiation, vow of secrecy, and the cultic rituals and use of herbs for manipulation and strange manifestations involved. These disqualify them from the list of types of worship of God. They are appropriately referred to as secret societies and are essentially evil. Cf. Vatican Report, *On Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements*, 27th edition, St Pauls, Australia, 1985, p. 10.

²⁸ C. Atangana, in *Op. Cit.*, p. 119.

²⁹ G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, 84.

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and masquerades to mark the return of the spirit to human societies, and to celebrate or renew the fertility of people and fields.³⁰ It is important to look at the economy of celebrations and rites because they convey strong messages about the relationship between an African and the Supreme Being. The following presentation serves the unique purpose of relating the idea that God in African Philosophy is not a theoretical reflection based on nothing but a reflection that flows from the very way an African lives and relates with Him. That is why it is often said that an African is notoriously religious. From the very principles governing communal living, the various functions that serve the traditional African society namely, priests, diviners, herbalists, mediums, oracles etc., one can practically discern their conception of God.

4.5. Communal Celebrations

As already intimated, there are occasions like the birth of a child, the giving of names, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriages, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain, and many others. They demand a lot of religious services with meaning, and through their observation, religious ideas are perpetuated and passed on to the next generations. Also, these structures expose African communities to the religious sentiments, doctrines of faith and show the relationship of the “God” idea to the structure of the society.³¹ A look at the communal rituals brings out this message.

4.5.1. The Economy of Rituals

A rite or ritual is a set form of carrying out religious services or duties, through the words, symbols and actions of the priests or mediums and it embodies a belief or beliefs. There are innumerable rituals and ceremonies in African Traditional religion.³² They give an opportunity for Africans to celebrate their religion and life. During these rituals, the people not only act their religion but communicate it to the younger generation. At the foundation of these rites and celebrations is an intrinsic factor – communion. Communion is not only limited to the arena of physicality but transcends the phenomenal.

4.5.2. The Principle of Communion

When sacrifices are made, the communion aspect is often prominent.³³ In the Igbo community in Nigeria for example, foods and drinks are put on a soily surface for the ancestors by the priests before the members of the community partake of them. This entails that the sacrifice is not just an individual thing but have a communal dimension, it involves at once, one’s relations in the community, the ancestors and ultimately God. This communion is manifested ultimately in the link that exist between the visible and the invisible world.

4.5.3. The African Community: A Symbol of Unity between Two Worlds

The Phenomenology of the African community operates a link between the visible and invisible or spiritual world. In traditional Africa, as already intimated the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.³⁴ Also, affirming the foregoing view, Christian Gaba says that the individual can only say: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"- a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man".³⁵ This same philosophy is translated to the invisible dimension such that whatever happens in the visible world is dictated from and has its influence in the spiritual world.

4.5.4. The Dignity of Sacred Places (Temples, Altars or Shrines)

African Traditional Religion (ATR) has often been despised because it possesses no mighty stone temples, witnesses to the artistic ability of past ages. The temples are made of clay and are often small and crude. That is because worship goes on in the open air. In ATR practice especially during communal ritual celebrations, only the priest enters the temple, stands at the alter or shrine. These places are often awesome and evoke a sense of the *mysterium fascinans* and the *mysterium tremendum*. That these feelings come to play is indicative of the transcendental nature of the supreme being in African thought.

4.5.5. Sacred Specialists

In all religions one finds experts in religious matters, whether full-time or not. The sacred is dangerous to ordinary mortals, its demands are mysterious and perhaps its character capricious, so that intermediaries are needed who themselves partake of the divine nature. However, there is a great deal of confusion over the names to be given to the religious specialists in various parts of Africa. Just as the words *juju* and *fetish* have been applied to a great variety of spiritual entities, so have titles such as witch-doctors, “sorcerer” and “*jujuman*” been wrongly used of religious officials.³⁶ The sacred specialists are comprised of different types of

³⁰ Cfr. Cheryl EKWUNIFE, *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, SNAAP Press, Enugu, Nigeria 1990, 118.

³¹ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *West Africa Religion and Religion in an African City*, 99.

³² Cfr. *Ibidem*, 80.

³³ At communion sacrifices, small gifts, like kola and other nuts, are commonly placed at shrines and graves. Kola nut a symbol of friendship is split in two and part handed to a friend that binds him in a union, “we have eaten kola together”. So if a god is given a part of the kola, the rest may be chewed by the worshipper. Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, 102.

³⁴ Cfr. J. MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, 106.

³⁵ Cfr. C. GABA, *Scriptures of an African People and the Sacred Utterances of the Anlo*, NOK Publishers, New York 1973, 159.

³⁶ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *African Mythology*, 120. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*,
African Traditional Religion, 101.

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people such as the priests, mediums, diviners, herbalist and witch doctors. The striking point here is that these groups of people are often revered and at the same time feared for the reason that the traditional African sees them as representing god. The notion of God thus becomes a God who is so great, and evokes fear especially for the one who does not respect his priests and mediums.

4.5.6. The Priest

The word *priest* in ATR is properly used in reference to an official servant of a god, and he normally ministers at a *temple* or shrine. They are also well versed in religious knowledge, in matters of myths, beliefs, traditions, legends, proverbs, and in the religious practices of their people. Traditional priests are found in Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana and other parts of West Africa, where people have temples and cults associated with major spirits (or divinities). The priests in African societies may be either men or women. In some societies, priests are not found but instead, ritual elders perform the priestly functions of sacrificing, leading rituals, praying, blessing and acting as the link between people and gods.⁴⁰ In the cults of the West African gods there are priests who are highly trained to do their work. In relation to the priestly service J. Mbiti writes:

They are often set aside from birth, or they may be called to the service of the gods by being possessed by his spirit. The priests carry out the duty of communal sacrifice. Their work is to look after temples and religious places, to pray, to lead in public worship, to receive presents on behalf of gods or other spiritual beings, and in some cases to act as seers and mediums.³⁷ In the ancestral cults the chief person to offer sacrifices is normally the representative of the ancestors. The chief is a priest of his people, for he is a sacred person, and he is the one charged with the responsibility of approaching the ancestors on behalf of the tribe. He is the natural link between the living and the powerful spirits of dead chiefs and elders.³⁸

4.5.7. The Mediums

Mediums refer to the people who get in touch with the spirits. As regards their duties or services to the community, the mediums tell where to find lost things, who may have bewitched a sick person, what types of ritual and medicine are necessary for the cure of people's troubles, whether an intended journey will be a success or not, which of the living dead may have a request to make and of what kind, and many other things. Mediums are closely linked with the priests who possess the spirit of the gods or ancestors. Such people, of whom the majority are women, may be attached to any temple or place where people come to consult an oracle. Sometimes they prefer to have a number of mediums under their control, who are consulted by order and whose possession is carefully regulated. Very frequently, they set up as freelancers, and go into trances when being consulted by those in need of guidance.³⁹

4.5.8. The Diviners

The diviners also known as the soothsayers refer to the specialists who seek to diagnose diseases, or discover the solution to problems, by means of inspiration or manipulation of objects through various techniques. Such men are very numerous or common throughout Africa. A diviner may be a medium through whom the spirit speaks. Dreams and visions are different ways in which the diviner receives word from the spirit world. Common tools of the trade include divine-stones, seeds, mute, gourds, bowls and material items picked up from scenes of accidents, just to mention a few. Furthermore, diviners are akin (similar) to mediums and certain priest, because they may be subject to possession and give their answers by recourse to an oracle.⁴⁰ Diviners deal with the question of finding out what has gone wrong. They tell who may have done evil, magic, sorcery or witchcraft against the sick or the barren. They find out which spirit may be troubling a possessed person, what it wants and what should be done to stop the trouble.

Diviners, like other social group-religious leaders, often have their own language. The main function of diviners, mediums, oracles and seers is to find out hidden secrets or knowledge and pass them on to other people.

4.5.9. The Herbalist

The herbalist in the traditional setup has knowledge of the various herbs. They are different from the diviners who combine herbal medicines with divination and the majestic power of the spirit world. Their methods of treatment include poultices, ointments, rubbing powders, sweating baths, and blood-letting. Within the verities of herbalists in West Africa, there are specialists who have their own techniques for particular types of sickness; men who treat sores, abscesses, or fevers. Some of the religious cults have the aim of curing specific diseases like smallpox. They are known as the smallpox gods in West Africa, whose priests isolated the sufferers and treated them from the disease.⁴¹

4.5.10. The Witch Doctors

G. Parrinder conceptualizes witch-doctors as diviners who are dealers in good magic and herbs. As their functional role to the community, the witch-doctors manipulate stones to predict the future or to detect witches.⁴² The witch-doctors in carrying out their services may denounce the witches by name, though they may avoid doing so unless they are sure that the people are unpopular.

³⁷ Cfr. J. MBITI, *The Concepts of God in Africa*, S.P. C. K., London 1970, 252.

³⁸ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *West Africa Religion and Religion in an African City*, 84.

³⁹ Cfr. *Ibid.*, *African Traditional Religion*, 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, *West Africa Religion and Religion in an African City*, 76.

⁴¹ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *West Africa Religion and Religion in an African City*, 98.

⁴² Cfr. *Ibidem*, 98.

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Some witch-doctors claim to recognize witches by special signs; here, they have hairy faces, bleary eyes, or red smoke coming out of their heads. But to see these means that one must have ‘the right sort of eyes’.⁴³ From all these, we are able to identify the services of the witch-doctors as those who liberate the community and her members from their problems thereby making their own contribution by their services and constituting a social group same like the rest of the sacred specialists.

In retrospect, one can say that most often than not, knowledge of God in African thought leads to some form of belief in God. Thus, although not all Africans commit themselves to a rigorous program of traditional religious observances, and granted that not all have been converted to Christianity and other religions, there is still discernible a fundamental religiosity among Africans. As highlighted above, it is inconceivable in Africa to have people who “**understand**” the concept of God, but **refuse** to make any assent in belief. Agnosticism and Atheism as practiced by Hume and Bertrand Russell, does not square with the African mentality.

5. Concluding Postscript: Must God Remain Greco-Roman?

Our analysis makes us pose this question which has been posed variously, and which we deem important. “Greek” here has nothing to do with the small Mediterranean country in Southern Europe, nor the Greek Orthodox Church. Neither does Rome refer to the Capital of Italy. However, we are using the terms in the descriptive sense of that patrimony of intellectual and theological thought about God shaped by the ancient and classical Greek and Roman thought.

Doctrines about God in the Christian tradition have reflected what some scholars call a Eurocentric character. It reflects assumptions of Western civilisation, which in turn is a descendant of ancient Greek philosophy. These concepts are very pervading and have had a lasting influence in shaping thought since the early era. For the sake of an example, we shall borrow a prayer from the Roman Catholic Liturgy to see how Philosophic concepts of God coming from Graeco-Roman Philosophy are at work.

Opening Prayer of Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A, Roman Missal

Let us Pray

Eternal Father, reaching from **end to end of the universe**, and **ordering** all things with your mighty arm: for you, **time is the unfolding of truth that already is**, the **unveiling of beauty that is yet to be**.

Your Son has saved us in **history** by rising from the dead, So that **transcending time** he might free us from death. May his presence among us lead to the **vision of unlimited truth** and **unfold the beauty of your love**.

One easily notices how much this prayer, (for the sake of an example), is steeped in Aristotelian-Thomistic Metaphysics. The evocation of concepts like eternity, the bounds of the universe, order, time, truth, beauty, history, transcendence, and beatific vision inevitably bring to mind this influence of Graeco-Roman philosophy. Given the fact that on the said day (7th Sunday of Easter, Year A), this prayer is said in all Catholic Churches the world over, it could be a genuine question to ask if that prayer comes alive in the hearts of the people of the various cultures attending the celebration. MUST GOD REMAIN GREEK? What would be the reaction of Christians in the traditional societies of Africa if on the same day, the prayer below is said instead?

All Powerful Father, Giver of Rain and Sunshine,

You **watch** over the **great and the small** with your mighty arm, For you, our stay here is only passing.

Your Son **bought us** from the evil one by **giving up** his life,

May his **blood spilled for us** help us **germinate into new life**,

Into **Your Kingdom**, full of milk and honey, where You shall be our **unending peace and love**.

In contrast, this version evokes the concepts of Might, Control over nature, vigilance/Providence, Impartiality, Sacrifice, Rebirth, Reign of God, and Peace in God. To a greater extent, this prayer states *virtually* the same affirmations and intentions as the one above. In any case, a more lyrical hand could render it more poetic. It is also very faithful to Biblical Theology in its reference to Christ’s Passion. Above all, it has the advantage of appealing to the African worldview –Nature, Sacrifice, Farming and so on. The all important question is whether such a prayer, faithful **both in its representation of God’s nature and in the African’s conception of that nature** could one day find its way into Missals for use in African Christian worship. MUST GOD REMAIN GREEK? However, it would appear that the answer to this question can be given better by experts in LITURGY and INCULTURATION. But away from public prayer, does the African Christian’s private prayer reflect the African’s conception of God? What about speech? These questions are necessary, if our whole enterprise on African Philosophy, on which so much ink has been spilled, needs to bear any significant import beyond the mere pouring of arguments back and forth among intellectuals.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, *African Traditional Religion*, 107-108.

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