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## 2

**SOCIETY, CULTURE AND RELIGION: AFRICAN  
TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM IN PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

*Every society has some set of beliefs and practices that centre on the relationship of humans with the supernatural. Religion which goes back to the beginnings of the human specie is truly universal. Sociologists and social Anthropologists are always involved in the study of religion because their approaches to the study of society and culture are holistic. Thus, sociological and anthropological studies of African societies and cultures have revealed that religion is the core of social machinery. It is observed that African religion cannot be separated from other aspects of societal function. This paper examines African traditional belief system from both sociological and anthropological perspectives. The essence is to reawaken our readers' minds on the value and importance of African traditional religion, considering the fact that it is fast becoming uninteresting to many people, although its functions, like every other religion, in African socio-cultural setting, are still obvious.*

**Introduction**

There is no universal or generally accepted definition of religion. However, sociologists and social anthropologists have attempted to define religion from various perspectives. A sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1915:65) defines religion as:

a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things separate and taboo (forbidden) which unite into one single moral community called a church, and all those who adhere to it.

A British social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1979:157) defines religion as, "an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power". Another anthropologist, A. Wallace

defines religion as, "the beliefs and practices concerned with supernatural beings" (1966:11).

Religion is an important, or even, essential part of the social machinery, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. It is one of the important institutional structures making up the total social system in society (O'Dea, 1966). Religion refers to beliefs in the existence of supernatural beings and the practices associated with relating to them (Collins, 1975). The religious institutions like other social institutions, is important in all human societies. There is no society that does not have one form of religious belief or the other.

Religious beliefs and practices are those that have to do with relationships between humans and supernatural forces or beings (Beals et al 1977; Donnell, 1981) The myth of the origin of a people, of the natural resources they exploit, or their cultural equipment and of social institutions express and sustain attitudes towards extra-human forces that are believed to control or intervene among them (Forde, 1963).

Human beings have to adapt to their physical environment and to their fellow human beings – to the natural and social worlds around them. Wallace (1966) notes that humans have created and then adapted as well, to the world of the supernatural and to the worlds of postulated mysterious beings, powers, and events.

In every human society, religion plays formidable roles in the social life of the people in a number of ways (Awofeso and Ogunbodede, 2000). Firstly, religion supports social norms and values and also provides a foundation for societal mores and values. Consequently, religious sanctions are sought for certain desirable patterns of behaviour to persist in society in the form of norms. Secondly, religion helps in overcoming fear and anxiety. Each person in the society can be susceptible to specific and general fears. Some human responses to such fears and anxieties are to reverse the power of nature, appease them and seek their cooperation. Thirdly, religion helps in self-justification and moral identity. That is, religion provides a means whereby man can face the crises and vicissitudes of life with strength and fortitudes.

Atere and Olagbemi (1997) have identified three elements of religion. Firstly, a set of beliefs regarding ultimate power in the universe. Secondly, a set of beliefs regarding the ideas and proper patterns of behaviour. Thirdly, a set of ceremonial ways of expressing these beliefs. These various elements will obviously vary in form, in observance, in the response they evoke from individuals depending on the type of religion and culture concerned.



The features of any religion include: ritual, emotion, belief and organization (Wallace, 1966). All religions observe ceremonial practices or rituals. The rituals of any religion can be described as the prescribed acts that are sacred in themselves and which also symbolize the sacred. Secondly, religious rituals are known to be evocative and often bring with them feelings that are dependent on the nature of the ceremony and what it symbolizes. In some circumstances, humility, reverence and awe may be evoked in religious practices while in others ecstasy or terror may be displayed. Thirdly, it has always been a recognised fact that in almost all societies, there are beliefs that justify and support religious rituals and feelings. Fourthly, just like any other form of association, the organization of religion is needed to conduct assemblies where beliefs and feelings are reinforced to recruit and train specialists in religious groups and the vest of society.

Like other religions, African traditional religion performs the above functions, hence through it social equilibrium is achieved in all African societies. The future of this age-long religion appears bleak due to factors such as modernization, westernization, civilization, technology and foreign religions. Against this background therefore, this article intends to reawaken people's minds by examining African traditional religion which still thrives in some places though in secrecy.

### Sociology, Social Anthropology and the Study of Religion

Sociologists believe that society is made up of institutions one of which is religion (Donnell, 1981). A society is a complex of patterned human behaviour exhibiting a high degree of regularity overtime (O'Dea, 1966). Because of the important roles that religion performs in society, it is often thoroughly examined by sociologists. This, in fact, is responsible for the evolution of a sub-field of sociology known as the sociology of religion.

There is one principle that anthropology has in hand to serve toward a larger synthesis of understanding – the concept of culture (Kroeber, 1968). According to Kroeber (1968), it is culture that is at once the precondition of all human history and the abiding and growing precipitates. Religion is an aspect of culture. Culture provides rules for beliefs and social life as well as means for exploiting the environment (Nanda, 1984). Anthropologists' usual involvement in the study of religion is derived mainly from the fact that their approach to the study of society and culture is holistic.

Every society has some set of beliefs and practices that centre on the relationship of humans with the supernatural. Religion which goes back

to the beginnings of the human species, is a true cultural universal (Nanda, 1984). The antiquity and universality of religion have led many sociologists and anthropologists to speculate about its origin and function. Sociologists have always been interested in the functions of religion. Although the search for origin no longer dominates anthropological thinking as it once did, anthropologists like sociologists are still interested in the many functions of religion.

Theoretical discussions on religion in the fields of sociology and social anthropology have been dominated during their history by a number of theories. In anthropology religion was first defined by Sir Edward Tylor, one of the founding fathers of the discipline, over a hundred years ago, as the belief in the supernatural being (Friedl, 1976). To James Frazer (another founding father of anthropology, religion is a means of getting what you want. He saw religion as the attitude of people who are disappointed to find that they could not control the forces of nature by applying the 'bastard science' of magic. According to him, they must have reasoned that there were beings stronger than them (Frazer, 1922). The conceptual arsenal of the sociology of religion is quite impressive (O'Dea, 1966). The contributions of numerous scholars over several generations from Vico and Comte to contemporary sociologists is commendable. The contributions of such figures as Durkheim and Weber, are especially important.

Emile Durkheim, the pioneer French sociologist of religion proposed that religion was the source of all higher culture. He, who wrote at the same time with Frazer was concerned not so much with belief systems as with the relation between religious belief and social order. For him the essence of religion was the church, in which believers gathered to assert their faith. He held that the beings toward whom they directed their worship were in fact personifications of the social order conceived as a moral order (Durkheim, 1915).

Malinowski explicitly rejected Durkheim's theory, but his own, in fact, has much in common with it. Where it contracts most strongly with some current ideas is in its insistence on the essentially emotional character of religion (Mair, 1973). To him religion is an expression of man's helplessness (just as Frazer recognized). Malinowski insists that primitive man was pragmatist, good at observing the objects in his environment that he needed to use, but not interested in speculation about the nature of the world (Malinowski, 1926).

Religion to Radcliffe-Brown (1979) was an essential part of the constitution of the society. According to him, the form of religion and the form of the social structure correspond one with another. The argument

made by Fustel-de Coulanges that we cannot understand the social, judicial and political institutions of the ancient societies unless we take the religion into account was appreciated by Radcliffe-Brown, but he added that it is equally true that we cannot understand religion except by an examination of its relations to the institutions (Radcliffe-Brown, 1979). R.K. Merton (1958) also shared this view.

Through the ages the functional theory has been used in both sociology and anthropology to examine religion in society and culture. In fact, O'Dea (1966:2) observes:

Much that is worthwhile in the growing research into the sociology of religion has been significantly influenced by a sociological point of view called "functional theory".

The theory functionalism is common to both sociology and social anthropology. As a frame of reference to empirical research; the theory sees society as ongoing equilibrium of social institutions which pattern human activity in terms of shared norms held to be legitimate and binding by the human participants themselves (Merton, 1958; Malinowski, 1926). This complex of institutions, which as a whole constitutes the social system (Radcliffe-Brown, 1979) is such that each part (each institutional element) is inter-dependent with all the other parts, and that changes in any part affect the others, and the condition of the system as a whole. According to O'Dea, the functional theory views culture as a more or less integrated body of knowledge, pseudo-knowledge, beliefs and values that define the human situation and the conditions of action for the members of a society.

We shall now examine African traditional belief system from the above perspective. This is necessitated by the fact that in traditional societies institutions that make up the social system are obviously interdependent.

### **The African Traditional Belief System**

In the last decades European and American anthropologists have conducted ethnographic researches in the various societies of Africa. These scholars have described traditional religion in the context of African culture. Their findings have shown that traditional African religion encompasses all aspects of the people's lives (Ogunbodede, 2000).

In the traditional life of most African societies religion plays a major role in everyday thought and action. The religious institution in African

societies is more closely interrelated with the rest of the lives of these people than it is in Western societies, making it difficult, if not impossible, to study any aspect of their life without touching on their religious behaviour (Mair, 1973) Religion is often an important basis of authority in government and in non-political affairs. The varying materials and cultural background of indigenous life in Africa have conditioned the beliefs and attitudes of its people. Social and personal conflicts and disintegration are bound to arise if the foundations of such beliefs and attitudes are abruptly swept away without opportunity for adjustment (Forde, 1963).

Myth and religion tend to depict and to treat the major issue in African societies, and when not consciously used as charters or explanations for important institutions of aspects of life, they often indicate the norms or ideals of the people concerned (Skinner, 1973). Several types of beliefs are found in varying combinations in different parts of Africa. These include belief in spirits, both ancestral and non-ancestral; magic, witchcraft and sorcery, and of course, the imported religions – Christianity and Muslim.

Important aspects of ritual and belief in a number of African societies have, indeed, been most effectively described and analysed, but usually in the context of some specific problems of social structure or of cultural change. Mary Kingsley, a pioneer field anthropologist, long ago wrote of the West African peoples to whom she was devoted, that to understand them it was necessary to study their beliefs, fears, and ritual practices in the context of their own social and cultural situations.

In African religious thought, the ancestors are seen as functioning members of the family, lineage, and clan: they are in a position of authority over the living and must be treated with honour and respect (Ottenberg, S. and P., 1960). The term 'ancestor worship' is sometimes used in a widely loose sense to refer to any sort of rites referring to dead persons. The cult group in this religion consists solely of persons related to one another by descent in one line from the same ancestor or ancestors. The principle of respect for seniority is extended to the ancestors, for whom death has been not so much a departure from the world of the living but a change of status within the social group. The living honour their ancestors by offering them sacrifices and behaving in a way of which they will approve, and in turn are rewarded or punished according to how they have performed their duties. The authority wielded over the living by the dead gives cohesion to the corporate kinship group. (Evans-Pritchard, 1956).

In traditional African belief system, the non-ancestral spirits may be classified as spirits associated with the control of natural phenomena (Ogunbodede, 2000). Examples of such phenomena are the ground, thunder, or water. Spirits that are concerned with vital functions such as human reproduction and crop fertility are also non-ancestral spirits. The guardian spirits are also non-ancestral spirits. It should be noted that one or more of these (non-ancestral spirits) may be present in the religious system of a given African society, and within each class there may be a variety of spirits. The authority of non-ancestral spirits is based on the principles of immanent justice, that is, the spirit's response to actions of humans is always automatic and is based on qualities inherent in the deities.

Another important part of religion in many African societies is the belief in a non-spiritual force, Magic. Magic may be used to promote either good or evil: to help and to cure or to harm (Ottenberg, S. and P., 1960). Medicines often herbal in nature are used in both types: charms and amulets are employed to ward off injury and evil. Since magic and witchcraft are lived, far more than they are reasoned, his (an African) daily actions are conditioned by these beliefs, till at every turn he is confronted by the threat of witchcraft and meets it with divination and magic (Gluckman, 1955). Spells may be uttered as a part of a magical procedures to activate the supernatural processes thought to be inherent in the magician's paraphernalia. Magic may be used to manipulate people, as in the case of love portions or harmful medicines. It may be used also to control spirits.

Sorcery is common in most African traditional societies and it is based on magical techniques. Sorcery bear some resemblance to witchcraft and both have been confused (Ogunbodede, 2000). Belief in witchcraft and sorcery are social and not psychological (Middleton and Winter, 1963). Witches are individuals who possess an innate malicious power which works to cause harm to either health or property. A sorcerer is an individual who consciously engages in bad magic for the purpose of harming someone. As opposed to witchcraft, anyone can engage in sorcery if he so wishes. The distinction between the two (sorcery and witchcraft) has been made by Evans-Pritchard and other anthropologists that have worked in Africa. In making a distinction between witchcraft and sorcery Evans-Pritchard (1956:41) observes:

Sorcery is the conscious practice of "magic that is illicit or is considered immoral", while witchcraft is a manifestation that is inherent in persons having "a supposed psychic emanation from witchcraft substance", a harmful material, thought to be present in the bodies of certain persons, that

may be diagnosed by oracles in the living and discovered by autopsy in the dead.

According to Evans-Pritchard (1956) a mystical power possessed by witches is known as witchcraft substance and is believed to be found in the gastro-intestinal tracts of witches where it grows in strength and size with advancing age. He notes that a distinction between sorcery and witchcraft is that while the belief in witchcraft and the effects attributed to it are real enough (but there is no actual evidence), sorcery (in which persons use evil magic to harm others), actually exist. The fundamental point is that the African is born into a society which believes in witchcraft and therefore the very texture of his thinking from childhood on, is woven of magic and mystical ideals (Gluckman, 1955).

There are three categories of practitioners in African traditional religions, viz.: priest, diviners and rainmakers (Ottenberg, S & P. 1960). The priests serve deities and individuals or groups; they serve a particular god or spirit and watch over the behaviour and needs of its adherents. Diviners on the other hand, serve their clients both as doctors and as revealers of the unknown. With the use of magical techniques, the diviners determine what may have caused a misfortune, illness or death, and they sometimes also call upon spirits to give them the desired knowledge. In theory, the role of the diviner is to promote the social order; this is usually also true in practice, but occasionally a "bad" diviner is found who finds it profitable to dispense evil magic despite strong group sanctions to the contrary. The rainmaker's task is not only to insure sufficient rainfall for the needs of pastures and crops, but also to stop the rain if floods threaten. Rainmakers are found in many African societies.

### Conclusion

The concept of religion has been examined in this paper with particular reference to traditional African societies. The views of different sociologists and social anthropologists regarding the concept of religion have been considered. The various aspects of traditional African religion have been discussed. Also examined are the various categories of practitioners in African traditional religion.

African traditional societies are kinship based. Social institutions are very closely interconnected. Thus, separation of religion from other aspects of societal function is not possible in African cultural settings. This is because the networks of kinship relationships, which are core to African setting, are maintained by a set of religious sanctions. Traditional

religion is no doubt still relevant in modern times; hence, its adherents should perform in the open, at least to uphold the African cultures of which religion is an essential part.

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