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The Fundamental Reality in the Ontology of African People

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THE FUNDAMENTAL REALITY IN THE
ONTOMETRY OF AFRICAN PEOPLE

A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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THE FUNDAMENTAL REALITY IN THE
ONTOLOGY OF AFRICAN PEOPLE

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"The fundamental reality in the ontology of African people" is an effort to alert the reader to a crucial omission in most contemporary studies on the religion or culture of African people. The majority of the current anthropologists (scholars in the field of contemporary religions) only make a passing reference to the spirit beings that infest the world of traditional Africa.

Apart from inadequate attempts to psychologize the religions of pre-literary man, investigators of pre-scientific cultures have for the most part been unable to account for the unflinching loyalty and meticulous devotion of traditional man to spirit beings. The reason was found to be two-fold, namely: ethnocentrism on the part of the western scholar, and his bias against supernaturalism in favor of empiricism and evolution.

The present investigation further showed that affirming or rejecting the reality of supernatural beings does not belong to the field of science because by definition supernatural beings are incorporeal. Therefore, there can be no scientific (set up) or apparatus that can verify such propositions. The appropriate fields were found to be those of metaphysics and epistemology. Further investigation showed
that there is no metaphysical or epistemological ground for
rejecting the reality of supernatural beings (spirit beings).
belief in spirit beings was shown to be quite consistent with
reason and logic.

In the ontology of traditional Africa, the highest
being is God (the supreme being). He is the same as the Christian
God. He created all living things in both the spirit world
of lesser "deities" and the physical world of mortal man. He
also created both the spirit world and the physical world.
The lesser spirits or deities exercise control over man in his
physical environment. At death, man becomes an ancestral
spirit who then gravitates into the spirit world. As an
ancestor, he is worshipped by the living. In return he offers
them protection, guidance, and care. That is why priests and
witch doctors play a dominant role in such societies. They
possess special knowledge about the spirit world. They have
the power to contact and to manipulate spirit beings. These
specialists provide the ordinary man with varying degrees of
charms, amulets, magic, and several such devices that enable
the latter to ward off the influence of malevolent spirit
beings, mischievous humans, and to guarantee success in life.
Such is the set up that controls the nerve center of tradi-
tional Africa from the cradle to the grave. Herein lies
reality to which the physical world of man must remain
subservient.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Superficially, the title of this thesis, "the fundamental reality in the ontology of African people," appears broad because of the vastness of Africa and the diversity of her people. Since the emphasis is not on the minute details in which African beliefs differ, nor on the accumulation of the beliefs themselves, but on the foundational reality that underlies the very existence of such beliefs, the scope of the investigation is therefore not unmanageable. The primary concern of this writer is to develop a coherent system that unifies and explains all the facets of reality in the lives of African people. In other words, what makes them tick?

The Problem of This Study

The difficulty one encounters when dealing with a subject of this nature stems from the unwillingness of people to abandon established habits. The intellectual community acquired in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the attitude of condescension toward the religious and cultural life of "primitive" man, that is, of man in pre-scientific, pre-literary, and pre-technological societies. Such people were once thought to be incapable of any mental activity, like having a philosophy of life. As a result, traditional
man was thought to be incapable of conceiving of God. Bolaji Idowu observes,

He had told Ludwig what the missionaries were doing in Africa—teaching the Africans about God. Ludwig was perplexed. Then he made his notorious remarks, How can this untutored African conceive God? . . . How can this be? . . . Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.

Why this exhumation, at this time of the day, of things that should be dead and are better forgotten? But are they really dead? Do these preconceived notions belong only to the past? . . . For example, it was Karl Barth's conviction that all other religions are 'sin', the work of Godless man, or humanistic attempts at raising men to divine level.

Idowu has a legitimate criticism. All the other religions of the world should not be simply written off as being worthless as Barth does. There is some truth in them. Yet this writer recognizes that perhaps Barth was only attempting to portray the uniqueness of Christianity. He did not quite succeed in his objective because of his implicit assumption of superiority over other religions, and that can easily alienate his potential "converts."

But Barth is not the only Westerner who thinks that traditional religions are ludicrous. Ludwig's underestimation of the mental capacity of traditional man has already been cited. A missionary, Virginia Blakeslee, with the African Inland Mission, writes,

Animism may be simply defined as 'spirit worship.' And it is applied to the most primitive forms of religion. Tribes involved in Animism have not learned to assign human or animal forms to their gods, but rather view them as spirits inhabiting stones, trees, water, the

hills, and the air around themselves and the sky above. Conscious life is ascribed to all natural objects. . . . The Animist, it has been said, resembles a captivated slave pledged to a satanic system, from which he struggles hopelessly to be delivered.  

According to Miss Blakeslee, traditional man is incapable of ascribing either human or even animal forms to his deities. But instead, in a somewhat irrational manner, he attributes conscious life to natural—inanimate—objects. Alas, such a man, she says, is like a "captivated slave pledged to a satanic system." This writer believes that Missionary Blakeslee allowed her "Christian" zeal to rob her of her sense of proportions. One wonders how she would respond to the obvious fact that throughout Africa traditional man uses both human and sometimes animal images to represent his objects of worship. Such a practice is almost identical with the system of iconoclasm within the Roman Church. Stephen Ezeanya makes such association in his writings. He states,

Belief in Angels replaces belief in minor divinities without much difficulty. Ancestral cult prepares the ground for the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. The strong attachment to ancestors makes it easy to promote both devotion to the Saints and prayers for the departed ones. . . . With regard to the use of images, there should be no difficulty from the point of view of those Christian denominations like the Roman Catholics. In the light of this fact, how could Missionary Blakeslee make such an outrageously false statement? Comments like that render a disservice to the Christian gospel instead of en-


hancing its message.

The paternalism of many Western scholars emerges even more clearly in the writings of Andrew Lang who describes pre-scientific man as savages. He uses one of the most abhorrent terms to describe them in order to show that he considers them to be an inferior breed of humanity. He writes,

> We regard low savages as very irrational and debased characters, consequently the nature of their myths does not surprise us. . . . Our theory is, therefore, that the savage and senseless element in mythology is, for the most part, a legacy from the fancy of ancestors of the civilized races who were once in an intellectual state not higher, but probably lower, than that of Australians, Bushmen, Red Indians, the lower races of South America, and other worse than barbaric peoples.

According to Lang, pre-scientific man, like the African in his traditional setting, is irrational, barbaric, debased, of a "lower" status, and intellectually inferior. How could a scholar, even of the caliber of Lang, claim objectivity for his study of religio-cultural life of traditional man when he already has condemned them to a beastly status? The reason for his subjective approach is not difficult to find.

The era of Lang was a period when the theory of evolution was a novelty that captivated intellectual man. Evolution provided the key to every mystery of life. When applied to the study of anthropology and religion, anthropologists hastily concluded that the religion of pre-scientific man best exemplifies the first evolutionary stages of the religions of civilized man. That explains why man in a tradi-

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tional setting is considered to be inferior, illogical, and irrational. What happened then was that scholars converted a circumstantial difference into a qualitative one. By committing such a fundamental error, they did not only then miss the basic reality in the ontology of the traditional man, they also unconsciously supplied the "intellectual" justification for the social (racial) crisis that then gripped the world of men.

Geoffrey Parrinder comments that

... the old evolutionary theory, which some writers have applied to Africa in the hope that it might show the early stages of religion, in animism or animatism, finds in the belief in God no very strong support. It is just as arguable that there was an ancient monotheistic belief from which men fell away.

Along the same vein, Greschat explains that the earlier approaches by Western anthropologists to the study of African religions were inadequate and resulted in erroneous conclusions. He asserts that

In the past, postulates were adopted from Western speculative philosophy and from the then still young natural sciences as assumed norms for the actual African scene. Simplified and vulgarized, such suppositions were made to serve various tendentious aims as well. Hobbes' formula of the original state of mankind, the savage 'bellum omnium contra omnes', was for example, used in explaining the African 'savage', thereby falsely interpreting Hobbes as well as the Africans.

The works of men like Parrinder and Greschat suggest a gradual and positive change about these matters, especially


as more and more people become familiar with the African scene. But old habits are hard to break.

A second habit one encounters in a study like this emerges clearly from the comments of Alan Dundes. He says,

The presence of apparent irrationality in folklore has posed as much of a problem to folklore theorists as his folklorer's multiple existence. These cannot be magic combs which turn into forests and thus impede pursuers. There is no vagina dentata (motif F547.1.1). There are no magic wands (motif D1254.1). Since these items are not found in nature, in objective reality, their origin must be related to the origin of human fantasies.

Dundes insists that nature is the only criterium for objective reality. Whatever is found in nature exists, but whatever is not evident in nature does not exist. He then proceeds to deny that there is any reality to magic or such things. Magic and its related matters are products of human fantasies. In other words, Dundes rejects the realm of the supernatural and makes nature the only reality that exists. The same categorical rejection of the supernatural can also be seen in the writings of Lang who on the other hand confesses that the origin of religions is unknown. Yet he emphatically rejects any possibility that religion has supernatural origins. He insists:

For our information is not yet adequate to a scientific theory of the origin of religion, and probably never will be. Behind the races whom we must regard as nearest the beginning are their unknown ancestors from a dateless past, men as human as ourselves, but men concerning whose physical, mental and moral condition we can only form conjectures. . . . To say this is not to hint at a theory of supernatural revelation to the earliest men, a theory which I must in time disclaim.


8 Andrew Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion, pp. xii and xiii.
Such dogmatic rejection of supernatural beings stems from the force of naturalism or in Dundes' words what is "found in nature." C. S. Lewis argues that to accept the doctrine of naturalism while rejecting the existence of supernatural beings is a contradiction in fact:

The answer depends on the Metaphysics one holds. If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves. Our convictions are simply a fact about us--like the colour of our hair.

If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform. It can be trusted only if quite a different Metaphysics is true.

Lewis is not alone in this conviction. Whitehead goes further and makes the belief in a rational supernatural being--God--foundational for the scientific method, namely: empiricism and naturalism. He contends,

I mean the inextinguishable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. It is this instinctive conviction, vividly poised before the imagination, which is the motive power of research. . . . When we compare this tone of thought in Europe with the attitude of other civilizations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered.

More and more contemporary writers are beginning to realize that there is more to reality than just what one

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discovers empirically. While not abandoning empiricism, some of them now concede that there is a reality that lies beyond the scope of empirical investigation. One of these current writers is Nathan Scott who argues,

It is the mistaken tendency, however, of the reigning school in Anglo-American philosophy today to suppose that reality is handled with genuine precision and seriousness only by those modes of symbolization that are susceptible of being authenticated by controlled experiments of an empirical order. . . . Yet, the satisfaction which we continue to derive from the highly complicated systems of utterance and discourse that comprise the various forms of literary art is, surely a persisting attestation to the possibility of our taking hold of what is by methods other than those of empirical science.

Mircea Eliade also sees empirical science as just one aspect of reality. He states,

This series of endeavors to point to a reality of which scientific theory has revealed only one aspect. . . . By acknowledging this frankly we shall restore science to the great family of human aspirations by which men hope to fulfill themselves in the world community as thinking sentient beings. For our problem is to discover a principle of differentiation and yet relationship lucid enough to justify and purify scientific, philosophic and all other knowledge, both discursive and intuitive, by accepting their interdependence.

The purpose of discussing the two problems mentioned here is to demonstrate and identify the prevailing attitudes of anthropologists and religious theorizers toward man in traditional societies. Owing to the assumptions of evolution, early investigators considered traditional man to be an inferior breed of humanity because he was least evolved. His


religion was either psychologized or simply ridiculed because it contained, primarily, beliefs about supernatural beings. Supernaturalism was decidedly unacceptable to the nineteenth century scholar who had been thoroughly indoctrinated in empiricism and naturalism. The scholar was convinced that no reality could possibly exist beyond nature. To talk about spirits, or supernatural beings, was nonsensical, let alone believe in them. Such beliefs were "unscientific" and "irrational."

The error of nineteenth century "scientism" about traditional cultures was that it confused a circumstantial difference for a qualitative one. The European Ph.D. scholar is not qualitatively different from the illiterate African. Both are members of the same specie: homo sapiens and so are qualitatively the same. The categories of "inferior" and "superior" are inappropriate when talking about them. The difference is descriptive and circumstantial. One had the privilege of training that enabled him to develop his innate potentiality. The other had not.

Need for Study

There are several reasons that make the present study necessary. The first reason concerns the persistence of old habits and attitudes toward traditional man. The imperious attitudes of western investigators toward the religious traditions of pre-scientific, pre-literary Africa still linger on. People are more refined about them now of course, and
even though many contemporary writers see the need to abandon such approaches and do call for a fresh, new start, they still latch on to some of the earlier ideas and phrasology like "totemism." That is why the supernaturalism of traditional man is rejected de facto and never really taken seriously by many modern scholars as a workable hypothesis. Instead, such beliefs are vaguely dealt with and assigned to man's mythical and ancestral past. One example of this will suffice here. Eliade states,

It is even interesting to note that the existence of God forced itself far more urgently upon modern man for whom history exists as such, as history and not as repetition, than upon the man of the archaic and traditional cultures, who, to defend himself from terror of history, had at his disposition all the myths, rites, and customs mentioned in the course of this book. Moreover, although the idea of God and the religious experiences that it implies existed from the most distant ages, they could be, and were, replaced at times by other religious 'forms' (totemism, cult of ancestors, great goddesses of fecundity, and so on) that more promptly answered the religious needs of primitive humanity.

It is clear from the above quotation that Eliade does not consider supernatural beings to be objectively real for traditional man. Eliade insists that the idea of God is replaced by "totemism" or by the "cult of the ancestors" and other forms that satisfy his religious needs. One has the feeling that Eliade is psychologizing the religion of traditional man. Also, the term "totemism" is used to show that man in a traditional setting, like the pre-literary African, is unable to differentiate between humankind and

the animal world. It is a term that resurrects the two problems mentioned earlier in this paper.

A second reason is to attempt to synthesize all the available data about the traditional religions of Africa in order to emerge with a coherent system that explains reality for the African. For instance, in rejecting the theories of early western investigators Parrinder recognizes that the African has a complex system. He writes,

The comparative theories of investigators which have warped their interpretation of religion... Pre-literary religions have been explained as 'primitive', and their supposed origin has been sought in magic, man, fetish, totem, animism, and the like. All this was for the most part conjecture. Then the psychologists came on the scene and tried to explain religion away in terms of the personification of nature, fear, awe, anxiety, projection, taboo, and such terms. Most of these theories have long ago been discredited as naive introspection guesses... Professor Elkin, writing of the Australian aborigines... goes on to maintain that their philosophy and ceremonial life are, in some respects, no lower or less complicated than our own.

One of the objectives of this writer is to search for that philosophical concept or principle of reality that adequately deals with African ontology. This search, in part, is a response to the challenge of men like Greschat who talk about "correcting the common western image of African spirituality and religiousity" and of emerging with "a new evaluation of African culture."15

A third reason for this study is to consider the point of view of the African--traditional man. Instead of allowing western ideas to dogmatize, or conclude on the basis of what


the scholar thinks, this writer seeks what traditional man thinks. How does he envision his own reality? What are his views of What Is and man? How does he conceive of God and how does he talk about these matters? What is his philosophy of life (that is, his theory of knowledge and metaphysics)? A study of this nature is past overdue.

The final reason for this study is to examine the point of view of the traditional African in terms of its rationality. Does it hold its ground against the searching criticism of modern methodology? Or is the conclusion of "irrationality" drawn by earlier anthropologists justified? In other words, is there an acceptable, scholarly argument for the African point of view?

**Scope and Method of Approach**

The scope of this thesis is not limited to one particular tribe but to all the tribes, and it focuses on the average man in traditional Africa. The primary concern of the present writer is not to describe the beliefs of African people in meticulous detail. Considered from that angle, it would be impossible to find specific details that are uniformly held by African people. The emphasis is on discovering the primary principle or philosophy behind these beliefs—any beliefs—of the Africans.

So far in this paper, terms like "traditional man," "man in traditional societies," "pre-literary and pre-scientific African" have been used. They refer unquestionably to the African scene. The writer uses them instead of the popularized
but negative designations like "primitive," "savage," or "heathen" used by western scholars. Such expressions are not only imprecise and derogatory, they also imply the inferior-superior attitude that has dominated the fields of religious studies and anthropology thus far. This writer will judiciously avoid the negative terms and cling to those already used thus far to describe African people and their religious beliefs.

The method of approach adopted here is basically one of probing. The present writer's background as an African brought up in the systems of African traditional religions will be a leading guide in determining the type of probing questions to be asked. This is not to say that other sources will not be used. On the contrary, the work of contemporary scholars, both African and non-African, will be used extensively in this study. But throughout, the concepts and nomenclature used will not be those of western philosophical thought. They will be those of the traditional African. Western concepts will only serve the function of labeling and identification. The reason for this approach is to enable the present study to get to the roots of African philosophical thought without the bias of western presuppositions.

The thesis will consist, from this point on, of three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will contain a description of what this writer considers to be that fundamental reality that explains the ontology of the African people. The next chapter, chapter three, will examine the philosophical implications of that reality while
chapter four will deal with the theological ones. In the conclusion, the present writer will then attempt to tie everything together.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BASIC REALITY IN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

Some Illustrations Considered

The present chapter is a description of the central concept that controls the life of the traditional African. In order to put the subject into sharp focus, this writer will consider some examples. The first example is a popular African story adapted by the present writer.

There was a hunter by the name of Eyube who went to the forest one day to hunt deer. He spent most of the early morning hours in his famous hiding place but found no game on this particular occasion. He was about to leave in dejection when a deer ran into the nearby bushes. The deer, unaware of the hunter's gazing look, removed its deer coat and transformed itself into a beautiful woman. The deer-woman emerged from the bushes and went away in the direction of the village. Perplexed by what he had seen, Eyube decided to hide the deer coat and wait to see the consequences.

Upon returning after several hours, the deer-woman discovered that her deer coat was gone. Then she noticed the hunter whom she asked about it. Eyube acknowledged having the coat but refused to relinquish it unless she promised to marry him. Whereupon, the woman agreed and assuming the name
of Ladi became Eyube's wife on the condition that the hunter would not disclose her true identity. Eyube agreed. But he already had another wife at home by the name of Onome.

When Onome asked her husband about his wife Ladi, she received no satisfactory answer because of his promise to keep the identify of Ladi secret. After she had tried every method and failed to extract the desired information from her husband, Onome decided to try liquor. She made her husband drunk. Eyube told her all he knew about his deer-wife while under the influence of alcohol.

Weeks later, the hunter went to his customary hunting ground. Meanwhile, a quarrel broke out between the two wives at home during which time the blabber mouth Onome divulged her knowledge about Ladi to the latter. Upon hearing that, Ladi cast a death spell upon Onome, went to the forest, killed the hunter, and disappeared.

How is one to understand this story? Many western scholars call it irrational and label it "totemism" because an animal—a deer—changed into a human being—the beautiful woman. They argue that such indiscriminate transformation from animals into human beings and vice versa shows that traditional man is incapable of recognizing the barriers between human beings and animals. Is this assessment of western anthropologists correct? Or is there a subtle underlying reality here that describes the world view of the African? The writer believes the latter to be the case. But two other examples will be considered before the subject is developed. While the illustration is from African folk tales, the other
examples are both from their religious and cultural life.

In his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe narrates a climactic event that involves a religious taboo among traditional Africans. Since the event in question covers several pages, this writer will paraphrase some of it.

One of the new converts to Christianity in Umuofia was Enoch. On a certain Sunday, during the annual worship of the earth goddess, the masked ancestral spirits (EGWUGWU) of the people appeared in public for the occasion. An EGWUGWU masquerade is not just a man wearing a mask like children do on Halloween night. On the contrary, he is an ancestral spirit and to unmask one in public is to commit a cardinal sin in African traditional religions. Its immediate consequence is death. "One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an EGWUGWU in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated."

On the day in question Enoch, the new Christian convert, accosted an EGWUGWU masquerade and tore off his mask. The result was drastic:

The other EGWUGWU immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and led him away. Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion. That night the mother of the spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. . . . On the next day all the masked EGWUGWU of Umuofia assembled in the market place. They came from all the quarters of the clan and even from the neighboring villages. The dreaded Otakas came from Imo, and Ekwensu, dangling a white cock, arrived from Uli. It

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was a terrible gathering. . . .
. . . From the market place the furious band made for
Enoch's compound. . . and with machete and fire reduced
to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church,
intoxicated with destruction. . . . When the EGWUGWU went
away the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was
a pile of earth and ashes. And for the moment the spirit
of the clan was pacified.

This writer realizes of course that the characters in
Achebe's novel are fictitious. However, there is no question
at all that Achebe does describe vividly and imaginatively the
consequences that follow from such an outrageous violation
of a crucial religious convention in Africa. "Why all that
vandalism for an otherwise simple offence?" One might be
tempted to ask. The District Commissioner in the story, him-
self a British administrator, raises such an objection. He
says,

We have brought a peaceful administration to you and
your people so that you may be happy. . . . But we will
not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of
law where we judge cases and administer justice just AS
IT IS DONE IN MY OWN COUNTRY [emphasis mine] under a
great queen.

Achebe's imaginary District Commissioner does indeed typify
the customary attitude of foreigners toward traditional
Africa. The key, in the writer's opinion, lies in the world
view of the African. What is reality for traditional man
and how does he relate to it? Scholars seem not to even
bother to consider this crucial issue in their study of
African religions and culture.

The third illustration comes from real life. Virginia

2 Ibid., pp. 193-197.

3 Ibid., p. 200.
Blakeslee includes the description in her article on "Animism." She writes,

For an illustration of how an Animistic ceremony is carried on, come with me to a certain African district inhabited by Animists. Last year's food supply is exhausted, grain bins are empty, Gardens have turned to dust. The cattle and sheep are dying of starvation. Children are crying for food. The garden lands have been prepared for seed sowing. The people have waited long but the relentless sun shines on. A group of second-rate elders [emphasis mine] have met to determine the cause of the prolonged drought... . In the morning one seer reports a communication from god. "Bring a brown sheep without spot or blemish, no matter how young", he commands. A brown lamb is brought... . A sacred tree under which the sacrifice for rain is to be made must be carefully selected. Five days and five nights hence the sacrifice will take place. The public is notified. On the sixth day they will communicate with the great god. Meantime, no one is permitted to ford a river or stream. No stranger may arrive or depart on the day of communion. All quarrels or disputes are banned... . lest the sacrificial ceremony be defiled and refused by the great god.

This writer could almost hear someone say, "That is strange!" or "Dumb natives!" After all, why would rational man seek a spiritual solution for a physical phenomenon? But is that so strange? The difficulty that Missionary Blakeslee has understanding the seemingly odd behavior of these Africans stems primarily from her ignorance of what the African conceives reality to be. Macdonald explains,

To us this may appear strange but it is quite consistent with savage thought. To the savage African or South Sea Islander the world is largely, if not exclusively, worked by supernatural agents.

The African World View

The reality that explains the ontology of the tradi-


tional African is, briefly, a firm belief that spirit beings exist objectively. These beings are supernatural, and they make up the inhabitants of the spirit world that supersedes the physical world of man. Their realm of existence is consequently superior to man's whose primary duty is to maintain a cordial, happy relationship with the spirit beings of the spirit-world. Parrinder explains,

To Africans, the spirit world is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that, whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with 'things invisible to mortal sight.'

This discovery is not new in the field of religious studies. The problem is that for some inexplicable reason, scholars did not develop it as a viable hypothesis. William James recognized it a long time ago. He stated,

Summing up in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life, as we have found them, it includes the following beliefs:—

1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. That union or harmonious relation with the higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof--be that spirit 'God' or 'law'--is a process wherein work is really done [emphasis mine], and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

Man in traditional Africa says, "bravo!" to these two quotations from Parrinder and James. When man in African traditional religions offers sacrifices to a particular spirit being or deity to avert the drastic consequences of famine,


it is because he believes that maintaining a "harmonious relation with the higher universe," as James puts it, is the chief purpose of man. And that it is only through "inner communion with the spirit thereof" that "work is really done" within "the phenomenal world" of men. This explains why the African reacts violently when a religious convention or taboos so rudely violated in the manner described by Achebe in Things Fall Apart. Traditional man sees a breach at that nature to involve a most vital relationship between man and the spirit world. This is an issue of life and death, and religious man (including the traditional African) will stop at nothing to ensure that his cordial fellowship with deity is unbroken. This reality also explains why his folktales abound with spirit beings who manifest themselves visibly through such animal-human transformations described in the first illustration of the present chapter. Not that man in such societies fails to see a distinction between man and animal but because spirit beings sometimes appear to men in the shape of animals. Whenever such a phenomenon occurs, traditional man recognizes it to be very rare. He does not use it as a hermeneutical device to explain his understanding of men and animals. He is not totemistic either.

The highest being in the spirit world is God or the Supreme Being. He is known by various names across Africa. He is the creator of all things and beings in both the spirit world and the physical world. This writer believes that the God of African traditional religions is also the God of Christianity. A serious mistake was committed by earlier
missionaries (some still do) who thought that the High God or the Supreme Being of Africa is different. Mendelsohn explains, In summary, there can be no doubt that belief in a high or supreme God is widely spread in Africa. It used to be said that the presence of such ideas must be due to the influence of Christian missionaries and Moslem preachers, but it is well known now that the notion of a Supreme Being did not come from the outside. It is a part of ancient African life; indeed, missionaries found that the Judeo-Christian God was something reasonably familiar to Africans.

That is why, as an African theologian, Dr Idowu criticizes legitimately those Christian workers who insist that the Christian God is different from the Supreme Being of African traditional religions. He argues,

By a miscarriage of purpose, the church has succeeded in preaching to, and in teaching, Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of the white man. But what has happened to the God as known to their forebears--the God who is the foundation of their traditional beliefs? He remains still with them. And so we have left them with two Gods in their hands and thus made of them peoples of ambivalent spiritual lives.

The Hierarchy of the Spirit Beings

In his description of the religion of the Benin Kingdom of Nigeria, R. E. Bradbury writes,

The Edo of the Benin Kingdom think of the universe as being divided into two parts, AGBD, the actual visible world in which men live, and ERIVI, the invisible abode of numerous deities, spirits, and supernatural powers. . . . these supernatural beings and entities are classified into four main groups:

1. Deities who have never been incarnated as human beings.

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2. Spirits of the departed.
3. Hero-deities associated with natural features of
   the environment.
4. Personal spirits and powers.\(^{10}\)

Stephen Farrow has a slightly different classification.

While describing the ontology of the Yoruba people of Western
Nigeria, he groups the spirit beings in the following ways:

We have seen that the Yorubas recognise four distinct
classes of spiritual beings, viz:
1. A Supreme Being, infinitely good and unique
2. A multitude of lesser deities, called ORISHAS
3. The spirits of the dead. (Ancestor-worship, etc.)
4. An evil spirit, who takes precedence of all those
   in class 2, and who inspired the leading ORISHA, IFA.

In a nutshell, reality in African ontology consists of
the following classification of beings--including man:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>God (Supreme Being)</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lesser Deities (Nature and Other Non-Ancestral Spirits)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ancestral Spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Witches and Other Semi-Human Beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Key to Diagram

In Section 1, the Supreme Being occupies the highest

\(^{10}\)R. E. Bradbury, The Benin Kingdom and the Edo Speaking
Peoples of South-Western Nigeria (London: International African

\(^{11}\)Stephen S. Farrow, Faith, Fancies and Fetich or Yoruba
place in the African scheme. He is the creator of all beings
and all things in both the spirit world and the physical
world. He is distinct from all other beings and has His own
personality. In chapter four, this writer hopes to pursue
the question of whether or not He is worshiped by the tradi-
tional African and how He relates to man and the other spirit
beings. Only His identity is being stressed here not His
functions in African religions, necessarily. Parrinder, who
is unquestionably one of the foremost contemporary European
scholars of African religions, comments, "In Africa notably,
although God is regarded as the source of power he has his own
personality. He is distinct from other beings and from the
sky and the wind."12

In Section 2, distinct from the Supreme Beings and
lower in status are a host of lesser deities. Mbiti has this
to say:

In reality, these spirits of the departed, together with
other spirits which may or may not have been once human
beings, occupy the ontological state between God and men.
Beyond the state of the Spirits, men cannot go or develop.13

The beings in focus are all those non-ancestral and sometimes
nature deities (like OLOKUN, the deity responsible for the sea).

The above quotation from Mbiti is also applicable to
Section 3, which describes ancestral spirits. These spirits
were once living human beings who, at death, gravitated into
the spirit world. At first they were the guardians of their

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12Geoffrey Parrinder, Worship in the World's Religions

13John S. Mbti, African Religions and Philosophy
(Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 34.
immediate families but with the passage of time, they lost that identity to their specific families and became anonymous serving as ancestral spirits who protect the clan or tribe. Achebe vividly describes this fact in the second illustration of this chapter.

Between the spirit beings and man is a class of beings who, from physical appearance, could be classified as man but from the unique and superhuman powers that they possess they really belong to a class by themselves. They are not worshipped. These are all the various shades of witches, magicians, diviners, and medicine men. The latter ones in the list acquired their ability to commune with the spirit world through initiation and training. But witches are just plainly uniquely semi-human and semi-spirit beings who constantly play their dual roles in human societies. Consequently, they are feared as being malevolent, and treated with disgust and alienation by ordinary man. Dr. Idowu comments,

Do witches exist? I will assert categorically that there are witches in Africa, that they are as real as are murderers, poisoners, and other categories of evil workers, overt or surreptitious. This, and not only imagination, is the basis of the strong belief in witchcraft. . . . Witches are the veritably wicked ones who derive sadistic satisfaction from bringing misfortune upon other people. There is a sense, therefore, in which they feed upon peoples's vitals. . . . They have become a potent, persistent scourges within society because they have so developed distorted, warped, cruel egos to the point at which such egos must be fed on malevolence in order to live.14

Lastly, at the bottom of the ladder is mortal man who is the victim of all the machinations of supernatural beings.

For him to succeed in this physical universe, which is directly controlled by spirit beings, he has to serve and obey them. At death, he begins his movement upward and becomes an ancestral spirit who, in turn, has the privilege to elicit reverence and devotion from the living. Is it any wonder that man resorts to magic, charms, and relies on the witch doctor or medicine man for protection? These devices preserve him from the spells of evil spirits and help to enhance his chances for success in the physical world.

The Contention of This Writer

The point being maintained in this thesis is not that scholars fail to describe the religious system of traditional man. On the contrary, their studies are very valuable for the field of comparative religions. Furthermore, their works are often very good anthologies of the religious beliefs and practices of humanity. For instance, a scholar like Eliade correctly states that

The Yorubas of the Slave Coast [now Nigeria] believed in a Sky God named Olorun... who, after beginning the Creation of the world, left it to a lesser god, Obatala, to finish and govern it.

Even Andrew Lang has this to say:

... we propose (merely for the purpose of the present work) to define religion as the belief in a primal being, a maker, undying, usually moral, without denying that the belief in spiritual beings, even if immoral, may be styled religious.

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15 Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 94.
16 Andrew Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion, p. 3.
These men at least recognize that the religion of traditional Africa is vividly connected with the firm belief in the objective existence of spirit beings. Yet, like a wide receiver in a game of football who fumbles the ball just before crossing the goal line, these scholars abandon their discovery about the spirit world. Andrew Lang says that the belief in spiritual beings is "immoral." And Eliade describes the notion of the withdrawn Supreme Being by linking it with Nietzsche's "death of God" idea.17 The crux of the matter is that owing to their commitment to empiricism they reject such beliefs with the verdict of "irrational." But King changes that,

It was a Westerner who was so unchildlike as to remark on going into orbit around the earth, 'I did not see God up there'. A Fante friend asked at the time, 'Why did he expect to see God more (or less) up there than down here."

This writer thinks that the reasons why King's criticism is valid is because, as Mbiti eloquently states,

"The spirit world differs radically from the human world. It is invisible to the eyes of men: People only know or believe that it is there, but do not actually 'see' it with their physical eyes."

So, the contributions of western investigators is worthwhile for the purposes of comparing and contrasting beliefs around the world, and also valuable for the descriptive function of religion in the life of man. Berger clearly recognizes this point when he says,

17 Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 95.


With the discovery of the archetypes by Jung, the kingdom of the world with its symbols, myths, pictures, and the whole psychic dynamism, the 'libido', became fashionable and was related back to the world of the magical in showing that the real catastrophe of the modern individual did not lie in the first instance in his suppressed sexuality but in the suppression of his religious dynamism, his religious needs, as they exist in every human being who lives with all his senses and capabilities.

Grisez also vindicates the writer's contention that,

Moreover, a psychological explanation of the fact of religious belief does not preclude its being true. A person who has paranoid delusions might also be a victim of genuine persecution.

These contributions are openly acknowledged by this writer, yet he thinks that scholars have not succeeded in developing a coherent system that explains reality from the point of view of the African. By rejecting the existence of supernatural beings and by their subconscious ethnocentrism, they miss the most significant aspect of the religion of the African. That aspect is the relationship between man and spirit beings. They exist objectively in the spirit world. Spirit beings and the spirit world are very real to the African, and this fact occupies the drivers seat in the ontology of African people.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

In the previous chapter, the coherent system that explicates reality for traditional Africa was encountered. The central thrust of it was a vivid, dynamic belief that spirit beings exist objectively. All of life has meaning for man only as he sustains a harmonious relationship with these spirit beings because by virtue of their supernatural ability, they control the world of man. Eugene Nida says basically the same thing that the belief in the objective existence of supernatural beings coupled with one's relationship with such beings constitutes the heart of religion:

... man seems to have always been concerned with the supernatural but a response to it, charged with emotion and expressed in such features as rites, ceremonies, prayers, sacrifices and observances of taboos.

Nida also insists that antisupernaturalism is a recent development in modern western culture, which has concocted "pseudo-scientific myths as state infalibility, racial purity, the 'great leader' and the superman" in order to provide symbols for the masses to worship.1


2 Ibid., p. 135.
The title of the present chapter suggests the direction that the present investigation will take. Is the African ontology valid philosophically? In other words, is the African point of view rationally acceptable? The answer to this question will emerge from what this writer considers to be a valid African philosophy. The question is examined from the angles of epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, and morality.

Epistemology

The concern of this section is two-fold. First of all, what is the epistemology of traditional man, and how does it relate to his world view? When this is known then one can adequately assess the rationality of the system.

What does pre-literary man consider to be the source of his knowledge? Is it rationalism, empiricism, or pragmatism? The traditional African, of course, does not use such categories when talking about his knowledge. If one should ask this writer's father to describe how the latter knows what he knows, or what his theory of knowledge is, he would shudder and survey the enquirer methodically for signs of lunacy. If satisfied, he would then reply, "Theory of what knowledge?" Then if one should answer, "The knowledge of what is (that is, of reality)." This writer's father would at that stage conclude that his interrogator was showing early signs of mental disorder. For, is there a man on earth who does not know that all knowledge comes from God? Besides, what is the difference between knowing God and knowing what is? Is
reality not subsumed in God?

The reason for that answer is obvious. In Africa, there is "no sharp dichotomy between the sacred and secular... religion is closely associated with all departments of life."\(^3\)

Idowu expresses the matter clearly:

This does not mean that, originally, he divides life into two disjunctive parts--the sacred and the common. The two are aspects of one and the same life to him, because the common has meaning for him really in terms of the sacred--the sacred informs and gives meaning to the common, and the common is for the sacred a means of self-expression.

God is the revealer of secrets. If He did not make any truth known, man would have no adequate source of knowledge: "And it is through the fact of God's revelation--the fact that God does make himself or his truth known to man--that we have any clue at all to certain fundamental issues of life."\(^5\)

According to Idowu, God is the source of man's knowledge. The revelation of Himself calls for man's response. The initiative comes from God, and man's duty is to make an intelligent, rational use of what is disclosed.\(^6\)

Does one need to ask how the African gets his knowledge about God? The answer for that question is "intuition" and "experience." Experience does not prove the existence of God. It confirms one's intuition or innate ideas that

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\(^5\) Ibid., p. 56.

\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 56-58.
God is. Though the traditional African may not directly experience the Supreme Being on account of His distance, yet he intuitively knows that God is. However, African theologians like Dr. Idowu want to say that God has revealed Himself to the African. What they mean though is natural revelation. This is so because God, who seeks and discloses Himself to man, is a personal, living Being. Idowu portrays this by writing,

We see that both Otto and Eliade tend to refer to the sacred in terms which may be construed as impersonal. Neither the 'numinous' nor 'hierophony' need necessarily signify impersonality: nevertheless either could signify that. The question then is, can one speak strictly of 'the numinous' or the sacred manifesting or revealing itself unless one implies living Being as the agent of manifestation? Manifestation or revelation presupposes an agent with a conscious will causing a situation by which the manifestation could be apprehended.

Harry Sawyerr, another African theologian, says

basically the same thing:

God obviously is not a philosophical concept. . . . Nor is He just a distant entity who left the earth and is permanently away from human reach, as we have already observed. Instead, He is a Person, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent; King, Judge, and Father of all men. At the same time, notions like sin and forgiveness, love and punishment which are applied to Him are built on human experience. It is in this context that the ancestors become unusually important, and with them the various nature divinities.

From Sawyerr, one observes that the knowledge of God, which the African has, is not a philosophical concept. But the attributes the African ascribes to God are based on human

[32]

7 Ibid., p. 53.
experience vis-a-vis his relation to ancestral spirits and the various nature deities. The significance of this disclosure is that in the final analysis traditional man's knowledge of God is intuitive and derivative from nature and his relationships with lesser spirit beings. He did not arrive at that conclusion via deduction.

The upshot of the preceding paragraphs is that the epistemology of traditional Africa is in many respects similar to that of the Christian theologian. It is not based on some philosophical concept of Cartesian rationalism nor on Hume's empiricism nor yet on pragmatism. Platonic idealism is not the basis either though it is very close to it. His epistemology is based on innate ideas and on the fact that God the creator, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and personal, has made Himself and His truth known to finite man. That was why the Psalmist could say in Psalm 19 verse 1, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."\(^0\)

But traditional Africa differs from the Christian in one significant aspect. The Christian has both special and natural revelations while African traditional religions have only natural revelation. However, the fact that lesser spirit beings do appear to reveal things to man may necessitate a slight modification of this view. The difference then is that for the Christian the special revelation comes from God

\(^0\)All quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard version unless otherwise stated.
Himself (that is, the Supreme Being) while for traditional man the "special" revelation is from the lesser divinities who are themselves, in the African scheme, created by God. Mbiti asserts, and this writer agrees with him, that

Spirits do not appear to human beings as often as do the living-dead, and where mention of their appearances is made it is generally in folk stories. They act in malicious ways as well as in a benevolent manner. . . . People report that they see the spirits in ponds, caves, groves, mountains or outside their villages, dancing, singing, herding cattle, working in their fields or nursing their children. Some spirits appear in people's dreams, especially to diviners, priests, medicine men and rainmakers to impart some information. These personages may also consult the spirits as part of their normal training and practice.

The present writer can really identify with this belief about spirits appearing to men and imparting information to them. One of his uncles became the local priest of one such deity because he was specifically directed in a dream, by that spirit being, to do so.

Experience and revelation do indeed complement each other especially when supernatural (spirit beings) are believed to exist objectively. Even Cartesianism or rationalism, as a system, depends on Descartes' proof of the existence of God to guarantee it against the deception of an evil genius (himself another spirit being). Bruce Aune states,

By the use of this method, Descartes abandons his initial skepticism concerning the existence of other persons and an external world. Rellying on the assumption that God does not deceive him—that what he clearly and distinctly apprehends must be true—he proceeds to ascertain what he takes to be the true nature of the physical world.

10 John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 105.

Is the epistemology of traditional Africa based on intuition and experience rationally defensible? To answer this question adequately one has to briefly examine other contemporary systems of epistemology. From the last quotation, one immediately notices that for "rationalism" to stand its ground as a system of epistemology, Descartes had to postulate the existence of God. However, God functions differently for "rationalism" than for the "immediate experience" of traditional man. In the former, God guarantees the system against the deception of an evil demon while in the latter, He communicates with man and so imparts knowledge—or the truth about the Universe—to finite man. Since this is the case, Cartesianism cannot get beyond intuition and experience as its basis. It is therefore not more rationally acceptable than the African's whose system is similarly based on intuition and experience.

Empiricism does not fare better either. After Hume's elaborate scheme that makes experience (not in the sense used above to depict man's encounter with God) the foundation of knowledge, he discovers that his experience does not go beyond his starting point—that is, intuition. Like the others, it too is no more rationally defensible:

Our belief that experience discloses a world external to our consciousness, which could exist even if all sentient beings were destroyed, turns out, in fact, to be rationally indefensible. . . . It is a question of fact whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects resembling them. How shall this question be determined? By experience surely, as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is and must be entirely silent. The mind has never anything present to it but perceptions and cannot possibly reach any experience of
their connection therefore without any foundation in reasoning.12

Pragmatism, on the other hand, is not a theory of knowledge as such—in the sense in which the other two are. Its basic argument is that since neither rationalists nor empiricists can produce an objective rational base for their systems, one is left no other choice but to adopt the common-sense view of knowledge until that common-sense view is disproved. That view operates on the basis of what is pragmatic in the observation and total experience of human existence. But knowledge, as claimed by rationalists and empiricists, is not possible:

A basic tenet of the pragmatist's point of view is that all claims to knowledge, even those that seem virtually indubitable, are based on numerous tacit assumptions, many of which cannot possibly be validated in advance. . . .

In spite of their dramatic differences on matters of detail, the rationalist and the empiricist are in full agreement on one fundamental point: scientific knowledge must rest on a foundation of certainty that can guarantee the truth of our most confident beliefs. For the pragmatist, a foundation of this kind can be nothing but a myth; we do not have it, cannot have it, and could not justify it if we did.

So where does one go from here? All the available theories of knowledge have the same starting point as the African's. All are based on intuition and experience. These echo the Pauline argument in Romans 1 verses 19 and 20 that the knowledge of God is self-evident in the world and in man. He says,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, be-

12 Ibid., pp. 66-68.
13 Ibid., pp. 145 and 177-178.
cause God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

In the light of the bleak situation about an adequate theory of knowledge, there really is no logical ground for rejecting the epistemology of traditional Africa. The African's intuition (innate knowledge of God) and his concept of experience as a source of knowledge puts him in the camp of faith because his system is religious. Yet, it is rational, it is empirical, and it is pragmatic, even though it is none of these exclusively. DeWolf summarizes the subject well when he writes,

It is true that the man who would learn the voltage of a lightning bolt may deliberately overlook all irrelevant data, while using instruments designed to bring him facts on this one problem alone. Such deliberate temporary impoverishment of experience is the price of those abstract truths sought by the specialized empirical sciences. But the man who would learn the truth about the purpose and destiny of his being in the world must seek it not in maximum poverty but in maximum wealth of experience. Not the reason of mere analysis and bare abstraction, but the comprehensive reason of coherence must be his instrument.

Such reason is no foe of revelation. A thinker who is obeying the demand for coherence for consideration of all possible data relevant to his problem cannot ignore the most revealing impacts of God's activity upon himself and upon human history.

DeWolf's comment quoted above can hardly be regarded as conclusive on the subject of faith (or experience) and reason. The argument is a hot issue in contemporary philosophical thought. There is an array of scholars on both camps. On the opposition, men like C. B. Martin reject the claims of faith and deny that a person affirms anything when he says that he has a religious experience because such assertions

are introspective, subjective, and presuppose faith while also being unverifiable: "... there are no tests agreed upon to establish genuine experience of God and distinguish it decisively from the ungenuine." On the other side of the argument, John Hick contends that the claim of Christians for the existence of God is verifiable eschatologically—that is, in future after death. In this writer's opinion Mavrodes' caution should be heeded while one is demanding proofs of and reasons for beliefs. He correctly observes that while one may be able to give a reason for one's beliefs, yet being unable to do so does not necessarily preclude the existence of such a reason. On the other hand, proofs for an argument do not always function the way people want them to function. That an argument may be cogent may not always be sufficient to prove the truth of its conclusion because its premises already imply prior knowledge of the truth of the conclusion. For instance,

Either Jupiter has no satellite or President Nixon is a Republican.
Jupiter has a satellite.
Therefore President Nixon is a Republican.
Most of us know this argument to be valid and its premises to be true. It is therefore cogent for us. Does it also prove to us that Mr. Nixon is a Republican?


While opting for the side of faith, the present writer wishes to conclude this section by appealing for moderation and objectivity because of what Ed Miller says:

Though the philosopher eschews irrationalism and embraces reason, his thought necessarily gives way, at one point or another, to non-rational (non irrational) contributions such as presupposition, intuition, poetic vision, mystery, and the like. Does not every position or theory or argument begin, for instance, with certain basic assumptions about something or other?

Metaphysics

Epistemology and metaphysics are very definitely related. There certainly is a clear connection between one's theory of knowledge and one's ideas about existence. The metaphysics of traditional man will center, in this section, only in two major areas. The first area deals with the mind-body problem. How do Africans conceive of man vis-a-vis this problem? The second area concerns itself with the discussion about free will and determinism. Is the traditional African a determinist or does he subscribe to free will? It is necessary to stress once more that Africans do not use western categories at all in discussing these issues. If an African were asked to describe his opinion about the mind-body problem or determinism, he would not understand the question. Yet if he were asked, "What is man; is he part spirit or part flesh or both?" His answer would be "both." Dr. Idowu explains,

To the question 'what is man?' the Yoruba will answer
off-handedly that man is body plus E'I, the English
approximation to which is 'spirit'. The body is the
concrete, tangible thing of flesh and bones which we
know through the senses, which can be described in a
general way, or analytically by anatomy. EMI is invisible
and intangible; it is that which gives life to the whole
body, and thus can be described through its casual func-
tions. Its presence in, or absence from, the body is
known only by the fact that a person is alive or dead.

The writer agrees with Idowu. The traditional African has a
dualistic concept of man. Man has both mind (soul or spirit)
and body. It is man's soul which survives after death as
immortal spirit which becomes an ancestor in the spirit
world. His anthropology is vividly tied to the ontology.

Swailem Sidhom concurs with the following words,

This ambiguity, in a way, is to be expected as long
as man belongs to the realm of the spiritual. Although
he has a body, yet it is inconsequential to define with
precision how it came into existence... What, then, is
that principle, force, entity, or essence which makes of
man, man? What is that 'thing itself' which gets united
with the body, forming with it a whole? In its state of
unity with the body it is variably referred to as 'heart',
'head', 'judgement', 'mind', 'reason', 'soul', and 'breath'.
When it departs it is referred to as 'shadow', 'ghost',
'spirit', and 'soul'.

Godfrey Dale agrees with this general description of man as
well. 21

The traditional African is not a materialist. His
concept of reality forces him into dualism. That is why he

19 Bolaji Idowu, OLODUMARE: God in Yoruba Beliefs

20 Swailem Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man,"

21 Godfrey Dale, The Peoples of Zanzibar: Their Customs
and Religious Beliefs (New York: Negro University Press, 1969),
generally fears witches because the latter have the capacity
to kill the human soul while the body, an empty shell, carries
on a temporary physical existence. Furthermore, they believe
that a witch could be physically present in one place while
his soul is elsewhere plotting against or causing havoc to
the soul of an innocent, mortal victim. Idowu writes,

There is a general belief about their meetings in
forests, in open places in the middle of the night, that
it is their 'souls', or the 'shadows' of witches that meet--
'shadows' meeting 'shadows'; that the havoc wrought on
human beings is the operation of 'shadows' upon 'shadows',
that is, it is the essence or the ethereal body of the
victim that is extracted and devoured."

Man in African traditional religions does not use the
term determinism or free will either since his world is
infested by spirit beings who control the activities of man.
He believes that a man's destiny or fate is unalterably
sealed at birth. But he does not fret about it nor is that
tantamount to a denial of his responsibility (free will in
western thought). Because he attributes enormous power to
spirit beings, he sometimes talks about them as if they
could violate the laws of nature. That accounts for his
frequent recourse to spiritual solutions for physical
problems like famine, earthquakes, sickness, and war. Farrow
states, "The animistic pagan is ignorant of the simplest laws
of natural science, and attributes all such effects to 'spirits'."

While Farrow does grasp the basic metaphysical framework of

\[22\] E. Bolaji Idowu, "The Challenge of Witchcraft," ORITA.,
p. 11.

\[23\] Stephen S. Farrow, Faith, Fancies and Fetich, p. 16.
the African by attributing limitless power to "spirits," his reason for that is wrong. The African is not displaying his ignorance of science necessarily but simply expressing his world view. Spirit beings are real, who also carry out their exploits in the human arena. In a situation like that, man is powerless. In order to counter the harassment of these supernatural beings, he utilizes charms, and various types of magic which are furnished by the medicine man, or cult priest. These individuals equip him with the necessary ammunitions for his protection in life. His dead ancestors also play a vital role in this scheme of things.

Yet, whatever he does is not to change his destiny because that was already determined at birth—whether good or bad. Idowu explains,

A person's destiny is known as IFIN-ORI. . . destiny is loosely designated ORI. . . 'A bad ORI (destiny) cannot be rectified with soap (by washing)' . . . What this means, strictly, is that a bad portion (fate) which is already allotted to the ORI cannot be rectified with medicine. . . that is, the bad quality of his ORI or destiny, reflects on his external activities. Still, strictly, this means that it is the portion which his ORI holds that conditions the person's life. 24

This is determinism, pure and simple, but in African metaphysics, the concept is modified somewhat. For the African, there is "good" destiny and "bad" destiny. He welcomes "good" destiny but tries to alter "bad" destiny through his ancestors and priests. Usually, the African divines his destiny from priests and seers, believed to

24 E. Bolaji Idowu, ULODUNARE: God in Yoruba Beliefs, pp. 171-72.
have the ability to communicate with God who then reveals future things to them. The diviner is also charged with the duty to represent the needs of man before deity. Mbiti explains,

When special needs arise, the Ifa go to a 'prophet or prophetess', who guides them in performing the necessary ritual and invocations to God. The Turkana diviners are said to receive prophetic dreams and to foretell the future. . . . They received their revelations either from God or the Spirits. . . . They are men and women chosen through being possessed by the divinities concerned. . . . Among the Yoruba, the Ifa oracle of divination has priests whose training lasts three years and who are also physicians. 25

No wonder, the traditional African is not upset by his version of determinism. His belief in the objective reality of spirit beings also provides for him the necessary reality through the activities of diviners, men who make life liveable, exciting, and dynamic.

Morality and Ethics

Missionary Blakeslee states:

They are totally blind to the beauties and charm of the handiwork of God in nature all about them. Bishop Tucker, Uganda, sought diligently to discover in the African some sense of an appreciation for the beautiful in nature. Walking alone the path on a safari, he saw one day to his delight one of his porters stoop down to pluck a brilliant gloriosa lily. But alas, the next moment he beheld the porter wiping his nose. The lovely lily was left in a crumpled mess by the wayside. Animism seems to rob its adherents of any conception of humanity, mercy, kindness, or love. A mother must be taken child to the bushes, leave it there and return to her village. In New Guinea, small girls, unsalable because their bodies were wrecked by yaws, are taken to the jungle

to shriek in vain for help until they perish...

Do the traditional Africans really lack any appreciation for nature? How does one understand the scene described by Missionary Blakeslee? This writer believes that the attitude of that African who wiped his nose with a plucked lily certainly has a different explanation. The purpose was ornamentation. If the African lacked aesthetic appreciation he would not even be interested in wearing ornaments. Eugene Nida explains,

The expression of an aesthetic sense is one of the universals of human behaviour, but whether it takes the form of rock paintings as it does among the Bushmen, or realistic imitative dances, as among the nearby Hottentots, is not predictable. Some people, such as the Marvallese, may be very fond of flowers; others, such as the Hunas, have little appreciation for them. But in one or another, all people express an aesthetic sense, which may, however, be so foreign to our modes of behaviour and way of thinking about beauty that appreciate it.

According to Nida, appreciation of flowers or the absence of such appreciation is not a suitable gauge to determine a person's aesthetic capacity. Besides, the African loves adorning himself with beautiful things. His appreciation of nature is pragmatic and he sees himself as competing with the elements. The deities responsible for the phenomena of nature assist him in his quest for survival. He worships mother Earth, and does his round of daily devotions to the goddess of the sea (OLOKUN) or of iron (OGUN). How else could he express his appreciation for nature if not in his adoration of the divinities of nature?


27. Eugene H. Nida, Customs and Cultures, p. 182.
The land is another prominent deity among the Igbo, and is regarded as the queen of the underworld. She is the source and judge of human morality and accordingly exercises the main ritual sanctions in disputes and offences.

On morality (ethics) this writer thanks Missionary Blakeslee also missed a point. The traditional African certainly has a "conception of humanity, mercy, and kindness." The examples she cited do not demonstrate that the African lacks these qualities. The spirits are believed to dwell in the forests as well. When a woman leaves her child in the forest, she does so because she believes that the spirits would then either restore the child to normal life or take its life. The final decision is theirs. Her duty is simply to comply with the will of the spirit beings. The same is true of the girls who were left to scream in the forest because of their disease. This writer is not interested in glamourizing African religions. His concern is that an accurate picture of these religions should be presented from the point of view of the African before criticisms are made. A point that has been stressed repeatedly in this thesis is that the world of the African is basically one that is controlled by spirit beings who are supernatural. Traditional man understands that his primary duty is to stay in the good graces of these spirit beings. All his activities are controlled by this central and dominant duty of man.

The reality of spirit beings is central to the concept

of morality in traditional Africa. This is so because all evils that man can commit are seen as offences against the ancestral spirits of the clan or tribe. And all evils that men suffer are caused either by unappeased ancestors, or by evil spirits or by witches or by sorcerers. This writer will discuss the subject of ethics in traditional Africa under two major aspects, namely: the evil that the individual commits and that which he suffers.

Since any form of evil committed by man is ultimately an offence against the ancestral spirits, the traditional African exercises some caution. He knows that if he does not restrain himself from his evil deeds, the truth will sooner or later be extracted from him in the form of a confession when he falls sick. Customarily, when a person is afflicted with an illness or a close relative of his is, one of the first things that the sorcerers try to determine is whether or not personal disobedience against cultic regulations, or a violation of a taboo or a malevolence against a neighbor is responsible. The same thing applies when a woman has difficulty in childbirth. That is viewed to be caused by the ancestral spirits of the husband who are demanding that the woman confess her misdeeds, which could be witchcraft, or adultery. This writer personally knows of countless occasions in his Uchobo tribe when such confessions were extracted from people in varying physical difficulties. The ethical

significance of a set up like that in Africa is that it serves as a very strong deterrent against the crimes within the society. Mendelsohn hints at this when he says,

I recall the words of a brilliant Ghanaian, one of the most promising and energetic of Ghana's native Methodist leaders. . . . What he said went like this: 'When I was growing up, my elders used to tell me that Christianity had brought about a lowering of moral standards in Africa because the Christian God was too good! This may sound like a silly charge, but . . . to most people in Africa the Supreme Being is good, but He does not brook evil and wickedness.'

What this quotation so vividly portrays in African traditional religions is the strong deterrent elements of the religions in the forms of confessions--at sickbeds and other critical moments of life. Until the advent of western influence in Africa, such social evils like thievery, burglary, and murder were rare. People feared the consequences (confessing their misdeeds in public at a time when they needed the moral support of the community most), and they also feared the punishment of deity.

As for the evil that the individual suffers, the cause is believed to be spiritual, not physical. Swailem writes,

Sickness, for instance, is not the normal, therefore it is a threat to man's security. The possible causes are, then, to be found. Is it the wages of disobedience, disrespect or of ignorant breaking of tabus? Could it be a greedy ancestor or a malicious enemy that moved something from outside (such as a foreign substance or an evil spirit) to enter into the body of the sick person? The spirit-world is, indeed, operative in this situation as well as in all other situations of existence.

But can the traditional African be called a humanitarian? Since he once engaged in human sacrifices, one is certainly

30 Jack Mendelsohn, God, Allah, and JuJu, p. 36.
31 Swailem Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," p. 103.
tempted to answer negatively. However, the reason is not because he did not recognize the dignity of man. On the contrary, man has dignity.\textsuperscript{32} The reason is to be found in his concept of kinship. The African thinks in "tribes." Those within a tribal group are members of the "in group," all others are not:

All that goes into the making of man is incorporated the complex unity of the tribe, outside of which all others are strangers and inferiors, if not enemies. 'The things of Shilluk are good, the things of the strangers are bad', runs a common tribal saying. And when a stranger is at all taken into confidence, he is at best treated as an equal.

In concluding this chapter, the present writer wants to stress that the case presented here for the African point of view is not a de facto proof that the spirit world or spirit beings necessarily exist objectively. Instead, this writer is insisting and merely presenting an argument that given the problems of epistemology and metaphysics in contemporary philosophical thought, is there any logical reason for refusing to accept the African world view as a workable hypothesis for the study of the religion and culture of man in traditional societies? This writer does not think that there is such a sound epistemological ground for the attitude of the Westerner toward the African's belief in the existence of an objectively real spirit world.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 112.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., pp. 99-100.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

Now that the spirit beings of African traditional religions have been described, this chapter will attempt to portray how traditional Africa relates to them. Does he worship all the spirit beings? If he does, to what extent does he do so and how? What is the significance of sacrifice in the African system and where do the priests fit in? In addition to such functional descriptions of the religious life of the African, this writer will also examine some of the underlying concepts behind all these activities of traditional man. In other words, what attributes does he ascribe to the spirit beings? Does he have the concept of personal sin and retribution? What is his view of salvation if any and how does he see time and history? All these ideas put together constitute what the present writer considers to be the theological implications of African ontology.

The present writer wishes to acknowledge one major difficulty in studying traditional religions. That difficulty is that there are no written documents about these religions. Like most of the scholars of African traditional religions, Idowu concedes,
Unfortunately, we cannot be quite certain about the derivations or history of several of the principal names in consequence of their age, but especially because we have no written literature about the ancient past of Africa to guide us.

Mbiti agrees:

One of the difficulties in studying African religions and philosophy is that there are no sacred scriptures. Religion in African societies is written not on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings.

This means that one should not expect to find the theological implications of African ontology codified in a book. The sources for this thesis are those mentioned by Mbiti, namely: the hearts of the people, their priests, and their rituals. Also, the present writer's own tribe (the Urhobo tribe) will be a valid source of information for the present investigation. The works of scholars on African religions will also be utilized.

This writer proposes to discuss this chapter under the following subtitles: The Attributes of the Spirit Beings; The Worship of the Spirit Beings; Soteriology in African Traditional Religions; and The African's Conception of Time and History.

The Attributes of the Spirit Beings

Once again, the word "attributes" is a western word. But Africans think about attributes in their answer to questions


2John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 4.
like: Who is God and what are his characteristics, in terms of knowledge, wisdom, and power? When the African speaks of wisdom, knowledge, and power, he is alluding to the Supreme Being (God). He alone is supreme in wisdom, in knowledge, and in power. He is the creator, and no other being surpasses him. Mbiti calls these the intrinsic attributes of God. His list of these perfections include, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, and immanence. While agreeing with Mbiti, this writer objects to Mbiti’s attribute to "immanence." The concept is decidedly foreign. It is not African at all. Traditional man believes that his God is distinct and separate from all other beings and from creation. God is not part of nature nor is nature part of God. Parrinder’s words bear this out. He writes, "... in Africa notably, although God is regarded as the source of power he has his own personality. He is distinct from other beings and from the sky and the wind."  

Bankole Timothy specifically states that God is not immanent: "In my country, Sierra Leone, the Mendes believe in a creator God whom they call Neewo. They believe that He existed from the beginning and that He is omnipotent though not immanent."  

Apart from Mbiti’s imputation of the concept of immanence to the Africans, his other ideas about the intrinsic  

5 Bankole Timothy, Missionary Shepherd and African Sheep, p. 11.
attributes of God express African notions correctly. Idowu maintains a similar view: "In Yoruba theology, OLODUMARE has always been placed first and far above the divinities and all else. He is over all." Farrow express the same opinion:

The second line of evidence is found in the attributes ascribed to this Diety, Olorun by pure pagans. . . . He is credited with omniscience, absolute power, justice, goodness and benevolence, and. . . with omnipresence.

But the attributes of the lesser spirits, on the other hand, are vague. Traditional man considers them to be much more powerful, more knowledgeable, and wiser than man. The lesser deities are closer to God. Their attributes approximate those of God, though not exactly in the same magnitude.

The Worship of the Spirit Beings

The key issue in this section is, "does traditional Africa worship God?" Mbeki answers that the Supreme Being is worshipped in Africa: "Evidence shows that African peoples worship God at any time and in any place, and that there are no rules obliging people to worship at a given time or place." Idowu agrees. He asserts,

We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him.

6 E, Bolaji Idowu, OLODUMARE: God in Yoruba Beliefs, p. 50.
7 Stephen S. Farrow, Faith, Fancies and Fetich, p. 27.
8 John S. Mbeki, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 93.
This writer disagrees with both Mbiti and Idowu. In their zeal to portray traditional religions positively, they have rationalized the African into worshipping God. But the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Harry Sawyerr says, "But God is, however, never worshipped. ... Instead, we meet a whole array of lesser gods and the long line of ancestral spirits to whom prayers are offered." Parrinder agrees:

Is God worshipped? To the monotheist the question will be strange, but in a polytheistic system the lesser gods may receive more attention than the supreme God. ... If worship is defined as requiring temples, priests, and sacrifice, then many illiterate peoples give God little worship. Rarely are temples built for him in Africa.

The only possible exception is the Akan of Ghana who have very few temples where God is supposed to be worshipped. But then, their concept of God is not as lofty as those of the other African people who have no formal God-cult. For the Akan people, God is an ancestor. Sawyerr writes,

Indeed the knowledge of God moves on from the experience of Him as 'ancestor very like man', that is, as NYANKOFAN, to an awareness of Him as the Final Cause, the Supreme Creator who is father as well as father's father, ... that is ODOMANKOMA. 'In him, the family completes its genealogy!'

This writer believes that the Akan concept of God as ancestor explains the reason why they have temples dedicated to the God cult. The veneration of ancestors is a central aspect of African traditional religions.

12 Ibid., p. 22.
But the reason given by Mbiti and Idowu for their supposition is the notion of intermediary. They contended that every worship of the lesser divinities is indirectly the worship of God. This is possible because they claim that the African considers the lower deities to be the intermediaries of God. They are supposed to transmit the prayers and petitions of devotees to the Supreme Being because of their proximity to the latter. With this rationalization, both Mbiti and Idowu make lower spirit beings the associates of God. Mbiti explains,

Divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for His activities or manifestations either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature. . . . It is reported that the Ashanti have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. . . . They. . . act as His servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures.

Idowu makes the divinities, the ministers of God. This concept serves the same function as intermediaries. Idowu says,

Then there are the divinities, especially the principal ones. All the indications which have come down to us are that they were all brought into existence by OLODUMARE that they might be his ministers. . . . They believe that once the divinities have been offered their worship, the divinities in their turn will transmit what is necessary of it to OLODUMARE. It is left to the divinities to take what belongs to them by virtue of their position as authorised by OLODUMARE and remit to Him all that is His either to receive or to execute.

But Stephen Ezeanya observes that the lesser deities are very independent of the Supreme Being. So, their supposed function as the agents of God in the African scheme is only

a theory that has no substance in practice: "The point has been made that these spirits are agents of the Supreme God; actually, this is so more in theory than in practice. These spirits, it appears, are self-sufficient."\(^{16}\) When the African devotee offers his sacrifice or performs his ritual in worship of these spirit beings, he does so as a challenge to the latter to act in his behalf. It is not for them to transmit a message from him to the Supreme Being. The African knows that the lower deities have the ability to act independently. That is why he blames them for all the ills of man. For the African, the lesser deities but not God are responsible for evil. Mbiti affirms that "Some societies see evil as originating from, or associated with, spiritual beings other than God. . . . In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil."\(^{17}\) The African worships these spirit beings in order to solicit their protection. To use a western expression, traditional Africa worships these lesser deities as an end in itself.

In summary, the African does not worship the Supreme Being. He may say a prayer out of desperation to God during a period of crisis. Such a prayer cannot be construed as worship. On the contrary, he worships the other divinities. Central in his religious practice is ancestor worship. Idowu contends and argues against the notion of ancestor worship.

\(^{16}\)Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God Spirits and the Spirit World," p. 47.

The solution to that problem depends on one's definition of worship since the meaning of the word "worship" implies a place for the worship, a sacrifice, a prayer, a ritual, Idowu has not made good his objection because all these factors are present in ancestor worship in Africa. The present writer recalls his own personal experience when as the first male child of his family, he acted as an ancestor-cult priest and thus led others in worshipping their ancestral spirits.

Soteriology in African Traditional Religions

What does soteriology mean to the African? No one disputes the fact that the word is foreign to traditional man. Is his religion geared toward the concept of "salvation" for man? How does one understand the sacrificial system of Africans?

To assist in this discussion, a brief summary of the anthropology of the African people is necessary here. Does the African see himself as "fallen" man who, on account of depravity, has become an enemy of God and so is in need of restitution with God (that is, of salvation)? What is the origin of man?

There is a general agreement among all the scholars of African traditional religions that the Africans conceive man to be created by God. Though the myths describing the detail of man's origin vary, they all acknowledge a period of "Golden age" in man's history when he lived in harmony with God. But something happened, and that initial relationship between God and man was broken. God moved to the sky. The
only things the African remembers now about God are his intrinsic attributes and name. Mbiti explains,

Practically every African society has its own myth or myths concerning the origin of man. ... According to many stories of creation, man was originally put in a state of happiness, childlike ignorance, immortality. ... and man lived more or less in a state of paradise. ... Different peoples tell different myths of how the happy relationship between God and man ended, and how the separation of the two came about.

The African does have a conception of "the fall" but for him this does not affect man's character, which remains basically the same. The African's version only recognizes that there has been an end to a previous mode of existence in which man was happier and closer to God. The myths he tells to explain the loss of that original relationship with the Supreme Being, "the fall, in Christian terms," generally attribute blame to some extraneous source. This may be an innocent act that makes man take God for granted because of familiarity. The source is never that of an outright disobedience to God. In this writer's Urhobo tribe, the frog is blamed because he beat the dog in a race and so, brought upon the earth the curse of death, disease, and estrangement from God. Man remains essentially good.

Given this view of man, "sin" in traditional Africa has a totally different connotation from the Christian view. Idowu of course disagrees and argues that

It is rather sweeping for anyone to say that the religion of the Toruba does not give a sense of sin. It is true that the Yoruba have not thought out or stated in a systematic way what they think, believe, and know about this universal source; ... Once a person knows that

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18 Ibid., pp. 119-129.
19 Ibid., p. 126.
the Deity will judge; that He judges man by what he is--by his character; once he can be conscious of a guilt which comes out of more ritual failings, he is already at the very threshold of 'Against thee and thee only have I sinned.'

Idowu is once more rationalizing and making the traditional African look like a Christian. Man, in African traditional religions, does not have the concept of the kind of judgment Idowu alludes to. In the Christian tradition, the view of God as judge is futuristic, that is, eschatological. The African has no such notion. The absence of any "future" myths in Africa is not an accident. It means that the African has no notion of an eschatological--future--judgment. That idea is taken over by the movement of man into the realm of the spirit world when man becomes an ancestor at death. Mbiti intimates,

We have seen that there are no myths of the future in traditional African societies. This is another indication that African concepts of history are not oriented towards the future, but towards the past.

Though this writer does not accept the conclusion of Mbiti, his observation about the absence of myths of the future in Africa does militate against Idowu's idea of God as judge.

The second objection to Idowu is that he fails to realize the significance of communal life in traditional Africa. When man experiences a sense of guilt outside a violation of ritual that person's guilt feeling does not

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stem from a "notion of God as judge" but rather from the fact that "Moral wrong in his eyes is to offend the law or custom of the tribe or village or family. A bad man to them is a man who does injury to others through force of jealousy or passion or covetousness."22 Parrinder heartily agrees.23 So, evil is not seen as a human flaw caused by a "fall" or depravity but as an offence against the community (the society as a whole).

Seen in this light, sacrifices are retributions for the violation of ritual or retributions for the breaking of custom. Sacrifices are also demanded by deities through priests as prices for appeasement. A priest functions as

... the spiritual and ritual pastor of the community or nation; it is he who officiates at sacrifices and ceremonies relating to his knowledge. He may also contact the spiritual world by acting as a medium or having other individuals as mediums.

The African's Conception of Time and History

The primary concern in this section is to discuss briefly how the African views time and history. Is there hope of immortality for him or does life end with physical death? Does he view history as cyclical or as a retrogression into the past? The hypothesis of two scholars, Mircea Eliade and John S. Mbiti, will be the backdrop against which the present writer will proceed.

24 John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 246.
Eliade argues that everything that goes on in traditional societies is a mythical repetition of God's activity in premonoidal times. Traditional man is unable to conceive time as history (that is, linearly). For him, time is cyclical. Eliade states,

Christianity is the 'religion' of modern man and historical man, of the man who simultaneously discovered personal freedom and continuous time (in place of cyclical time). It is even interesting to note that the existence of God forced itself for more urgently upon modern man, for whom history exists as such, as history and not as repetition, than upon the man of the archaic and traditional cultures, who, to defend himself from the terror of history, had at his disposal all the myths, rites, and customs mentioned in the course of this book.

This writer disagrees because traditional societies also regard history as history. Their annual celebrations are not commemorative but largely symbolic. The celebration of new crops (that is, harvest) symbolically but vividly portrays the ritual of life and death or the provision of deity. The ceremonies at the end of the year also symbolically depict the ritual of confession and dedication. All these factors are not sufficient to warrant Eliade's conclusion. In traditional societies, there are events that transcend the cycle of annual celebrations. Anticipation of future events is a natural aspect of human life. How can this be if one has no concept of linear time? Boys and girls anticipate the excitement of adolescent years. Young men anticipate marriage and a settled life. Adults anticipate an upward movement in the social scale and even older men anticipate their role as

ancestors. Life for traditional man is one dynamic process of anticipations. Man always projects himself into the future hoping for the better life. Some Africans make plans and planning implies a historical continuum. Parents plan for their children, the village council plans for the advancement and progress of the village. All of this would be meaningless if life was cyclical (lasting only one trifling year at a time).

A third objection to Eliade is his defective understanding of God for traditional man. God is very much as real for the African as He is real for the Christian. One major purpose of this thesis has been to establish that God and spirit beings in the spirit world are objectively real for the African. Granting this, Eliade's contention falls apart because the distinction that he makes between modern man and traditional man is the degree to which they recognize the existence of God. Since both are conscious of the same God, and modern man views history as history, why not traditional man?

Lastly even if one were to accept hypothetically that the African does not have the concept of the existence of God, still Eliade cannot make the traditional man's view of time cyclical. The African certainly does not see life as terminating at death. Life continues for man. He becomes an ancestor and plays an active part in the lives of the living.

Nbiti's theory is different. He extracted his idea that time is a movement backward for the African, from the latter's anthropology. Traditional man believes that at
death man, if he was married and had children, becomes an ancestor for the living. Mbiti uses the terms SASA and ZAMANI to depict the two periods of ancestral progression, namely: Initially when one is still vividly remembered by the members of one's immediate family and later when one loses this identity and becomes anonymous as one of the ancestors for the entire clan or tribe. 26 He contends,  

The linear concept of time, with a past, present and future stretching from infinity to infinity, is foreign to African thinking, in which the dominant factor is a virtual absence of the future. By our definition time is a composition of events, and since the future events have not occurred, the future 27 a necessary linear component of time is virtually absent.  

Mbiti rejects linear conception of time for the African because "Future events have not occurred." Time for modern man is linear, for whom future events are yet to occur. Why can the same conclusion not be made for traditional man? Some of the objections raised against Eliade also apply here. Mbiti underestimates the force of "anticipation" in future events. Africans make plans and anticipate the future. Besides, their vocabulary contains words that depict the future. In the writer's tribe, those words are "ODE" meaning tomorrow, "USA" meaning coming, and "OBARC" meaning front. Various shades of the future (immediate to the distant future) are expressed with these words. How could the Africans have the word for expressing a concept that, according to Mbiti, they are not supposed to have? 

26 J. S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, pp. 105-118.  
Mbiti states,

Becoming a spirit is, in a sense, a social elevation. For this reason, African peoples show respect and high regard for their living-dead and for some of the important spirits. Spirits are 'older' than men, when viewed against the SASA and ZAMANI periods—they have moved completely into the ZAMANI period. Their age which is greater than that of human beings compels the latter to give them respect. 28

If anything, this statement shows a progression not a backward movement. Since "becoming spirits is, in a sense, a social elevation," every traditional man longs for the day he will become one. All of this is clearly future. Swailem Sidhom's comment is a fitting summary of the discussion about the way traditional man conceives time. He says,

To the African, immortality is the highest good for the achievement of which his whole life is structured. He is born, brought up, trained, eroded, initiated and led into maturity so as to attain the greatest of all personal hopes. 29

But this future hope of the African, which Sidhom talks about, will not be possible unless spirit beings living in the spirit world are objectively real.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to accomplish two primary objectives. The first of these is to alert the serious student of African traditional religions about a dimension of reality in those religions that Western scholars quite frequently ignore. Many of them recognize the centrality of the belief that spirit beings and the spirit world are real objectively for the African. In other words, scholars discover immediately when they embark on a study of the culture and religion of traditional man that spirit beings and the spirit world play a dynamic role in the life and experience of the African. Yet, for the most part, none of them takes the belief seriously as a working hypothesis for unraveling the ontology of traditional man. Mbiti charges that "Reference to spirits is found in many of the books listed in the bibliography at the end of this work, but as a rule the subject is given little space."1

On the contrary, Sawyerr cites two vivid illustrations from recent events in Sierra Leone to demonstrate the commanding force that this belief has for the Africans. He intimates,

A landslide in the mountain area above Freetown in Sierra Leone in 1945 was thought to have been caused by some energy spirit. The villagers of Leicester two miles

1John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 97.
south of Greetown held a ritual feast sometime around 1960, to placate the spirits of the countryside before they started to make a road about three miles long.

In other words, the African believes that spirit beings exist as distinct separate entities. They are not his creation to satisfy a psychological need or to fill the gap of a spiritual vacuum. On the contrary, spirit beings are supernatural beings who are as real as man himself, but whose mode of existence and power is superior to man's. These divinities control the affairs of man and the latter's primary obligation is to maintain a continuous, happy relationship with them. Traditional man fulfills his responsibility to the spirit beings through a complicated network of priests, medicine men, witchdoctors, diviners, ritual sacrifices, worship, and unflinching loyalty. His practice of sympathetic magic, his fear of witches, his folk tales about the exploits of diverse spirits among men, and his attitudes of seeking a spiritual solution for a physical problem, find their explanation within the belief of the African that spirit beings who are also supernatural exist objectively.

At the head of the spirit beings is the Supreme Being, equivalent to the Christian God, who is also "wholly other," that is supreme and apart from all other beings. He is not immanent but distinct. He created both the spirit world and the physical world including all their inhabitants. Yet little or no worship at all is accorded him.

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The second objective of this thesis has been to identify why anthropologists have not taken the world view of the African seriously. This writer has contended that the reason is found partly in the derogatory remarks by earlier writers about Africans and their way of life. Even though the methodology of older anthropologists is being abandoned by current scholars, some of the old habits like outright skepticism and phrases like "totemism" still linger on. Why should serious effort not be made to write from the perspective of the devotees of traditional religions?

The other reason why the ontology of the African is not taken seriously is the bias of the investigator against the mere possibility of the supernatural. The hold of empiricism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries plainly refuses to relax. Men are still bound by the optimism of logical positivism even though they have abandoned it as a methodology. Crass naturalism still holds its sway in many circles. Even though writers like Killinger and Nelson Scott and philosophers like Bergson and Whitehead have done much to undermine the claims of empiricism, somehow the old enemy still rears its head. Scholars still find it difficult to seriously believe in the objective reality of spirit beings who are also supernatural.

The last objective of this thesis has been to call to question the intellectual climate that rejects in a summary fashion the possibility that supernatural beings exist literally. This writer has shown that there is no epistemological
reason why one may not rationally believe in the objective reality of such beings. On the contrary, a rejection of the realm of supernatural beings has been shown to be more a subjective matter than an objective or scientific one as many scholars want to claim. The discussion does not belong to the field of science either because by definition, spirit supernatural) beings are non-physical. So, there is no known scientific apparatus that can empirically verify the reality or non-reality of their existence. This writer further showed that the verdict of existence or nonexistence of spirit beings (supernatural agents) as distinct separate entities boils down to one's epistemology--starting point. If that is the case, why should African ontology, which claims the reality of such spirit beings, be treated with ridicule as is so often the case?

In conclusion, the present writer wishes to agree with what was hinted by Geoffrey Parrinder when he comments that

> The old evolutionary theory, which some writers have applied to Africa in the hope that it might show the early stages of religions, in animism or animatism, finds in the belief in God no very strong support. It is just as arguable that there was an ancient monothetic belief from which men fell away. Neither theory is provable as things are.

Precisely! The point of this thesis has not been to prove that spirit beings in fact exist objectively, nor is it to glorify African religions. The Christian certainly has many areas in which he can plug his criticism of African traditional religions if he wants to. The major effort of this writer has

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3Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religions*, p. 43.
been to provide an argument, equally as plausible as any other, that the objective existence of the spirit world (of God and all the lesser spirit beings) should be taken more seriously than anthropologists have done so far. The matter cannot be treated lightly without doing violence to the essence and character of the religious beliefs and ontology of the traditional African.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
Books


Periodicals


