

GOD, DIVINITIES AND ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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Abstract

This paper examines how Africans conceive of the Supreme Being, divinities and the ancestors. The paper discusses the place of the divinities and ancestors in African religious meta-physics, stressing that their belief in these other spiritual beings do not in any way contradict their belief in the Supreme Being as some western scholars opined. The paper used inter-disciplinary method which involves the use of interview, observations and secondary sources. Data were collected using descriptive analysis to examine the place of Supreme Being, divinities and ancestors in African traditional religious thought. Findings from the research have shown that the concept of Supreme Being is not strange to the Africans but in traditional Africa, there is no atheist. It sees the divinities as the offspring or apparitional beings who receive their authority from the Supreme Being to serve in the unitary theocratic system of government. The paper sees the ancestors as the intermediaries between the Supreme Being, divinities and the living. The paper suggests amongst others, the need for proper religious education, a theology of enculturation and understanding of African worldviews in order to sustain Africans beliefs and practices in these spiritual beings.

Keywords: God, Divinities, Ancestors, African, Traditional, Religion.

Introduction

For many decades, the concept of Supreme Being (God), divinities and ancestors (the living-dead) in African traditional religious thought has been a controversial and misunderstood concept. There were many factors which 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 (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. 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 (Mbiti, 1970). These armchair scholars went as far as believing that the sub-saharan Africa is one country with one religious belief and practice.

This controversy and misunderstanding 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 (Ray, 1976).

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 place, position and the role of divinities and ancestors (the living-dead) in African traditional religious meta-physics stressing that their belief in these other beings do not in any way contradict Africans belief in the Supreme Being as opined by some western scholars.

It should be noted that there are realities in African traditional religion which has not been properly echoed by Africans themselves, especially, the Eurocentric ones whose religious inclination has blinded them to the fact that Africans are not strangers to worship of monotheistic God (Supreme Being) who is called by various names in Africa. In most religions of the world, the concept of Supreme Being is clearly spelt out just as it is in African traditional religion where the Supreme Being is conceived as a Supreme King with the divinities appointed to minister each department in the theocratic government of the world and the ancestors (the living-dead) clearly set forth as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living (Mbiti, 1970).

God (The Supreme Being) in African Traditional Religious Thought

Belief in the existence of God (Supreme Being) is fundamental in African society. The word God (Supreme Being) refers to "the living eternal Being who is the creator and source of all living and whose life existed from the dateless past" (Idowu, 1962). God (Supreme Being) is self-existent and an all knowing being whose power sustains the universe and sees all things at the same time without any modern instrument. This Great Being as revealed Himself in many different ways, and human beings have always felt His presence and responded to Him in worship (Brown, 1975). This manifestation or revelation of God (the Supreme Being) has brought about a living relationship between God and mankind, leading to what we now call "religion" (Mbiti, 1975). Many people, especially the Jews and Muslims who received this revelation have seen God as a "Personal Being", while others like the Buddhists, think of God as a Personal Being at all (Idowu, 1962). The

greatness of God has been described by many scholars, religious people and Holy Books. In describing the Supreme Being, Shorter (1978) states:

The Supreme Being (God) is the power, the kingdom, the glory and the majesty, and to him belongs creation and to rule over what He has created. He alone is the Giver of life; He is omniscient for His knowledge encompasses all things. He beholds the thoughts of all mankind and secrets of their hearts, by His knowledge, which was from aforetime.

The Arjuma's Hymn in ancient Hindu Gita, written in about 500-100 BC further expresses the same belief in the greatness of this great God and his relationship with humanity and the universe thus:

Why should human beings not worship or venerate you? You are the first creator, infinite; Lord of the gods, home of the Universe. You are the imperishable. You are the last Prop-and-resting Peace of the universe. You are the knower and what is to be known... The whole universe was spun by You... Your strength is infinite, Your power is limitless. You bring all things to their fulfillment: hence You are All... You are the Father of the world of moving and unmoving things (Brown, 1975:40-56).

This description of African belief given above shows the extent of the greatness of this Supreme Being by many religions. The greatness of the Supreme Being is also portrayed in African religion by Mbiti (1975) when he explains:

Though the knowledge of God as the Supreme Being is not documented in any sacred book, yet it is "expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies.

The point Mbiti (1975) is making here is that for one to understand the concept of God (the Supreme Being) in Africa, he/she has to study carefully the entirety of the culture of the people. This however, agreed with what Mbiti (1975) said: "one should not therefore, expect long dissertations about God. But is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists".

This description of the greatness of the Supreme Being is further supported by an Ashanti proverb which says: "No one shows a child the Supreme

Being” (Ekeopara, 2005). This proverb indicates that anyone born in African does not need to go to school to learn about the existence of the Supreme Being. His existence is known by all, including the children. This proverb however, debunked the erroneous conclusion usually drawn on African belief in God by the western scholars who argued that the idea of God (the Supreme Being) is foreign to African people (P’Bitek, 1970). Parrinder (1974) posited that belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is a common feature of African religion; therefore, it is wrong assumption for the western scholars to think that Africans only claim to have the idea of the Supreme Being with the advent of Christianity.

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. 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. Mbiti (1975) asserts that: the process of arriving at this conclusion of belief must have taken a long time “and there must have been many myths and ideas which tried to explain these mysteries of the world”. 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 mankind’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. Mbiti (1975) posits that “this idea made it logical and necessary for mankind 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. This is the monotheistic God that the Africans worship. 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.

Mankind from time immemorial 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 mankind yet unreachable, they began to associate the earth with a great God who is very close to mankind, supplying his needs such as rain for his land to produce abundant fruits. Mbiti (1975) opines that this may be the reason "that God is so much associated with the sky and the heavens. It is very likely that Africans came to believe in God's existence through such a link between heaven and earth. Mankind 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.

Attributes of Supreme Being in Africa

Attributes of God refers to phrases ascribing traits, properties, qualities or characteristics to the Supreme Being (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). These attributes are anthropomorphic in nature because any religion that stripes the Supreme Being of anthropomorphic phenomenon will eventually end up as an abstract religion that does not have human feelings and is not fully realizable in the world. The term "anthropomorphism" is the ascribing of human character to God such as someone who listens, hears, eats, get angry and smoke (Parker, 1954). This way of describing God anthropomorphically has been found in all religions as a way of expressing ideas or concepts about the preternatural world of realities. However, in higher anthropomorphism, all that adherents try to do is to speak about the ineffable categories to avoid repetition of the concept of God.

Imosogie (1982) argues that anthropomorphic attributes of God cannot be accepted as a part of the structure of African religion because as we study those attributes, we must be conscious of the fact that there are no sacred scriptures of African traditional religion for us to consult and know what

these attributes are, as one who wishes to study the attributes of God in Christianity or Islam will do. Rather attributes of God in African traditional religion can be found in the songs, proverbs, sayings, recitals and liturgies of so many African people. These attributes of God include:

(a) God is real to Africans

African people do not perceive of God as an abstract entity whose existence is in the mind. He is seen and perceived as a real personal entity whose help is sought in times of trouble and who is believed to be the protector of the people. The various names given to God in African attest to this. The fact that God is real to Africans is enshrined in the meaning of the name they call him. The Yoruba of Nigeria call God *Olodumare* or *Edumereme* meaning "The King or Chief unique who holds the sceptre, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth, and he is at the same time permanent, unchanging and reliable" (Idowu, 1973).

Other Yoruba names for God are *Olorun* meaning "the owner of heaven" or "the Lord of heaven" showing God as the author of all things both visible and invisible and *Olofin-Orun*, meaning "the one who owns the place of heaven" or "Supreme Ruler who abides in heaven" (Idowu, 1973). The Igbo of Nigeria call God by these names *Chukwu* meaning "Source Being" which connotes "the Great One from whom being originates". *Chineke* meaning, "The Source Being Who creates all things". The Edo of Nigeria knows God as *Osanobua* or *Osanobwa* which means "the source of all beings who carries and sustains the world or universe". Among the Nupe of Nigeria God is called *Soko* which means "the creator or supreme deity that resides in heaven" (Ikenga-Metuh, 1991).

The Ewe and Fon people of Dahomey call God *Nana Buluku* which means the great ancient Deity. Among the Akan and Ga people of Ghana, God is known by *Am* (Idowu, 1962). The Akan of Ghana call God by these names: *Odamankoma*, meaning "He who is uninterruptedly, infinitely and exclusively fully of grace" or "He who alone is full of abundance or completeness" or "He who in His grace has completed everything in heaven and on earth". *Nyame* or *Onyameme* meaning "if you possess or get him, you are satisfied" which expresses God as God of fullness or God of satisfaction (Arensen, 1988). Among the Mende people of Sierra-Leone God is called *Ngewo* which means "the eternal one who rules from above" (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

The Tiv of Nigeria calls God *Aôndo*, which means "the Supreme Being who resides in the vault of Heaven". He is great unknown that creates and rule

over all things. The Tiv refers to Him as *Gba-Aôndo*, meaning "God the creator" (Akiga, 1939). The Isoko names for God are: *Oghene*, which literally means "He that is strong" or "provider of all things". His praise name is "the white piece of cloth which is very ancient". The Isoko also call God "*Osenobruwe*, which means "the Father who brings blessings" and His praise name is *Osonabwawa*, which means "the one who carry and sustained the world" (Forde, 1954). For the Nupe, God is called *Soko*, which means "the great God in the sky". The Ibibio call God *Abasi*, which means "the greatest God" or "the God who lives above the earth" (Parrinder, 1969). The Nuer people call God *Kwoth*, which means "the spirit who is in the sky". *Kwoth* is "the creator of the universe", the great omnipotent one and "the creator of mankind" (Forde, 1954). For the Dimka, God is called *Nhialic*, which means "the sky" or "the above".

Nyimang people call God, *Abradi*, which means "the maker" (Parrinder, 1962). While among the Tusi and Hutu of Rwanda and Burundi, God is called *Imama*, which means "to create out of the existing matter". The Baluba of Aire name for God is *Vidyé, Mukulu*, which means "Great Lord" or "the first father". The Tumbuka, Kamaangand the Tonga people of Malawi names for God are: *Ciuta, Malungaand Lezaand* are associated with God as being behind "the rain bearing bow above" or "the giver of rain" (Idowu, 1973). The Hottentots name for God is *Tsuior Goam*, which means "wounded knees" (Jacobs, 1961). These names were not created by Africans after the colonial era but shows how real God is to Africans. If God were not real to Africans how did they manufacture these names and given to the Being they do not know?

(b) God is the Creator

When we use the word "creation" with reference to attributes of God it implies basically the fact that God is the originator as illustrated in some of the African myths. The Yoruba creation myth, for example, states that God the creator (*Orisanla*) commissioned the chief divinity to perform some works of creation and He therefore, created human body (Idowu, 1973). However, there is no doubt that creation originated from the Supreme Being himself. He has absolute power over his creatures and no creature has reason to boast of itself.

This capacity of God as a creator made the Yoruba's to call Him "*Eleeda*" which means "creator" or "owner of creation" (Adasu, 1985). The Igbo call God "*Chineke*" meaning "the spirit that creates" or "source of being that creates" (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). The Tiv call Him "*Gba-Aôndo*" which means "God the creator of the universe" while the Edo people call Him "*Osanobowa*" meaning the source being who carries and sustains the universe" (Ikenga-

Metuh, 1984). Equally, the Akan of Ghana call Him “*Odomokoma*” meaning “the creator of the universe” (Mbiti, 1970). The Nupe illustrates this creative nature of God in their song, which says:

“Soko” is the creator of the cosmos and all that is in it. He is responsible for the ultimate issues of life and death and He is the only one responsible for the vital principle of life or the essence or personality in mankind.

The Kulung people also believe that God the creator, “*Yamba*” is the giver of life and preserver of all things, while the Sura of Pamyam says: God “*nam*” is the maker of the world and the one who sends down rain to his people (Idowu, 1962).

c) **God is unique**

When the word unique is used in reference to the attribute of God in Africa we are looking at God as having no equal or non like Him and being the only One of its sort (Parrinder, 1962). We earlier explained that the Yoruba people of Nigeria refer to God as *Olodumare* meaning “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 permanent, unchanging and reliable” (Idowu, 1973). This description shows the uniqueness of God in Africa. He is also seen as permanent, unchanging and reliable. This is why in Africa there are no images attributed to the Supreme Being.

In most cases there are no temples except in few places, dedicated to the Supreme Being. Nobody in Africa has produced any picture attributive to the Supreme Being because the concept of God is embedded deeply in their thought as unique and nothing is comparable to Him. Deng (1978) in describing *Leza*, the name used for the High God by the Baila, Botanga, and other tribes of Northern Zambia explains that *Leza* is described as “the One who does what no other can do”. In writing about the Ruanda people Evans – Pritchard (1956) described their Supreme Being (*Imana*) in a proverb thus: “There is none to equal *Imana*”. These descriptions show the uniqueness of the Supreme Being in African traditional religious thought as someone who reveals Himself through them. Although the various natural phenomena are not God from the African concept of God, however, they are vehicles through which God reveals Himself to people.

(d) **God is Transcendent and Immanent**

These two words, transcendent and immanent could be seen as two sides of the same coin. Transcendent means that something is beyond what is natural

and normal, and different from it. When Africans see God as transcendent, it means:

God is not limited to a particular place and time as human beings are. It means that God lives outside the natural world in which human beings live. Human beings can never fully comprehend the will or thoughts of the Supreme Being. He is beyond their understanding. God is always there first: He is the creator of all things and the initiator of all events. Human beings feel awe when they remember the presence of God. He is good and trustworthy in a way that they are not. As an immanent God, Africans see Him as God whose presence is felt by people within the natural world. The Africans feel his presence around their surroundings, and through what happens to them and their families (Smith, 1978:20-38).

African people see God as very present within the natural world to help protect and deliver his creation and transcend the natural realm. When we say that God is immanent in the world, we are presenting an attribute that shows God as dwelling among us or within us. So many writers especially the armchair scholars from the West argue that God in the African concept is far removed that they see Him as "AbsenteeLandlord" or "Withdrawn God" who after creating the world has withdrawn to the vault of heaven (Parrinder, 1962). They erroneously conclude by saying that though Africans have a faint knowledge of God, but He is far removed from them so that they rather go to the divinity for help. This is false assumption because you cannot emphasize God's remoteness to Africans to the exclusion of His nearness.

Awolalu and Dopamu(1979) posit that to the Africans the transcendence and immanence of God are two divine attributes that are paradoxically complementary. This is revealed in the *Nupesong*: "God is far away. God is in front, He is in the back". This *Nupesong* means that though God is not on earth yet He is very present, always, and everywhere. To show the immanence of God among the Yoruba of Nigeria they ask "What can you do in concealment that God's eyes do not reach?" And they also add another statement "He who steals under concealment, even though the eyes of the earthly ruler do not see him, those of the King of Heaven is looking at him" (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). The above sayings reveal the immanence of God in African religious ontology. They show that Africans believe that though God is transcendent, yet He is immanent. d) In Africa God is eternal and immortal.

The Africans do not see the Supreme Being as One who will one day cease to be or one who will eventually die. They rather see Him as the eternal and immortal One who lives forever to satisfy the human soul. This is why “they hold that the Supreme Deity is the Ever-living Reality Whose Being stretches to eternity” (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). A Yoruba epithet of praise describes this eternal and immortal attribute of the Supreme Being in Africa: *Oyigiyi Ota Aiku*- “The mighty, immovable, hard, ancient, durable Rock that never dies”. The *Kono* people of Sierra Leone call God by the name *Yataa* which means that “God is the One you meet everywhere”. They also call God by another name *Meketai* implying “the Everlasting One”, “The One who remains and does not die” showing that people of many generations experience God living (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

(e) God is King

When the word “king” is used in reference to the attributes of God in Africa, we are looking at God as the mighty one who is the absolute controller and sustainer of the universe with unique and incomparable attributes. The Africans venerate Him with higher regard than any respect given to an earthly king. The Yoruba’s call him “*Oba orun*, “*Oba-Atererekariaiyé* or *Oba AsekaanMaku*” which means the king who does the work with perfection” (Igboaka, 2007). The Igbo call God “*EzeNdeWelu*” or “*Ezeelu*” which means “the king in heaven” (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). For the Mende, God is the head of the universe.

The Nupe says that God is the “*Isoci*” which means He is the only one who reigns”, owns us” or is “our Lord”. The Akan people of Ghana put it in this way, “the earth is wide but *Onyamse* is the head” (Parrinder, 1969). As king, God is omnipotent and the sovereign ruler of the universe. He is also the father of all and there is nothing he cannot do. For the Tiv, God is described as the one surrounding the whole world with moon, sun and stars under his control. Thus, the Tiv people call Him “*Aôndo u akume a sha*” meaning “God the owner and king of the universe” (Abraham, 1933). The Idoma people believed that there is a strong cult of the earth but if God likes he can spoil the earth (Mbiti, 1970).

(f) God is the Judge

When Africans conceive God as a judge they include everything in association with justice, punishments and retribution. He is the impartial judge who dispenses justice and punishes offenders (Mbiti, 1969). It is an inbuilt retributive principle which deals with dispensation of justice, reward and punishment in the now and hereafter. The Igbo’s believed that God’s dispensation of justice and punishment are according to each person’s offence

in the daily occurrences of individual lives. As judge, God inflicts several punishments on the hard hearted and un-hospitable ones in their societies. The Yoruba's call Him "*Oba Adakedejo*" meaning "the king whose judgment is executed in silence". The Tiv refers to Him as "He who embodies retributive justice" and "perfect judge who allots vengeance to wrong doers"(Aresen, 1988).

Thus, in African traditional society, the judgment of God is a conception which is real and not just a matter of intellectual knowledge. However, there are cases of God's wraths in the world, which indicates that the judgment of God is just. He judges human beings as a creator in a pluralistic manner and His judgment starts here on earth and continues in the hereafter. The wrongdoers are punished, while, the good ones are rewarded by Him. The African people believe that God is an angry God who detests evil of all kinds. Hence, the people conceptualized the anger of God in the lightning and thunder that struck trees, buildings animals and human beings. Among the Yoruba's the anger of God is demonstrated in the fight between "*Sango*" and "*Jakuta*" (the thunder and fire divinities of Yoruba land).

The Nupe people described the anger of God as the "axe of God". For the Tiv, the anger of God is refers to as "*Nyiar I Aôndo*" meaning "the thunder of the powerful one from the vault of heaven". While for the Igbo, the word "*Amadioha*" expresses the anger of God as one who thunders. The Akan said that "*Onyame*" himself is one who bears the axe of punishment. He is judge because He is perfect, all wise, all knowing and all seeing (Parker, 1954). The Nuer people also believe that God punishes wrong doing and reward uprightness. While Evambo people believe that murder and stealing are punishable by God (Okpoku, 1987).

All these concrete examples mentioned above show how African people conceive God as the supreme judge who acts without impartiality. He is said to have the sun, moon and the firmament as His eyes that helps Him to see and know even the most hidden secrets of human thought and actions in the world (Eliade, 1986). There are so many other great attributes of God in African traditional religious thought which we may not expatiate in this work such as: God is the absolute controller of the universe, God is Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient in Africa; the Supreme Being is one in Africa; God is good and merciful, and God is Holy(Downes, 1971). The attributes as enumerated above are not the product of missionary activities or colonial era, but are part and parcel of Africans.

Every child born into African culture grows with these concepts of God and he does not need to learn them because they are imbued in their folklores, myths, short stories, short sayings, proverbs, ceremonies and everything around them. These attributes show the place and position of the Supreme Being in the African traditional religious thought. No one under any guise should say that Africans did not know God before colonial era or before the coming of the missionaries. The knowledge of God as the Supreme Being in Africa has been part of our culture from time immemorial.

The Worship of God (Supreme Being)

In African society, the worship of God varies from one community to the other. It includes offering of sacrifices and prayers to the Supreme Being, Invocations, Blessing, Salutations, expressions of worship by religious intermediaries and specialists, and the place of worship. These forms of worship have sought to address the issues of what, when, how and where the worship of God do take place in the traditional African society. In Yoruba society, for example, there is no organized direct public worship of God since the divinities are regarded as the messengers of Olodumare. The Yoruba people believed that once these divinities have been worshipped and sacrificed to, they in turn will transmit what is necessary of the worship and sacrifice to Olodumare. This is because as it is known and accepted in their socio-political environment, the King cannot be approached directly except through the various ward chiefs who formed the King's cabinets.

However, outside ritual contexts the Yoruba recognize Olodumare's readiness to intervene in human affairs and do make direct appeals to him. This is done especially in periods of personal crises and oppression or injustice. Redress is sought mostly in the courts of Olodumare (Mbiti, 1969). The form of direct worship of Olodumare that is common among the Yoruba is that of pouring libation of cold water and praying with kola in the centre of a circle drawn with white chalk. This is reportedly done by a priest in the palace of the Ooni (King) of Ife on a daily basis while individuals can carry this out on instruction from the oracle. However as Idowu (1962) opines, this direct worship of Olodumare is dying out gradually.

The Akan is a typical example of an African society with elaborate public worship of God. According to Rattray (1927), the Akan has shrines, temples and priests that are dedicated to the service and regular worship of Onyame. Almost every Akan compound has an altar for Onyame at which private devotions and daily offerings are made to God. The private altar is made of a forked branch of a tree called God's tree. A basin or pot is placed in between the branches and it contains an axe called God axe that is used to bless the

members of the house. Apart from these, private altars are also what are called the personal altars. The weekly worship of God among the Akan holds on Saturday which known as Onyame's day. The Igbo people also have altars and shrines. The Ikenye, the eldest member of the community, directs the worship. AjaEze Emu is one of such direct worship and it is observed during the dry and rainy seasons (Busia, 1926).

Divinities in African Traditional Religious Thought

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) 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) 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 Edo of 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*)".

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) sees these divinities as being "co-eval with the coming into being of the cosmos". They include such divinities as *Sango* or *Amadioha*-thunder divinities for Yoruba and Igbo; *Anior 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.

There are two major schools of thought as regards the origin of divinities in African religious ontology. The first school of thought is led by John S. Mbiti (1969). He argues that divinities were created by the Supreme Being. He explains that divinities "have been created by God in the ontological category

of the spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for His activities or manifestation either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature". By this view of Mbiti (1969) and his group, divinities are under the Supreme Being in the order of things. They can also be seen as manifestations of the characteristics or attributes of the Supreme Being.

The second school of thought, championed by Idowu (1973), argues that divinities were not created but were brought out into being. From the point of view of the theology of African traditional religion, it will not be correct to say that the divinities were created but rather they were brought into being, or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe. This view of Idowu (1973) may correspond to the Christian theology about the divinity of Christ. Christians believe that Christ was not created but came out (brought forth) from the Father and so shares almost all the attributes of the Father. This is why he is called the Son of God. In the same way, Idowu (1973) applies the same theology to the divinities. He explains that *Orisa-nla* (the arch-divinity among the Yoruba) "is definitely a derivation partaking of the very nature and metaphysical attributes of *Olodumare*". This is why the Yoruba people call him "Deity's son and deputy, vested with the power and authority of royal sonship".

In Benin of Edo State, *Olokun* the arch-divinity is regarded as the son of *Osanobwa*, which means a son vested with power and majesty by his father. Among the *Akan* people of Ghana, all their divinities are regarded as sons of *Onyame*. Idowu therefore argues that "it is in consequence of this derivative relationship that these divine "beings" are entitled to be called divinities or deities". A careful look at these two schools will show that Idowu (1973) was applying the Christian theological principle to African traditional religion by declaring that the divinities were not created just as Christians believe that Jesus Christ was not created. Parrinder (1967) lays his weight behind Idowu (1973) by declaring that the divinities were not created and adds "Divinities are brought into being to serve the will of the Supreme Being". There is a general agreement among scholars that divinities are divided into three groups, namely; primordial divinities, deified ancestors and personification of natural forces and phenomenon.

The origin of primordial divinities is unknown, however, Africans have a belief that they are deities of heaven who have been with the Supreme Being since the creation of the universe and were partakers in the creative work of the universe and work hand in hand with the supreme deity who is the arch-creator of the universe (Idowu, 1973). The deified ancestors because of the

extraordinary lives they have lived in African society were made divinities or gods with all the attributes and characteristics of the earlier divinities. Among the Yoruba's for example, Jakuta and Sango are the divinities associated with thunder and fire, Sango who was the fourth King of Oyo became a deified divinity after his death. He was so powerful that after deification, he acquired the attributes of Jakuta, the thunder divinity of Yoruba land (Idowu, 1962).

The third category of divinities, "the spirits" are associated with natural phenomenon like hills, lakes, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes and thick forests in Africa. Among the Yoruba's for example, Oke Ibadan hill is believed to be a hill for the spirits which have helped the Yoruba people during wars and which have continued to bless the people of Ibadan till date. Thus, there are priests dedicated to these spirits and animal festivals are celebrated by the people in their honour as protectors of the land. Although, divinities of natural phenomenon are many, and their numbers varies from one community to the other their number is said to be between 202, 401, 600 and 1700. The African people called them by various names depending on the functions they performed and the characteristics they acquired as divinities.

From the given above facts, one could argue that if all divinities were not created, it means that those heroic human beings of the distant past who were deified were not created. This will run contrary to the general belief of Africans concerning the Supreme Being whom alone has no beginning and no ending in African religious theology. If the divinities are said to possess the same uncreated nature, then there must be equality between them in some sense. But we have submitted in this paper that in Yoruba of Nigeria, the name *Olodumare*, a name given to the Supreme Being, means a king or chief who wields authority and is "unique".

This uniqueness means one of his kinds. None is comparable to Him. He is unchangeable and reliable. It therefore follows that if God is unique then every other creature must be different from Him. They are regarded as divinities. Their being called divinities is because they are sometimes the personification of the natural forces or the manifestation of the Supreme Being. These researchers therefore, agree with Mbiti (1969) that divinities have been created by God initially as spirits and are largely the personifications of natural objects and forces of the universe.

Relationship between Divinities and the Supreme Being

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. They are created "beings". As created beings, they are subordinate to the Supreme Being.
 3. They are derivations from Deity. The 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, 1975).
 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*, 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. The 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 off-springs. 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

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 claim, but constitute only a half-way house which is not meant to be permanent resting place for man's soul. While man may find the divinities 'sufficient' for certain 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.

Though 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. On the other hand, those who see African religion as being pantheistic have failed to understand that "polytheism is a qualitative and not quantitative concept. It is not a belief in a plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character".

Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought

The Africans also recognized another category of spiritual beings called "Ancestors". The belief in the existence of these beings is so strong that in the past some scholars had labeled African traditional religion as ancestral worship (Mbiti, 1969). Although there are divergent views among Africans concerning the ancestors, their activities are so common that the people are able to draw a clear cult demarcation between the Supreme Being, divinities and the ancestors. Mbiti (1975) maintained that the term "Ancestors" refers to:

All the dead departed who are physically dead but are still believed to be alive in the memory of those who remember them when they were in the community. They are regarded as integral members of the family in Africa. They are seen as always present and have interests in the affairs of their families. This however, makes their family members to venerate them and to offer sacrifices to seek for their protection, blessing and intervention in times of wars and difficulties.

Mbiti (1975) coined another term “the living-dead” to referred to good spirits of those departed who are recently dead but are perceived as still related to the living in the community. This category of spiritual beings include: the departed souls of young men who have died bad death and have left no children in the community (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). Such young people are not regard as the living-dead because they have not achieved the highest spiritual status or fulfilled the laid down qualifications for becoming an ancestors in African traditional religion. In African religious thought, the departed who have left the visible world, are believed to continue their existence in the invisible and metaphysical worlds. This makes the Africans to interpret death as a rite of passage to the ancestral world (Mbiti, 1969).

This belief in the existence of the departed in the community is so common that the ancestors are conceived as custodians and symbols of customs, traditions and morals in African society. They are guardians of the tradition and intermediaries between God and the community (Imasogie, 1982). They guaranteed a good and prosperous life for their upright descendants who continue to acknowledge them as mediators between the Supreme Being, divinities and the living (Eliade, 1986). The ancestors watch over their descendants positively, ensuring their happiness and welfare and guaranteeing their general well-being. They are seen as immediate sources or avenues to a successful life, good health, children and prosperity (Idowu, 1973). The ancestors also bless and protect their family members. If the community or individuals break the moral law, ancestors punish them to remind the living of their duties (Adegbola, 1998). They visit the community in dreams and visions and give specific orders.

Requests are made to the ancestors for things which are believed to be gifts from the spirit world. They mediate the Soteriological goals which relate to tangible well-being and success for which human beings strive to achieve in their lives. Their protection gives their descendants spiritual security against inimical powers that may seek to disrupt their lives and such benefits. The filial bonds between the living and their ancestors make the latter approachable with such requests, while their post-mortar spiritual attainment gives them the leverage needed to acquire such benefits from the spirit world for their descendants (Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969).

Naming of children is a common reason why the living-dead speak to a family member. The name of the deceased contains their good character which will be passed on to the next generation. Wrong naming causes sickness or even death (Forde, 1954). Without naming, the child is not part of the community and is not considered to be a human being. Thus, to become a

living-dead and an ancestor, one must have been a role model in the community. The ancestral cult, however, is not only concerned with success in life, but goes beyond life-after death. In African belief therefore, a person may come to different sorts of spiritual existence after death. He can become a wondering ghost, or take up human life elsewhere on earth without going through the process of re-incarnation. This process of taking up a new life in the spirit world of the ancestors, even if one is not ranked as one of them is referred to as “post-mortem existence” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987).

Mbiti (1969) opined that the living-dead are in *Sasa* (the present) and are not yet completed the process of dying. They can only move into *Zamani* (the past) as personal spirits and become mere “its” when the last person who could remember them dies. They now lose their identities in antiquity beyond five generations and the living no longer remembers them by names (Ray, 1976). They become unknown by names and slip back into *Zamani* (the past) with continuous involvement in the affairs of the community. This partial process of re-incarnation involving re-birth is opposed to the Christian concept of resurrection which promises eternal life (Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969).

In African religious belief, therefore, the departed who were not given admittance into the ancestral world becomes ghosts, haunting the living (Mbiti, 1970). These were departed members who had lived a bad life, committed suicide or died without proper burial rites (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). African traditional “heaven” and it is believed to be the abode of the ancestors. Thus, for the Africans for one to be in “hell” is to be an evil spirit (Nowell, 1969). The Styx that must be crossed at death is the gate between lives as a disembodied restless spirit and the peaceful world of the ancestors, where one is re-integrated into the root of his lineage. At death, the liturgy of libation requests that the deceased settle into the world and not cause any harm to the living, except those who may be responsible for his death. Libation is also poured out and prayers offered to the ancestors to allow their deceased descendants to join them (Parrinder, 1962).

The funeral rites are geared towards facilitating the settlement of the deceased into the ancestral world. These rituals which are passage rites re-direct the personality soul back to the ancestors and not to God, for the “life-soul” has already departed to God, its maker (Imasogie, 1982). Africans classified death as bad or unnatural deaths which do not anger well for easy transition. These include: the death of infants and children, accidental deaths by drowning, for example, or fire, lightning, pregnancy, falling from tree, death during festivals or periods of mourning, and death due to certain types of abominable disease such as dropsy, leprosy, small pox and so on (Abioye, 2001).

All such deaths suggest the displeasure of the ancestors or the gods and indicate the likelihood of a post-mortem existence outside the pale of the ancestral world. In most cases, such corpses are not even buried in the usual burial ground (Dennis, 1994). Natural death suggests easy transits to an ancestral world, except where proper funeral rites have not been performed. Such a natural death consists in death at a ripe old age or at middle age after a brief illness (Imosagie, 1982). During these funerals, white attire is wearied by the living to signify that the person has just gone "home" to meet the ancestors. Those who died unnatural deaths thus, become disembodied spirits and are believed to be harmful to the living.

It is believed that the "personality soul" is the seat of psychic phenomena and, disembodied at death; it acquires even more power (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). The soul, if it is not at rest in the ancestral abode, constitutes a danger to the living. In the case of children who die, it is believed that they continually re-incarnate and die, thus causing their unfortunate parents much pain (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). Accident victims are believed to be dangerous and vengeful as they haunt the spot where their mishap occurred, continuously dragging others to the same fate (Shorter, 1975). Such spirits are called "wandering spirits" or "those who died an untimely or bloody death" (Mbiti, 1969). In African religious thought, the ancestors are believed to be in the state of personal immortality and are externalized in the physical continuation of the individual through procreation so that the children bear the traits of their deceased parents or progenitors. This belief in "personal immortality" according to Mbiti (1975) is further expressed in acts like respecting the dead, giving portions of food to them, pouring out libations and carrying out instructions given by them. Dzurgba (1985) opined that the basis for Africans belief in immortality of the ancestors lies in the general worldwide view that communication takes place between the living and the dead; and that the departed can still be of help to the living members (Ikenga-Metuh, 1984). However, for the Africans, there seems to be no clear cult demarcations between the Supreme Being (God) and divinities on the one hand, and ancestors on the other hand. The Supreme Being (God) and the divinities belong to the supra-sensible world, while the ancestors are part and parcel of the existence of the living (Kalu, 1978). The Africans have a strong belief that the ancestors, though still relates to the living, they are no longer material beings since they have crossed to the supernatural level and have been freed from all the restrictions of the physical world (Yuhe, 1978).

The ancestors are believed to be next to the Supreme Being and because of their elevations to spiritual status which enables them to play enormous roles

not everybody is qualified to become an ancestor (Downes, 1971). The admittance into the ancestral abode has certain qualifications of which a departed person has to obtain and certain processes that must be followed before she/he attains the status of an ancestor. These include, (i) the departed must have been a befitting burial rites (ii) He must have died a good death (iii) He must have lived to old age (iv) He must have been married and has children and (v) He must have lived a good life that is worthy of emulation and acceptable as laid down moral standard by the society. These qualifications are necessary because without them the departed would not be admitted into world of the ancestors. Africans generally believe that the world of the spirits is a compartmental-whole, whereby the different category of spirits therein, together work for a harmonious existence and governance of the universe.

Ancestral Veneration in African Religion

In African religions, ancestral veneration is undoubtedly an important element of religious life. Ikenga-Metuh quoting Morioka (1975), affirms that the Africans believe that their ancestors will protect them and their children in return for the tributes the living pay them. However, it seems that Africans belief in the influence of the ancestors on the lives of the living as discussed earlier is stronger than most essential aspects of the ancestral cult. Okpoku (1987:40) explains this thus:

The spirit of a person who has recently died is accorded special treatment by members of the household until it is thought to have moved from direct involvement from the world of the living to a remote realm. At length, the spirit of the person who has recently died is said to become an ancestral spirit.

The point Okpoku is pointing out here is that, beyond the ancestral world, the departed spirit may attain the status of an ancestral deity (Olademo, 2008). At death, the deceased person is believed to start a new life. After seven days of dangerous liminal period, the deceased receive a posthumous name which is comparable to the naming of a new born child on the seventh day (Nowell, 1969). The soul is then assumed to have departed to the world but its full transition is marked by requiem rites that take place on the first, third and finally on either the thirty-third or forty-ninth anniversary when obsequies are completed or the dead is elevated to the status of an ancestor or deity (Opoku, 1987). The spirit of the deceased retains its individuality until the final obsequies at which the departed sheds its individual numerical identity and merges into the collective ancestry of the family (Tohoshi, 1967).

The term ancestral veneration therefore, refers to a kind of respect, reverence and honour given to the ancestors in African traditional religion just as the Saints are venerated in the Catholic Theology (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). This religions institution surrounding the traditional religious thought is what others call the “cult of the ancestors” (Adasu, 1985). The Africans venerates the ancestors but do not worship them. This is because, the relationship that the livings have with their ancestors is so important that life has no meaning without the ancestral presence and power. The ancestors are guardians of the family traditions and life; they act as disciplinarians and channels of communication between the Supreme Being (God), divinities and human beings (Okpoku, 1987).

The Africans venerate the ancestors by pouring libations and giving food to them as part of their share so that they too could participate in the family meal with the living. They could be approach through divination which prescribes for them the kind of sacrifice to be offered by the people to appease them (Ikenga-Metuh, 1984). These facts has debunked the question usually asked by western scholars whether the Africans venerate or worship the ancestors. Worship and veneration as used here are psychologically closer terms than the next door to each other. Thus, to say that the Africans worship the ancestors is to deny them the opportunity of giving respect and reverence to their departed as found in many societies of Africa.

In some African societies, both departed men and women could be venerated as the ancestors. In Tiv culture, for example, both departed men and women are consulted by family members in times of needs asking for their blessings, protections and intervention. At times, in the liturgy of prayer, more immediate ancestors whose names are known asked to pass on the message on to forebears they knew and with whom they now live. Thus, as Mbiti (1969) affirms:

The decease son or daughter would go to the grave of his/her father or mother and sit or lie on it crying for his/her intervention on problems affecting him or her family. He/she then offer the departed cooked food, meats and drinks to appease their souls. At the end of this, it is the belief of the Tiv people that the ancestor will intervene in the problem.

This form of venerating the dead in Tiv culture is akin with what take place in many African societies where by the ancestor is given a sacrifice, ritualis performed and libation is poured on the grave of departed person to solicit for his/her blessings and protections on the family or the children (Afolabi, 1966).

Sometimes, cola nuts and palm wine are offered to the ancestors as food and drinks as a sign of venerating them. This form of venerating the ancestors has been resilient to Christian influence in modern times. It lends credence to the skepticism about the future of historically African ancestral veneration and its continued relevance into the 21st century.

Conclusion

From the foregone discussion, we have seen that in African religious thought the Supreme Being, divinities and ancestors exist and they play crucial roles in the development of human society. Supreme Being is regarded as an uncreated self-existent, unchanging and reliable being whose power transcends all powers. He is seen as the creator, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent being who is immortal and directs human affairs. In Africa, He is venerated and not worshipped. The Africans have no temple and an image attributed to Him because He is beyond human comprehension and is unique showing that there is none like Him. The Supreme Being in African religious belief has so many divinities or deputies who work with Him in the unitary theocratic governance of the universe. They are functionaries and ministers whose duties are to carry out the full instructions of Supreme Being. They do not have absolute power or existence is derived from Supreme Being. They are created and so are subordinate to God in all matters.

The divinities are also regarded as manifestations of the attributes of the Supreme Being. Africans have shrines and temples dedicated to them, even though they are seen as intermediaries between human beings and the Supreme Being. There are also the ancestors who are the living-dead that are still perceived as integral members of the family in Africa. They are seen as always present and interested with the affairs of their families. They are not worshipped but venerated as the Saints are venerated in Catholic Theology. The ancestors though still related to the living are no longer mortals because they have crossed to the supernatural world and have been freed from all restrictions of the physical world and so can be of help to the living who are still bound by these physical restrictions. The ancestors can also serve as leaders of their families, and intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living in African religious thought. Because of the enormous responsibilities and the basis of elevation to a spiritual status, it is not everybody that is qualified to be an ancestor in African traditional religion.

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