

## **THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND ITS CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES**

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### **Abstract**

*African Traditional Religion is the traditional religion of the African people before the coming of Islam and Christianity. However, the missionaries of the two foreign religions succeeded in converting some African people to the new religions. The African religion was condemned by the Early European scholars, travelers, investigators and missionaries. The educated Elite who were products of the schools established by the Christian missionaries in particular and the converts in general did not see anything good in African religion. It is interesting to note that African traditional religion is being studied in many Universities and Colleges in Africa since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so that it may not go into total neglect in African history and culture. The study, therefore, is facing many challenges which are affecting the interest of African scholars in the field. The paper has been able to highlight the problems of African religion in the contemporary time, while some suggestions are given, so as to make it meet the challenges of the modern times.*

### **Introduction**

The objective of this paper is to examine the relevance of African traditional religion and its challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Globally, it was a herculean task before the religion was recognized by scholars from other continents of the World because of prejudice and bias. It is worth recalling the observation made by Awolalu, an eminent scholar of African Religion and a pioneer of the International Association for the History of Religions (IHAR) in West Africa, that papers in African Religion were first accepted for presentation in the XIIIth Congress of the Association held in Lancaster in 1975.<sup>1</sup> In other words, previous efforts were not permitted by

the organizers of the association. However, the situation is changing gradually. For instance, this paper initially accepted for presentation at the 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Association in Toronto, Canada, held in August, 2010, could not be presented because of my inability to obtain a visa from the Canadian embassy.

There are four issues to be addressed in this paper.

1. What is meant by the term African traditional religion (A.T.R.)?
2. What are the values of A.T.R in the age of science and technology, most especially in the area of traditional medicine?
3. What are the challenges confronting the survival and continuous existence of A.T.R?
4. Some suggestions shall be offered to further enhance the study of the religion.

The methodology to be adopted is phenomenological approach. Adogbo opines that “a phenomenologist is identified by the way in which he goes about his work of attempting to understand and describe his environment.”<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl describes “phenomenology as a ‘descriptive science’ which seeks to unfold the archaeological realities of the objects, beliefs and practices under study without presuppositions”<sup>3</sup> In other words; we are to take into consideration the suggestions of Bolaji Idowu in carrying out a serious study and investigation of people’s religion. The codes identified by Bolaji Idowu are: “caution, openness, sympathy, reverence and adaptability”<sup>4</sup>. These qualities were absent in the researches of the early European investigators who were accused of bias, ignorance, prejudice and lacking the necessary tools for an investigation into African religion<sup>5</sup>.

The scope of study of this paper is Africa in general. However, the continent may be represented by Nigeria or West Africa. According to Awolalu “Africa is a large continent with multitude of nations, complex cultures, innumerable languages and myriads of dialects.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, in most cases, references shall be drawn from the Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria to represent the African people; this is to avoid generalization of ideas because it is a large continent. Even in Nigeria, there are three major ethnic groups with many other minorities .There are about two hundred and fifty languages notwithstanding innumerable dialects.

The Yoruba have been well researched into with no less than three thousand five hundred works.<sup>7</sup> The Yoruba are found in the present states of Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Ondo, Lagos and some parts of Kwara and Kogi. The sub-ethnic groups found in Yorubaland are: Ijebu, Oyo, Ife, Ijesa, Ondo, Akoko, Ekiti, Ikale, Ilaje, Egbado, Okun and Igbomina<sup>8</sup>

Idowu posits that “the real keynote of the life of the Yoruba is neither in their noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of their heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things, they are religious”.<sup>9</sup> This religious consciousness and understanding are found in all African societies. This paper shall focus on the challenges being faced by traditional medicine in Yorubaland. Unfortunately, magic, sorcery and witchcraft are often confused and misinterpreted with medicine. Some Christians associate African medicine with magic, sorcery and witchcraft, hence, their negative attitude to the use of herbs. However, the situation is changing gradually in Africa.

The objective of this study therefore is to present African traditional religion as a living and not a fossil religion. According to Nigolian as quoted by Dopamu:

Many religions rose only to disappear quickly leaving little or no trace. Others flourished only as long as a particular civilization or nation flourished, but died with it. A few however were destined to persist as living religions to the present era.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt that the missionary propaganda of the foreign religions has drifted some practitioners of A.T.R away from the religion. The A.T.R is believed to be a religion brought about by God who is regarded as the Supreme Being. The Yoruba people call Him *Olorun*, *Olodumare* and *Oluwa*<sup>11</sup>. Apart from these names; there are numerous attributes that are ascribed to him. These are: the creator, king, transcendence and immanence. Others are: immortality, omnipotence and uniqueness.<sup>12</sup> There is also the expression of God in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies<sup>13</sup>.

Apart from the belief in the Supreme Being, the Yoruba also believe in some divinities and spirits. The divinities are classified into

three groups i.e. the Primordial (Obatala, Orunmila, Esu and Ogun). These divinities are believed to be divinities of heaven<sup>14</sup>. They were with the Supreme Being from the creation of the universe. They partook in the creative work. The divinities are believed to have emanated from the Supreme-Being. The second classification of divinities is regarded as deified ancestors<sup>15</sup>. Some examples in this category are *Sango*, *Orisa-oko* and *Ayelala*<sup>16</sup>. The deified ancestors were human beings who had lived extra-ordinary and mysterious lives on earth, so much that when they died, they were deified as gods. The third category is personification of natural forces and phenomena<sup>17</sup>. The divinities in this category are the earth, rivers, lagoon and the sea.<sup>18</sup> Others are mountains, hills, trees and wind. All these are found among the Yoruba.

Generally, there is a cordial relationship between the divinities and the Supreme Being. They are brought into being for a definite purpose which is to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the World. In the Yoruba sociological interpretation of relationship between the traditional chief and his subjects, he was expected to be served by an *Emese* (intermediary) between him and his subjects.

It is necessary at this juncture to give a clear, not necessarily the most acceptable term for African traditional religion. In fact, African scholars have different views on the description of the religion. According to Dopamu “the indigenous religion of the Africans has been inconsistently labeled African traditional religion (ATR), African Religions, African Indigenous Religion (AIR), African Systems of Thought, and Primal Heritage.<sup>19</sup> Scholars like Parrinder and Mbiti inconsistently used African Traditional Religion and African Religion, while Onibere insisted on African Indigenous Religion. However an erudite and acclaimed Professor of African religion, late Dopamu was consistent in the use of the term African Religion with the acronym “Afrel”<sup>20</sup>. However, we believe that the term African traditional religion is appropriate and acceptable because it is an indigenous religion that portrays the culture and customs of the people. Again the name distinguishes the religion from the foreign ones.

In defining the concept of African traditional religion, Awolalu and Dopamu said:

When we speak of African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature yet it is “written” everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people’s myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old.<sup>21</sup>

The above definition is a summary of what the religion is all about. Incidentally, the religion is being practised by those who claim to be Christians or Muslims. As noted in the definition, the religion has no founder, like some other religions as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism etc. It is a revealed religion. However, it has been affected generally as a result of universal changes in the world. It is better to use the modern terms of globalization, modernization, civilization, enlightenment and of course science and technology as changing factors that affect the religion. Dopamu observes that: “The achievements of science and technology have radically altered the pattern of man’s life: socially, economically, politically and intellectually. The same changes are affecting his moral and religious values”.<sup>22</sup>

It is necessary to mention that African Traditional Religion has for a long time been misrepresented by the early European explorers, investigators and Christian missionaries. Many of them used obnoxious and unacceptable terminologies to describe the religion, such as “the high god of the primitive people”, “withdrawn god”, “polytheism”, “fetishism”, “idolatry”, “heathenism”, “paganism”, “animism”, “juju”, “mana”, and

“ancestor worship”<sup>23</sup>. These terms have been rejected at different fora and in scholarly publications by African scholars and authors as uncomplimentary and unacceptable. Some of these scholars are Samuel Johnson, Olumide Lucas, E.G.Parrinder, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, H.Sawyerr, E.G.Ilogu, Christian Gaba, Afolabi Ojo, P.C Lloyd, E.W Smith and Wande Abimbola<sup>24</sup>.

In fact, some European investigators were later seen to have been sympathetic to the African course by showing understanding in their studies. For example, R.S Rattray, P.A Talbot, A.B Ellis, S.S Farrow, S.E.Nadel, Andrew Lang, Arch-Bishop Soderblom and Father Schmidt of Vienna<sup>25</sup>. According to Awolalu “there were undoubtedly, a few who had the usably feeling that the story of a spiritual vacuum for a whole continent of people’s could not be entirely true”<sup>26</sup> For instance, T.J Bowen<sup>27</sup>, a Baptist missionary worked extensively and achieved so much in his missionary endeavours in Ijaye and Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria. He lived among the people, studied and observed their traditional worship. He left imperishable achievements in the religious and socio-economic lives of the people. In appreciating his missionary activities, the Baptist Convention in Nigeria, named a Christian Private University after him known as Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria. In assessing the Yoruba religion, he said

In Yoruba, many of the notions which the people entertain of God are remarkably correct. They make him the efficient, though not always the instrumental creator. They have some notion of His justice and holiness, and they talk much of his goodness, knowledge, power and providence... They may extol the power and defend the worship of their idols, whom they regard as mighty beings, but they will not compare the greatest idol to God”<sup>28</sup>

The comments of Bowen are fair assessment of the religious beliefs of the Yoruba people about God. It may be necessary in this paper to mention some uncomplimentary and unacceptable comments of some early European scholars and missionaries about African traditional religion. Emil Ludwig was quoted to have said “How can the untutored African conceive of God? How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which

savage are incapable of framing”<sup>29</sup>. It is observed that the writer must have concluded in his mind that his culture was better than that of the African people before he embarked on the investigation.

Another investigator named James Frazer in 1922 in his work titled: “The Golden Bough”<sup>30</sup> described three stages of human intellectual development i.e. magic to religion and from religion to science. Dopamu pointed out the rejection of this position. According to him, such conclusion is bogus because magic and medicine are found in all cultures. A French scholar, Banding in 1884 had this to say:

At the same time, they think that God, after beginning the organization of the world charged Obatala to finish it and govern it, even withdrew and went into an eternal rest to look after his own happiness<sup>31</sup>.

Bandings position cannot be a true representation of African religious worldview. Africans believe that the world was created by God. *Obatala* in Yoruba creation mythology was an arch-divinity. He could not function on his own.

R.P. Bouche also said that “A Yoruba man thinks that God is too great to deal with and that He has delegated the care of the blacks to the orisa”<sup>32</sup>. The scholar goofed in his submission because he did not understand the concept of God in Yoruba story of creation. It is true that God is omnipotent, transcendent, and at the same time He is immanent. He is worshipped everyday through sacrifices and prayers. Bouche went further to say that “God enjoys abundance and gentle rest, keeping his favour for the white man”. This statement could be seen as racially discriminatory between the whites and the blacks. God is universal as the creator of the universe.

In another piece, Leo Frobenius, said:

Before the introduction of a genuine faith and a higher standard of culture by the Arabs, the natives had no political organization, nor, strictly speaking, any religion... Therefore, it is necessary in examining the pre-Muhammedan conditions of the Negro races, to confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their vulgar and repulsive idols. None but the

most primitive instinct determines the lives and conduct of the Negroes, who lack every kind of ethical inspiration.<sup>33</sup>

The above statement made use of some obnoxious and wrong terminologies like native, fetishism and idols. These terms have been consistently rejected by African scholars.

An International academic conference titled “African Culture, Modern Science and Religious Thought” was held at the University of Ilorin in 2003 where the interplay between religion and science were demonstrated by eminent scholars. In the western world, the period of science and technology started with the renaissance period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup>. The revival of learning brought about enlightenment and civilization in the European countries. The old order, most especially, ignorance and corruption even in the church was condemned by church reformers, such as, John Huss, John Wycliffe, Peter Waldo, and of course Martin Luther<sup>35</sup>.

Coupled with the above was the abolition of the four hundred years of obnoxious and illegitimate slave trade and its aftermath. One of the factors that eventually necessitated the abolition of slavery in Europe was the scientific and technological development in Europe towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> C. The re-settled and liberated ex-slaves in Sierra-Leone eventually accompanied the Christian missionaries to Nigeria in the propagation of Christianity, most especially in Yorubaland. Thomas Birch Freeman led the Methodist mission in 1842 to Badagry while Henry Townsend led the Church Missionary Society (CMS).<sup>36</sup>

Other Christian missionaries like the Catholic, Baptist and others later followed suit. Different strategies were adopted in the conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity. Fafunwa said that “the aim of the missionaries in the establishment of schools was to convert the “heathen” to Christianity via education<sup>37</sup>. In our earlier study, we argued that the establishment of schools was a road to scientific and technological development<sup>38</sup>.

Another strategy used by the Christian missionaries was the establishment of hospitals and provision of improved medical facilities<sup>39</sup>. However; it was an opportunity to condemn the African traditional

medicine in Yorubaland in particular and Africa in general. In achieving this, the Christian missionaries embarked on the establishment of hospitals and medical centres. For instance, the Methodist church established Wesley Guild Hospital, Ilesa, the Seventh Day Adventist opened Seventh Day Adventist Hospital at Ile-Ife, the Baptist mission established Medical centre at Ogbomoso, the Catholic church has her hospital at Oluyoro in Ibadan. The Anglican Church established a hospital at Iyi-enu near Onitsha and Sacred Heart hospital was established in Abeokuta by the Roman Catholic Church, while the Sudan Interior Mission now known as Evangelical Church For Winning All (ECWA) established a hospital at Egbe, Kogi State.<sup>40</sup>

According to Babalola, “with the arrival of the missionaries and modern medical practice the indigenous people were trained to forsake anything that is indigenous including indigenous medicine”<sup>41</sup>. This call was complemented by pastors who, in their various denominations, condemn traditional medicine through revivals, printed tracts, preaching in churches, on radios and televisions. In fact, traditional medicine was consistently referred to as “juju”. This term is to deride the potency and usefulness of traditional medicine. Juju is seen as a toy or doll to be played with in the society. For instance, P.A .Talbot in his works on Southern Nigeria speaks of “minor deities or juju”<sup>42</sup>. We believe that this submission does not represent the opinion of the African people.

Good as it is, the advantages are enormous but western technology and its introduction has contributed greatly to the failure of the growth and development of indigenous science and technology in Africa. Olaoye opines that “the same principles apparently underline science and technology whether modern or indigenous. What perhaps differ are the nature, form and stage of development”<sup>43</sup>. Unfortunately, the African initiative was not allowed to grow as expected.

In many Asian countries like India and Korea, indigenous technology has grown to an extent that traditional medicine in these countries have been modernized and improved upon. Some people believe that colonial experience has been harmful to technological development of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. In Swahili, traditional medicine

is known as *Waganga*, the Yoruba call it *Onisegun*, the Nupe refer to it as *Cigbeni* while the Tiv refer to it as *Ortwer*.<sup>44</sup>

In Yorubaland, traditional medicine is defined thus: “The traditional art and science of the prevention and cure of diseases. It is the use of natural substance to prevent, treat or cure diseases. It can also mean medicament used internally or externally”<sup>45</sup>. Its purpose is both therapeutic (for the treatment or curing of disease) and prophylactic (intended to prevent disease)<sup>46</sup>. Many studies have shown the potency and usefulness of African medicine, even in the age of science and technology. Ajadi opines

It is interesting and particularly encouraging to realize that folk or traditional medicine is now being visited throughout the world by medical science, scientists all over the world are resolutely engaged in an expedient task of bringing their training and expertise to bear on the study of herbal remedies in order to fully utilize and enjoy the curative power of nature's medicine in the contemporary world<sup>47</sup>

For example, the International Centre for Ethno-medicine and Drug Development is charged with the responsibility to “transform many excellent scientific studies on traditional medical remedies into practical therapeutic tools for the treatment of AIDS and malaria”<sup>48</sup>

Some scholars have successfully carried out researches on the potency of traditional medicine in Yorubaland. For example, P.Ade Dopamu, Simpson, Ajadi, and Laguda. Dopamu emphasizes that Yoruba medicine is used to treat *arun* (disease) or *aisan* (illness).<sup>49</sup> The former is frequently used for unhealthy conditions believed to be caused by germs, worms, insects, infections, bad food, weather and carelessness on the part of the sufferer, and other spiritual agencies.

It has been observed that many sicknesses are taken to some hospitals without the necessary cures and solution. Such illnesses were later cured by applying traditional medicines. Some of these illnesses in Yorubaland are: *eje riru* (hypertension), *ito egbe* (diabetes), *tuulu* (migraine, acute, splitting headache), *lakuregbe* (rheumatism) and *ofinkin* (cold, running nose)<sup>50</sup>.

In fact, there are many recognized and reputable traditional medicine centres in Yorubaland e.g the late Dr Felix Ogundipe, the founder of Awaye Herbal Home which was later known as Ogundipe Traditional Hospital, Ijebu-Igbo, Ogun state. Another herbal medicine man is Alhaji Basiriyu Olorunsogo Disu of Ijebu-Oru who is a producer of curative balm called *Kando*<sup>51</sup>. It has prescriptions for cold, cough; body weakness and convulsion. We believe that medicines are performing different functions, even though they may have their own inadequacies. A non-African may laugh it off; doubting the efficacy of the African medicine. Nwankwo Ezeabasili captured the scene when he said:

By African science, I mean an African account of nature and how it works. This account contains hypotheses, many of which are not acceptable to men of Western culture. The testing ground of all sciences (African and Western Science) is utility it would be idle of us, black Africans, to imagine that peoples of other cultures will easily accept our theories of matter if we cannot produce practical results to back up our theories<sup>52</sup>.

Dopamu in his works tried to demonstrate the scientific knowledge and knowhow of African medicine.

### **Problems besetting the study of African traditional religion**

Africa is a vast continent with many countries, languages, ethnics and complex dialects. In fact, this is same with Nigeria. There are different ethnic groups and languages in the country. As a result of this, it may be difficult for a researcher to carry out any successful research in all parts of the nation. The three major ethnic groups are: the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani. Apart from the above, there are other minorities with different languages and dialects. As earlier mentioned, God is called *Olodumare* in Yorubaland, the Igbo call him *Chineke*, Edo people refer to him as *Osanobuwa*, Nupe refer to him as *Soko*. The Ijaw call him *Temearau* and Fon and Ewe of Dahomey call God *Nana Buluku* while the Akan of Ghana refer to him as *Odomankoma*. The Mende of Sierra-Leone call him *Ngewo* while the Kono of Sierra-Leone regard him as *Meketa*.<sup>53</sup> In

view of the multi-various names of God in West Africa, it may be difficult for a scholar to fully understand the concept of God among these different peoples. This must have probably contributed to some generalization and wrong conclusion of the early investigators about the African Religion.

Another major problem in the study of African religion is secrecy<sup>54</sup>. Many African priests, priestesses and other functionaries are not always willing to disclose some aspects of the religion. For example, medicine-men or practitioners of African medicine men hardly reveal the ingredients necessary for any effective medicine to an investigator. In other words, many of them died with the knowledge probably acquired from their fathers.

Coupled with this was the lack of written records. They were not custodians of Africa's rich medical knowledge because they were largely illiterates and therefore incapable of proper documentation for the use and benefit of generations yet unborn.

Other factors that contributed to poor record keeping in many African societies were inter-tribal wars, migration and re-settlement as a result of marriage and search for food and employment. These factors have affected the culture of the people considerably. At times, some of them could not recount the history of the past accurately.

As Awolalu has rightly mentioned in his work, the influence of the foreign religions, such as Christianity and Islam have affected the growth of African religion adversely<sup>55</sup>. The two religions in particular have missionary drives by converting the people through some strategies like western education and improved medical facilities as earlier stated in this paper. This has led us to the modern age of science and technology being witnessed in Africa today.

Many African people are more comfortable to be identified with any of the foreign religions than African religion because they are believed to be religions of the enlightened and civilized people of the world.

### **Recommendations:**

It is observed that African personality, consciousness and struggle for self recognition and independence have contributed to the study of African religion in Africa. At the time of struggle for

independence in many African countries, Christianity was the only religion studied in many Departments of Religions in African universities. The nationalists insisted that traditional religion must be included in the curriculum of the Nigerian Universities. In fact, in Nigeria today many Universities are offering Comparative religion as a discipline at undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels. This is the practice at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State and the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State.

The years of prohibition and neglect notwithstanding, there are now ample opportunities to expatiate and theorize on and dissect African Traditional Religion. The African religion is even being studied in some universities in the Western countries like Harvard in the United States of America and Cambridge in Britain. It is interesting to note that competent African scholars like J.K Olupona and Professor Afe Adogame a former student of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria are noted and recognized in this regard.

The African government at different levels should support African scholars in research into African Studies and culture. More Institutes of African Studies should be established in African University so as to go into more studies about African people. The University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State and Obafemi Awolowo Universities, Ile-Ife, Osun State should be commended in this regard.

In the area of traditional medicine, there should be collaboration between the orthodox and traditional medicine. Collaboration will improve documentation. The traditional practitioners' should be given the necessary encouragement in improving the quality of their medicament.

It is observed that many people claiming to be Christians and Muslims are not able to do away with African traditional values. In fact, there is a new dimension to the importance of African religion in Christianity. The African Independent Churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim and Celestial Church of Christ have adopted some aspect of African worship in their daily worship. It is also observed that many Christians and Muslims do visit the traditional medicine practitioners secretly at night for assistance in the area of protection, promotion and productivity.

## **Conclusion**

African traditional religion is a heritage given to the Africans by God, the Supreme Being. He is universal and known by the people before the introduction of Christianity and Islam. The introduction of the foreign religions brought many challenges to the growth and expansion of African religion. In fact, some early missionaries predicted an extinction of the religion. But alas! It is not so. Today; the religion is studied in many African and Western universities and conferences as is exemplified in the last xxth International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) World Congress held in Toronto, Canada. In Africa many African Independent Churches have brought the tenets of African religion into Christianity. This was also a subject of discussion at an International conference at the University of Torino, Turin, Italy in September, 2010. African Culture is dynamic, and it cannot die as being canvassed in some quarters because it is a living institution. Africa is passing through a phase in her historical development. In other words, African religion will continue to co-exist with science and technology. The two phenomena are partners in progress and are given to mankind by God.

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53. For a detailed study of the names and attributes of God in different languages read J.O. Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* pp.36-52
54. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion A Definition*, London, SCM press, 1973 p.80
55. J.Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, Essex, Longman, 1979 pp183-191