

The Supreme Being and Divinities in African Traditional Religion: X-Raying Their Relationship and Conflicts

By

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Abstract

In the realm of the supernatural, God and divinities gain prominent control that impact humans and the African environment. African traditional religion holds that the Supreme Being is the owner of heaven and earth. Divinities relate with God and are seen to be God's messenger and intermediaries. This research x-rayed the concept of God in Africa traditional religion, the Concept of divinities in African traditional religion, the place of God and divinities in African traditional religion, the relationship between the Supreme Being and divinities, The Supreme Being and human beings, the conflicts between God and Divinities in Africa traditional religion. The research utilized the historical and analytical methods of research as well as the utilization of books, journals, and internet materials. This paper recommends amongst others that Africans should respect one's belief as it will avert conflicts and create peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

For many decades, the concept of Supreme Being (God) and divinities in African traditional religious thought has been a controversial and misunderstood concept. Many factors led to this controversy and

misconception. These include lack of written documents, lack of indebt study of African religion leading to hasty conclusion, prejudice by western scholars who misconceived African traditional religious concept with Christianity and language barriers as stated by Ikenga-Metuh (1981). Most of the scholars (ethnographers, historians and colonial anthropologists) who came to study the indigenous religion of Africa were armchair scholars who depended on data from missionaries who themselves concentrated in one community or tribe. Mbiti (1970) has it that they used the scanty information derived from one or two localities in Africa to draw conclusion about the ontology of the Supreme Being, divinities and ancestors (the living-dead) in Africa. These armchair scholars went as far as believing that the sub-Saharan Africa is one country with one religious belief and practice.

Ray (1976) avers that this misconception continued until the 1970s and 1980s when some African indigenous scholars like Bolaji E. Idowu, Mbiti, S. John set out to refute some of the erroneous claims about African traditional religion. They acknowledged the fact that “Africans” had known God before the missionaries came. This view gave Africans and their religion, which was battered and shattered by the missionaries who condemned and denigrated their religion, a new hope and integrity. In this paper, our attention is drawn to the roles and conflicts of God and divinities in African traditional religion.

The Concept of the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion

When we refer to the word ‘God’, we are talking about the living eternal Being who is the source of all living and whose life existed from the dateless past. He is self- existed and is the one whose power sustains the universe. He is an all-knowing Being who knows and sees all things at the same time without any modern instrument. He even knows the end from the beginning. According to Brown (1975:78), this Great Being has revealed Himself in many different ways, “and human beings, in particular, have

always felt His presence and responded to Him in worship". This manifestation or revelation of God has brought about a living relationship between God and Man leading to what we now call religion.

There are divergent views of scholars as per the origin of religion and the belief in God in Africa. As per religion, some scholars see religion as originating from fear. As people saw the vastness of the universe, the rumblings of thunder, lightning, the sea and so many other things that caused them fear, they developed faith in something that will shield them from what they feared. Others see religion as originating from magic while others see religion as the creation of the priestly class. Sbani (2014:5) opines that "religion is the quest for humanity to have an object of worship which directly or indirectly becomes their God or god and is the basis of their belief and driving force". As there are divergent views of scholars concerning the origin of religion, in the same way many scholars have various views as per the origin of belief in God in Africa. Thus, three important views exist which are here explained. Firstly, through reflections on the nature of the universe, Africans came to believe in God. This view has its bases on the fact that Africans believe in Supreme Being as the Creator of the universe. This belief led them to reflect on the vastness of the universe. Their imagination led them to this conclusion that there must be a Supreme Being whose power not only created this vast and complex universe but also sustains it. They therefore began to give this being worship and adoration. Secondly, through realization of their own limitations Africans came to believe in God. This second view of the origin of belief in God in Africa has its root in human's limitations and the insatiable nature of his needs. Africans saw that they were limited and weak in many respects, including knowledge and power.

These limitations and powerlessness rather led them to speculate that there must be a Supreme Being who is superior to these other powers that can be drawn to help them through appeasement and or sacrifice. This made it

necessary for humans to depend on the one who is more powerful than people. This however, made Africans to feel that they needed the help of this Supreme Being in their experiences of limitations and powerlessness. The Africans worship this monotheistic God. It should be observed that the process of this formulation took a long period before it was actually conceptualized. Thirdly, as Africans observed the forces of nature, they came to believe in God. This third view of the origin of belief in God in Africa is so important because it has to do with the various forces of nature. Humanity from time past has been in the habit of looking at the forces of nature with awe and reverence. This made him to worship these forces as having one supernatural power or another. As Africans looked at nature, season and creatures, seeing their enormous benefit to humans yet unreachable, they began to associate the earth with a great God who is very close to man supplying his needs such as rain for his land to produce abundant fruits. It is very likely that Africans came to believe in God's existence through such a link between heaven and earth. Humanity was at the centre of the universe. Standing on the earth but looking up to the heavens, and that belief began to make sense and fit into man's continued attempts to understand and explain the visible and the invisible universe, the earthly and heavenly worlds of which man is the centre. This knowledge of God through belief; became the cardinal point of the traditional religion of Africans. Noss (1949:3) posits:

This realization ranges from primitive conceptions of dependence on powers and forces in the immediate social and moral environment to conceptions in the high religions of a first cause of all things, a being personal or impersonal that has produced the universe and is the present basis of its existence and functioning.

Agah (2012) says in every case the highest or ultimate object of veneration or worship is regarded as an actual being, the Supreme Being, either personal creator or an impersonal being of existence. In some cases it could

even be a human being or inanimate object. It is not uncommon to find in every case the loyalties of the adherents integrated and directed towards the Supreme object of worship.

The Concept of Divinities in African Traditional Religion

The next in rank to the Supreme Being, God, are the divinities. The divinities are brought to life by the Supreme Being. Amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Orisa-nla is one of the divinities and the next in rank to God, but created by God, who left the universe in their hands to be re-fashioned. All the divinities are functionaries and act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the rest of the universe, including human beings. They have no power of their own, except what the Supreme Being permits them to do. Yet they are very important as far as the orderly function of the universe is concerned.

African traditional religion partly recognizes a group of beings popularly known as divinities. These beings have been given various names by various writers such as 'gods', 'demigods', 'nature spirits', divinities, and the like. Mbiti (1969:67) explains that the term divinities "covers personification of God's activities and manifestations, the so-called 'nature spirits', deified heroes, and mythological figures". This belief in divinities is a common phenomenon especially in West Africa, while in other parts of Africa; the concept of divinity is not succinctly expressed. This is what Njoku (2002:33) means when he said, "The phenomenon of belief in divinities is not everywhere prominent in Africa". In West Africa where the concept of divinities is clearly expressed, there are so many of such divinities. In Yoruba pantheon, for example, Idowu (1973) asserts that there are as much as 201, 401, 600, or 1700 divinities in Nigeria. Mbiti (1969) posits that there are as many divinities as there are human needs, activities and experiences, and the cults of these divinities are recognized as such. He states: One divinity is connected with wealth, human fertility, and supply

of children (Oluku); another is iron (Ogu), another of medicine (Osu), and another of death (Ogiuwu).

Functionally, the gods are operative both on earth and in heaven. Orisanla, the arch divinity, for example functioned in heaven and on earth. He was the one, according to Yorùbá oral traditions, employed by God to mould the physical aspect of man. He was also the one charged with the responsibility of creating the solid earth. Orunmila (Ifa), according to Yorùbá oral traditions, operates between heaven and earth. Yorùbá traditions have it that he is usually a witness of human destiny before Olódùmarè. Thus he is usually referred to by the Yorùbá as Eleriipin – the witness of lot. He is regarded by the Yorùbá as the deputy of Olódùmarè with regard to omniscience and wisdom.

According to one Odu corpus, when Ifa left heaven, his first stopping place was Usi in Ekiti land. Then he moved to Ado, Ilesa and finally settles at Oke-Igbeti in Ile-Ife. His earthly father's name is said to be one Agboniregun. Thus, we can describe these divinities as gbayegborun – “living on earth and in heaven.” This is to say that, like the Supreme Being the divinities are transcendental and at the same time immanent. However, this thesis should not be taken to mean that they are of equal status with God. As a matter of fact, all beings in heaven and on earth exist in consequence of the being of God. The functional role of the divinities is twofold. Divinities are messengers and errand runners. They run errands for the Supreme Being and at the same time human messages are relayed to the Supreme messenger in charge of prayer and sacrifice.

The Place of God and Divinities in African Traditional Religion

In African Traditional Religion, there is God, divinities, ancestors and man. As said earlier, God is the one whose existence and beginning is not known and the creator of all things. Therefore, God in African Traditional Religion is at the apex of the ladder and is known as the Supreme Being having

various names in different cultures and tribes. Divinities have been grouped into two major groups namely: the Principal Divinities and Minor Divinities. Principal divinities are regarded as part of the Original order of things. Njoku (2002:34) sees these divinities as being “co-equal with the coming into being of the cosmos”. They include such divinities as Sango or Amadioha–thunder divinities for Yoruba and Igbo; Ani or Ala –earth divinity among the Igbo, Aje in Idoma land and other solar divinities. The Dinka people of Sudan recognize Deng divinity associated with rain, fertility and others, Abak with mother role, Garang– perfect picture of father/son relationship. They also recognize Macardt – a divinity associated with death.

The Concept of Image in African Worship:

In Africa, there are no images of the Supreme Being but the divinities are represented with images, temples or shrines. Idowu (1973) explains that the divinities do not prevent Africans from knowing or worshipping the Supreme Being directly as some erroneously claims, but constitutes only a halfway house, which is not meant to be a permanent resting place for man’s soul.

While man may find the divinities ‘sufficient’ needs, something continues to warn him that ‘sufficiency’ is only in Supreme Being. The divinities are only means to an end and not end in themselves. In African Traditional Religious thought, especially among the West African people, the concept of divinity is well established. Divinities are so many that their number seems not to be known. This concept has made so many scholars to believe that African religion is either pantheism or polytheism. Those who believe that African religion is pantheistic are of the view that Africans see spirit in everything including wood, tree, fire, and others.

However, this may be true but Africans do not see these spirits as deserving worship. They still have a strong place for the Supreme Being whom they

revere in a special way and whom they believe is unique. It is not a belief in a plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character.

The Supreme Being and Human Beings

The first and central amongst the themes in Africa Traditional Religion is God and human beings. The basic structure of Africa Traditional Religion amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria has the Supreme Being as the head of all things, the creator and the controller, the everlasting, the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and ever-acting God, even if all divinities and the ancestors became silent. Like in the Old Testament, the basic belief in the Supreme Being, God, is not disputed all over Africa. He is the unique and the incomparable one. B. J van der Walt's diagram has the Supreme Being as the head and the rest of the spirit world and human community follow him (Van der Walt 2003).

The concept of human beings in Africa Traditional Religion is also important, because it is generally acknowledged that God is the originator of humanity, despite the fact that the exact method of that creation may be different from place to place (Mbiti 1970; Muzorewa 1985). To be a human being is to share a sense of a community. What makes a human being is incorporated in the 'complex unity of the tribe, outside of which all others are strangers and inferiors, if not enemies' (Sidhom 1969). This relationship can be extended to the invisible world, the spirit world in all the hierarchical order, namely God, Deity and Ancestors (Oborji 2002). When there is estrangement between God and the spirit beings, there is a need to pacify and recapture the lost relationship between God and humans by sacrifice, performing rituals and medicine.

Relationship between the Supreme Being and Divinities

1. Divinities are “semi-autonomous agents” who are the executive heads of various departments in the monarchical government of the world. People regard them as convenient and appropriate channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Supreme Being (Brown, 1975).
2. Divinities are created “beings”. As created beings, they are subordinate to the Supreme Being.
3. They are derivations from Deity. Divinities do not have independent Existence or absolute existence, but derive their being from the Supreme Being. This means that since divinities derive their being from the Supreme Being, their powers and authorities are meaningless apart from Him. They constitute a halfway house where man’s mind cannot obtain the fullest satisfaction except through them. This implies that the divinities are means to an end and not end in themselves. Hence, divinities cannot do anything without the approval and sanction of the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 1970).
4. They act as the objective phenomena of African traditional religion. Divinities are entities, which are real to African people and are said to be ministers with portfolio in the theocratic governance of the world. They are functionaries delegated to rule the world, each of them, is given his own territory to administer for example, Sango, Amadioha, Skoba and Xevioso are names of divinities in Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe and Ewe associated with thunder and fire; and are usually employed to protect the society by the people when such calamities occur (Mbiti, 1970).
5. They are given functions to perform: Divinities do not perform duties against the will of the Supreme Being rather they are obedient to the command of the Supreme Being. Various communities of Africa who believe in divinities have their local names for each divinity depending on the function the divinity performs. In Yoruba Jakuta is the divinity responsible for wrath-one who hurls or fights with

stones”, is known in Nupe as Sokogba– God’s axe. Among the Igbo Ala or Ani– Earth, is the arch-divinity responsible for the fertility of the soil.

6. Divinities serve as “functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe” (Idowu, 1973). This means that the various divinities have been apportioned various duties to perform in accordance with the will of the Supreme Being. This is clearly shown by Idowu in his book *Olodumare ...* where he explained that in Dahomey, Mawu-Lisa is regarded as an arch divinity who apportioned the kingdoms of the sky, the sea, and the earth to six of his offspring. He made his seventh child Legba, the divine messenger and inspector-general in African pantheon. This also means that the divinities are ministers with different definite portfolios in the monarchical government of the Supreme Being. They therefore serve as administrative heads of various departments (Idowu, 1973).
7. Divinities are intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being. They have therefore become channels through which sacrifices, prayers and offerings are presented to the Supreme Being.

The Conflicts between God and Divinities in Africa Traditional Religion

1. Prayers: Sibani (2018) posits that God demands prayers from humans and humans also intentionally offer prayers to divinities via libations from fathers who are the head of the family or through community heads or those designated for such activities at the shrine. Obviously, appeasement is very important in African cosmology as rituals, sacrifices are used as means of prayers to the gods. Christians view the African methodology of prayer as satanic, barbaric, and fetish as they are offered to deities that are inferior to the Supreme Being. According to Sibani (2018: 56-57), “The Church prays for the nation, leaders, for peace and security. The clergy is the right intermediary on grounds of relationship between God and man. Prayer causes reconciliation in broken homes, makes the sick whole and brings hope”.

2. Ancestor Worship: Mbiti (1970) states that when a person dies, his soul or spirit wanders around the bush until his relations perform the necessary and befitting burial rites. According to O'Neil (2006), some ethnic groups in Nigeria venture into monotheism and discussions of concepts of belief in ancestors as well as the doctrine of reincarnation and oath taking as a mechanism to enforcing accountability. Sibani (2015:57) avers that:

Ancestors are believed in African traditional religion to be spirits of their fore-fathers. They are no longer visible in the sense that they have become spirits but they still play dominant role in the running of the affairs of the family to which they belong, while still here on earth receive sacrifice from them from time to time.

After the burial, M. Oboh (Personal Communication February 2019) explained that there is a kind of conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religion in respect of ancestral worship. He further mentioned that before Christianity, God have ways of leading His people. He said our people still believe in God. The ancestors served as intermediary between man and God. The ancestors served as God's representatives. He said now that Christianity has come, the intermediary between man and God is not the ancestors, Jesus Christ now plays the role of ancestors. He added that there have been series of arguments saying that Jesus Christ is the greatest ancestor. He said humanly speaking; Jesus Christ is an ancestor because he plays the intermediary between man and God. As a man He came to die to reconcile man to God. Though Jesus is God, when we picture Him from African Traditional point of view, the African man can perceive Jesus Christ as an Ancestor. His relationship with Jesus Christ will not be like the one with ancestors where they worship with rituals but through prayers. He further said that it will be difficult for the African man to believe that Jesus Christ can play the role of the ancestors without all those rituals and sacrifice.

3. Ritual Act of Worship: Each community worships and carried out its rituals in its compound and environs. Sibani (2015) opines that the larger religious communities consist of the village where members can also belong to different cults and closed associations. People communicate with divinities; spirits and ancestors through a technique used to diagnosed and analyze social and moral relations as well as to probe misfortune and inquire about one's prospect priorities for the future. Here rituals include seasonal, initiation, fertility, life cycle and crisis rites: kingship ceremonies, offerings, purification, healing activities and agricultural ritual which are sometimes linked to rain rituals. Christianity frowns at seeing divinities as object of worship rather than ascribing all glory to God who is the Supreme Deity.

Recommendations

In this section, consideration will be given to recommendations that will enhance better worship environment and good governance as follows:

1. Africans should respect one another's belief in the supernatural to avert crisis in their worship lives.
2. It is necessary for Africans to look into loyalty of divinities to the Supreme Being and learn subordination to leaders in authorities.
3. Obviously, there are protocols and intermediaries to the God in Africa, lessons should immediately be learnt from their government by humans to respect orderliness.

Conclusion

The Supreme Being and divinities are part of the hierarchical order of creation in Africa traditional religion. A good knowledge of them will make us avoid misinterpreting their powers and exchanging roles. The Supreme Being will always remain the creator of all things while the divinities will remain subordinates to God in helping him to continue his creation work here on earth while still being messengers to humans such as the angels in the Bible were. Agah (2012) posits that it seem strange to complete any

work on the history of religion without dealing briefly on the veneration of saints or ancestors which pervades all religions. How did man come to worship ocean gods, spirits of the field, the forest and sky? In the spirit of this research, clarity has been made in relation to divinities and the Supreme Being (God), their relationship and conflicts.

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