The Challenges Besetting the Study of African Traditional Religion in the 21st Century Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This essay examines the challenges besetting the study of African traditional religion in the 21st century Nigeria. African traditional religion is a distinct religion with distinct features; meaning that the religion never started the same way with other world religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc but it is a religion that the Africans today have become inseparably related to it that there is nothing they can do without making reference to it. Despite this, the study of African traditional religion is faced with challenges relating to death of devotees, Christianity, lack of written literature. In addition to these are industrialization and urbanization, western education and indoctrination. The study adopts secondary sources of data (published materials) as its main sources of data gathering. Findings from the study reveal that African traditional religion is still relevance and has continued to proffer solution to all the problems of life and of our environment especially in a world where science and technology has failed to answer all questions of life.

Key Words: African Traditional Religion, Challenges, Besetting, 21st Century Nigeria.

Introduction

The term African traditional religion, here, is a suggestive of that which was practiced by the African fore bears and which is today been practiced by the

present generations of Africa which of course will continued to be practiced by the future generations. It is the religion that originated from the people's ecosystem, believed to shape and nature the African peoples through its values, system of taboos, beliefs, customs and also sustained the traditional society prior to the event of Christianity and Islam. Thus, it is the religion that connects the past with the present generation; believed to be everything for the African peoples their culture, practices, traditions and all that the people cherished so dear as deeply embedded in their cosmology. Here, they are so intimately and inseparably attached to this religion that there is nothing they can do without making reference to it (Ugwu, 1999, p. 26). It was in this vein that Mbiti (1969) wrote:

> Wherever the African is, there he is with his religion. He carries it to the fields where is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university. If he is a politician, he takes it to the House of Representatives (p. 2).

This is a religion which lay much emphasis on high degree of morality, respect for sanctity of life. In fact, communitarian spirit is highly emphasized which make each a brother's keeper. These values amongst others form the foundation of the religion (Amadi and Ezeonye, 2019, p. 166).

This essay, therefore, intend to discuss the challenges besetting the study of African traditional religion. This study relied majorly on secondary sources of data. That is published materials.

Conceptual Clarification

African Traditional Religion

Ekwunife (1990) defines African traditional religion as:

> Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions such as myths, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pity-

> sayings and names/sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities (p. 1).

Furthermore, it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans (Awolulu and Dopamu, 1979, p.26).

Why We Label African Religion, Traditional

The religion is traditional in the sense that it originated from the peoples' environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported from outside to them. Africans are not converted into it; they are born into it. It serves the purpose of distinguishing African Religion from any other religion that has been brought to Africa through missionary and Islam propagation. It is based on oral tradition for its transmissions. It has no written literature, sacred scriptures or creedal forms. It has no reformers, preachers or missionaries that bring about a change in the religion from time to time as we have in other world religions (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 22).

Structure of African Traditional Religion

Belief in God (Supreme Being)

For the Africans, the belief in God is unshaken. The people's idea or the concepts of God are derivable from His relation or disclosure of Himself through the created order as perceived by each society in Africa. That is why people call Him by different names in African societies depending on what they think He does. Among the Igbo He is Chineke (The God that creates) (Peters, 2009, p. 36). Among the Yoruba, He is Olodumare (The King or Chief Unique who holds the scepter, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth and he is at the same time permanently unchanging and reliable). Among the Edo, He is Osanobua or Osanobwa (the one who sustains, under pines and supports, the universe), among the Nupe, He is Soko (immense, great or the highest Deity that resides in heaven (Tasie and Ofuru, 2013, pp. 21-22). Among the Akans of Ghana, He is Nyame (The bright, majestic, splendid God who rules the universe). For the

Africans, God is not only real but He is also believed to be known and worshipped (Metuh, 1987, pp. 77-82).

Belief in Divinities

Divinities, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) are gods with small letter "g", believed to possess divine attributes since they are emanations from the Supreme Deity. They are said to be brought into being by the Supreme Being, hence they have no separate existence, but their existence is as permitted by the Supreme Deity, who cause them into being. As for their position and duties, the divinities were brought into being for a definite purpose, and the purpose of which is to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the universe. In other words, the divinities serve as intermediaries between God and man. The divinities, therefore, become channels through which sacrifices, prayers, and offerings are presented to the Supreme Being. They have temples, shrines and devotees with priests and priestesses. So they are means to an end and not an end in themselves (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As for their census and names, the divinities are many and their numbers vary from locality to locality. Among the Yoruba, for instance, the number varies between 201, 401, 601 and 1700. With regards to their names, each divinity has a name, sometimes, the names are descriptive in the sense that they describe the true nature, character and functions of the divinities. For instance, in Yoruba, Jakuta, the divinity responsible for wrath, i.e. one who fights with stones is known in Nape as Sokogba, meaning God's axe (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As Imasogie (1981), pointed out, The Supreme Being having created the universe, appointed the divinities to the various departments of nature to carry out its purpose; hence there are, for instance, a divinity in charge of human procreation, a divinity responsible for death, another in charge of food production, yet another charged with the responsibility for bodies of waters, etc. According to him, these divinities have full authority over their respective areas of influence, subject only to the power of the Supreme Being (p. 34):

George Tasie and Chisa Ofuru (2013), observe that the divinities are highly personalized. Some as they noted, are conceived in gender terms as male or

female. According to Tasie and Ofuru, the Ashanti, for instance, not only consider the earth to be a female divinity and second to God, but also observe Thursday as her day. Also, the Igbo, as they remarked also regard the earth to be God's daughter who protects people and helps with crops. Some of the divinities according to them are further conceived as having spouses as humans do. For Tasie and Ofuru, a telling example among the Yoruba are the goddess Osun and Oya both of whom are believed to be the wives of Sango, the divinity of thunder and lighting. They further noted that there are other divinities that are believed to be androgynous, possessing male and female characteristics. They pointed to the Egba and the Ewe who conceive Buruku in this manner (p. 43).

Belief in Spirit

Spirits, as Anyacho (1994) pointed out, are invisible beings which are capable of assuming different shape and form when they want to reveal themselves to man. For him, they are believed to be created by God and as such are subordinate to Him (p. 247). In much the same vein, Omoregbe (1999) notes that spirits are believed to appear sometimes to people in human form (p. 66).

As for their nature, spirits are not only abstract (i.e. they can take any form or shape and nature, but also ubiquitous in the sense that there is no area of the earth, any object or creature which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Spirit possess, complex nature and attributes depending on the order in which it is being spoken of but generally, spirit is said to possess vital influence and force or power. As for their abode, spirits are believed to inhabited natural objects such as (trees, mountains, rivers, forests, etc and they are believed to be sacred, there are good and bad spirits. The good spirits are responsible for giving fortunes to people while the bad spirits include: *ogbanje* born to die spirit) and ghost spirits which are spirits of those who died "bad death" and were not properly buried. Their spirits become wanderers and haunts the living (Peters, 2009 pp. 41-42).

Belief in the Ancestors

Who are the Ancestors?

J.S. Mbiti (1969), sees the ancestors as the deceased members of their families who are still remembered and venerated by members of their families. Any wonder, he describes them as the "Living dead" (P. 83). In much the same vein, Tasie (2009)

also sees the ancestors as those who lived a very good life while on earth and died "good death" at a ripe old age and were accorded burial rites befitting their status (P. 43). According to Anyacho (1994), "the ancestors are those who are believed to have acquired extra-human powers in the afterlife which enables them to intervene in the lives of the living members of their families" (P. 257). Thus, they are regarded as the benevolent fore fathers; the nearest and closet to man (Ugwu and Uwueye, 2004, P.46). Also the deceased departed are considered to have keen interest in the affairs of their living descendants which is why they are regarded as the watch-dog of their families or lineages (Benjamin, 1976, P. 126).

For Madu, (1964), the ancestors were human beings, who, having lived in this world, experienced the sufferings of humanity and died. By virtue of their death, according to Madu, they were ushered into the land of their forebears by full burial rites accorded to them here on earth, having suffered with humanity on earth, and having entered into the blessedness of the ancestral land, he is in better position to appreciate the suffering of man (P.66).

According to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), ancestors are the departed members of the family who still maintain close relationship with their survivors. Though, no longer physically visible, yet their participation in family and patrilineage matters of the group are practically felt (P. 120). According to them, there are two categories of ancestors in West Africa namely, the living dead and the ghost. The former, according to them, are the group of departed members of the family and kin unit members that can be remembered by their names and survivors. They are normally numerous; yet, they are remembered by their names and physiognomy identity while the latter, according to them, are the departed people, whose identity is in the fast fading memory of the living, or even forgotten. Those who know them have equally died. The names of this category of ancestors as they further noted can be remembered, but their physique cannot be inferred or described (P. 121).

As for their qualities, it is not all who have departed become ancestors rather, there are qualities or attributes that qualify the departed to be an ancestor. To become an ancestor first, one must have children (i.e. parenthoods), for Owete and Iheanacho, this is important because it is the children that perpetuate the

'existence' of the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc. According to them, it is not even merely having children, but at least a male child. This is why procreation as they further noted are almost norms for actualizing man's physical essence, union and fulfillment in group life-family, kindred and community. According to them, perpetual bachelorhood is discouraged, abhorred and looked upon with disdain, as a condition that is capable of facilitating the extinction of a kin group and, an ancestral lineage (P. 121).

Following closely is advanced age. For Owete and Iheanacho (2009) the departed man must have lived a long life. Such longevity according to them is believed to be a manifestation of the individual's good relation with the gods of the land. For them, this is against the background of the people's belief, that death does not ordinarily strike, especially with young people as its victim. Death at such stage of live according to them, come as a result of sin committed against supernatural beings, or as a result of sorcery, and evil hands at work. Therefore, for one to live to an advanced age, as they further noted portend that he has not committed offence (s) against supernatural beings, and by extension is in good terms with his neighbours (pp. 121-122).

In addition to this is performance of burial rites. The funeral rites that precede ancestorhood, according to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), are in two phases; those performed before interment and the post interment rites, popularly called 'second burial.' For them, all are required for ancestorhood status. According to them it is a common belief among West African societies that it is the full performance of the second burial rites that send the departed 'home,' and in dignified peace.

Following this is good life. For them, this is important because a man who lived a bad life is not given not only normal and decent funeral rites, but also not propitiated as such. But in recent time, this factor according to them is somehow being played down on, as result of modern influences as the wealthy is always remembered and propitiated by his children, irrespective of his life. Even at that, it is the good according to them that is more often remembered and propitiated by the entire ancestral lineage, especially in the group and community assembly. In many West African societies, an ancestor as they further noted must not therefore, die of mysterious disease, suicide and many other circumstances that are abhorred

by the given community. Above all, a complement to good life as they finally noted is 'good death' (pp. 122-123).

With regard to their relationship with the living, they are believed to be closely related to their families and kindred, retaining their status and responsibilities as heads and parts of the institutions as they were while living as human beings on earth. Here, it follows that death is conceived as a mere extension of live on earth, to the hereafter as spirit. In this new state, communication and communion, with the ancestors are only possible at the spiritual realm; while in the spiritual world, the ancestors still show concern and interest in the affairs of their living members. Equally, the living members still see them as older people from whom their life on earth began and have meaning. Also, the ancestors are not only close to their relations, they are also aware of things that will bring progress to their people and those that could be in the contrary. Here, the new state of being, place the order relatives who have departed, closer to God and other spiritual entities. Here, the living used them, and they readily act as intermediaries between them (the living), and the spiritual world which embrace all spiritual forces including God.

Ancestors also feed the living back with information from the unseen supersensible world. The departed are therefore the closet link the living people have to the network of communication at the spiritual level of man's absence. In addition to giving the departed full burial rites, the living relations, try to appease and heed to their instructions. Yet, they are remembered and invited at gatherings, to come, share, and commune with the living, especially when the summon is at the ancestral shrine while the living try to know from them the 'state of things' through divination, the forebears could seized, somebody to prophecy their wish and resolve on family or kindred issues. They also reveal themselves through other manifestations and signs, like in dreams and totems. Some medicine man claims to have received knowledge of medicine and healing from ancestors through this process (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, P. 124). As for their names, they are called different names in different African societies. They are called *baba-nla* in Yoruba, they Igbo called them *ndi-iche*, and they are called *samanfo* in Akan (Ghana). Also in Kalabari they are called *duen* and in Ashanti of Ghana, they are known as asamanfo. For the Isoko they are known to be *esemo* (Tasie, 2009, P. 43).

As for whether the ancestors are worshipped or venerated, here, they are not worshipped, rather they are venerated. To the West African people, the reason for this is that death is not the end of one's interaction with his relatives, rather it is a change to "another being" different from the living, yet, maintain, participate and share in the activities of their kins-family and kindred. They have departed, yet, are "practically felt" by their survivors. It is in this light that ancestors are recognized, respected, and venerated. As for the reason for the veneration of ancestors, here, the veneration of ancestors among West African societies encourages and strengthens unity among the living members of their families and patriline kingship group. For instance, one's ancestral lineage, according to Owete and Iheanacho, (2009) is a binding force for them, people born to such kin group are "brothers and sisters". No matter the degree of quarrel between members of a kindred, assembly before their ancestral shrine as they further noted can never be affected.

Explaining further, people under one ancestral lineage as they noted share in common-legends and myths; sacred days; totems; agricultural seasons; as well as land and timber (pp. 128-129). Apart from this, the annual sacrifice (obligatory sacrifice) to commemorate the beginning of the ancestor festival in many West African communities brings kinsmen and relations together for a re-union. To the living, sharing the flesh of the annual sacrifices together for them is like being fed by one mother with on dish and spoon.

Kinsmen in the diaspora, those at home, and the departed as they noted come together this day, at the ancestral shrine. Having come together, dialogue is possible as the living dialogue amongst themselves on one hand while the living join voice to speak to their departed members on the other hand. This flow of communication is characterized by recall of memorable events, and reference to the life and history of the lineage, in which both the living and the departed are embraced. In addition, the blood of the sacrificial victims poured before ancestral shrines which is a symbol of bond reaffirms the living's commitment to maintaining the values of the lineage. Thus, it also serves as renewal of covenant-of cordial relationship between the living and the departed (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, pp. 128-129).

The Practice of Magic and Medicine

By definition, magic is an attempt by man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefits. Medicine on the other hand, is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent disease, to restore and to preserve health. according to African traditional belief, magic and medicine are inseparably related. In other words, they have come features in the sense that: both are controlled by the same divinity. E.g. among the Yoruba we have Sonyin and Igbos the Agwu as the tutelary divinity of magic and medicine. Both arose out of man's urgent need to conquer his physical environment. Ritual is a common element in both magic and medicine. It is believed by people that magic and medicine can lost their power if certain taboos are broken among other things. Magic and medicine will not keep their powers if taken to the pit toilet, touched after sex, or by menstruating women, or by an unauthorized person. Both magic and medicine can be purchased or learnt through apprenticeship. Nearly anything can be used in preparing them: animals and plants, skulls, skins, bones, dried bats, lizards, porcupine quills, these are believed to have occultic powers that can be used to achieve men's ends (Peters, 2009, pp. 45-46).

Attributes of God

These are words or phrases ascribing traits, qualities or characteristics to the Supreme Being. Considering God's attributes, we are concerned with what people really think God is, what they consider to be His nature and what they believe to be His role and position in relation to the world and supersensible reality (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 34).

Below are some of these attributes of God:

God as Creator

It is the believe of the African peoples that the universe and all that are in it were created by the Supreme Being (God). But in creation, the Supreme Deity delegated certain divinities to carry out specific tasks. E.g. in Yoruba, Olodumare (God) delegated created function to Orisala Nla. Also, in Igbo, God is known as Chineke (The God that creates, 'Chukwukere (God created), in Yoruba He is Elda (creator), or owner of creation. These expressions, for the Africans really portray God as the creator of the univers.

God is Unique

For the Africans, God is one and there is no one close to His Supremacy. Because of His uniqueness there is no vivid image or pictoral painting of Him. He is completely in His own class. The divinities own their existence to Him and they have no absolute power of their own. Which means that He is not of the same rank and file with the divinities.

God is King

His Kingship is unique and adorable in majesty. He is known in Yoruba as *Oba-run*' which means the King who dwells in heaven. The Igbo call Him "*Eze-Eluigwe* (King of heaven), as a king, He is also regarded as the Sovereign ruler of the universe. Since He is all powerful, He is seen as one who rules and controls the universe absolutely in His almightiness.

God is Judge

For the Africans God is seen as the impartial Judge who dispenses and punishes sin. The Yoruba see Him as *Oba-Adake Dajo* meaning, The King who dwells above, who executes judgement in silence. While the Igbo normally show that God is judge in these expressions, *Chinwe Ikpe* "Gods owns judgement or "judgment belongs to God", *Chinwe Obo* meaning vengeance belongs to God.

All these clearly affirm that in African society, God is conceived as the Supreme Judge that has the final order and say over everything (Peters, 2009 pp. 49-50).

God is Immortal

The Africans believe that God should live forever to satisfy the human soul. If He ceases to live, nothing else well exist, so He is an ever-living reality. His praise name in Yoruba is *Oyigiyi-Ola-Aiku*, meaning, the Mighty, Immovable Rock that never dies. In Kono, they know Him as *Yataa* implying God's immortal nature and *meketa* meaning the Everlasting One, who remains and does not die. So all this implies that each generation find Him living (PP.49-51).

God is Transcendent

God is seen as being far-removed from the world He created, for instance, during sacrifice, the essence of invocation is to call the attention of the far-removed God

to the place of sacrifice. That is why the Yoruba call Him "*Oba-Orun*" which means 'King above' or the King of heaven.

God is Immanent

In spite of the fact, that God is far-removed from the world He created, yet, He is immanent; His love, providence and power fill and envelope the whole universe as if He is just beside and close by (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 35).

The Importance of Studying African Traditional Religion

Reasons why we study African traditional religion are:

- To correct the notions and impressions made about African Traditional Religion by some foreign investigators and armchair researchers who used wrong terminologies to qualify African Religion.
- To make comparison with other religions to show that all religions share some basic elements-belief in God, man's separation from Him and the way back to God. The end, which is the ultimate, also remains the same but the means of attainment are different.
- To make known the worldview of the Africans to the outside world to enable them understand the social and moral behaviour of Africans, which might seem strange.
- The study is essential for academic purpose. It will help enlighten the world on the rich cultural heritage of the people of Africa.
- To fulfil the essence of studying history, which is to known the past in order to get well married with the present so as to foretell the future very well.
- Studying African Traditional Religion will help Africans to reconstruct their past in order to understand the present and to effectively plan for the future in political, social, religious and economic sphere of life. It will help to project the distinctive personality of the African and this will help him in his search for self-assertion and self-determination.

It is important to study African Religion in order to let the world know that to the Africans, the spiritual world is so real and near that its-forces do inspire their visible world (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, pp. 29-30).

Challenges Besetting the Study of African Traditional Religion in the 21st Century Nigeria

Language is one of the problems besetting the study of African traditional religion. As we may know, Africa is a content with multi-languages and dialects. In fact, there are more than 3000 languages spoken in African. These languages and dialects differ remarkably from country to country and tribe to tribe. This make it very difficult for the Western scholars to understand local idioms and to interpret African religious phenomena. The net result is that it leads to distortion of facts about African traditional beliefs and practices.

In addition to this is indoctrination, indoctrination, here. denote a situation whereby a person is made not only to believe so much in the culture of other people, but also to consider it to be superior to his own culture. However, many African peoples so much believed in the Western culture that they not only down grade their own culture and religion, but also loose gripe of their traditional practices. This is closely followed by Western education. Education which came along with Christianity not only replaced the informal system of education which hitherto has been in existence in Africa but also exposed the African peoples . The net result is that those who acquired education, not only begin to feel absolutely indifferent to their traditional beliefs and practices, but also see Western education as highest and superior than their aged indigenous institutionalized values and belief system. Following this is Christianity. One noticeable impact of Christianity upon its arrival on African traditional religion is that it led to the conversion of most African peoples into Christianity. In consequence of this, those who embraced the new religion are the most people to denounce the traditional beliefs and practices as paganism, heathenism, idolatry, etc. Another negative impact of Christianity on African traditional religion is the Wanton destruction of shrines, burning of religious objects, killing and eating of sacred animals dedicated to the deities (Onyeidu, 1993, p.3) .In addition to this is death. African Traditional Religion is not a religion of the book. There is no collection of book or books where its beliefs and practices are written. Rather, the African peoples relied mainly on oral traditions as sources of information about her religious practices. Here, those who are supposed to be the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people are now drying out or better still have passed away due to the event of death (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 4).

Following this is the size of Africa. Africa is not only large in size, but also a multi-cultural, languages, ethnic groups and tribes. This make it the more complex for the foreign investigators to come out with plausible investigations on African religion and culture. They based their researches on the culture and traditions of few African tribes and this in turn led to sweeping generalization and distortion of the beliefs and practices of the African peoples. In addition to these are urbanization and industrialization. Urbanization and industrialization have also left adverse impact on African traditional religion by encouraging influx of rural-urban migration of African peoples among whom are genuine votaries of traditional religion to big cities in pursuit of white collar jobs and modern lifestyle. With this amount of exposure and wealth of experience gained, everybody now behaves, acts and thinks like a 'white' man.

The net result is that by the time they would return home they have already been disconnected from the custom and traditions of the people. Thus shrine and groves dedicated to the deities are been cleared to build industries. Written document is also another problem bedeviling the study of African indigenous religion. African indigenous religion depends on oral traditions for its transmission. This means that the religion has no written scriptures or literature where its beliefs and practices are committed down for its adherents to read. Rather, all we know of the religion come to us through oral traditions such as myths, names, songs, proverbs, etc. This, however, led to distortions and misinterpretations of the traditional beliefs and practices of the African peoples.

Finally, African traditional religion or indigenous religion has no propaganda machinery. African traditional religion or indigenous religion, evolved from the people's environment and on their soil. This suggest that Africans are not converted into it; rather each person is born into it. Based on this, the religion, unlike Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have no preachers or missionaries that carry out crusade or evangelism in order to make converts. Therefore, the religion is not preached and so does not galvanize for converts like other world religions (Ajayi, 1981, p.16).

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion as earlier pointed out, is a religion that is practiced by our forebears and which is today been practiced by the present generation and which of course will continue to be practiced by future generation. In other words, it is a religion that links the African forebears with the present generation. Though, the study of African traditional religion may be faced with challenges such as western Education, Christianity, urbanization, lack of written literature and so on. In spite of this, the religion still remains resilient and people - oriented.

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