

**THE WORSHIP OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL  
RELIGION**

**A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**BY**

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(M.A.)

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## A B S T R A C T

To date numerous works in the African traditional religion have appeared . In this field many have been devoted to the description of particular religion phenomena, while some have attempted to refute the beliefs and practices of the religion. But examining the effort of various investigators who have grappled with this task, one has the impression that they may have overlooked something. This something is bringing together the beliefs and practices of African traditional religion to form the worships in other world religions.

It can be said the worship of God in Africa traditional religion is the very soul of African religion. This study attempts and examines what some scholars have written about African traditional religion, its beliefs and practices, and brought it together to form what may be called the worship of God in the religion.

In constructing the purpose of this study, many writers have been used. Here the writer would like to mention some scholars by name, because much of their material have been constantly used. Such scholars as John S> Mbiti, Geoffrey Parrinder and Emmanuel Bolaji Idowu. These writers recorded careful observation of African traditional religion, its beliefs and practices. This provides useful insights into the worship of God in the

religion.

In achieving the study, the problem of ancestor-worship has been discussed, although a final conclusion has not been reached, because it is an ongoing debate. The practices and believes have been discussed as the starting point of the worship in religion.

The study observed particular practices which constitute the worship. These includes: sacrifice, offering, prayer and the religious leaders who performed the worship. To make what constitutes the worship complete, the spiritual aspect of it as also been discussed.

At the end of the study, some suggestions and recommendations have been made so as to stimulate and motivate the African students undertaking the studies of African traditional religion. It is also a challenge to the students who are studying African theology.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Background to the study: The debate about Ancestor worship

To begin with, one cannot write about the worship of God in African Traditional Religion without discussing ancestor worship which has been a debate among scholars for a long time. It is still an ongoing debate in which the argument is based on whether African peoples worship God or their ancestors.

The problem of ancestor-worship which some people regard as African Traditional Religion, came about from a phrase mentioned by Herbert Spencer in his book: 'The Principles of Sociology'. In it he stated that 'there is no exception then. Using the phrase ancestor-worship in its broadest sense as comprehending all worship of the dead, be they of the same blood or not, we conclude that ancestor-worship is the root of every religion'<sup>1</sup>.

Spencer arrived at this conclusion and based his argument on the explanation he gave in his book on the chapter: 'General Ancestor-worship'. In this chapter he argued that there is no question whether there are human beings in whom dreams have not generated the notion of a double, and the sequence notion that at death the double has gone away, can hold that first traceable conception of a supernatural being is the conception of a ghost.<sup>2</sup>

According to him, the notion of a ghost grows from that first vagueness and variables into a definite and avowed idea, there naturally arises the desire and the endeavour to propitiate the ghost. This resulted in the development of ancestor-worship.<sup>3</sup> He further elaborates on his argument on the development of ancestor-worship. That among the settled groups, "there exist the burial places in their midst, among whom development of funeral rites is thus made possible, we find that continued propitiation of dead relatives becomes an established practice".<sup>4</sup>



He sees that behind the supernatural being of this order, human beings find that there has in every case been a human personality. Therefore, anything which transcends the ordinary, human beings think of as supernatural or divine, the remarkable man among the rest. 'This remarkable man may be simply the remotest ancestor remembered as the founder of the tribe, he may be a chief famed for strength and bravery, he or she may be a medicine-man or woman of great repute, he or she may be an inventor of something new. And then, instead of being a member of the tribe, he or she may be a superior stranger bringing arts and knowledge, or he or she may be one of a superior race predominating by conquest. Being at first one or other of these, regarded with awe during his or her life, he or she is regarded with increased awe after his or her death, and the propitiation of his or her ghost, becoming greater than the propitiation of ghosts which are less feared, develops into an established worship'.<sup>5</sup>

Although this view of Spencer about ancestor-worship is a general one which applies to other world religions, some scholars came to regard it as African Traditional Religion.

The question of ancestor-worship became a burning issue among some scholars, and it leads to a debate whereby, some came to have the opinion that African peoples worship their ancestors. In his paper, 'The secular Aspect of Ancestor-worship in Africa', J.H.Driberg stated: 'no hesitation in affirming that the religious beliefs and philosophy of the African are fixed primarily on the concept of a universal power of energy, which informs and is the cause of all life, and secondarily on a number of deifications'.<sup>6</sup> He argued that the 'High God' idea does not exist in Africa, that African has his abstract power-concept, and it most certainly is not otiose'. In his argument on ancestor-worship he stated that 'there are ancestors who have become anthropomorphic gods, who coexist with the deification of natural phenomena and who by a confused mental process may sometimes, as with Musisi of the Baganda, an ancestor now identified with earthquakes, be transferred from the human to the non-human sphere and thus carry an illusion of anthropomorphism into the more spiritual atmosphere of natural

phenomena'.<sup>7</sup>

Driberg sees ancestor-worship as the general social organisation of the community. According to him, ancestor-worship is just social organisation and status and not religious conviction that determines the character of the regard paid to ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

In his paper, 'Some Reflections on Ancestor-worship in Africa', M.Fortes also argued that ancestor-worship in Africa is widespread. He quoted Tylor saying, 'it has long been recognised that ancestor-worship is a conspicuous feature of African religious systems'.<sup>9</sup> He stressed that wherever it occurs, ancestor-worship is rooted in domestic, kinship and descent relations and institutions. He goes on to argue that the delimitation of the group of worshippers by rules of kinship, descent, and marriage is implicit in the very concept of ancestor-worship.

In other words, Fortes sees ancestor-worship as belonging to the 'region of kinship and descent structure in which laws, backed by the sanctions of the political order, regulates social relations and conduct, as opposed to the region of patri-filial relationships in which conduct is ruled by moral and spiritual considerations'. In this sense, Fortes argument is that ancestor-worship is an aspect of citizenship in the politico-jural domain, not of membership of domestic groups.<sup>10</sup>

In his conclusion, he stressed that 'ancestor symbolise the continuity of the social structure, and the proper allocation at any given time of the authority and right they held and transmitted. Ancestor-worship therefore, put the final source of jural authority and right where it is inviolable and unchangeable, and thus able to mobilise the consent of all who must comply with it'.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, W.D.Hammond-Tooke argued on ancestor-worship in his paper, 'Do the South-eastern Bantu Worship their Ancestor?', that the term 'cult' has been discussed by a number of scholars, and he mentioned such people as Kenyatta, Kopytoff, Brain and West, who have come to consider the opinion that the term 'worship' is inappropriate to use as the worship of

ancestors. Later on John S.Mbiti came to agree with the opinion of the above mentioned scholars. According to Mbiti, 'it is wrong to interpret traditional religion simply in terms of 'worshipping the ancestors'... Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect... Worship is the wrong word to apply in this situation... It is almost blasphemous, therefore, to describe these acts of family relationships as 'worship'.<sup>12</sup>

Hammond-Tooke argued on Mbiti's opinion that if ancestors are not worship, but venerating, what then exactly does veneration mean? According to him, if definition of the word *worship* 'implies elements of adoration, devotion and supplication', of a superior power, surely, then , one can talk of ancestor worship, because the elements mentioned are found in ancestor-worship.

Hammond-Tooke based his argument on the point that the word veneration is, 'overt behaviour can be difficult to interpret, and in any event is not diacritical in solving the problem of ancestor-worship, because structure and sentiment do not always coincide. Therefore, the word worship needs more clear definition'. To define the word 'worship' he used the definition of Ninian Smart:

Firstly, worship is a relational activity, one cannot worship oneself. Secondly, the ritual of worship expresses the superiority of the Focus (of worship) to the worshippers. Thirdly, the ritual also performatively sustains or is part of the power of the Focus. Fourthly, the experience which worship expresses is that of the numinous, and the object of worship is thus perceived as awe inspiring...Fifthly, the Focus of worship is unseen i.e. transcends any particular manifestations of it that there may be. Finally, the superiority of the Focus gives it greater power than the worshipper, and this gap is infinite in the case of an undoubtedly Supreme Being (but only, presumably, for such a Being), so that the worshipper has no relevant merit, except insofar as this may be conferred on him by the Supreme Being.<sup>13</sup>

In this definition, Hammond-Tooke claimed that the word 'worship' fulfils what ancestor-

worship

worship is. He goes on arguing that 'the oft-repeated statement that the ancestors stand in a hierarchical relationship to the Supreme Being and mediate between him and human is not part of any indigenous world-view'. According to him, where such an idea has been recorded it is almost certainly due to missionary influence. 'There is nothing in indigenous concepts to indicate such a relationship. So veneration, as a substitute for 'worship', just will not do'.<sup>14</sup>

He also points out that the communication is as much through ritual acts as through verbal formulae. Therefore, he concludes that, 'objects of religious ritual are set apart, consecrated, and to achieve this they have to be created or constructed for the purpose of the ritual. The shades are always there, invisible and immanent in the background of the life-world; what is needed is a focusing of the interaction situation that brings them into the foreground, as it were, so that they can be confronted and influenced. Focusing involves the disengaging (setting apart) of the situation from its profane background and the construction of it as a sacred one. 'This is done spatially, by locating the killing in the byre, but also verbally, through the mechanism

of a special language form, the ngula invocation'.<sup>15</sup>

In this ongoing debate on ancestor-worship the theologians played their own part as well. In The Lumko of Missiological Institute Seminar, some theologians took part in the seminar and made their contribution on the debate in the light of theological point of view.

We are not going to discuss all that has taken place at the seminar, but only what some theologians said about ancestor-worship or 'Ancestor Religion', the phrase the Conference used.

At the Seminar H.Kuckertz stated that 'the review of ancestor Religion in African theology has been a problem for long, and it is at the centre of the age-old controversy about African religion in general. The problem raised questions such as, 'Is African religion particularly in its aspect of ancestor religion 'animism', ancestor worship' or 'vital participation?'<sup>16</sup> With this question

in mind some theologians have taken initiatives to discuss the issue of ancestor worship.

But before the Lumko Conference, some theologians have written about ancestor worship. For example, Fr Placide Tempel, in his book, 'Bantu Philosophy', wrote that 'the spirits of the first ancestors, highly exalted in the super-human world, possess extraordinary force...(they are) the propagators of the divine inheritance of vital human strength. The other dead are esteemed only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their progeny'.<sup>17</sup>

In his contribution, Mogoba stated that 'the veneration of an ancestor can be regarded as the attitude shown by Africans towards any elder and that towards God. He stressed that the distance between human and God and thus the respect due to God, necessitates the use of intermediaries in approaching God'. He regards ancestor as intermediaries between human and God, but they are not God.<sup>18</sup>

As for Fashole-Luke, he considers the degree of worship intended by the actor. He compares his view with that of a Roman Catholic who worships God and venerates a saint. He stressed that 'the Catholic intends an essential difference between two acts. Because of the difference in intention the essential difference between God and the Saint is maintained, and in a similar way the essential difference between God and the ancestor is maintained. Therefore, the worship offered to God is different from the veneration offered to the ancestors. They are two difference intentions. The former is worship and the latter veneration'.<sup>19</sup>

In his interview and discussion among 'Zulu Christians and Ancestor cult', Fr.J.A.Nxumalo suggested that in dealing with ancestor worship, 'one has to travel into the depth of the African soul by grasping the gems of his traditional religion'. If I understood him well, he suggested that in dealing with ancestor worship, one cannot rush to say that Africans are worshipping ancestors. It needs time and the study of the traditional religion of Africans before talking about ancestor worship.

In addition to this, Fr. Mulago also suggested that one should 'reach out to the essential values by digging down, weeding, sweeping, with patience, the rocky terrain of superstition, and that one should travel on a difficult journey to the source of the Black man's thought so as to discover the pre-Christian values. Such careful evaluation will lead to a positive attitude as regards African religion'.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to ancestor worship, Nxumalo wrote that according to the Zulu, 'the ancestors are not only seen in relation to the family, but they are said to be with God, they have been assumed into the 'family of God'. They are ruled and governed by the power of God, they are close to one another and their souls are with God. These ancestors are called upon by their families in the time of suffering and in crisis, and are honoured on the day they are particularly remembered. As one woman whom he interviewed put it, 'They are the ones who will intercede for me, who have the power to petition God, *Kumvelinqangi*'<sup>21</sup>

Some people who were interviewed by Nxumalo, do not use the word *ukukhonza*, that is 'worship', in relation to the ancestors; they rather spoke of *ukukhumbula* 'to remember'. This indicates that ancestors are not worshipped but remembered.<sup>22</sup> According to other informants, they said that 'we do not worship, *ukukhonza*, the shades. We simply speak to them, *ukuthetha*, telling them everything'... Old people say that the correct term used traditionally was not *ukukhonza* but *ukuthetha*. 'It is only now that people say *ukukhonza* for everything that is done...we do not say *ukukhonza*. We say *ukuthetha*'.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, other theologians sees ancestors as social beings like all other humans. They regard the ancestor cult as essentially a social affair.<sup>24</sup>

To sum up what has been so far discussed on ancestor-worship, one may look at it as a coin which has two sides. On one side is represented those scholars who have the opinion that African peoples worship their ancestors, and on the other side of the coin are those who regard ancestor worship as veneration or respect. Both sides present their views and substantiations.

In fact, one can hardly find people agree on one thing, they either support it or oppose it. These notions presented by some scholars on the question of 'ancestor worship' is still a burning issue, in the sense that there is no agreement on the issue. But these disagreements will not make one neutral on these notions. Although it is not the aim of this paper to go into the ongoing debate, yet one has to show his own position. But how can one show one's own position without going into an indepth study on ancestor worship? As Fr. Mulago suggested, 'one has to reach out to the essential values by digging down, weeding and sweeping, ... one should travel on a difficult journey to the source of the Black man's thought' so to enable one to take a position.

Still, in the light of some reports from interviews and discussions among some African societies, one may be tempted to have the view that Africans do not worship ancestors, but they venerate them, because veneration has to do with recent ancestors, while worship is everyday life practice. Worship is refer to God, and veneration to ancestors.

## 1.2. The Purpose of the Paper

Bronnum Lutheran Seminary ( B.L.S.) is owned and run by The Lutheran Church of Christ In Nigeria ( L.C.C.N. ). The Seminary is named after the founder of the church in Numan, Nigeria, Neils Bronnum.<sup>24</sup> The primary purpose for the establishment of the Seminary, is to train young men and women for the ministry of the Church and also to train them to be religious educators in both private and secular schools in the country. The Seminary awards Diplomas in Christian Ministry. In its curriculum the Seminary offers various courses, of which African Traditional Religion is one. One of the experiences in this subject, is the question raised by the students on the worship of God in African Traditional Religion. The emphasis of the question is on what 'constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion'. There are many books written on African Traditional Religion, for example, on belief in God, about Prayer, Initiation and so on. But these

have not been put together to form what may be seen as that which constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion. If there is, I have not come across it.

The question raised by the students of Bronnum Lutheran Seminary on what constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion, prompted the writer to undertake research on what constitutes this worship. It is not the purpose of this paper to refute what has been written on the worship of God in African Traditional Religion, but the main purpose is to bring together what has already been written on the topic, so that one may see as a whole what constitutes worship in African Traditional Religion. The outcome of the research will enable one to see the whole picture of the worship of God in African Traditional Religion, especially what constitutes worship.

### 1.3. Scope and Limitation

Many books have been written on African Traditional Religion. This paper will be limited to what constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion. The Author must declare his position. He is a Nigerian, an African and a Christian. He will seek to be fair to each of those positions, by being alert to each of those positions in himself as observer. In particular he wishes to understand the worship of God in traditional African Religion in its own terms and must therefore be aware that he comes to it as a Nigerian and as a Christian.

If we would understand in a situation of interrelation with other human beings, we must operate in a way which not only enables us to understand but also be understood. The quest will not succeed if it is not directed toward mutual understanding and growth together.

### 1.4. Methodology and Sources

It would have been better if the topic had been a fieldwork research, but due to some circumstances which were beyond the control of the writer, he had to adopt a library research method. The sources include primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include books which are relevant to the topic. The secondary sources include, , encyclopaedias, journals, and relevant books which are available in libraries.



## END NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer (1896) The Principles of Sociology. Greenwood Press, Publishers p.281
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid p.282
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid p.282
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid p.411
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid p.411
- <sup>6</sup> Journal of The Royal African Society, 1936 Volume 35, No.138. p.3
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid p.21
- <sup>8</sup> M.Fortes and Dieterlen eds (1960) African Systems of Thought. London Oxford University Press. p.16
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid p.122
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid p.130
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid p.137
- <sup>12</sup> Hammond-Tooke,W.D. (1978) Do The South-eastern Bantu Worship Their Ancestors? Oxford University Press. p.134
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid p.136
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid p.138
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid p.147
- <sup>16</sup> Kuckertz H. (1981) Ancestor belief in Africa as call and as challenge. In Ancestor religion in South Africa. H.Kuckertz ed. Cocadu, Transkei. Lumko Missiological Institute p.79
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid p.81
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid p.83
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid p.83
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid p.65

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.67

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p.73

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p. 83

<sup>24</sup> Journal Of Religion in Africa, Volume viii, 1976. p.3

## CHAPTER 2

### 2. AFRICAN BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Before we go further, I would like very briefly to define the word 'religion'. In fact, there are many definitions on the word 'religion'. Many scholars have defined it differently. However, 'Adequate definitions are not so easy to find'. Nevertheless, some defined religion as 'an ultimate context for meaning and value'. Others see religion as 'A social entity, for example, the authoritative symbol set which creates a society out of a group of individuals'. Still, others defined religion as, 'the way in which individuals organise to cope with social change and other threats in their environment'.

Still furthermore, others defined religion as 'the quest for, realisation or maintenance of a sense of belonging to the ultimately-real'.<sup>1</sup> These brief definitions of religion and other definitions which are not mentioned in this paper, are all important and it can be applied to any religions in the world, among them the African Traditional Religion is one of them. In the light of this definition and the purpose of this paper, one can talk about what constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion.

#### 2.1. The Concept of God

In the Introductory Chapter we discussed the argument of some scholars on the question of ancestor-worship in African Traditional Religion. The same question raised by many people about the concept of God in African Traditional Religion. In order to know what constitute the worship of God in African Traditional Religion one has to discuss the Beliefs and Practices about God.

Questions raised by people on the concept of God in African Traditional Religion come from within and without. People from outside asked questions such as; Is there any awareness of God in Africa? If so, what idea of him have they formed? To put the questions more accurately; Is there an African concept of God? If Africans know God, what God or which God do they know? Is it their own god or the real God?<sup>2</sup>

These were the age-old questions in the minds of some people, and even today they continue in the minds of many people. We will consider those scholars who have especially, written about the concept of God in African traditional religion.

Before Edwin Smith's explanation on the African concept of God, he quoted Farnell as saying; 'the epithets whereby a Greek divinity was addressed in prayer and in official hymns give the best due to the idea of ancient worship'.<sup>3</sup> In order to make the quotation clear and to relate it to the African concept of God, he goes on to say; 'when Zeus is invoked as cloud-wrapped, delighting in Thunder and Apollo as for-worker we know how the Greek thought of them. Similar epithets are bestowed by Africans upon the Supreme Being. As a rule the epithets are unquestionably old and widely known among pagan Africans'.<sup>4</sup>

Smith stated, 'Africans have rich store of folk-proverbs. In them the African peoples express a pungent criticism of life and the gathered wisdom of the past'. He gave an example from Ghana to illustrate how frequently the name God occurs in these proverbs. For instance, 'if you would tell God tell the wind', says the *Hawk*, 'all God did is good'.<sup>5</sup> In these proverbs one can see the concept of God among the African peoples, especially in their religion.

Apart from the proverbs, ethnographic descriptions of African tribes usually include specimens of their myths and legend, and many of these illuminate the African concept

of God. In his study of African cosmology and theology, Hermann Baumann said. 'African mythology is less colourful and reveals a weaker aptitude for speculation than that displayed by Polynesians. Central to it stand a creative principle, which in most instances is identical with the High God, and the first man formed or called forth by this creative power'. He went on, saying, 'The fashion in which this man came on the earth, how he lived and what he experienced, is the subject of nearly all African mythology'.<sup>6</sup>

In these, one can understand that the myths were not mere folk-lore but constitute the African's Genesis. They tell what people believe actually to have happened, or they are symbolically if not literally true. But not only in myths can one see the concept of God among African peoples, there is also another source and this is everyday speech.

In their everyday speech Africans uttered the divine name in oaths in daily conversation. Furthermore, in obeying the universe, Africans take, for the most part, celestial phenomena as symbols of the Supreme Being. Such symbols not only spring from emotion, they generate emotions of awe and gratitude which are directed towards the deity they symbolise.<sup>7</sup> As J.H.Driberg put it; 'religious beliefs and philosophy of the African are fixed primarily on the concept of a universal power or energy, which informs and is the cause of all life'.<sup>8</sup>

J.S.Mbiti categories African concept of God into four general groups. These are . 'what God does, human pictures of God, the nature of God, and people's relationship with God'.<sup>9</sup> Africans are rich in their concept of God and many books have been and are being written about God as understood by African peoples.

## 2.2. Belief in God

The Oxford English Dictionary defined the word 'belief' as the mental action, condition, or habit, of trusting to or confiding in a person or thing; trust, dependence, reliance, confidence,

faith'. In the other words, 'belief' is a mental acceptance of a proposition, statement, fact, as true, on the ground of authority or evidence; assent of the mind to a statement, to the truth of a fact beyond observation, on the testimony of another, or to a fact or truth on the evidence of consciousness; the mental condition involved in this assent.<sup>10</sup>

Religiously, the word means intellectual conviction alongside the notion of trust, the bending of one=s whole being to God in complete confidence in his or her infinite goodness and in his or her ability to guard and to guide one=s entire life in the best possible way.<sup>11</sup>

To relate this definition to African traditional religion, I want to use the word '*tuwahama*' the word is from Longuda tribe in Nigeria, literally means, to have confidence in some one or some thing. This definitions of the word 'belief' will enable one to talk about Belief in God in African traditional religion.

It has been asserted that there is, seemingly, no people, nor tribe in Africa which does not believe in a supreme being with one or more names to describe him either in terms of his activities or his place of abode. Other names given to this acknowledged deity are obviously indicative of opinions held regarding him or of attributes which he is understood to possess.<sup>12</sup>

In his book title 'Fetishism and Fetish Worshippers', Pere Noel Baudin stated;

In these religious systems, the idea of a God is fundamental, they believe in the existence of a supreme, primordial being, the lord of the universe, his work, ...and notwithstanding the abundant testimony of the existence of God...he is considered the supreme primordial being, the author and the father of the gods and genii...<sup>13</sup>

E.M.Uka on the other hand stated that 'All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the centre of African traditional religion and dominates all its other beliefs'. He went on to say, in many parts of Africa, many people, traditionally believe in one single Supreme God who is the creator of the world and of man.<sup>14</sup>

On the belief in God in African traditional religion, E.B.Idowu wrote; ‘ with regard to the concept of God, there is a common thread, however tenuous in places, running throughout the continent. Whatsoever outsiders may say, it is in fact this one factor of the concept, with particular reference to the character, of deity which makes it possible to speak of a religion of Africa.’<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in his research among the Ashanti of Ghana, R.S.Rettray said about them concerning the concept of God:

I had some years ago taken a firm stand against a school of thought... which denied that the conception of a supreme being in the West African mind, and his place in their religion, were due to any cause deeper or more remote than the influence of Christian missionary teachings... further research embodying a much fuller investigation into Ashanti religious beliefs than was before possible has only served to strengthen the opinion which I formerly expressed... I am convinced that the conception in the Ashanti mind of the supreme being has nothing whatever to do with missionary influence... contact with Christians or even, I believe with Mohammedants... in a sense, therefore, it is true that this great supreme being, the conception of whom has been innate in the minds of the Ashanti, is the Jehovah of the Israelites.<sup>16</sup>

Again, according to Idowu, when we speak about the belief in God, as an African concept, we may also speak of the other side of the belief. The reason is because in each locality, the concept of god usually takes its emphasis and complexion from the sociological structure and climate. That is why, there are various names of the Supreme Being in tribes. The names given to the supreme god in different African societies reflect these intrinsic attributes.

Some of the names given to the supreme beings by African tribes are; *Leve or Ngwo*-a name given by the Mende people of Sierra Leone. This name is directly translated as Supreme God. The Mende people believe that all life and activity in both a material and non-material sense

derive from him. Akan people of Ghana call God *Onyame*, (the Supreme Being,) God the creator of all things, the Deity. In Nigeria, the Binin people call God *Osanobua*, for literally, the creator of the world, the sky, the earth and of life and death. The Igbo called God, *Chineke*, (the creator) God, *Chukwu*, (the creator spirit). The Yoruba called him, *Olodumare*, (the Almighty, the Supreme God).<sup>17</sup>

Other tribes are; Basuto who live in the Transvaal said that their high God is called *Hueane*. *Leza* is the name used for their High God by the Baila, Botango and several other tribes of Northern Zambia. The Wachaga tribe from Tanzania called God *Iruwa*, and in Kenya God is called *Akuj*, for the Mangu, the name for God is *Ngai*. There are many other tribes which are not mentioned in this paper.

The names given to God by African peoples are not just mere names, but are descriptive of His character and epithet of the fact that He is a reality. The names denote that, as Westermann observes, he is a reality to the Africans and convey 'the purest expression of' their religious thinking and of their religious experience. The names given to God help to show his attributes. Some names refer to him as creator, maker of souls, founder of the universe, controller of nature and giver of rain, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from these intrinsic attributes of God, there are external attributes which are attributed to him. He is also seen as being self-existent, the first and the last, invisible, incomprehensible, mysterious and immutable. Other attributes are; pity, kindness, love, comfort, faithfulness Goodness, Anger, Will, Justice and the Holiness. Idowu went on to elaborate that African peoples believe in God's providence. They believe that it is God who provides sunshine, moonshine, rain, fertility, health and plenty. God is not only provider, he also protects, guard, controls and saves his people. In short, Africans see God as king, ruler, lord and master of the world".

In addition to these attributes, African peoples believe that God is incomparable, he is unique.



His uniqueness is one of the reasons why there are no imagesgraven, drawn or painted of him in Africa. There are many symbols found in many places in Africa, but these are not images. 'The African concept of God in this regard is an emphatic 'no one and none' to the question to whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?'<sup>19</sup> The fact of God's uniqueness implies his transcendence. The conception of God as king with absolute supremacy, emphasises his uniqueness.

John Middleton saw this fact and put it clearly in connection with Lugbara belief; He is said not to be a person, 'Did he not put *Gborogboro* and *Meme* (the first being) in the world? How then can he be a person?...' 'The power of God is outside men and outside society, since it created men ....'<sup>20</sup>

All in all as W.Schmidt said, 'the belief in and worship of one supreme deity is universal among all 'primitive' peoples... They 'high god' is found among them all...prominently enough to make his dominant position indubitable.'<sup>21</sup>

The discussion on this sub-heading gives us the reason why we will talk about the concept of worship in African traditional religion, especially what constitutes the worship of God.

### 2.3. African belief in spirits

There is no doubt about belief in spirits in Africa, because it is a common feature among all African peoples. But there is no clear definition of the spirits in African traditional religion. The spirits may be anthropomorphically conceived, but they are more often than not thought of as powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which take on human shape. They are immaterial and incorporeal beings. They are so constituted that they can assume various dimensions whenever they wish to 'see'. They may be either abnormally small or abnormally tall, fat or thin. It is believed that especially when they appear beside the natural object which is

either residence, they may appear in the form or shape or dimensions of the object.<sup>22</sup>

It is a belief of African peoples that spirits can be found everywhere. There is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a 'spirit' of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. The spirits inhabit all sorts of places such as trees, hills, rivers, forests and bushes. There are special trees which are considered sacred and are believed to be special places of spirits. Such a tree or trees which are believed to be the residences of spirits, become their emblem, and offerings and sacrifices are made to them.<sup>23</sup>

Persons, animals or birds are also believed by Africans to be instruments of possession by spirits of all descriptions-good or bad, vengeful and helpful. Spirits may cause insanity or disease, miscarriages in women or deformity in human beings. For this reason African traditional religion was variously described as animism or even as 'nature religion'.<sup>24</sup>

Mbiti stated; there are many types of spirits, and God is their creator, just as He is the creator of all things. According to him, the spirits have a status between God and men, and are not identical with either. But people often speak about them in human terms, or treat them as though they had human characteristics such as thinking, speaking, intelligence and possession of power which they can use at their will. Because the spirits are created by God, they are subordinate to him and dependent on him and some of them may be used by God to do certain things.<sup>25</sup>

Mbiti categorised the spirits as follows; nature spirits, sky spirits, earth spirits and human spirits. He described the nature spirits as those which people associate specifically with natural objects and forces. Some of the spirits are thought to have been created by God initially as spirits, others are said to have been human beings of the distant past. The sky spirits are those associated with objects and forces in the sky. These include; the sun, the moon, stars, rainbow, rain, storms, wind, thunder, lightning and so on. People say or believe either that such objects and forces are themselves the spirits, or that there are spirits occupying and controlling them.

And the nature spirits of the earth are the spirits associated with things and forces of the earth. These spirits are connected with the earth, hills, mountains, rocks and boulders. Others are trees, and forests, metals, water in various forms. Thus, through these nature spirits, African peoples have direct link with both inanimate things and the forces of nature, and living things.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Mbiti described human spirits as long dead (ghosts) and recently dead (living-dead). Belief in the existence of human spirits is widespread throughout Africa. It is the natural consequence of the strong belief in African religion that human life does not terminate at the death of the individual, but continues beyond death. He concluded his description of spirits that some spirits are considered to have been created as a 'race' by themselves. These, like other living creatures, have continued to reproduce themselves, adding to their numbers. The spirits are invisible but may make themselves visible to human beings. The ontological transcendence of God is bridged by the spirit mode of existence.<sup>27</sup>

#### 2.4. African Belief in Ancestors

It has been stated elsewhere in this paper that African traditional religion was early often interpreted by some people as ancestor-worship. Much has been discussed on this issue. Nevertheless, one of the reason was because among Africans there is the belief that communication and communion is possible between the living and the dead. They believe that the dead has the power to influence, help or molest the living. So it could be said that there is a continuing interdependence between the living and the dead. These so-called living-dead are said to be the closest link we have with the spirit world, and they are also regarded as intermediaries between God and human beings. The living-dead know the needs of people from whose company they had withdrawn bodily. Therefore, Africans believe that their dead are

never really gone. Because the dead are considered by Africans as living-dead, they are therefore dependent on those still in the world for their care and sustenance. For this reason they have special shrines where they are served with food offerings and also venerated.<sup>28</sup>

The question of African traditional religion and ancestor-worship led H.H.Farmers to undertake research and examine the question of ancestor-worship, and concluded;

The ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in peculiarly close relation to the tribe or the family, the life of the latter has been derived from him and because he is still in existence he is still in a sense one with it, his favour or disfavour has therefore a sharply focused relation to it and is more urgently to be sought or avoided. In addition to this, of course, is all that might be brought to the relationship by the sense of social solidarity and the kinship-ties, as well as on occasion at least by natural affection and filialpiety. The commonly used phrase 'ancestor-worship' must not mislead us here, nor be allowed to suggest a distinctly religious significance in the cult of ancestors which it does not necessarily possess.<sup>29</sup>

Farmer went further and said, 'The English word 'worship' is an ambiguous term, it can be His Worship the Mayor, the Worshipful Master of Freemasonry, and 'Your Worship' used in addressing a judge, all show that the word 'worship' is not confined to the specifically religious'.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, on the question of ancestor-worship, J.H.Driberg wrote;

What we have mistaken for a religious attitude is nothing more than a projection of (the Africans) social behaviour...For no African prays to a dead grandfather any more than he 'prays' to his living father, In both cases the words employed are the same; he asks as of right or he beseeches, or he expostulates with or he reprimands, or (as the Eastern Ewe word espied put it) he gives an address to, his ancestors, as he would do to elders sitting in conclave but he never uses in this context the words for 'prayer' and 'worship' which

are strictly reserved for his religious dealings with the Absolute word *pietas* probably best describes the attitude of Africans to their dead ancestors, as to their living elders.<sup>31</sup>

Still, furthermore on ancestor-worship, Kuper wrote on Swazi;

Ancestral spirits are not worshipped. Swazi address them in much the same way as they speak to the living, and the word *tsetisa* (to scold) is frequently used to describe the manner of approach Swazi rarely express gratitude when they think the ancestors are blessing them, and they are more indignant than humble when they find they are being punished...<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, it is the Africans' strong sense of continuing communion with their living-dead and the honour and service they still give them that made some people thinking that the living-dead were being worshipped. However, Africans believed that the ancestors are not worshipped but are venerated.

The veneration of ancestors in African traditional religion needs a certain qualification. Mbiti stated that to qualify as ancestor, in the spirit world, one must fulfil certain conditions namely, the conduct of the person while he lived must have been above board. He must have attained a reasonable old age, he must have been married with children. He must not die a bad death, for example, death through accident, lunacy, epilepsy, suicide or through any form of violence.<sup>33</sup>

In African traditional religion, the world of human beings and the unseen world of the spirit maintain something like a symbiotic relationship which however requires people to serve as the link between their fellow human being on the one hand and God, spirits and divinities on the other. For this reason one found in African traditional religion the leader in any home or the leader of the clan conducts the dealings with the gods for himself or herself, and he or her family or the clan.

Apart from the dealing of a leader of a clan, there are those who are trained and skilled for the

purpose of dealing with the gods. Some are said to be specifically called by the gods to perform the work of a priest to the people. Such professional work includes diviners, medium, seers, ritual leaders, rainmakers, and medicine men and women. These religious leaders are the custodians of the religious treasures and religious knowledge of the people. These spiritual leaders embody the presence of God to the people as well as their moral values.<sup>34</sup> We will discuss more about the spiritual leaders in the next chapter.

Although the argument on ancestor worship has been discussed at the beginning of this paper, one may conclude in this sub-section, in the light of what some writers have said, that Africans do not put their ancestors, as ancestors, on the same level with Deity or the divinities. Certainly the cults of the ancestor do not constitute African traditional religion. The proper measure of the ancestral cults derives from the African belief that death is not the end of life, that the family or community life of this earth has only become extended into the life beyond in consequence of the death of the ancestors. Thus, the cults are a means of communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirits world of the ancestors.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.5. Africans belief in Divinities

On the question of divinity in African traditional religion, Mbiti stated that there is difficulty on the word. He wondered where a line should be drawn when writing about divinity, because many writers speak of gods, demigods, divinities, nature spirits, ancestral spirits and the like. He therefore used the word 'divinity' to cover personifications of God's activities and manifestations of natural phenomena and objects, the so-called 'nature spirits'.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Idowu stated that it is becoming increasingly accepted that what human first encountered by experience as divine was that of unitary control of the universe and that it

was as a result of the development of material culture and the organisation of society that human being came to develop the idea of an order of divine powers, whether these be in subjection to one absolute controller or in the form of what is generally described as proper polytheism.<sup>37</sup>

Paul Radin argues;

Monotheism itself presents a number of phases; A recent classification of its history divides it with three stages into monolatry, i.e. a belief in a supreme being but the persistence of the worship of other deities at the same time, implicit monotheism, i.e. a belief in a supreme deity yet no definite denial of other gods, and lastly, explicit monotheism, a belief in a supreme deity and a denial of the existence of other gods.<sup>38</sup>

According to Idowu, if what Radin said were true, it might at first glance follow that we have to deny the existence among any primitive peoples of anything except monolatry. He then went on to ask the question, (Is it really the mere fact of the worship of the other gods or spirits or culture-heroes that constitutes the fundamental difference between explicit monotheism and monolatry? What of those cases where lesser gods have been created by a supreme deity, where all their powers have been derived from him, where they are venerated not directly addressed to a supreme deity, but to his divinely appointed intermediary as contrary to the spirit of monotheism?) He then went on to give the answer to the question;

African traditional religion cannot therefore be described as polytheistic. Its appropriate description is monotheistic, however modified this may be. The modification is however inevitable, because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of the religion. But 'beings' in their case can only be spelt with the initial small letter 'b'. 'Powers,' when they are so described can only be spelt with the initial small letter 'p'. This is because in fact they have no absolute existence and the African world is under a unitary theocratic government.<sup>39</sup>

In this answer Idowu stressed that the question of the relationship between Deity and the divinities defines the place of the latter within the whole system. In the first place, from the point of view of the theology of African traditional religion it will not be correct to say that the divinities were created. It will be correct to say that they were brought into being or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe.

Secondly, the divinities are derivatives from Deity. Because it is generally theologically provable that the divinities have no absolute existence, they are in being only in consequence of the being of Deity. Because the divinities derive from Deity, their powers and authorities are meaningless apart from him.

Thirdly, each divinity has his own local name in the local language, which is descriptive either of his allotted function or the natural phenomenon which is believed to be a manifestation or emblem of his being.

Fourthly, the divinities were brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. Fifthly, the divinities are ministers, each with his own definite portfolio in the Deity's monarchical government. Each is in head of a department. They are also intermediaries between Deity and human especially with reference to their particular functions.

Sixthly, the divinities, under their various generic names from the pantheon vary in sizes according to the sociological set-up or other factors which may influence the concept of the universe among each people. Over each pantheon is usually an archdivinity who is more closely related in attributes to Deity.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, in African traditional religion, the divinities are associated with God, 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. Let us see some examples from African societies. It is reported that the Ashanti from Ghana have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. They are known as *bosom*, and they are said to 'come from



Him' and to act as His servants and intermediaries between him and the other creatures.

Amongst the Yoruba, the divinities are associated with natural phenomena and objects, as well as with human activities and experiences. They are said to render to God annual tributes of their substance in acknowledgement of his Lordship. There are special divinities which are concerned with matters of war, of hunting, fishing, farming, metal-work, and other lighting, rivers or lakes, sun or moon and so on.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.6. Practice in African Traditional Religion.

There are many practices found in African traditional religion , it cannot be included in this sub-section, because they will appear in the next chapter.

### 2.6.1. Practices Magic

Some writers on African traditional religion regard magic as a religion. According to others magic might have evolved before religion as human beings attempted to manipulate the unseen world. But when human being failed to control natural objects and phenomena by means of magic, they then resigned themselves to forces beyond them, which in turn led to a belief in God as the source of all power.<sup>42</sup> On these Mbiti wrote that a careful examination of the situation in African societies shows that magic is part of the religious background and it is not easy to separate the two. Magic, according him, belongs to the religious mentality of African peoples. But religion is not magic and magic cannot explain religion, because religion is greater than magic.<sup>43</sup>

As for Idowu, there are two principal ways in which the human being has tried to avail himself or herself of the resources of this power for the fulfilment of his or her needs. Where he or she recognises the power of a divine being with whom the human being may have communion and

communication, his or her approach has been one of submission and appeal. Where he or she conceives of the power only as the reservoir of elemental forces, he or she has sought to tap and harness it and make it subserve his or her own end. The principal upon which he or she works in this case is one of technique, seeking to secure the proper means to the end that he or she may have control over these elemental forces. Magic is that second course by which humans seek to reach the goal of their independent devices. It will, however be deluding ourselves that, anywhere in the world, human beings always make a clear distinction in practice between these two courses.

He defined magic as an attempt on the part of human beings to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his or her own benefit. It is a 'resort to supercausation by means of spell and rite and rests on the manipulation and enforcement of supernatural benefits...' Magic serves the humans ego centrality and is for him a short cut to spiritual bliss.<sup>44</sup>

Magic is generally described as good or evil. Good in the sense that it is accepted and esteemed by African society. It is used in the treatment of diseases, in counteracting misfortunes, and in warding off or diluting or destroying evil 'power'. It is also evil in the sense that it involves the belief in and practice of tapping and using this power to do harm to human beings or their property.<sup>45</sup>

#### 2.6.2. Practice Medicine

The practice of medicine is widespread among the African peoples. To African societies the practice of medicine is considered as the greatest gift, and the most useful source of help. Every village in Africa has a medicine man and woman within reach and he or she is the friend of the community. He or she is accessible to everybody and at almost any time and comes into

the picture at many points on the individual and community life.

There is no specific, fixed rule for being called to the office of medicine man or woman. There are some who believe that spirits or the living-dead have called them in dreams and visions. There are both men and women in this profession. Their personal qualities vary, but medicine men and women are expected by the society to be trustworthy, upright morally friendly, willing and ready to serve and able to discern people's needs and not be greedy in their charges.

The medicine men and women may acquire knowledge in the medicinal value, quality and use of different herbs, leaves, roots, fruits, barks, grasses and of various objects like minerals, dead insects, bones, feathers, powders, smoke from different objects, excreta of animals, and insects, shells, eggs and so on. The other requirement, is to know the causes, cures and prevention of diseases and other forms of suffering.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.7. Conclusion

We may conclude this chapter by stressing that what some writers have said about the concept of God may cast some doubt in the minds of some people who feel that African peoples do not have an idea of God. And the discussion shows clearly that African traditional religion is really a religion indeed. And for this reason one may talk about the worship of God and what constitutes the worship.

## END NOTE

## CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup>Cumpsty, J.S. (1991) Religion As Belonging: A General Theory of Religion. London M.D.University Press of America. p.20

<sup>2</sup> Edwin W.Smith (1950) African Ideas of God. A Symposium. London, Edinburgh House Press. p.1

<sup>3</sup> E.M.Uka (1991) Reading in African Traditional Religion, Structure, Meaning, Relevance, Future. Peter Lang. p.39

<sup>4</sup> Smith (1950) p.4

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p.9

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p.13

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.21

<sup>11</sup> John S.Mbiti (1975) Introduction to African Religion. London, Heinemann. p.43

<sup>12</sup> S.A.Thorpe (1992) Primal Religions World-wide. p.30

<sup>13</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu (1973) African Traditional Religion. A definition. SCM Press LTD. p.40

<sup>14</sup> Uka (1991). p.39

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p. 43

<sup>16</sup> Idowu (1973). p.103

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p.141

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p.148

<sup>19</sup> Uka (1991). p.43

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.167

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.167

## CHAPTER 3

### 3. THE WORSHIP OF GOD IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

In the preceding chapter we discussed the concept of God in African traditional religion and we concluded that this concept of God enable one to talk about the worship of God in African traditional religion, especially what constitutes the worship. In this chapter, we are going to discuss more of what constitutes the worship.

#### 3.1. What is worship?

As I stated , the aim of this paper is to elucidate on what constitutes the worship of God in African traditional religion and this cannot be defining the various meanings of the word 'worship' mean.

The word 'worship' by definition means; reverence veneration paid to a being who is regarded as supernatural or divine... The action or practice of displaying this by appropriate acts, rites, or ceremonies.<sup>1</sup> This definition can be applied to any religion, in which African traditional religion is one.

The issue of worship in African traditional religion became a controversial one because of the question of direct approach to God or his worship. Also Westermann made it more controversial when he stated; 'In Africa God does not live in practical religion'.<sup>2</sup>

In African traditional religion one can find in every cult its set liturgy. A liturgy that consists of the pattern as well as subject-matter of worship. African liturgy, which is unwritten, does not sound the same when recited outside the context of actual worship. Liturgy here may be

defined as the means of communication and communion with deity within the setting of worship.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in African liturgy there is invocation, during which a rattle or an instrument of the same import is sounded and the libation is poured, the divine being called by names and attributes and summoned to attend worship. There is also prayer; in these, the needs of the worshippers are expressed and the divine being besought to satisfy them. Thus, from the liturgies of African traditional religion we learn the names and the attributes of deity or the divinities, the confidence and hopes of the people, the capability believed to belong to deity, and the fact of the general relationship between God and human being.<sup>4</sup>

Let us see what some scholars said about worship. Cheslyn Jones, sees worship as he put it; 'at once reaching out to the Transcendent and as embedded in human life. By the sacred meal especially, it was the means by which the community expressed its corporate life, which it saw as essentially dependent on the divine, however that may have been conceived. A further quality is that it engaged the whole being of man. Actions, gestures, symbols, expressive of a reality they could but dimly grasp, song and dance were the menace he or she felt necessary to express his or her worship.<sup>5</sup> For Allan Menzies, worship is done before or near the object which represented the worshippers.<sup>6</sup> For Mbiti, worship is a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world. He goes on, saying, 'African peoples are very much aware of the existence of the invisible world, which they see as a real part of the universe. Therefore, they perform acts of worship to keep alive the contact between the visible and invisible worlds, between humans and God'.<sup>7</sup>

Worship is also used as a means of creating harmony in the world of humankind. People turn to God in worship generally when trouble comes. They need at such times to restore their peace, happiness and sense of security. If nothing is done, they fear that things will get worse. Worship therefore, helps them to get back a sense of peace and religious harmony in their life

and in the world at large.<sup>8</sup>

In his conclusion on the definition of the word 'worship', Denys Shropshire concluded that 'if, then, religious worship be considered along the broad lines thus defined, we shall be well able to include the worship of God in African traditional religion, which largely consists of ritual ceremonial act'.<sup>9</sup> From this conclusion one can see that there are many things which constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion. These include sacrifice, offering, prayer, place of worship, religious leaders and so on. These we will discuss next.

### 3.2. Sacrifice as worship

Sacrifice in African traditional religion has been regarded as one of the commonest acts of worship among African societies. Sacrifice as worship consists of the material which are sacrificed, the method use when making the sacrifice, the place and occasions of sacrifice, the recipients of the sacrifice, and the purpose or intentions of the sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

The word 'sacrifice' is derived from the Latin word 'sacrificium' (sacer, 'holy', facere, 'to make',) meaning 'to make, 'holy'. The word carries the connotation of the religious act in the highest, or fullest sense, it can also be understood as the act of sanctifying or consecrating an object.<sup>11</sup>

To make it more accurate, let us discuss some theories on what sacrifice is all about. Valerio Valeri said that the most common theory of sacrifice since Plato is the gift theory. This theory according to him has been reformulated in the nineteenth century by Tylor, who sees sacrifice as a gift made to a deity as if he were a man. In this theory Tylor attempts to demonstrate that the direction of religious evolution proceeds 'from practical reality to formal ceremony'. This theory says Valeri, is followed by the 'homage theory', which is also followed in turn by the 'abnegation theory'. This sequence corresponds to a progressive 'spiritualization' of sacrifice.



At first it is believed that the efficacy of the offering is based on its real transmission to the god.

On the other hand, in the case of homage stage, the offering is thought to be efficacious through knowledge; the god does not need or receive the offering, but the knowledge that it is given, prompt him to use his power on behalf of the giver. As for the abnegation theory, he says, it is a purely anthropocentric notion of sacrifice; no benefit for the god, only loss for human determines the value and efficacy of the sacrifice. Thus, the efficacy attributed to sacrifice by the sacrificer is purely 'moral'.<sup>12</sup>

In his criticism, Valeri says that Tylor's theory of sacrifice fails to recognise the fundamental fact that the object given as sacrifice symbolises the sacrificer, and often the god and the aim of the sacrifice as well. He says Tylor reduces sacrifice to *a do ut des*-to a misplaced application of the sound principle of Unitarian exchange. Moreover, Tylor artificially separates the sacrificial oblation from the total symbolic process of which it is only a part. Therefore, Tylor's symbolic view of the offering creates a double distortion; it also reduces the gift to a commodity and reduces the ritual action to mere gift giving. According to him, Tylor did not see sacrifice as a gift is effective because it is a token of the relationship between god and human because it creates that relationship by instantiating it.<sup>13</sup>

Robertson Smith sees sacrifice as the central fact of religion which is the relation of the god and his worshippers. This relationship is identical to that binding the members of the community. Sacrifice in this sense, re-establishes the relationship between the members of the community. The two relationships coincide, the god is the personification of the society, of the principle that makes it possible. He re-stated that this is the basis of the efficacy of sacrifice. To put it in other words, Smith's theory of sacrifice is a totemic practice which sometimes calls for the ritual killing and eating of the forbidden animal, that sacrifice originated with these practices.<sup>14</sup>

Smith's theory was also criticised because he restricted the idea of communion to its most literal material expression, a communion of substance brought about by sharing the same food. In this sense, he failed to recognise that the gift contained an element of communion in a more abstract sense than the meal.

As for Hubert and Mauss, sacrifice is a religious act which through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned. They used the words 'sacrifice' and 'consecrate' to mean to 'make sacred'. This means that the victim must be perfect, as it will become, progressively divine. Hubert and Mauss did not go uncriticised. They were criticised in that the research had shown that victims of a sacrifice were rarely held to be sacred, that the sacred of the victim is not what matters, because the sacrifice is eaten by people as meat. But what matters is that sacrifice and offering should be regarded as gifts because they have something in common.<sup>15</sup>

Lagrange sees sacrifice as a gift, but it has to be conceived as a symbol of the relationship between human and god. Only when it is seen as such can it be viewed as the common feature of all sacrifices. In this theory, basically, then, the gift can be said to be the common element of all sacrifices because it incorporates the idea of communion in a form more abstract than the theory of Smith.<sup>16</sup>

For Rene Girard, sacrifice is the sacrificial victim which is always an outlet for the violence inherent in human relationship. By concentrating the diffuse and reciprocal violence that exists among individuals into one single individual, the victim, sacrifice makes violence 'unanimous'. This 'unanimous' violence at the expense of a victim drains society of its internal violence and therefore becomes the foundation for the positive forms of unanimity of which society consists. More accurately, Girard sees sacrifice as the universal truth which society seeks to divert toward an uninvolved victim, a sacrificial victim, a violence that threaten its own members,

whom it intends to protect at all cost. It is the entire community that sacrifice protects, from its own violence; it is the entire community that it diverts towards victim that are outsiders. Sacrifice focuses on the victim the widespread germs of dissension, and it disperses them by offering a partial satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> Girard's theory was also condemned.

Still, furthermore, Van Baal described sacrifice and offering as gifts. He argued that sacrifice and offering should be regarded as gifts in the sense that it has something in common with the concept of gifts. He goes on arguing that a gift holds a message to the donee, that of 'I, donor, regard you as a partner, appreciate you as a friend, as one who belongs to us'. That the gift transfers this message not with empty words but with the unshakeable factuality of its material presence. Thus the gift is an answer to the fundamental problem of the human condition, that of humans uncertainty about themselves as part of their universe from which, as a subject, differ and are perennially separate. He concludes that true giving is participation, participating in the life and work of the donee, participating in one's universe as a sympathising member. According to him, no one can participate without giving first. Giving, therefore, is essential for a meaningful existence. He also indicates that the simple food offering set aside for the gods, the clumsy, prayer before meals, and the give and take characteristic of mutual care in the small group, are the most real and effective means of communication, cementing togetherness and confirming security. All communication begins with giving, offering.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, as for Bolle Kees, no matter what differences sacrifice may have, the main point is that the symbolism of 'being there', and the sacrificial action far outweigh the importance of a divinity's 'individuality'. In other words, 'Is it not possible that sacrifices manifest the real intention behind the events? Do they not all point to self-sacrifice?' He concludes that sacrifice is a reality as that sacrifice can take a mystical turn.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, de Heusch defined sacrifice as a complete ritual cuisine, the expression of social order,

or it is aimed at restoring or maintaining group unity or individual integrity. Sacrifice is just social structure.<sup>20</sup>

To sum up, most theories of sacrifice are based on , sacrifice as a gift to gods , as a part of a process of exchange between gods and humans, as a communion between humans and God through a meal and as an efficacious representation and as cathartic. Since the discussion on the theories of sacrifice is not the aim of this chapter we will turn to the main purpose, that is, to discuss sacrifice as worship.

In fact, the essence of these theories of sacrifice will be applied to sacrifice as worship in African traditional religion. We have already mentioned that sacrifice as worship consists of , sacrifice, offering, prayer, place and occasion of worship, and religious leaders. Others are, the sacrificer, the material sacrifice, the method used when sacrificing, the recipients and the purpose or intentions of sacrifice.

There is no doubt about the varieties of worship among African societies. Worship differs from one society to another, and from one area to another. Likewise, the way sacrifice are being offered differ from one society to another, and from one area to another. For example, among Dinka and Nuer nearly all their waking time of acts of worship centred the on offering of sacrifice. Some societies have only a few and occasional acts of worship.<sup>21</sup>

Sacrifice as worship needs one who can perform it. The sacrificer may vary from one society to another as already mentioned. In most cases sacrifices are being offered by a group or community, but there are also individual sacrifices for entirely personal reasons, in unstratified societies. Therefore, everyone is principally able to offer sacrifices. In addition to this, the sacrificer may be the head of a family or clan, an elder, or performed through a special person, the priest.<sup>22</sup> As we all know, the human beings have always felt the need of a special mediator between himself or herself and the object of his or her worship, the sacrificer is the object of his or her worship.

On the types of material offered as sacrifice, originally in African traditional religion, they were either an object or an element or symbol of life. Therefore, the material can be categorised into three groups. These are: agricultural material, inanimate material things and domesticated animals. The material may vary from one society to another; it depends on the geographical location of the society and what they grow in that area. But, generally, agricultural material offered as sacrifice includes food crops and plants, such as fruits, leaves, banana stems, yams, cassava, corn, etc. Inanimate material things are, milk, water, tools, jewellery, strips of cloth, money, tobacco, to mention but a few. The domesticated animals include cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, dogs, pigs, horses, camels, and even human beings.<sup>23</sup>

Some societies placed some conditions on the material they offer as sacrifice. For example, the physical integrity of the victim. For example, physical defects make the offering unacceptable especially in a sacrifice of petition and thanksgiving. Every animal, before it is offered, says Leonard, 'is first of all carefully examined and if a scratch or incision is found on any part of its body, or a limb is seen to be bruised or broken, it is instantly classed as unclean and unfit. In addition to that, its colour also matters. White is the most favoured in some societies, while other societies prefer a black. White colour indeed seems to have an otherworldliness, a spirituality, a purity about it.'<sup>24</sup>

Looking at sacrifice as worship, we said it consists of the manner or method used when sacrificing. As worship it involves not only a visible gift, but an action or gesture that expresses the offering. The method used in sacrificing may also differ from one society to another. The sacrificing may consist of a simple deposition or it may be lifting up of the sacrifice, without any change being effected in the object. The external form of the offering is already determined in many cases by the material of sacrifice, in the case of fluids, for example, the natural manner of offering them is to pour them out, which is a kind of destruction. If the sacrifice is a living being the destruction takes the form of killing. When

blood in particular is regarded as the vehicle of life, the pouring out of the blood or the lifting up of bleeding parts of the victim, or even the flow of blood in the slaughtering may be the real act of offering. Another category of blood rites serves to apply the power in the blood to the offerings, their relatives and the sphere in which they live their life, this application may take the form of, for example, smearing.<sup>25</sup>

The other area of consideration of sacrifice as worship is the places and occasions in which the sacrificial worship takes place. In regards to this, there is not always an altar set aside for the purpose. Thus sacrifices to the dead are often offered at their graves, and sacrifices to the spirits of nature are made beside trees or bushes, in caves, at springs and so on. Far more frequently, natural stones or heaps of stones or earthen mounds serve as altars.<sup>26</sup>

In regard to time, for instance, regular sacrifices are determined by the astronomical or vegetative year, thus there will be daily, weekly, and monthly sacrifices. In the individual life, birth, puberty, marriage, and death are frequently occasions for sacrifices. Some are extraordinary occasions for sacrifice which are provided by special occurrences in the life of the community or the individual. For example, at the time when there was a joy, illnesses and at the time of drought or other natural disasters. The Abaluyia tribe, for instance have formal occasions when they make sacrifices. They offer sacrifices during the time of birth, naming and circumcising a person, at the time of weddings, funerals and harvest time. Among the Kikuyu tribe of Kenya were said offered sacrifices in worshipping God in sacred grooves. On special occasions, in drought or disease, and in Thanksgivings for bumper harvests.<sup>27</sup>

Still, among the Igbo of Nigeria, Shelton reported that 'in some villages there is regular daily worship of the High God or when the individual faces a particular problem which requires his supplication of God rather than one of the alusi'. According to Talbot, 'as a rule sacrifices are made to God at the two great festivals of seed-time and harvest'.<sup>28</sup>

We also mentioned elsewhere that sacrifice has to do with recipients. With regard to this,

many definitions specify recipients as divine beings, but there are also many kinds of beings to whom humans pay religious veneration and those whom people fear. All can be recipients of sacrifice. These recipients function as intermediaries between God and humans whether or not the worshippers are aware of that. For example, for the Yoruba of Nigeria, *Olorun* is thus the ground of all transactions between humans and the gods. Sacrifices to the *Orisha* therefore conclude with prayers acknowledging *Olorun*'s indirect involvement; 'May *Olodumere* accept it'. Furthermore, *Olorun* is also involved in the system of divination, called *Ifa*. On many occasions, when no *Orisha* or ancestor is specifically named in the divination process, the messenger god, *Eshu*, takes the sacrifice directly to *Olorun*. He is exhorted by the supplicants prayer to, 'Please tell *Olorun* to accept my sacrifice and relieve my suffering.'<sup>29</sup> Among the Igbo, Meek says that anyone may sacrifice to *Chukwu* through *Anyanwu*, 'when he feels inclined or when directed to do so by a diviner.'<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, sacrifice as worship has an intention or purpose. There are four basic intentions which constitute sacrifice, namely, praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and expiation. There may be others, but these are the basic ones.

We are all aware that humans always want to maintain ontological order between him or her and God, between him or her and the spirits, and between him or her and the departed and the living. As Mbiti stated 'when this balance is upset people experience misfortunes and sufferings, or fear that these will strike them. The making of sacrifice therefore, is to restore this ontological balance. Sacrifice also, is an act and occasion of making and renewing contact between God and the human being, and also between spirits and human beings in the spiritual and the physical worlds. When the sacrifices are directed towards the departed, they are symbol of fellowship, a recognition that the departed are still members of their human families, and tokens of respect and remembrance for the departed'<sup>31</sup>

In addition to these, the making of sacrifices also allowed participants to maintain



communication with an invisible spiritual realm. For instance if the intention of the sacrifices are to secure a needed blessing or gift for a person or a community, such sacrifices are regarded as propitiatory sacrifice; and this kind of sacrifice would be an offering made during a drought in the hope of bringing rain. On the one hand a peculiar sacrifice is one made to atone for an offence or sin. However, most commonly, sacrifices are offered simply to maintain good relationships between people and spiritual powers. Often during a communal meal a part of these sacrifices is eaten by the participants and a designated portion is given to the deities or ancestors. Thus a bond is established and strengthened between the visible and invisible worlds.<sup>32</sup>

An example can be seen from other African societies. For instance, among Thonga, when they offer a goat as sacrifice, they eat the meat and reserve a small portion taken from each leg for the ancestors. As for the Zulu, the sacrifice of the cow serves to unite the living and the dead, who share the same 'having'.<sup>33</sup>

In regard to the intentions of the sacrifice, for Thonga, sacrifices are intended for individual therapeutic rites, as well as in the rites making the major collective crises, such as marriage, death and insanity. While on the other hand, for Zulus, sacrifices are intended at restoring or maintaining group unity or individual integrity.<sup>34</sup>

As for the Yoruba, sacrifice has its positive as well as its negative intentions. On the positive side, sacrifice springs from the longing on the part of humans to establish relationship, renew and maintain communication with the supernatural beings and to share and enjoy communion with them. On the negative side, sacrifice may relate to powers of destruction.<sup>35</sup>

We may conclude from this that the intentions of sacrifice is an offering made to the supernatural beings for various purposes; it may be an expression of gratitude for benefits received, or as a means of securing the favour of the divinities and of establishing relationship with them. It may also be a means of warding off malevolent attacks and of preventing



imminent dangers. Or we may say, as David Chidester put it, 'the sacrificial killing of animals has been prescribed for two basic purposes, the expulsion of serious illness, disease, or evil through the sacrifice of a scape-goat animal and the restoration of health, purity, or order through sacrifice for the ancestral spirits.'<sup>36</sup>

Although we did not offer indepth explanation of what sacrifice is all about in African traditional religion, because it not the aim of the paper, what we have discussed so far can be seen as one of the things that constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion.

### 3.3. Offering as Worship

Offering is used as a synonym of sacrifice (or as a more inclusive category of which sacrifice is a subdivision) and means the presentation of a gift. The word itself is derived from the Latin word 'offerre', meaning 'to offer, present.' Thus the word evokes once again the idea of sacred action.<sup>37</sup>

In order to differentiate offering from sacrifice, it would be referred to the remaining cases which do not involve the killing of an animal, but being chiefly the presentation of foodstuffs and other items. As J.Van Baal stated 'reversibly, an offering can be a highly impressive religious ceremony without including a sacrifice', he went on, 'quite a variety of Balinese temple feasts do not include any form of ritual killing'.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, offering consists of foodstuffs such as fruits, maize, millet, nuts, cassava, water, and other things of a miscellaneous nature such as the dung of the hyrax, cloth, money, chalk, incense, agricultural implements ornaments, tobacco and cowries-shell. Thus, almost everything that human beings can get hold of and use, is offered to God and other spiritual beings. For instance, in Balinese temple feasts, the decorated dishes are prepared at home, afterwards to be carried by

the assembled villagers in a colourful ceremonial procession to the temple where they devoutly place the offerings at the foot of one of the shrines, to be dedicated by the priest who, on a raised platform, says his prayers and mantras and rings his bell.<sup>39</sup>

Like sacrifice, offerings are given for both communal and personal or family needs. These include whatever people wish and are able to give. Communal offerings as in sacrifices, are normally made at shrines or in sacred groves, or other holy places, such as hills, lakes, waterfalls, and so on. Personal offerings are normally made in or near the home.<sup>40</sup>

As we already know, people feel that for important needs they should not approach God with empty hands. People also know quite well that God will not literally eat or make use of their offerings, or sacrifice, but they want to show their humbleness before God, AND the seriousness of their needs. Sometimes the offerings and sacrifices are eaten by the ritual leaders. Sometimes the offerers share it among themselves. In some cases, the offerings which have been blessed are then given back to their owners for normal use.<sup>41</sup>

Allan Menzies wrote, 'offering is presented to the god whole, but the worshippers help to eat it. The god gets the savour of it, which rises into the air towards him, while the more material part is devoured below.' He goes on 'all the incidents of offerings and sacrifices suggest that it is not merely a thing offered to the deity, but a thing in which man takes part; if it is a meal, it is one of which the god and the worshippers partake in common'.<sup>42</sup>

Offering also have an intention as in sacrifice. Van Baal put it 'True giving is participating, in the life and work of the offerer, participating in ones universe as a sympathising member. No one can participate without offering first. Giving is essential for a meaningful existence. The simple food offering set aside for the gods, the prayer before meals, characteristic of mutual core in the small group, are the most real and effective means of communication, cementing togetherness and confirming security. All communication begins with giving, or offering'.<sup>43</sup>

If this is what offering is all about, one may conclude that African traditional religion

worshippers worship God with all they have been blessed. Therefore offering is one of the things that constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion.

### 3.4. Prayer as Worship

In the preceding sub-headings we have discussed sacrifices and offerings as some of the practices that constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion. In this sub-heading we will consider prayer as worship as well.

Prayer is worship because it can be found in many places in Africa. People offered their prayers to God all the time. It is said, 'prayer is the central phenomenon of religion'.<sup>44</sup> This statement can be applied to African traditional religion as well.

Heiler sees prayer as an expression of faith, life, work and ruling motive of the religious believer. He goes on to explain prayer as a sign of religion wherever it is alive; religion in action and through it differing cultural identities and revealed. He defined the word 'prayer' as a living communion of the religious man (and woman) with God, a communion which reflects the forms of the social relations of humanity. Prayer is not simply the oral aspect of worship or religious ritual, nor even simply an 'oral rite'. It is the essential activity, or the essential disposition of the religious man or woman. Prayer is the basic foundation of worship, and worship in its usual connotation goes beyond the verbal, material and corporal expression of prayer, to include instrumental or 'sacramental' rituals as well as merely expressive and instructional elements.<sup>45</sup>

S.A. Thorpe described prayer as a common characteristic found in all religions. For him the primal religions are no exception, although he sees that the outward forms which these actions may take differ in certain respects. According to him, the words of prayers comprise the verbal action of a larger ritual or ceremony and are often inherited formulations that have

been passed down orally from generation to generation. He therefore defined prayer as 'a means of maintaining communication with the spiritual realm, actions as well as speech may be viewed as prayer forms'.<sup>46</sup>

Looking at prayer as worship in African traditional religion, we can say that it is the commonest method of approaching God. This can be found in all African societies. Aylward Shorter categorised three basic types of prayers in African traditional religion. They are as follows, praise-poem form of prayer, for example, a panegyric or hymn. This type of prayer is a lengthy, poetic recitation, usually concerned with praise or thanksgiving, but this form of prayer sometimes is extended invocation, narrating in detail a set of circumstances as the prelude to a petition; the litany or call and response prayer form. In this type of prayer, a leader makes the invocations or intercessions and a choir or congregation takes up a formal response or refrain; and ritual formula form of prayer. This type of prayer is usually spoken, and short in length, in the form of a petition accompanying a ritual action.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to this, in African traditional religion, blessings, salutations, greetings and farewells are done in the form of prayers. For instance, the blessings are done by an elderly person. They may be a form of spitting or sprinkling water upon those who are being blessed, though it may vary from one society to another. The blessings are usually accompanied the name of God. For example, the prayer may be like, 'may God go with you', 'God preserve you and keep you until you see your children', 'may God help you', 'may God bless you'. Salutations, greetings and farewells are in the form of prayer. For example, 'go with God', 'Pass the night with God' and so on.<sup>48</sup>

As worship, prayers in African traditional religion may be done privately, by individuals, or by heads or their families. Other prayers are made communally, in public meeting for public needs. Anybody can pray to God at any time and in any place. On the one hand, there are also people who can pray on behalf of others. Such people are priests, rain-makers, chiefs, and

sometimes medicine-men or medicine-women, who may pray for the general public or for private individuals who ask their assistance. Within the family, prayer is normally done by the head of the family, or the oldest member of the family, but sometimes a ritual elder or local priest may be asked to do the prayer.<sup>49</sup>

Here are some examples on how African societies pray. Among Abaluyia, for instance, when an old person rise up in the morning, he kneels, facing east and pray to God, spitting and asking him to let the day down well, to pour upon the people his medicine of health, and to drive away the evil divinity. And among Galla, it was reported that they make frequent prayers and invocations to God. They pray in the morning and in the evening every day, asking God for protection of their cattle, crops and their families. For Ila, prayers are said to be addressed to God, asking him for help and during the time of drought, at the time of prayer, they come together and join in singing and invoking God saying, 'come to us with a continued rain O God, fall'.<sup>50</sup>

A report among Igbo stated that many of their prayers are offered to God through the deities especially *Chi* and *Anyanwu* (sun). Prayers that are addressed directly to God are prayers mostly in the form of invocations. These types of prayers are very frequent; Thus, when the head of a family wakes up in the morning, he may, after washing his hands, lay a *kola* or some snuff on the ground, saying, '*Obasi-Idinenu*' (*Chukwu*), watch over me and my children this day'.<sup>51</sup>

The Yoruba pray to *Olorun* as well. For example, in situations of sudden personal crisis when no other power is available or deemed effective, they appeal directly to *Olorun* (God) praying, 'may *Olorun* save me', *Olorun* have pity'.<sup>52</sup> As for Dinka, *Nhialic* (God) may also be invoked in times of personal distress by short petitioner phrases, '*Nhialic* Father, help me' 'Creator, Father, *Nhialic*. help me' I ask you my father'.<sup>53</sup>

Prayers made to God by African traditional religion worshippers are important because they

believe that God listens to their prayers. Like the sacrifices and offerings we have so far discussed, prayers also have purposes or intentions. Devotees perform acts of worship, prayers, offerings and sacrifices in order to keep alive their contact with their God. For instance, in times of trouble or when there is a crisis, they instinctively and automatically turn to God in prayers.

As stated above, some of the prayers are in the form of an expression for what God has done to them. Some prayers express concrete needs, such as good health, protection from danger, for safety in travelling, and for security, prosperity and the preservation of life both for the individual and for the community. For the community at large, prayers are always for rain, cessation of epidemics, for victory in war and so on.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to this, Geoffrey Parrinder wrote:

Prayer is worship, and in many places prayers are offered to God. They may not be uttered as frequently as to more trouble-some spirits. But when all else fails, when the thunder god or smallpox spirit do not hear, and the ancestors slumber or have turned aside, then the great God can be appealed to. He is the final court of appeal, the judge of all, and to him men [or women] turn in despair. They may approach him without priest or intermediary, with empty hands and in any place, since he is almighty and omnipresent, he can hear the slightest voice and humblest cry.<sup>55</sup>

Prayers in African traditional religion are essential, as in other religions. They are essential to the worshippers in the sense that they are an asymmetrical relationship with the supernatural power perceived in experience as Aylward Shorter put it:

**It is the certainty that the power is listening to the worshipper's story as it unfolds that encourages him to speak and to develop in a way he could not do outside this experience. The one who listens has an effect upon the worshipper analogous to that of the psychotherapist upon his client, helping him more effectively through listening than through offering advice. Yet, at the same time the worshipper is also listening, becoming**

conscious of the change that is being worked in him.<sup>56</sup>

He concluded, "Thus, prayer becomes a dimension of life that transcends and reinterprets every social relationship and social experience. Ultimately, prayer is a continuous mode of living, a living communion, by no means limited to occasions of formal utterance or formal communication. Obviously, prayer, like religious, faith, has different degrees of intensity. It is also true that it operates within social structures, serving a number of social purposes unrelated or incidental to its own".<sup>57</sup>

It could be also added here that through prayer it is evident that Africans communicate with God, by pouring out their hearts before him at any time and in any place. Thus, prayer strengthens the link between humans and God, and between humans and humans. Prayers also help to remove personal and communal anxieties, fears, frustrations and worries. Prayers also help to cultivate human dependence on God and increase his or her spiritual outreach.

Prayers in African traditional religion are essential because the worshippers address themselves to the invisible world. They do not see God, but they believe that he is present with them. Therefore, prayer is an act of pouring out the soul of the individual or community. In praying, the worshippers get as close as they can to God whom they worship, since they speak to him directly or through the intermediaries. Communal prayers also help to cement together the members of the group in one intention, for one purpose, and in one act of worship.<sup>58</sup>

### 3.5. Religious Leaders

Leaders are found in any organisation. Likewise, in African traditional religion they are leaders who play the role of religious leaders.

To begin with, priests are found almost in all of African societies. They are regarded as religious servants and are usually associated with temples. In African understanding the word priest is used to cover everyone who performs religious duties, whether in temples, shrines,



sacred groves or elsewhere. The priest is the chief intermediary who stands between God, or divinity, and humans. He or she is seen as the religious symbol of God among his or her people. Most of the priests' duties among their people are the, performing of daily and weekly rites, making libation, sacrificing and offering prayers for blessing and for other needy people.

In fact, the roles of the priests are chiefly religious, but since Africans do not separate religion from other departments of life, he or she may have other functions as well. Priests are also regarded as the spiritual and ritual pastors of the community or nation; because it is he or she who officiates at the time of sacrifices, offerings and ceremonies which are related to his or her knowledge. He or she may also contact the spiritual world by acting as a medium or having other individuals as mediums.<sup>59</sup>

Here are some examples. Among Ankore, Baganda, Ashanti, Yoruba and others, when they offer sacrifices and offerings in order to intercede with God or the divinities, is the priest who received the sacrifices and offerings and make intercessions on behalf of the needy people. We can see from here that the priests are acting as the living representative of their cult.

Apart from priests, some rituals can also be performed by the head of the family, whether male or female, in making family offerings, libation and prayer. In African societies, there are some elders in each community who are recognised as leaders by their communities. These elders take charge of communal rites, ceremonies, weddings, settlement of disputes, initiations festivals, rites of passage, rainmaking ceremonies, cleansing ceremonies, upkeep of shrines and sacred objects and places, and appointments, or various other functions of the community,<sup>60</sup> as the priests do.

Furthermore, in African traditional religion, there are also other functionaries who perform religious duties as indicated elsewhere. Such functionaries are, medicine-men and women, mediums and diviners, rainmakers and kings, and so on. These are also regarded as religious leaders, because their functions are connected with religion. For example, medicine-men or



women, in their treatment of a patient, apply both treat psychological and physical methods, which assures the patient that all is and will be well. This implies the medicine man and woman is both doctor and pastor to the sick person. Apart from this there are some diseases, some misfortune which are regarded as religious experiences that require a religious approach to deal with them.<sup>61</sup>

In this connection, mediums are associated with priests and temples or shrines, in some societies. Such mediums are found among the Ashanti, Baganda, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba and a number of other tribes, especially in West Africa.

Diviners also play the role of counsellors, judges, pastors, priests and so on. Divination links together in its own way, the physical and the spiritual worlds, making it a religious activity. The diviner as a religious leader fulfils an intermediary function between the human and the spiritual, for the sake of his or her own community.<sup>62</sup>

In regard to rainmakers as religious leaders, they also play a role in the performance of rituals or other ceremonies. During the time of drought they pray for rain. These functions are mediatorial positions between human and God or the spiritual realm. Rain is a deeply religious rhythm and those who deal in it transact business of the highest religious calibre.<sup>63</sup>

Lastly, other functionaries, such as kings or political rulers; are not simply political heads. They are regarded by the societies as mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. Their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. They are, therefore, divine rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. In many areas the ruler takes part or leads in national ceremonies, and may play the role of the priest, rainmaker, intermediary, diviner or mediator between human and God.<sup>64</sup>

All that we have so far discussed under this section, will enable one to see how religious leaders in African traditional religion play a great role in the worship of God. It will also enable one to see that everything in African traditional religion involves the worship of God,

because everyday activities is pervaded religion. Their political, sociological and economical life, is religious. Therefore, sacrifice, offering, prayer, and religious leaders constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion.

## END NOTES CHAPTER 3

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- <sup>31</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu ( ? ) Yoruba Sacrificial Practice. University of Ibadan, Nigeria. p.82
- <sup>31</sup> Chdster. David (1991) Shots in the Streets. Violence and Religion in South Africa. Boston. Beacon Press. p.58
- <sup>32</sup> Baal. (1976) P.162
- <sup>33</sup> Mbiti (1969).p.61
- <sup>34</sup> Baal (1976) p.162
- <sup>35</sup> Mbiti (1975) p.59
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 60
- <sup>37</sup> Menzies (1908) p.66
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid. 67
- <sup>39</sup> Aylward Shorter (1975) Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa. Nairobi, Oxford University Press. p.1
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.2
- <sup>41</sup> S.A Thorpe (1992) Primal Religions World-wide: An Introductory, descriptive review. Pretoria. University of South Africa. pp.113-114
- <sup>42</sup> Mbiti ( 1969) p. 55
- <sup>43</sup> Shorter (1975) p. 20

- 44 Mbiti ( 1969) p.65
- 45 Ibid. p.66
- 46 Ibid p.65
- 47 Ibid. pp.61-2
- 48 Metuh ( 1973) p.5
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- 50 Ibid. p.58
- 51 E.M.Uka, ed, ( 1991) Readings in African Traditional Religion Structure, Meaning, Relevance, Future. Peter Lang. p.50
- 52 Parrinder ( 1961 ) p.23
- 53 Shorter (1975) p.4
- 54 Ibid. p.4
- 55 Mbiti ( 1969 ) p.56
- 56 Ibid. p.57
- 57 Ibid. p.187
- 58 Ibid. p.188
- 59 Ibid. p.189
- 60 Ibid. p.169
- 61 Ibid. p.173
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## CHAPTER 4

### 4. SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICAN WORSHIP

#### 4.1. SPIRITUALITY OF WORSHIP

In the preceding chapter we discussed some of the things which constitute the worship of God in African traditional religion. In this chapter we are going to discuss spirituality in African traditional worship. This will include, spirituality of worship, ethics and spiritual life, and the physical aspect of worship.

To begin with, spirituality has been described generally as “those attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate peoples’ lives and help them to reach out toward the super-sensible realities”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, spirituality can be seen as the relationship between human beings and the supernatural being inasmuch as such a relationship derives from a particular vision of the world, and in its turn affects the way of relating to self, to other people, and to the universe as a whole.

This definition of spirituality is not restricted to any one religion, but it can also be found variously in all religions and cultures. In this case, spirituality can also be found in African traditional worship.<sup>2</sup>

It can be said that spirituality is the very soul of African religion because it is found principally in the mystical emotion provided by an African’s faith, and can also be seen in the meaning he or she gives to the dialogue between him or her and the supernatural being. As Zahan stated, ‘the essence of African spirituality lies in the feeling man has of being at once image, model, and integral part of the world in whose cyclical life he senses himself deeply and necessarily

engaged'. He goes on, 'moral life and mystical life, these two aspects of African spirituality, give it its proper dimensions. They constitute, so to speak, the supreme goal of the African soul the objective towards which the individual strives with all his energy because he feels his perfection can only be completed and consummated if he masters and surpasses himself through divinity, indeed through the mastery of divinity itself'.<sup>3</sup>

For Africans, life is a totality, culture is holistic. What one might isolate as the spiritual dimension among Africans, is embedded in the whole of the people's way of living. Spirituality in Africa is in the context of traditional religious practice. It can be found in the worship, ritual, and prayer which are performed by the worshippers. It is in these that people's spirituality becomes easier to grasp. It is here that Africans deepest aspirations are made manifest and their underlying outlook on the world of realities is revealed, not in theories or formulas, but in practical attitude.<sup>4</sup>

African spiritual life is so impregnated with the idea of immolation it is hard to find religious practices that do not include the slaughter of animals. That is why it has been said sacrifice is the keystone of African traditional religion. The sacrifice constitutes the Prayer that which could not be renounced without compromising the relationship between human kind and the supernatural being. It is from the blood of the animals which are sacrificed and human beings who have fallen on innumerable altars that its entire value in African traditional religion derives. It is through these sacrifices that a human being was trying to offer to the supernatural powers something of himself or herself. To offer animals as sacrifice in African traditional religion means to present oneself before the invisible. The sacrifice thus becomes the act by which one penetrates the very heart of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

We have already mentioned that spirituality in African traditional religion, include, acts such as, worship, ritual and prayer. Prayers are made to the supreme Deity, and also to other spiritual realities such as divinities, spirits, the living-dead, and personifications of

nature. Prayer according to Africans is based on the view that the world of realities consists of two interrelating spheres, namely, the supernatural being and the human being, of which human being is in some ways dependent on the supernatural being. So, human living, both individual and in community, consists mainly 'of' or 'exists in' an interaction between the human and supernatural being. In their prayers they ask for such things are basic to the very existence of individuals and the community. They also ask things for their survival. Some of the things they pray for include children, rain, abundant food, success in hunting, protection or healing from sickness and epidemics, aversion of war or success in it, reconciliation and peace, detection of evil and its defeat. Other things which people ask from God are the need to survive and live well, and to be protected from evil.

The spirituality here in what people pray for, is the conviction that is involved in their struggle between life and death, and that the outcome of the struggle depends on how successfully they may avail themselves of the help of the invisible world. In this struggle there are two elements of African spirituality. The first one is the consciousness that individuals and the community are committed to an ever-present struggle against menacing evil if life is to be worth living, and the second is the struggle of assistance which people ask from the invisible.

In addition to these there is conviction that this struggle is not pursued by individuals alone in isolation, but that it is through the community that the struggle can be carried on effectively. We can see from these that African spirituality is not for an individual only, but it also relies on the spirit of community as well, on co-operation rather than open competition, on sharing and redistribution, rather than on accumulation or individualistic hoarding.<sup>6</sup>

It can also be added here that spiritual experience is one of the cornerstones of religion. Although African traditional religion has always suffered in isolation from the other great religions of the world, yet, in terms of mysticism it is essential for it to be placed firmly in other religions. As Louis Massignon wrote, "if we define mysticism with Ghazali as methodical



introspection in religious experience, and its results in the believer who practises it, we must think that cases of mysticism can be noted in every religious environment where there are sincere and reflective souls. Therefore mysticism cannot be the exclusive property of one race, one language, or one nation. It is a human phenomenon of a spiritual order, which physical limitations cannot restrict". By definition, a mystic is 'one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity.'<sup>7</sup> The word was derived from the Greek word 'mysteria', in which the initiates performed dances and gave cries of joy to express the ecstasy of union with the deity.

An example should be drawn from the Old Testament, whereby, not only did the priests of Baal experience mysticism by crying out and cutting themselves with knives ( I Kings 18:28) but many other prophets experienced the same things. For instance, King Saul was not only a warrior and judge, but he was also counted among the prophets, and he experienced mysticism by tearing off his clothes and throwing himself naked on the ground before the Lord ( I Sam. 19:24 ). Jeremiah the prophet also went about with a yoke on his neck ( Jer.27-28 ), and prophet Isaiah who has been described as a wise counsellor, walked naked and unshod for three years ( Isa.20:2f ).

Although these examples may be interpreted differently, that does not concern us here, but the point here is that the practices of mysticism can also be found in African traditional religion. The persons who experience " possession" are not always trained experts but they may also be ordinary orthodox believers upon whom the spirit descends unexpectedly. If therefore, African phenomena of ecstasy and possession are considered in their universal context, they become more comprehensible, and it may be easier to take these practices further by linking with the religious experiences of the ordinary believer in African traditional religion.

An essential characteristic of these experiences is the belief that the spirit in question possesses the man or woman who is his property and servant. For example, the Fon of Benin

say that the god “mounts the head” of the person, or “comes into the head”<sup>8</sup> of his servant or wife. In Nigeria also the medium is regarded as the wife of the spirit. The divine messages which the possessors received are not the cause but the product of the possession, which is a mystical experience.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the mystical experience and the process of possession in African traditional religion and that of the Old Testament we have just discussed, one will see their similarities. More examples should be given on African mysticism. In Ghana, Margaret Field had conducted a research among Ga people, on the work of mediums in ‘Religion and Medicine for Security’ she reported:

The trancestates of the mediums were preceded by times of silence or dullness. Then suddenly, incited by the sound of drums, the medium began to shake and jump about. She would cry out, sing, dance, prophesy, speak in strange words or a language that was not her own. In this posed state mediums commonly do things that would be difficult under normal conditions running great distances, whirling round like dancing dervishes, and tearing off their clothes though never to a state of complete nudity. Usually the state of possession is calmer, although the medium does not stay still but shakes or dances a little. Her face is impassive like a mask while her eyes roll about or have a fixed stare. Eventually the trance state ends quickly, with the medium throwing herself to the ground or against a wall or into the arms of someone standing by. Then she often comes to her normal senses as if awaking from a deep sleep and is surprised at her state, but she seems to be very tired and often falls into a deep sleep.<sup>10</sup>

From this report, Field pointed out that African mediums go into a trance in order to help other people, and not to escape from the world, but to participate in the divine nature and bring the god’s message to inquirers. She also indicated that too much attention can be paid to the apparently “abnormal” behaviour of the mediums, which is not abnormal in their special

context. The shouts of joy or ecstasy, the words in foreign languages, "speaking in tongues", the symbolical actions and wild dances, are only outward signs of divine possession. But the medium is also a practical person, whose activity and words are directed towards the need of her clients, and for them she produces messages which may be strange but which have religious value. And in her own life the medium considers these trances as the chief part of her religious experience, which provides times of communion with the deity.<sup>11</sup> From these discussions, one may say that spirituality as in other world religions, can also be found in African traditional religion.

#### 4.2. Ethics and Spiritual life

The sub-heading can also be understood as morality. In this case we will use the word morality in place of the word *ethics*. Here I prefer the word morality than the word ethics because the word *ethics* is too broadly in this paper. We may therefore say that the sub-heading is about morality as spirituality in African traditional religion. Of course, this will not hinder us to use the word ethics where is necessary.

The word morality is derived from the Latin word *mos, or mores*, that is, in plural; meaning manners, moral character, the category according to which human conduct is judged according to a norm.<sup>12</sup> It can also be described as the mores, the manners and customs of society, or as a way of regulating the conduct of individuals in communities. In this case, it represents a response to the problem of co-operation among competing persons or groups and aims at settling disputes that may arise in social contexts.<sup>13</sup>

Before we relate morality to spirituality in African traditional religion, let us see what J.N.Kudadjie has written on: Does Religion Determine Morality in African Society? In this Kudadjie stated that most of the people who are of the opinion that morality can be determined

by religion based their argument on the fact that true morality has a total dependence on religion; that is to say, as regards the origin of moral ideas, the ethical standard, and norms, and the motives, sanctions and environment which make possible the good life. The second view which these people depend on is that "ethics is autonomous of religion, not only can people know and do the right thing independently of their knowledge of God, but their attribution of moral concepts like goodness, justice to God presupposes a prior knowledge of morality, so that if anything morality should lead to religion".<sup>14</sup>

His main point of argument here was that morality in African societies is not based on religion nor does it depend on religious beliefs and practices. According to him there are no facts which support that morality depends on religion. He quoted Danquah who wrote that "tradition is the determinant of what is right and just, what is good and done." He argued that in this statement there is no indication whether it is God who determines morality or tradition. He went on and quoted Idowu, whose statement reads, "Our own view is that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that to begin with, it was dependent upon it. God made man, and it is He who implants in him the sense of right and wrong. This is a fact, the validity of which does not depend upon whether man realises and acknowledges it or not."<sup>15</sup> According to Kudadjie, even in this quotation, Idowu did not clearly indicate that religion determines morality.

He also argued here that in many African customs there is little in them that is religious. He gave an example of the Yoruba greetings and the babies' ceremonial among the Adas of Ghana in which they performed it because it was the tradition of the people. In the babies' ceremonial the only part that can be regarded religious is the pouring of libation in which the people are thanking the gods and ancestors and asking their blessing and protection for the baby, its parents and the entire family. Apart from these, other activities in the ceremonial of the babies has to do with tradition of the people. Therefore, it cannot be said that morality is

the fruit of religion.<sup>16</sup>

To support his argument, Kudadjie used the factor of custom and tradition. He claimed that what has been the practice in a society from time immemorial is taken as right, and what has been avoided is wrong. So, the particular act which tradition has sanctioned or condemned may have a religious significance, but what actually makes it an act to be pursued or avoided is the sheer authority of tradition.

In fact, he did not completely disagree with the view that religion is the fruit of morality, for he stated that "religion has been issued in a certain way of life, for the phenomenon of religion is not complete without an ethical dimension". Of course, religion provides effective sanctions and environment; but so do others like social organisation. That religion is the factors of social structure and the hard social facts that bend people to adopt certain modes of behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

He concluded, "the simple truth is that religion is very important in the life of the African. But it is not the whole of his life. It is incorrect to claim that every aspect of the African's life is religious, and that morality in a traditional African society is determined solely by religion. But some morality is determined by language and education, social and geographical environments, tradition and customs, conscience and intuition which have no dependence on religion."<sup>18</sup>

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to argue on the question of whether religion determines morality in African society or not, however, one has to show his own stance on this argument. But before then, let us see what some scholars say about morality in African traditional religion.

Mbiti asserted that "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it".<sup>19</sup> Although we have quoted Idowu elsewhere, I would like to quote him again. Writing specifically on the Yoruba, Idowu said: "The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things, they are religious...The religion of the

Yoruba permeates their lives so much that it expresses itself in multifarious ways'.<sup>20</sup> McVeigh wrote that 'The African is deeply religious'. On these quotations and many others about the religiosity of African peoples has led some scholars to assert a link between religion and morality.

In her conclusion to her chapter on 'Morality' Monica Wilson remarks: 'To conclude, in the traditional societies in Africa there was a direct connection between religion and morality, though the concepts of sin varied and the sources of retribution were diverse'. Dickson also stated that '... in Africa religion and life go together: life is to a very great extent believed to be permeated by religious values'. He happens to subscribe to the view that in African thought there is some link between religion and morality. Busia maintained that 'Religion defined moral duties for the members of the group or tribe', and again, that 'The standards and loyalties, the obligations and reciprocities of social life in Africa are rooted in religion.'<sup>21</sup>

Some scholars take this to mean that the African moral system derives from, or is founded upon religion, and that African morality is a religious morality. According to Parrinder, 'Morality is bound up with religion and receives its sanction from the creator who gives the order of the world. What is ethically good must be ontologically good also'.<sup>22</sup> Here one may think, according to Parrinder that religion is the basis of morality. Thus, he sees African morality as an offshoot of African religion.

In his argument Kudadjie did not completely disagree with the question of whether religion determines morality, because he agreed that religion provides effective sanctions and environment. What we have discussed may lead one to look at the word 'instinct'. If one want to apply it to religion one may say that religion determines morality, because one does not create himself or herself. We are all created by God and he is the one who created what is within human being. Therefore, one may say that religion determines morality. We will turn to morality as spirituality in African traditional religion.

Human beings live in a moral community and their behaviour is prescribed by relationship. Good morality is living in appropriate relationships with other people, sanctions of morality are the disapproval of the social group, expressed in reward and punishment. Because of this, some people doubted whether God is essential to morality, or whether religion is necessarily moral, since morality concerns society in its interrelationships, horizontally rather than vertically.

But God is not to be separated off into some non secular or supernatural world; because he is the creator of all beings. Therefore, he is in the ordinary affairs of everyday life. Human beings believe that rewards and punishments come from God in reaction to human behaviour. NB

These show that He is closely concerned with morality. Rituals and sacrifices were sometimes made to renew the social order. So, morality is bound up with religion and receives its sanction from the creator who gives the order of the world.<sup>23</sup>

The complex interrelationship between religion and morality is illustrated by the fact that moral legitimisation may sometimes involve appeal to shared beliefs involving the supernatural or the sacred.<sup>24</sup> These indicate that one should talk about morality as spirituality in African traditional religion.

Let us see what some writers wrote about morality as spirituality in African traditional religion. Emezie Ikenga Metuh, writing about spirituality among Igbo stated that, according to African myths, God is not responsible for the presence of evil in the world. The presence of evil is blamed on their responsible behaviour of certain animals. For the Igbo the blame was on a vulture. The natural inference from these myths is that God, the creator, is all good. Therefore, he requires moral goodness from his creatures. So, physical evils are punishment for moral evils; and good fortune is regarded as the fruit of moral goodness. This is seen as a fundamental dogma in African ethical belief.<sup>25</sup>

The existence of moral consciousness in the African traditional religion can be shown in terms



of sayings, stories and practices which illustrate conscience, moral values and the moral code in African traditions. In African traditional religion, moral code, unlike the Ten Commandments, is not written down. Rather it is preserved in oral tradition and forms part of the education given to its members by the traditional society. Its observance is a moral as well as a religious obligation. Metuh stressed here that as in many preliterate societies, proverbs, names, sayings and folk tales are not merely instruments for preserving moral ideals, but are very effective methods of teaching them. He gave an example that many Igbo proverbs and sayings praise virtue and condemn vice; they approve of religion and disapprove of the irreligious; they predict blessings for goodness and warn of the evil consequences of bad behaviour.<sup>26</sup>

The basis of African morality does not consist in the ordinary behaviour of humans, there may indeed be some element of utilitarianism in an individual's approach to morality, but a balanced assessment of morality in African traditional religion should attempt to put it in the context of their whole system of belief, as expressed not only in the behavioural patterns of selected individuals, but set within the whole framework of ways in which Africans express themselves both individually and in their traditional groups.

In African societies, some see sin as consisting principally in the harm done to the welfare of a group member, so that stealing, witchcraft, murder and adultery are considered serious sins, which in some cases, are thought to be expiated by paying compensation. But this is only one of several aspects of the African view of morality. Crimes such as witchcraft, murder and theft require ritual purification for their expiation, because they are considered offences against God or the deities. I want to make it clear here that not only the sins mentioned above needs purification or expiation, there are certain things such as pollution, it though is not regarded as sin, that needs purification. When someone is being polluted from certain taboo, such person need purification before joining the community.

In fact, there is no doubt that traditional African morality emphasises social rather than



individual moral responsibility, but the supernatural takes precedence over both social and personal dimensions of morality. This is because the overriding concern in the African system of belief is the maintenance of harmony in the ontological order, in which the human being himself is a vital force. The basis of all morality is seen as the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between human beings and supernatural being.

Furthermore, some offences are primarily seen as offences against God, and others against the deities or ancestors. Still others are deemed to be directed against human society and some compromise the integrity of the individual.<sup>27</sup>

Among Igbo, said Metuh, the moral code is called *Omenala*, which in literal terms, means the customs of the land; and theologically, it means the customs sanctioned by the *Earthdeity*. This law embodies the moral code as well as the customs. So, offences such as murder, theft and adultery are all heinous crimes in the Igbo moral code, but the nature and gravity of each of them changes according to the circumstances, and have both social and supernatural repercussions. For instance, the Igbo respect human life. The taking of human life is regarded as a great evil. Therefore, murder is a heinous abomination and an offence against the Earth Deity. To do away with such crime an offering of expiatory sacrifices must be done to the Earth Deity. Sacrifices are necessary to restore the balance and harmony which has been disturbed by the offence. Theft is severely punished. A thief caught in the act may be summarily killed. Adultery is also condemned whether it is committed by a man or a woman. A man convicted of adultery pays a statutory compensation to the wronged husband. Adultery can be seen as social as well as a moral fault which brings down supernatural sanctions on the offenders.<sup>28</sup>

In all that we have so far discussed, the question whether African morality is referred to God or not still remains. Because Monica Wilson argued on this question that "since the traditional religions of African were not monotheistic, the sources of retribution conceived were diverse.

They include the shades; the heroes, living senior kin and village head men, neighbours and age-mates, all of whom were thought to exercise mystical power.”

What Wilson stated here is basically true, because she did not exclude God completely from the sphere of morality. As Meek reported, “*Ala*, the Earth Deity deprives evil men of their lives, and her priests are the guardians of public morality.”<sup>29</sup>

There are also other evils, which are the joint concern of *Chukwu* ( God ), the deities and human society. Adultery, for example, is not only an act of injustice against the husband, but is an offence against God and the deities. Therefore, whoever committed adultery may be punished or even put to death. Hence, not only the compensation that the offender has to pay, but also confession, and ritual purification are all necessary to obtain forgiveness.

Nevertheless the Igbo believe that whatever the intervening role of the deities,, the ultimate control of all morality rests with God. Besides the voice of conscience which God put in human beings, he exercises . His control over morality in several ways: first, through His universal providence over the universe; second, through his direct punishment of wrongdoing in this life; third, through the prerogative he has of allotting a good or bad during reincarnation cycles, and fourth, through his control of reincarnation itself.

Igbo also believe that order and harmony in the world are under the control of God and are ruled by fixed laws. Good deeds for example, bring order and attract peace, happiness and prosperity and evil creates disorder and brings suffering, misfortune and death.<sup>30</sup>

Although this discussion has not been very wide, nevertheless, there is an element of morality as spirituality which can be applied to other African societies.

#### 4.3. Physical Aspect of Worship

The physical aspect of worship that we are discussing in this section should not be confused

with the practical aspect of worship already discussed, that is to say, the sacrificing of an animal and the offering of agricultural items to God.

In this section the main emphasis will be on the spiritual aspect of the physical worship. It has been said that in Africa the “ hidden truth is more profound than that which is visible. The inner being is esteemed more highly than the outer being and thought has a greater value than act; intention prevails over action”.<sup>31</sup> I think this quotation need further investigation, though there is no space to discuss it in this paper.

In African traditional religion some practices seen as a social aspects, also has a spiritual aspects. Some of the practices, such as sacrifice, requires a victim of high rank, but if this victim is lacking, another of lesser importance may be substituted. If this one in turn proves impossible to find, another, even more “ insignificant” one may replace it .

Let us see one of many possible demonstrations of the importance which Africans give to the interior domain, to that which remains hidden and escapes the notice of others. Dominique Zahan wrote that initiation in Africa must rather be viewed as a slow transformation of the individual, as a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority. It allows the human being to gain consciousness of his humanity.<sup>32</sup>

In these practices, whether or not he or she participates in initiation societies, the individual feels himself or herself drawn toward the interior life, toward the search for the invisible and a dialogue with the divinity. It is in the initiation that spiritual life is developed, perfected, and completed by constant meditation. Thus, defined, initiation becomes a long process, a confrontation between the initiates which ends only with death.

Apart from the social aspect of initiation, it also entails a spiritual aspect as we have just said. Initiation in African traditional religion can be regarded as a sort of sacrament in which it grants the initiate resurrection and a new life after he or she has been symbolically put to death.

As Zahan stated:

It is generally held that the death and resurrection of the neophyte corresponds to the idea of the renewal of the human being who, owing to this symbolic trauma, sheds the 'old man' that he was in order to be transformed into the 'new man' of his or her new spiritual state. This is accurate if we look at the initiation rites 'close up'. As soon as we step back from these ceremonies and consider their most minute details, we notice that in reality they involve the idea of a fettle stage situated between the 'death' and 'resurrection' of the neophyte.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, among Gbaya tribe in Cameroon, they have boys initiation rite called *Labi*. This initiation is the Gbaya way for providing a comprehensive education for adolescent boys. The initiation, though, has no worship or sacrifice, but it is a religious practice. Because the training of the boys was not only physical and mental; but it was also spiritual. The initiation teaches the boys how to live and how to distinguish between right and wrong. This happens when the boys 'go under the water to die'.

The process of the initiation began with counseling, whereby the boys were notified of the difficulties they may face during the initiation. A part of the counselling goes as follows: "You are going away to die. You must take leave of your parents and be sure that all is well between you. You are going to learn how to live as a genuine person. Those who are not initiated into *labi* do not know anything about life; they are worthless".<sup>34</sup>

The essence of this initiation is the symbolical meaning of going into the water. Going into the water, a spear is used to thrust at the abdomen of each novice and it indicates that they have been 'killed' and 'buried.' After that the novices are taken to a certain place called, 'House of Blood'. The initiates are taken to that place as dead persons. In that place the novices are severely whipped and beaten by the old initiates. After that punishment, medicine is used to raise them from the dead. The medicine is poured into the nostrils of each boy, the immediate effect of which is a violent sneeze. All the old initiates shout, "To your health!" and "You are saved ( resurrected )!" This is an indication that in the eyes of the initiated, the life that follows

this event is a new one, it is life after death.<sup>35</sup>

From the House of Blood, the novices are given the blood to eat or drink as a covenant. "This is your blood". "Now that you eat this blood, if you ever reveal the secrets of *labi* to anyone who is not an initiate, may your own blood kill you!"...If you reveal the secrets of *labi*; may all that God has made kill you!"<sup>36</sup>

Apart from this declaration, the boys are also anointed with kaolin ( the white anointing) and camwood, ( the red anointing ). The white anointing signifies that the *labi* are separated from the rest of Gbaya society, they must not come into contact with women, but remain pure and undefiled. The red anointing indicates a change in status, an evolution; the boys are beginning to mature. The red colour indicates that the boys have passed through a veil of blood; they have left their past lives behind to be reborn in freedom through their participation in the *labi* rites.<sup>37</sup>

From this initiation of Gbaya society, although it has to do with a social aspect, there is also a spiritual aspect. For example, the washing away *labi* which states that, "we wash you to take away *labi*; you are a new person now," has to do with religion, and also the jumping on a goat which was dead, as a scapegoat of Hebrew tradition is also a religious practice.

We can see from here that the rites of washing, jumping over the fire and the Sore' branch and the boys' also stomping of a goat to death and jumping on the victim one by one until it succumbs, has to do with religion. However, the *labi* goat is eaten by the old initiates as a protection against witchcraft. We can see also the connection of initiation in Gbaya society to a sort of sacrament in Christianity. In this case we can see what the various aspects of the moral conduct of the Africans are; such as fidelity, hospitality, sense of justice, love and respect for relatives and traditions, modesty surrounding relations between the sexes, unselfishness, dedication and self-sacrifice.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, in African ethics self-knowledge inevitably leads to self-mastery. "An African's esteem for someone is a function of his or her ability to dominate his or her passions, emotions,

behaviour, and actions. Apprenticeship in this conduct begins during the first years of a child's life. This life immediately focuses on the domination of suffering, physical as much as moral". The child constantly learns to check his or her reaction towards painful situations which are imposed on him or her by the group during his or her progressive introduction into society. This life of suffering would be a humiliating dishonour both to himself or herself and his or her family if he or she were not able to repress his or her tears and especially, during the trials or initiation to which he or she is subjected. As A. Raffanel remarked:

**The blacks have a profound disdain for pain. They take pride in affecting indifference when they receive serious injury or when they are afflicted with painful illnesses: to make a single cry would be a dishonour. With equal success the women practice the stoicism of their husbands. While in labour they must seem not to feel the least discomfort. As soon as they have delivered, they clean their child and make it comfortable by themselves. That day or the next they go about the ordinary concerns of the household.**<sup>39</sup>

In all cases a single rule governs the human being's education; this is the stoic bearing of pain, which is felt to be the best training in self-mastering. In fact, the African places the true basis for the human being's dominion over his or her acts and his or her conduct in the power and control exercised over his or her speech. This is clear from the labi initiation rites of Gbaya society, whereby, from the 'House of Blood' the novices are given the blood to eat or drink as a covenant that is declared, "This is your blood". "Now that you eat this blood, if you ever reveal the secrets of labi to anyone who is not an initiate, may your own blood kill you!"... If you reveal the secrets of labi; may all that God has made kill you!"<sup>40</sup>

The ethic of African peoples goes beyond the framework of human conduct; it is a sort of wisdom. It brings human being closer to the divinity, for he or she who is able to assure his or her dominion over himself or herself possesses inner peace and equilibrium, true detachment. In both cases the human being is in search of a sort of deliverance capable of transfiguring his

or her terrestrial condition. Like the believer in the other world religions, the African is not only content to implore the pardon or aid of the divinity or to express his or her gratitude to him. He or she aspires to have contact with his or her god, he or she wishes for the sight of the one he or she adores, they long to become the other through a transformation which nevertheless they wish not to be radical.

The point that I am making here is that all those who practice initiation in African societies, put their emphasis on the spiritual aspect of the practice. Asceticism of the body, it is thought, sharpen the sensitivity of the mind, conferring upon it a greater liberty by orienting it toward interior life. In initiation such as mysticism, Africans through effort and asceticism place the wise human being in the best frame of mind to 'see God' and to lay out his or her path before he or she attains joy.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to this section, dancing as spirituality should be considered as well. Dancing in African traditional religion is part of worship. Dancing generally, has been described "as part of many systems of belief about the universe that deal with the nature and mystery of human existence and it involves feelings, thoughts, and actions".

In terms of religion, "people dance in order to fulfil a range of intentions and functions that change over time. People dance to explain religion, to create and recreate social roles, to worship or honour, conduct supernatural beneficence, effect change, to embody or merge with the supernatural through inner or external transformations, and to reveal divinity through dance creation".

"It has been said that the power of dance in religious practice lies in its multisensory, emotional, and symbolic capacity to communicate. It can also create moods and a sense of situation in attention riveting patterns by framing, prolonging, or discontinuing communication. Dance is a vehicle that incorporates inchoate ideas in visible human form and modifies inner experience as well as social action".<sup>42</sup>



Looking at dancing in African perspectives as spirituality, we may say that in traditional Africa, every life, blending profane and sacred activities, is permeated with music, dance, rhythmic movement, symbolic gestures, song, and verbal artistry.<sup>43</sup>

Many dances which Africans are performing are both religious and social. They are both religious and social in the sense that it is performed by several dancers and fulfils social functions.

Dance is frequently an element of the process by which meanings are exchanged through symbols related to the supernatural world of ancestors, spirits, and gods. It is part of ritual constructions of reality to communicate to people so that they may understand the world and operate in it. It is in dance that the lore of sacred and profane belief often intertwined, is told and retold.

Dance as spirituality in African traditional religion is "part of rituals that revere; that greet as a token of fellowship, hospitality, and respect; that thank, entreat, placate, or offer penitence to deities, ancestors, and other supernatural entities".<sup>44</sup>

Dance may also be used as "a medium to reverse a debilitating condition caused by the supernatural or to prepare an individual or group to reach a religiously defined ideal state. It is also used to embody the supernatural in inner transformation; for example, personal possession. It may serve as the activating agent for giving oneself temporarily to a supernatural being or force. This process is usually accompanied by a devout state and is often aided by auto-suggestion or auto-intoxication, further reinforced by audience encouragement".<sup>45</sup>

There are some reports which indicate that dancing in Africa has a spiritual aspect. For example, Nketia, Verger and others, reported of: "the importance of ancient songs which are memorised easily with the music and passed down from generation to generation. Here is the nucleus of creeds and religious history. The words, music and movement of the dance express



the character and actions of the deity that is being praised, and the nature of human petitions to him. For instance, the dancers wear coloured and symbolic costumes, become possessed by the god, and reveal his nature in action. The importance of music in African religious life is that it gives expression to the deepest feelings but it is not only feeling, for it points to belief in the life force that underlines religious thought. Dancing is symbolical and expressive in sound, gesture and costume, expressing the life of the family and society and the meaning of the world".<sup>42</sup>

We may conclude from this section that dancing in African traditional religion has its spiritual aspect, because people dance in order to explain religion, to convey sanctified models for social organization, to revere the divine, to conduct supernatural beneficence, to effect change, to embody the supernatural through internal or external transformation, to merge with the divine toward enlightenment, and to reveal divinity through creating dance.

## END NOTE

## CHAPTER 4

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- 33 Zahan (1979)p.110
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- 40 Ibid, p.205
- 41 Ibid: p.209
- 42 Parrinder, (1969) p.77

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

## 5.1 SUMMARY

In the attempt to discuss the worship of God in African Traditional Religion, especially what constitutes the worship, we were able to bring the different stands together. These include: The concept of God, sacrifice, offering, prayer, religious leaders, and the spiritual aspect of the worship.

In the Introductory chapter, we very briefly discussed the ongoing debate on ancestor-worship, in which the main area of the debate is on two words, 'worship' and 'veneration'. In these two words, we came to understand that the former applies to the worship of God and the latter is applied to the respect for and service of ancestors.

Being an ongoing debate, it is hardly proper for someone to draw a conclusion on the issue of ancestor-worship because the issue needs further investigation or more research. For this reason, I want to repeat here the suggestion made by Fr. Mulago, that in the study of African Traditional Religion, Aone has to reach out to the essential values by digging down, weeding and sweeping... one should travel on a difficult journey to the source of the Black man's thought' so to enable one to come out with a concrete result on whether the worship in African Traditional Religion has to do with ancestor-worship or they are being venerated. This is the work which is ahead for African students who are undertaking their studies in African Traditional Religion, particularly the African theologians.

In Chapter two, we discussed how one cannot talk about the worship of God, unless one has the idea of, and a concept for God. Here we have seen the contribution of various scholars, especially African scholars, who have undertaken research in African societies and, sometimes, among their own tribe, and who concluded that African peoples have a concept of God and that they worship God.

In addition to the concept of God among African peoples, there is also the belief in forces, such as lesser deities and spirits different kinds. We learn that these forces are regarded by the African peoples as the mediators between the human being and God. The question of these forces as intermediaries has been treated by some scholars, who say that when Africans regard such forces as intermediaries they are not saying that the forces are being worshipped as God. Because while God involves the gods and the ancestors in all aspects of governing the world, He does not however involve them in creation. The Africans see that the 'worship' of gods was wrongly interpreted by some early anthropologists. For Africans, creation is a continuous activity on God's part. Through the creation God makes his power and presence felt in the world.

In this discussion there is an indication that the Supreme Being is not a figment of the imagination, that God is not an abstraction, but He is a God who is capable of maintaining a personal relationship with the human beings that he has created and actually maintains such a relationship and that He is worshipped.

In Chapter three we discussed the main purpose of the paper, i.e. what constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion. We have seen from that chapter the purposes or intentions of the worshippers when they performed sacrifices, offerings and prayed to God.

Most of the sacrifices, offerings and prayer which they offered to God, were primarily a means of establishing contact with him, and when they were offered to Him it effected an entry into the divine presence. In this, the intention and thought of the worshipper is conveyed and sealed in the words and action.

Lastly, in Chapter four, we discussed how the worshippers of the African Traditional Religion are not only worshipping God physically, but that spirituality is an important aspect of the worship as well. We have seen how the worshippers are so much devoted and convicted spiritually in their worship.

Thus, the concept of God among African peoples, the sacrifices, the offering, and the prayer which they offered to God, and the spirituality of their worship constitutes the worship in African Traditional Religion.

Although the paper is not a comparative study, one may see that all the material presented here can be found in other world religions as well. I think these material are the primary and basic factors which constitutes the worship of God in most world religions.

## 5.2. SUGGESTIONS

Whoever reads this paper may come across things which raise questions which are left unanswered or which are not fully explained. For this reason I want to offer some suggestions here for the reader.

This topic needs more research in the sense that some people are still have the view that African peoples are ancestor-worshippers. Therefore, as already suggested elsewhere, one has to go to the grassroot of the African for further study on the worship of God in African Traditional Religion.

This topic became a challenge to me and I hope it will also become a challenged to the reader, especially the African theologian who undertakes studies in African Traditional Religion. I want to suggest here that Seminaries and Theological institutions on the African Continent should take the initiative of engaging in the study of African Traditional Religion. Not only studying the religion but also to introducing the subject in their curriculum. They should also undertake research in their respective societies, especially among their own tribes. Being part and parcel of their tribe or community, they will be able to elicit useful material on the worship of God in African Traditional Religion.

Lastly, but not the least, the African scholars should be encouraged to write more books on African Traditional Religion. The African scholars have an advantage in writing about African Traditional Religion, because they do not need to learn their own language and culture, as they are part of that culture.

### 5.3. RECOMMENDATION

A general question that one may ask here is, why does one study African Traditional Religion? There are many answers to this question many of which are not relevant here, but there certainly is a purpose in studying it. For most theologians, the main purpose of studying it, is to enable them preach their belief to adherents of African traditional religion, who have been regarded as ancestor-worshippers. If this is the case, and if this is the primary aim of studying African Traditional Religion, they need to be equipped well, and they need to go into the grassroots of the religion of African peoples and study what their beliefs are and how they worship God. For this, I want to recommend two methods of fostering the witness of one's belief to the worshippers in the traditional religions of Africa.

The first of these entails witnessing in the society of the adherents of the traditional African Religion, to the highest and best in the respective religions by the example of one's personal manner of life, behaviour, and worship.

The second method involves engaging, in a spirit of goodwill, in discourse with all interested persons about the teaching of their respective religions. In connection with this, one has to bear in mind that all world religions claim that their own religion is the only true religion. Therefore, one needs to be equipped in order to preach his or her religion to other world religions. Also one must seek always to show his or her appreciation of and respect for other people's religion and cultural values. One must also understand that one's attitude of neglect, outright rejection, and condemnation of other people's values, especially that of African Traditional Religion, incites hatred, and the witnessing which one wants to do becomes ineffective.

As Jesus Christ told his followers, "let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify God". If one engages with people of good will in this way the student of African Traditional Religion, not least of its worship of God, will achieve his or her purpose to understand and to be understood, to mutually enrich and grow together.



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