NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COURSE CODE: CTH 491

COURSE TITLE: AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

**COURSE
GUIDE**

CTH491

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Introduction

CTH491 is a 400 level course for undergraduates of Christian Theology. The course consists of fourteen units that present the new trends in theology. This course guide tells you briefly what the course is about, what course materials you will be using and how to work your way through these materials. It suggests some general guidelines for the amount of time you are likely to spend on each unit of the course. It also gives you some guidance on your tutor-marked assignments. You are advised to attend the tutorial classes to discuss your difficulties with your tutors.

Course Aims

There are objectives to be achieved in each unit of the course. Read these objectives and know them before studying each unit.

Working through This Course

To finish this course successfully, you are advised to study the units, locate the recommended passages and read them. Do not forget other materials provided by NOUN. At particular points in each unit, you will find self-assessment exercises. You are advised to do them because they are geared towards testing your understanding of the topic discussed.

You will also find tutor-marked assignments at the end of each unit. You are required to submit these assignments to your Tutor for assessment purposes. These tutor-marked assignments will count towards your overall performance in the course. There will be a final examination at the end of the course. The course will take you about

fourteen weeks to complete. All the components of the course are listed below. You have to allocate your time to each unit in order to complete the course successfully and on time. Do not jump units; study all of them because they have been developed hierarchically.

Course Materials

The major components of the course are:

(a)   Study units

(b)   References

(c)   Assignments file

(d)   Presentation schedule

Study Units

There are fourteen study units in this course. They are as follows:

Module 1   General Introduction to African Traditional Religion and Culture

Unit 1   Definition of African Traditional Religion and   Culture

Unit 2   Errors of Terminology of African Traditional Religion

Unit 3   Justification for the Study of African Traditional Religion and Culture

Unit 4   Sources of African Traditional Religion and the   Problems Confronting Its Study

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Unit 5   The Nature and Characteristics of African Traditional
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Module 2   God and Man in African Traditional Religion and Culture

Unit 1   The Concept of God in African Traditional Religious Beliefs

Unit 2   Ancestral Veneration in African Traditional Religion

Unit 3   Revelation in African Traditional Religion

Unit 4   God and the World in African Traditional Religion and
                Culture

**Module 3   The Relationship between African Traditional Religion
                and Culture**

Unit 1   The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Unit 2   Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religion

Unit 3   Proverbs in African Religious Beliefs

Unit 4   Symbols in African Traditional Religion and Culture

Unit 5 Totems and Taboos in African Traditional Religion and
                Culture

Assessment

This course is assessed in two ways: tutor marked assignments and a
final examination. In doing these assignments, you are expected to
utilize the knowledge gathered during the course. As the University is
now largely automated in its operations, the tutor marked assignments

are now done online and the grading immediate. This has largely helped in reducing the burden of slowness in accessing results by students. You are thus advised to adhere strictly to the deadlines given for their completion as stated in the presentation schedule and the assignment file. You are expected to do four Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) and the best three of these would be used for you. The tutor marked assignments will carry 30% of your total course grade. You are also expected to take an end of semester examination which is 70% of your total mark. This examination is also currently done on the electronic platform. It is thus obvious that you need to master your computer skills and become very techno-friendly.

Tutor-Marked Assignment

Nonetheless, you are encouraged to attempt the Tutor-Marked Assignments found at the end of each unit. Doing this will greatly help your understanding of the course material. Even though your assessment will now be electronic, you should not sacrifice the better understanding that attempting these TMAs would grant on the altar of indolence. As noted above, TMAs carry 30% of your final assessment.

Final Examination and Grading

The final examination of CTH491 will carry 70% of the total course grade. The examinations will comprise questions reflecting the kinds of Self-Assessment Exercises and the Tutor-Marked Assignment problems you have previously encountered in the course work. Expect questions from any part of the course. You are advised to go through your self-assessment exercises and Tutor-Marked Assignments before the examination. Make sure you have enough time in revising the entire course.

Facilitators/Tutors and Tutorials

There are arrangements for tutorials provided in support of this course. You will be notified of the dates, times and location of these tutorials, together with the name and phone number of your tutorial facilitator as soon as you are assigned to a tutorial group. Your tutorial facilitator will mark and comment on your assignments, keep a close watch on your progress, and address any difficulties you might encounter as well as provide assistance to you during the course. Do not hesitate to contact your tutor by telephone or e-mail if you need help. Contact your tutorial facilitator if:

i.   You do not understand any part of the study units or the assigned readings;
ii.   You have difficulty with the assignments; and
iii.   You have a question or a problem with an assignment.

You should try your best to attend the tutorials. This is the only chance to have face-to-face contact with your tutor and ask questions which are answered instantly. You can raise any problem encountered in the course of your study. To gain the maximum benefit from course tutorials, prepare a question list before attending them. You will gain a lot from participating actively.

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**UNIT 1   DEFINITION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL
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1.0   INTRODUCTION

In this unit, which is the first, you will be introduced to the definitions of
'religion', 'African', 'traditional' and 'culture'.

The unit will also discuss the importance of religion, culture and the basic components of culture. This unit sets the pace for detail study of subsequent units in this course. Therefore, to have in-depth background knowledge of the course, you are advised to carefully read the specific objectives outlined below.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define African traditional religion and culture
- give reasons for calling African traditional religion "African" and "traditional"
- explain the importance of religion and culture.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of Religion

Several attempts have been made at defining religion. It has been difficult to arrive at one acceptable definition of religion. This is because different people look at religion from different perspectives based on their beliefs, occupations and academic backgrounds. Thus, a farmer would look at religion differently from a tailor just as a pastor/priest would look at it differently from an academician. Even among academicians, the historian would see religion differently from the scientist, psychologist, philosopher and sociologist, and so on.

Due to the enormity of this problem, Professor Leuba is reported to have assembled 48 definitions of religion as advanced by other scholars and added two of his own (Idowu, 1973). His aim was to arrive at a definition that everyone would accept. However, Leuba ended up giving a definition that was too broad that no one accepted it. Apart from the problem of the various areas of specialisation, religion has to do with the sacred and the profane (that is, the holy (God) and the unholy (human beings), the worshipped and the worshipper. It becomes a problem for scholars to give a definition that would encompass all these vital components of religion. According to Kegley (1981: 25), "the word 'religion' is a generic word." This means it represents a group of religions and not just one specific religion. This is another difficulty in giving a definition that would accommodate all strands of religions.

Since the essential nature of religion appears to be vague, each person defines it based on what he/she thinks is an essential nature of religion (Spiro, 1966: 85-86). Thus, there are a number of problems associated

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with the definition of religion ranging from peoples' thoughts, beliefs, behaviours, tastes, emotions, feelings, attitudes, personal experiences, areas of interest and cultural conditions. Therefore, it is difficult for everyone to agree on one definition of religion (Yinger, 1970: 3-4). In this section, we shall examine some of these definitions.

Definitions of Religion from Anthropological Perspective

Taylor, E.B. gives a minimum definition of religion as "a belief in spiritual beings" (in Scharf, 1971: 31). This definition is too limited as it only reduces religion to beliefs in spirits. According to R. Brown, "Religion is everywhere an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on power outside ourselves, a power of which we may speak as a spiritual or moral power". This definition emphasised the importance of dependence on God. This could be expressed in rituals, which are a vital part of religion. Some of these rituals include prayer, sacrifice, baptism, offering, Holy Communion, wedding, and so on. Even here, only one aspect of religion is emphasised. This definition is thus not all-inclusive.

According to Geetu, C., religion is:

A system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasion and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Again, this definition is too long and does not adequately explain what religion is. In a similar fashion, Saper, E. (1960: 122) says:

Religion is omnipresent fear and a vast humility paradoxically turned into bedrock security, for once and fear is imaginatively taken to one's heart and humility confessed for good and all, the triumph of human consciousness is assured. There can be no fear or humiliation for deeply religious nature, for they have initiatively experienced both these emotions in advance of the declared hostility of an overwhelming world, coldly different to human desire… It is the permit, conscious or unconscious, of the ultimate reality following total and necessary defeat that constitutes religion.

Definitions of Religion from Sociological Perspective

Emile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices which are related to sacred things, things set apart and

forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church and all those who adhere to them." In this definition, Durkheim stressed the social aspect of religion even more than its spiritual part. He mentioned the basic aspects of religion, which are the church (the separated ones). Others are rituals, emotions of fear, and awe. However, this definition has over-stressed the social dimension of religion and cannot be accepted as an adequate definition of religion.

According to Yinger, J.M. "religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. It is the refusal to capitulate to death to give up in face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one's human association". This definition takes care of people's anxiety, security, confidence, hatred, despair, cooperation and so on. Thus, religion is a basic and permanent factor in human affairs.

For O'dea Thomas (1960: 27), "Religion is man's response to breaking points at which he experiences ultimate and sacred power. Out of this experience, religious organisations, ritual practices, beliefs and values evolve." This definition has brought out man's powerlessness in the face of nature. He calls this the 'breaking points'. These could refer to the sad moments in human life, difficulties people experience in the face of sickness, poverty and death. He says it is at these breaking points that religion becomes meaningful or is born. This means, if humanity has no problem, then religion would lose its value. Nevertheless, religion cannot be limited to problem solving alone.

Definitions of Religion from a Philosophical Perspective

According to Kegley, C.W. Religion is:

The attitude or active relationship and actions growing out of that attitude or relationship, towards whatever or whomever an individual and or group of persons take to be of greater value and reality (Kegley, 1981: 27).

Kegley believes that the basic features of religion are belief in God or gods, which differ from one religion to another, feeling and action (worship). While philosophy dwells more on reflective thinking, religion involves action. Thus, religious ideas, doctrines, and beliefs are put into action. Therefore, every believer knows that he/she is to live according to the tenets (teachings) of his/her religion. Religion is thus an important source of morality. It upholds moral values such as patience, honesty, responsibility, loyalty, love, truthfulness, accountability, mercy, kindness, tolerance, and so on.

Emmanuel Kant defined religion as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands." This definition has stressed the role of the "Divine" (God) in directing the affairs of humanity. It means that religion is only based on taking orders from the beyond – God or gods. However, religion does not only involve the idea of receiving orders from the Supreme Being. It also involves worship and moral living among members of the society.

3.2   The Term 'African'

African traditional religion is called 'African' due to certain reasons. First, it is called 'African' because it is indigenous, aboriginal, foundational or handed down from generation to generation. Again, the religion is "part and parcel" of African life. It was founded by the Africans and is handed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth. In addition, African traditional religion has been in existence long ago before the advent of Islam and Christianity on the African continent. Furthermore, African traditional religion is only practiced by the Africans. The Africans are "incurably religious people." Mbiti (1969: 1) believes that since there are a thousand and one ethnic groups in Africa and each group has its own religion, African traditional religion should be talked to in the plural. However, many other scholars of African traditional religion have disagreed to this pointing to the similarities in beliefs and acts of worship including the concept of God, which cut across all African nationalities.

3.3   The Term 'Traditional'

African traditional religion is said to be 'traditional' due to many factors.

African traditional religion is traditional because it is a religion and culture that is based on the lives of the Africans. This pattern of life has been handed on from their ancestors from generation to generation. Its mode of worship, articles of faith, materials used for worship in temples, shrine and holy places are all from the African local environment.

The Africans founded the religion and the Africans on the African soil practice it. It is a community affair and not limited to an individual. Religion is part and parcel of life in traditional African society. Religion permeates all aspects of life be it politics, economics, education, and so on. Thus, to be an effective member of the community, one must belong to the religion of the land. Right from birth to death religion controls every aspect of life of the individual. Traditional religion is part of African culture. One cannot separate oneself from traditional religion.

Unlike in other world religions, traditional religion has no one founder. It can be said to have arisen from the way of life within the traditional African society. Thus, African traditional religion is based on oral traditions, which are handed on by word of mouth from one generation to the other. Members of the society learn the tenets of the religion through practical examples from generation to generation. This religion can also be learnt through myths, folklores, informal stories of gods/goddesses, proverbs, songs, conversational music and dance.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Why call African traditional religion 'traditional' and 'African'?

3.4   Theories of the Origin of Religion

There are several theories of the origin of religion. We shall discuss some of them here. These include theological theory, speculative theory, mythological theory, psychological theory and anthropological theory respectively.

3.4.1 Theological Theory

The word "theology" is from two Greek words: *theos,* which means "God" and *logos*, which means "word." Theology is thus said to be God's words; it is the study of God. Theology is divided into six broad areas: the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the person of Christ, the work of Christ, the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of the last things known in theological language as eschatology. The theologian in the study of these areas uses information from both the Old and New Testaments to produce acceptable explanation (theory).

The essential ingredient in theology is faith in God. A theologian begins with personal faith in God and tries to work out the implications of God for human life. He tries to show how human experiences can assist him understand the nature of God. The emphasis of a theologian is on the spiritual aspects of religion rather than the political, economic, and social aspects of religion. The life to be lived beyond (in heaven) is the main concern of a theologian rather than the affairs of the here and now (this world).

According to Christianity, God revealed himself to humanity. Therefore, the transcendental being of God has been broken and has become a part of human history. The history of the Hebrews and of the Christian Church is from this standpoint. It is seen as a dialogue between God and his people. According to O'Dea (1966: 34), 'God has called the people

and they have responded to His call. In many and various ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world' (Hebrew, 1: 1-2).

Based on this view, from Abraham to Jesus Christ, God has established a relationship with the people and that relationship has continued. The Christian experience involves the relationship with the supernatural beings. The structure of religious experience examined here is based on the Christian perspective. It is a phenomenological analysis of the religious experience of Christianity.

3.4.2 Speculative Theory

This theory is based on critical and reflective thinking. Many people after the mythological theory of the origin of religion began to question the origin of religion. This approach is called speculative because they did not have sufficient knowledge about the origin of religion. Their ideas were merely based on guesswork. They did not use effective methods of research. Brandon (1969: 6) said they only used the logical reasoning method, which had no valid opinions.

3.4.3 Mythological Theory

This was almost the first known theory of the origin of religion. In the early period, the origin of religion was linked with the gods and goddesses. The priests of the various religious persuasions taught their believers that the gods were the original creators of the world. According to them, (priests) religion came because of the handiwork of their respective gods. That means a divine being created the world, human beings and all the things in the universe. As a result of this explanation, the followers of this beliefs started building temples and shrines for the gods. Sacrifices were also made to the gods for protection and blessings. Brandon (1969: 4) says the myths of the ancient people across the world portray their gods as the originators of religion.

3.4.4 Psychological Theory

This theory is largely based on the cognitive need theory, which says that religion evolved from man's need to find solutions to the uncertainties of his world. This came because of the solution to questions which early man asked such as what is the value of life? What is the purpose of life? Why is there illness, disease, hunger, and thirst? What accounts for the vegetation cover? Why do people die? Man needed basic answers to these questions and other aspects of life. This

theory of religion was thus developed to provide a rational explanation to these questions.

The projection theory, which is an aspect of the psychological theory, says religion was the projection of man's highest aspirations. Sigmund Freud (1901: 258-259) observed a psychological element in religion. He saw that it resembled the behaviours of neurotic patients (patients with mental disorders). Freud felt that religion was an expression of psychological processes, which were brought out from the inner self. The Freudian theory was based on the "animism concept." This was to cope with the problems of this world, the need for security and power. The second strand of Freud's theory of the origin of religion is called "Oedipus complex." He said in pre-historic society, due to marriage problems, the father expelled some of his sons. Those expelled conspired, killed their father and ate his body. Later, due to the fear of further killings within the family, the children decided to deify their father. They set up a pattern of worship from where religion emerged. Thus according to Freud, religion began from a human fatherhood to a spiritual fatherhood.

One can also see from this theory that fear, anxiety, awe, emotions, feelings and despair are all features of religion. This could be described as the emotional theory of the origin of religion. Man in his inexplicable experiences of life, which are fascinating and terrifying, gave rise to a great feeling and non-rational response to the unseen source of the agent of the experience God.

3.4.5 Anthropological Theory

One of the earliest known theories of religion is that of animism. E.B. Taylor propounded this theory in his book *Primitive Culture.* This theory tried to explain the origin of religion. Taylor sees religion as belief in "Spiritual Beings." According to him, the primitive man's first experience of the idea of spirit was from his sleep, dreams, shadows, breath and death. He argued that the primitive man conceived that the spirit was an invisible being that could animate as a soul even in natural objects such as stones, trees and the celestial bodies like the stars, sun, moon and water. Thus, the primitive man believed that natural objects had souls. This was because he could not comprehend the power of natural phenomena such as the stars, moon, sun, clouds, wind, rain, rivers, thunder, lightening, and so on. Due to the fear of these inexplicable natural phenomena, primitive man decided to worship the natural phenomena. This lead Taylor to conclude that the idea of animistic souls give birth to the beliefs in celestial gods and thus the origin of religion.

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The theory of animism says that the primitive man believed that the world was animated by impersonal powers. For James Frazer however, magic was the first known form of religion. Man first tried magic; when magic failed, he tried religion learning to seek favour from the natural power by means of prayer and sacrifice.

3.4.6 Sociological Theory

Emile Durkheim says man's dependence on society gave birth to religion. Thus, for Durkheim, the origin of religion can be traced to society. Durkheim maintained that the rules and values of society exist for its members as something beyond and above them. Each member of the society believes that the rules and values of society go beyond and are more lasting than his/her existence. Durkheim therefore, defined religion as an acknowledgement of man's dependence on a superior power. This acknowledgement is put into action by means of rituals, which enables a person to put his/her self in the right relationship to this power. Thus, he/she can receive rewards and punishment from this power. For Durkheim society is far and above man. That man respects and worships the symbols of society, which are seen as sacred things of religion.

On the other hand, Spenser states that religion started with animism to polytheism to monotheism. Animism is the belief that all things both animate and inanimate have souls. While polytheism is the worship of many gods, monotheism is the worship of only one god or deity. Spenser is of the opinion that religion is a mistake and in fact an illusion that has surrounded humanity; sleep, dreams and death gave rise to the idea that the soul can live independent of its body. Thus, sacrifice came as a result of the worship of the souls of the departed persons. Sociological theory believes that natural phenomena, which possess power, were adored and were believed to have indwelling spirits in them. These include the sun, moon, stars, storms, thunder, lightening, rain, and so on. E.B. Taylor essentially shared this theory. According to this theory, the primitive man created religion out of his intellectual ability and ignorance of the workings of the natural phenomena.

Marx's idea of the origin of religion can also be classified under a sociological theory. Marx says its men who created religion and not religion that created man. Karl Marx sees religion as a creation of the rich. According to Uchegbue (1989: 30), the rich created religion to calm and control the poor people's thinking, behaviours, aspirations and reactions. Marx actually sees people becoming religious to improve on their poverty situation. By fitting everything into a beyond, man believes that all his frustrations, fear and anxieties would be overcome. This

Marxian theory is almost similar to that of Freud. Freud sees religion as defence by man in his helpless confrontation with the terrible nature. Man is afraid of the deities but he is sure that they would provide him security against all dangers.

3.5   Definition of the Term "Culture"

Culture is generally seen as people's way of life. It could be referred to as a kind of good knowledge, handed from one generation to the other so that each can take advantage of the experience of the previous ones. It is passed from parents to children. Culture may be passed on to children in many ways: through marriage ceremonies, initiation ceremonies or through teaching of morals and ways of doing things like farming, hunting, fishing, and so on.

Different people have defined the term "culture" differently. According to Shaibu and Puke (2001: 147), culture is the whole body of knowledge, beliefs, arts, law, norms, morals, customs, values, habits and all other capabilities, acquired by man as a member of society. In a similar fashion, Mkpa (2001: 112) defined culture as the totality of a people's way of life; adding that culture is the whole gamut of knowledge, beliefs, customs, traditions and skills that are available to members of a society. These are man-made things, which are to guide all aspects of a people's life. Culture is the sum total of human knowledge as acquired behaviour of human kind. Wagley (1990: 384) in a technical sense says human culture includes insignificant and mundane behavioural traits of everyday life, such as dietary habits, dressing, language as well as refined art of a society.

3.6   Components of Culture

Culture has two basic components. These are material and non-material culture. Material culture consists of all objects, physical traits, instruments and tools, which are made and used by people in various aspects of their community life. These include things like cutlasses, hoes, and normative aspects. Material culture also embraces achievements of people such as production of food, water supply, clothing, housing, healing, tools, utensils, weapons, art, literature, science and technology.

Non-material culture refers to the non-physical phenomena processes and ideas, which are abstract and non-visible but are part of the people's way of life. These consist of ideas, knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs which are prevalent among a given society. Others include the rules, regulations and norms of behaviours and social actions.

Culture is an all-embracing concept in which religion is also involved. Therefore, the African religion can be said to be tied to culture. You would study the relationship between religion and culture in module three. The intertwine between religion and culture has given rise to the study of African traditional religion and culture.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Religion is difficult to define because of its generic nature and the personal attitudes of the scholars. The various theories of the origin of religion discussed include the speculative theory, mythological, anthropological, philosophical, psychological and sociological theories respectively.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt the definition of religion, and culture. You have also learnt why African traditional religion is termed 'African' and 'traditional'. This unit has also discussed the main theories of the origin of religion as well as the components of culture. We have seen the basic components of culture and its relationship with African traditional religion.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

African traditional religion is called "traditional" because it was handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the other. The religion has been in practice on the African soil from time immemorial.

African traditional religion is called "African" because it was founded by the Africans. It is for the Africans and it is practiced by the Africans on the African soil and it has been nurtured on the African soil for a very long time.

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Outline and discuss the problems of defining religion.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2   ERRORS OF TERMINOLOGY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you learnt that African traditional religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our ancestors or forefathers. These forefathers formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, observed religious ceremonies and rituals, uttered proverbs and myths, which conveyed religious meanings, and they enacted decrees, interdicts, laws and customs which safeguard the moral life of the individual and the community.

As noted earlier, African traditional religion is embedded in the African worldview as well as in the norms and values of the people. The concept "African traditional religion" is profoundly typified in the African life, the world and the universe. For the Africans, there is the world of man populated by created things and beings, both animate and inanimate. There is also the spirit of world, the abode of the creator, the deities, the disembodied and malignant spirits as well as ancestral spirits. To the Africans, the spiritual and the physical could communicate and coalesce yet maintain their uniqueness and functions. Thus, Anih (1992: 12) contends that there is always cacophony in the symphony of African thought and interplay between the spiritual and the physical.

African traditional religion is characterised by people's belief in and fear of the super-ordinate being, belief in lesser gods, deities, and spirits as well as belief in the ancestors. The deities, lesser gods and spirits obtain their powers to dominate over men from the supreme deity and are regarded as the agents of the supreme God and intermediaries between the latter and the people.

African traditional religion, however, has been grossly misrepresented and misconceived by Western scholars and foreign missionaries. The misconception of African traditional religion is most apparent in the terminologies wrongly applied to it. We shall consider these derogatory or disparaging terms of African traditional religion in this unit.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify factors or reasons that lead to misconceptions about African traditional religion
- describe the various disparaging or derogatory terms or misconceptions of African traditional religion
- discuss these misconceptions in the light of practices within the traditional religion.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Introduction to the General Errors of Terminology of African Traditional Religion

A close study and evaluation of African traditional religion over the years has been influenced by many historical factors. Foreign scholars have written many books and articles about African traditional religion. In these writings, a number of wrong and disparaging terms have been used. This has led even some African scholars to use the same terms and hold the same ideas about their indigenous religion. Reasons for these attitudes are not far-fetched. These range from sheer ignorance of African cultures among early travellers, racial and cultural superiority complex among some European writers, and colonial domination, to the assumptions of evolutionary, psychological, sociological, and anthropological theories.

Many of these foreigners were missionaries, traders, and explorers. For these categories of writers, anything that had to do with Africa was considered archaic, backward and inferior. Even the widely acclaimed scholars who did not carry out an in depth study about the Africans and their religion were guilty of this. This perception led to the use of such terms as animism, fetishism, totemism, paganism, heathenism, primitive, and so on.

Thus, an error of terminology can be explained here as meaning when one tries to describe or given name to that which he does not really

understand. Errors of terminology in African traditional religion will be treated in this unit.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Fill in the blank spaces with the correct words or phrases.

1.   African   traditional   religion   is   characterised   by ……………………….

2.   List three factors or reasons responsible for the errors of terminology in African traditional religion:

(a)   …………………………………………………………………
(b)   …………………………………………………………………
(c)   …………………………………………………………………

3.   List any four of these derogatory terms:

(a)   …………………………………………………………………
(b)   …………………………………………………………………
(c)   …………………………………………………………………

3.2   Errors of Terminology of African Traditional Religion

(i)   Primitive

The term "primitive" is derived from the Latin word "*primus*" meaning "first in relation to second." Primus, in this context, is "that from which other things are derived." Similarly, the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word "primitive" as early, ancient, old-fashioned, simple, rude, original and primary. Western scholars used this word to describe anything that did not meet up with their set standards or expectations or in describing certain cultural patterns that did not conform to their accepted behaviour. It was also used to denote those things left behind in the crave to attaining modernity. Again, the word was used out of prejudice to connote backwardness of other races or tribes, intellectually, socially, economically and religiously or spiritually.

Therefore, out of ignorance and prejudice, these scholars used this term freely to apply to Africa and her religion. Onwubiko (1991: 64) confirms that it is not uncommon to read books referring to African traditional religion as "a primitive religion" in a derogatory sense. He contended that those who use the word to describe African traditional religion do so in reference to Christianity. The sense in which *primus*

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means "that" from which a thing is derived cannot be applied to African traditional religion with reference to Christianity; however, the sense in which *primus* refers to the "first" in relation to the "second" can be applied to an African convert as having been converted from his first primitive religion to his second religion, Christianity. Outside this context, it is a misnomer to designate African religion as a "primitive" religion.

(ii)   Animism

The term "animism" is derived from the Latin word "*anima*" meaning "soul." The term according to Taylor means the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general. Animism as used and understood by E.B. Taylor has two meanings: first, it can be understood as a belief system according to which religious men especially primitives attribute a soul to human beings and hence to other living creatures, and to inanimate objects. Secondly, it can be taken as a theory held by E.B. Taylor and his followers that the idea of a human soul was because of reasoning about certain psychic experiences especially dreams. In such a minimum definition of religion, Taylor introduced the term "animism" to cover all forms of beliefs in spiritual beings.

The belief in spiritual beings includes two forms: the belief that human beings have souls, which survive their death; and the belief that other spiritual beings exist. Animism owes its origin to early attempts to explain several bodily and mental conditions like sleeping, trance, disease, life and death, human shapes that appear in dreams and visions.

All these experiences found their explanations if one believes and supposes that there exists a soul, which can leave the body temporarily or permanently and go elsewhere. The idea of the soul and of its survival gave rise to the cult of the dead especially in the form of ancestral worship.

Taken as a religious phenomenon, animism appears to be universal in all religions and is not limited to primitive forms of religions alone. It manifests itself in different kinds of spirits, which include:

(a)   Spirits associated with human beings such as souls of human beings departed, ancestral spirits, malevolent spirits of people who die under unnatural circumstances.

(b)   Spirits of non-human natural objects like waterfalls, rocks, mountains, and so on.

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(c)   Spirits associated with social groups like gods, demons, and angels, and so on.

(d)   Spirits associated with natural forces like wind, thunder, flood, fire, and so on.

As explained above, "animism" applies to all religions and African traditional religion cannot be described as animism. Any religion that professes animism accepts beliefs in spirits and recognition of spirits as having separate and separable entities from the objects, which are their symbols. Hence, the belief among Christians too that God is a spirit, and all those who worship Him, worship Him in spirit and in truth (Awolalu, 1979: 78). Mbiti (1965: 17) supports this as follows: "To say that there are spirits in the world does not mean that people's religion is only about these spirits. Christianity and Islam also acknowledge the existence of spirits, but neither of them is animism."

(i)   Fetishism

The word "fetish" is derived from the Latin word "*factitius*" meaning "magical artful". From being used by the Portuguese traders and explorers, "*factitius*" became part of English and French vocabularies, and was spelt "fetish" and "*fetiche*" respectively. The word "fetishism" came into use as describing African traditional religion and related matters.

Fetishism is the belief that spirits inhibits certain objects. It is a well known fact that in many tribes objects such as bundles of sticks, which could be representation of beings are treated so with special reverence and religious virtue is also attached to them. Such objects are called fetishes. Parrinder (1960: 15) asserts that these objects become sacred because they are thought to be dwelling places of the deities or objects where the deities manifest themselves and then disappear occasionally. He contends that no people worship material objects as such, but that there is a clear distinction between material objects, symbols and the divine being symbolised by them (material objects).

There are three general beliefs concerning the existence of spirits after death, which are derived from animism according to Taylor.

(a)   Belief that souls metamorphose into other beings.
(b)   Belief in a special residence for souls in another world.
(c)   Belief that the soul or spirits continue either to live in the life similar to the earthly life or they are rewarded or punished according to the deeds of their earthly lives.

The above description fits the belief of many world religions, including Christianity and Islam. However, the European scholars only associated the traditional religion with fetishism. This is in sharp contrast to what Parrinder (1060: 15) observed in his study on African traditional religion. He contended that religion is not just the worship or work of men's hands, and that no heathen in his blindness bows down to wood, stone or any created objects.

Mbiti (1965: 17-18) agrees with Parrinder when he said that fetishism is a word which came originally from a Portuguese word used by early Portuguese traders and travellers to describe the charms worn by Africans on the West Coast of Africa. Since then fetishism has been widely used to describe many other things connected with African religious life. It now connotes something bad and primitive. However, fetishism is completely an inadequate term to describe African traditional religion. A charm cannot be a religion, neither can a religion be a charm. Thus, fetishism as a general description for religion in Africa results from a misuse or abuse of the word, and it is most inappropriate (Idowu, 1973: 128).

(iv)   Totemism

The word "totem" comes from a term of a tribe in North America usually written as "totem," "totam," "dotaim." Totemism can be broadly described as a system of beliefs and practices embodying a certain idea of mystical or ritual relationship between members of a social group and a species of animals or plants. It implies respect and injunctions such as prohibitions against killing or eating the totem animal or plant, or against interfering with the totem animal or plant.

Members of a social group also believe that they are descendants of such totemic ancestors or believe that they and the members of the totem species are brothers or related. Therefore, they use the totem as a group symbol of unity, and they consider it as a protector of that group. They also perform "increase rites" to effect the multiplication of these species.

However, this should not be confused with animal worship; totems are not worshipped. Totem creatures are not selected because of their imposing appearances but because of some social interactions. The designation of such totems is because of the mystical relation they have with certain animals or plants in the past.

Unfortunately, the early missionaries conceived these totemic symbols as idols and branded them as such. Awolalu (1979: 19) had this to say concerning the attitude of the European scholars, "Africans have been

labelled 'idol worshippers,' because of lack of understanding on the side of the outsiders or foreigners."

(v)   Heathenism

The word "heathenism" has its roots from German language meaning "a dweller in the heath." The word "heath" was originally used to refer to wasteland, outskirts of a city, a dwelling place for vagabonds, brigands, and hooligans. Therefore, the heathen was considered as one who belongs to or has the habit of, or has the forbidding quality or characteristics of the heath dwellers.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary on the other hand defines heathen as "one who is neither Christian, Jewish nor Mohammedan, unenlightened person. As carefully observed by Awolalu (1979: 21).heathen and pagan is made synonymous. This term "heathen" was given a new interpretation by sociologists in describing the religions of primitive societies including African traditional religion. Chartenji (1960: 134) also commented on the missionaries' attitude to African traditional religion in their use of derogatory terms. He asserted that most of the Christian missionaries that brought light or the gospel to the "dark continent" thought that with heathen religion and her cruel or barbaric practices, the minds of the Africans were plunged into the darkness of ignorance and superstition; and as such, only Christianity could dispel it.

(vi)   Paganism

The word "paganism" comes from the Latin word "*paganus*" meaning "a village-dweller or a country man." Paganism also means "one who is removed from a civilised community or one who lives in an unenlightened environment." Onwubiko (1991: 64) opined that paganism seems to be the oldest and most common name used to describe the religion of the so-called "primitive people." This term was adopted and used by the Christian missionaries in describing village settlers who were yet to be converted into Christianity. This later received wider acceptance among sociologists and even African Christian converts. Unfortunately, Christians do not use this term on Muslims. This implies that practitioners of African traditional religion are looked upon as pagans while Christians and Muslims are not pagans.

Mbiti (1965: 17) states

Paganism or pagan is sometimes used as a derogatory word to describe Africans who are not followers of either Christianity or Islam. Yet there are many people in Europe and America who do not follow either of

these world religions, and are often wholly irreligious but they are never called pagans. Africans who follow African traditional religion are deeply religious people and it is wrong and foolish, therefore to speak of them as pagans, or to regard their religion as paganism.

(vii) Tribe

Oxford Dictionary defines tribe as a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor… Set of people that can be lumped together (usually contemptuously…) (NTI, 1990: 69. Module 5). This definition is misleading and has reduced the people to the stage of atavism. It is not too different from the definition given by the Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English, which sees tribe as a racial group especially one united by language and customs, living as a community under one or more chiefs. All these definitions should not be used to refer to Africans. The term "tribe" is actually no longer used to describe people. At present, the term "ethnic group"   has come to replace tribe. This term (ethnic group) is most appropriate to describe people and not just African alone.

(viii) Native

This means a place in which one is given birth to – a person or peoples' place of birth. For instance, African traditional religion was born in Africa. In this case, the religion is native of Africa. However, as used by the Europeans, the term "native" connotes backwardness and thus should not be used to describe Africans and their religion. The Europeans use the term "native" to imply that the Africans are underdeveloped. For instance, the Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition brings out this discrimination clearly. It defines native as one born or whose parents are domicile in a place. Until the Europeans understand that all human beings are equal despite the differences in colour, culture, and geographical location, this discrimination would continue.

(ix) Savage

This word is used to describe the uncivilised nature of Africans. In the past, Africans were looked upon as wild and uncivilised people. That is why some Europeans described them Africans as 'black monkeys'. This was because of some European travellers who were only concerned in emphasising the dark side of the Africans. They popularised the bad aspects of the Africans and took to the Western world nude pictures of

people at times sitting with wild animals. This portrayed Africans as uncivilised people.

In addition, due to some practices carried out by the Africans, such as human sacrifice and the throwing away of twins, the name savage was used to describe Africa and her people. This is prejudice on the part of the Europeans. As Idowu (1973: 112-113) rightly observes, till date, there is wicked wrestling, wanton shooting, murder, and all forms of violent going on in the developed countries but they are not described as savages. Thus, the term "savage" cannot be said to adequately describe African continent or their religion.

(x)   Idolatry

This word is from the Greek word "*eidolon,*" meaning "image or pantheons." That is "things used to represent other things as symbols or emblem" (Awolalu, 1979: 19). It also means a conception, in the mind, as idea, vision, fancy or imagination. The Europeans have called Africans idol worshippers due to misunderstanding. The truth of the matter is that, the idols are believed to be the representatives of God. They are a means to an end and not end in themselves.

The idols and other images, which the Africans venerate, are intermediaries between God and man in African religious beliefs. For instance, some of these objects could be changed or even destroyed, but the true essence of the religion (belief in God) remains intact. It is unfortunate that the term "idolatry" is used to imply that which is false, unreal, a false god or image of the mind, a false conception or false representation of other things. Initially, idol was not a representation of falsehood. It symbolised what was real before it later came to be used as an emblem of religion. According to Idowu (1973: 125), it would be unfair to term African traditional religion "idolatry."

4.0   CONCLUSION

The misconception of African traditional religion is most apparent and appalling in the terminologies wrongly used in our study above. Our discussion revealed that European writers and even some Africans have designated African traditional religion with such derogatory terms like paganism, animism, heathenism, totemism, primitive among others. These terms were used out of sheer ignorance, out of prejudice, or skepticism, superiority complex or racial bias. Therefore, these and other misnomers must be dropped for proper terms. Accurate terminologies are necessary for clear expression of original African religious concepts.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that Africans belief in the Supreme Being, lesser gods, deities and spirits. We have identified some errors of terminology of African traditional religion such as a primitive. fetishism, totemism, heathenism and paganism. We conclude that these derogatory terminologies should be dropped and original African religious concepts be used as replacements.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

1.   African traditional religion is characterised by the people's belief in the Supreme Being, and in the lesser gods, deities and spirits.

2.   Factors responsible for errors of terminology of African traditional religion are:

(i)   Sheer ignorance of African culture
(ii)   Racial and cultural superiority
(iii) Colonial domination
(iv)   Assumptions of evolutionary theorists

3.   Derogatory terminologies/errors of terminologies of African traditional religion are:

(i)   Primitive
(ii)   Animism
(iii) Fetishism
(iv)   Totemism
(v)   Heathenism
(vi)   Paganism

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1.   What four factors gave rise to errors of terminology of African traditional religion?
2.   Briefly discuss fetishism as an error of terminology of African traditional religion.

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 3   JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

CONTENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Africa has a rich heritage of what past generations of Africans thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage links African ancestors with their descendants. A study of such a rich heritage makes it possible to see and understand something about the people who lived not only a short while ago, but several years ago.

Religion is part of the cultural heritage. It is by far the richest part of the African heritage. Religion is found in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of Africans to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organisations and economic activities. We can therefore say that religion is closely bound with the traditional way of African life, while at the same time, this way of life has shaped religion as well.

Given its importance in the life of Africans, religion should be studied carefully and thoroughly. For that reason, this unit concerns itself with the study of African traditional religion and culture, which has grown out of the African soil. It is called traditional to distinguish it from any other type of religion, since there are other religions in Africa.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the reasons for the study of African traditional religion
- discuss the future of African traditional religion
- justify importance of studying African traditional religion.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Characteristics of African Traditional Religion

We shall now consider the characteristics of African traditional religion in order to see what it really means. Religion according to Mbiti (1965: 10) can be seen in five parts. No part by itself constitutes the entire meaning of religion. All these parts must be seen as working together to give a complete picture. They are beliefs, practices, ceremonies and festivals, religious objects and places, values and morals, religious officials or leaders.

Beliefs are an essential part of any religion. They show the way people think about the world and their attitude to life. African religious beliefs centre on God, spirits, human life, magic, death and the hereafter.

Religious practices, ceremonies and festivals are also essential to any religion. Religious practices show how people express their beliefs practically. They include prayers, rituals, sacrifices and offerings, and so on. Festivals are joyful occasions where people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event.

Religious objects and places cover the things and places, which people have set apart as being holy or sacred. They are seldom used except for a particular religious purpose. There are many such religious objects and places. Some are man-made while others are taken in their natural form and set aside for religious purposes.

Values and morals are the aspects of religion, which deal with such ideas that safeguard or uphold the life of the people in their relationship with one another and the world around them. Values and morals cover issues like truth, justice, love, right and wrong, good and evil, beauty, decency, respect for people and property, the keeping of promises and agreements, praise and blame, crime and punishment, and so on.

Religious officials or leaders are the people who conduct religious matters such as ceremonies, sacrifices, divinations, prayers, etc. These

are trained men and women. They have vast knowledge about religious affairs more than other people, and are respected by their community. They hold offices as priests, ritual elders, rainmakers, diviners, medicine men, etc.

These are the five essential parts, which make up a religion. They have to be considered together, because religion is complex. Having considered the parts, which make up a religion, let us now see the importance of religion in any given society.

3.2   The Importance of Religion in the Society

Mbiti (1969: 1) asserted that Africans are notoriously religious, and each person has its own religious systems with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all the departments of life so much that it is not easy or possible to separate it from the society. From this assertion, and from what we have discussed so far, we cannot deny the fact that religion occupies a key position in any given society, Nigeria inclusive.

Religion helps people relate harmoniously with one another, and with their creator. This relationship promotes peace and avoids conflicts. Comte and Freud Marx, Martin (1967: 8) observed that religion was dismissed as a meaningless subject; however, the situation has changed over time; the importance of religion in society is now accepted in Britain. Martin refers to religion as a social reality so pervasive and powerful. After all, faith and ritual persist.

Religion permeates culture and mediates in social structures. Studies in sociology and political science have revealed that it is quite impossible to ignore a religious factor in party affiliation, voting behaviour and pressure group formation.

3.2   The Role of Religion in the Society

The functionalist theory sees religion as a system of interrelated systems that constitute the whole social system. Each unit or sub-system is interdependent on the other institutions of the whole social system. Changes in any part or sub-system affect the others as well as the total condition of the whole social system. This argument of the functionalist theory is that anything that has no function ceases to exist. However, since religion has continued to exist, it probably must have a function within the social system.

The functionalist school of thought views the contribution of religion to human societies and cultures based on its general characteristics of

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contingency, powerlessness, and scarcity. The functionalists assert that since human beings live in conditions of uncertainty and insecurity, all things are contingent and so devoid of any security. According to functionalists, human beings are incapable of controlling and affecting situations within their environment such as suffering, decay, death, and so on. This exposes their weakness or powerlessness. Lastly, that human beings have to grapple with scarce resources to satisfy unlimited wants or needs, there is relative socio-economic deprivation.

Based on these three characteristics of human existence, which have been described by Weber as "breaking points in human existence," religion plays positive roles in society. Some of the positive roles or functions of religion will be discussed here.

Religion introduces a new life style. A new outlook, thinking and conduct or behaviour is introduced to adherent's knowledge to shape their reflections, decisions, choices, tastes, opinions, habits, feelings and freedom of action. Such a particular lifestyle is created, maintained and sustained through religious doctrines, laws and ethics. These serve as safeguards, checkpoints, or racetracks against a deviation from the laid down lifestyle.

New relationships are also established. Religion creates several fellowship levels – women, adult, males, and the youth. Out of these groups, friendship, marriages, godparents, godchildren, and fraternal brotherhoods emerge. Thus, religion opens a new horizon in the life of the adherent as he is given an opportunity to interact socially and religiously.

The Introduction of New Institutions

Religion introduces new institutions to its adherents. For example, the Christian missionaries introduced such new institutions like hospitals, schools, a new legal system, a new form of marriage (monogamy), and so on. Similarly, Islam introduced Islamic education and the Sharia legal system. All these institutions were alien to the African prior to the coming of these religions on the land of Africa.

 Religion enhances the establishment and maintenance of new social groups among various communities. The Christian missionaries, for example, introduced in Nigeria such groups as Boys' Brigade, Girls' Brigade, Boys' Scout, Fellowship of Christian Students, Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association, and so on. In these social groups, members learn both religious and social values, which help them to be faithful Christians and patriotic citizens.

Dissemination of Ideas and Information

Religion introduces new ideas and aids the dissemination of such ideas and information to every nook and cranny of the community. Christian missionaries brought new ideas and information about education, medicine, business enterprises, agriculture, roads, pipe-borne water, rural electrification, games, bridges, architecture, organisation and administration. All these ideas and information were disseminated to mission stations in rural communities. The Islamic religion did the same thing, having introduced Islamic education, laws, Arabic language, Arabic writing, mode of dressing, architecture, marriage and purdah system, and so on. These religions and others alike have established communication channels such as newspapers, television, radio, pulpits, revivals and religious literature to enlighten members of the public about their activities, and current issues in the mass media.

Religion transforms the society

Every newly introduced religion changes a people's culture. It does this by introducing new cultural elements such as religious doctrines, dogma, laws, organisations, pressure groups, buildings, patterns of marriage, kinship, training of children, death and burial rites among other elements of culture. For instance, Christianity came and eliminated some traditional and cultural practices like the killing of twins, slavery, female circumcision among some communities.

From all these we can see the positive role of religion in the society. However, we must note that religion plays negative roles or functions in the society too. For instance, religion serves as a source of conflict between individuals and communities. Religious intolerance and fanaticism often mars peaceful co-existence among families, communities and nations. Wrong religious orientation could lead to deviant behaviour and deficient personality maladjustment and integration. Occasionally, religion prevents its adherents from attending to their social needs, and action that could have improved their condition in society.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

1.   List the five characteristics of African traditional religion.
2.   Mention any two importance of religion in the society.
3.   Identify four positive roles of religion in the society.

3.3   The Role and Significance of Culture in the African Society

The word "culture" has no generally accepted definition. This is because it is not possible to have a consensus among scholars as to what the word "culture" means. However, scholars in sociology and anthropology have put forward certain definitions of culture, which seem to be generally acceptable in the academic arena. Radcliffe Brown, a sociologist, defined culture essentially as a set of rules that embody the basic ideas that give a society its identity and bind it into a unit. While E.B. Taylor, an anthropologist, defined culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

From the elements of culture mentioned by Taylor, we can classify culture into three broad categories, namely the cognitive aspect of culture (knowledge and belief), the technological aspect (art), and the ethical aspect (moral, law and custom). All these constitute the "complex" whole in our definition (Adelakun, 1990: 15).

For culture to be well understood, according to Ogunmodede (1990: 23), it has to be analysed in at least three levels, namely human, social and historical.

Culture is neither divine nor natural. It is a human product. It is the totality of human efforts and achievements in the course of his struggle for existence and survival amidst the unfriendly militating forces of nature. Hence, Neibuhr (1976: 103) asserts that culture is the product of the hand and mind of man.

Society and socialisation characterise culture. As the life and soul of people, culture cannot be conceived in a vacuum. Everyone is born into a society. It is here in the society that he lives. It is in society that he develops and realises himself as a person. Here, he acquires cultural values, learns and socialises with others and makes his own contributions to the overall wellbeing of his society.

Culture has a historical evolution and development. In the course of living together in the society, new situations arise in time. These require change and adjustment in life style. The ability to change is what differentiates man from rigid and programmatised and mechanised animals, and makes possible the evolution and development of history.

Although culture cannot be reduced into forms of atoms, we can however identify major components of it. Adelakun (1990: 7) identified

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two broad categories of culture as, material culture and non-material culture. Material culture consists of all objects: physical, traits, instruments, tools which are made and used by a people in various aspects of their community life. These include things like cutlasses, hoes, brooms, pots, pipes, masks, clothes, and so on.

Non-material culture refers to the non-physical phenomena, processes, and ideas, which are abstract and non-visible, but are part of the peoples' ways of life. Non-material culture is further divided into cognitive and normative aspects. The cognitive aspect of non-material culture consists of the ideas, knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs which are common among a given people while the normative aspect of non-material culture consists of the rules, regulations and norms of behaviours and social actions.

From our definition of the concept, levels and components of culture, we come to understand that different people have different culture, and that culture keeps changing, whether rapidly or slowly. The word "culture" covers many things such as the way people live, behave, act, their physical as well as their intellectual achievements. Culture shows itself in art and literature, dance, music and drama, in the styles of building houses and of people's clothing, in social organisation, and political systems, in religion, ethics, morals and philosophy, in the customs and institutions of the people, in their values and laws, and in their economic life.

Each African tribe has its own cultural heritage. Some aspects of our cultures are fairly similar to other parts of the continent. There are also many differences, which add to the variety of African culture in general. For instance, in many parts of Africa one finds round houses, the keeping of cattle, sheep and goats, and the growing of banana, millet or yams as staple foods. The custom of one husband having more than one wife exists in practically every African society.

Legends, myths, proverbs, riddles and stories are found as common features among Africans. These have been transmitted orally from one generation to another. Some are a record of actual historical events while others are created by people's imaginations. They serve many purposes – to entertain, to warn, to teach morals, stimulate the imagination of the listeners, a chronology of heroes and heroines at given periods of time. Myths and stories are often ways of explaining certain things. Proverbs and wise sayings are the rich deposit of many generations. Every African society has its proverbs, and wise people know how to use them properly.

From our foregoing discussion on concept of culture, some basic characteristics seem to emerge. These are highlighted below.

- **Culture is socially determined.** This means that culture has to do with human relationships, which are differentiated, from the kind of relationships that exist between animals or objects. It encompasses a practical condition in which the members involved in the relationship are in some intelligible sense mutually aware of the existence of each other. These elements share set goals and values in life.

- **Culture is transmissible.** This means that culture can be transmitted or passed from one group to another, and from one generation to another. This is the element of continuity in culture. It does not die with those who practice it but outlives them.

- **Culture is general.** This refers to generally held and shared experiences by a group of people at the same time. Although there could be variant cultural patterns within a social group; sub-groups might exhibit unique conduct or behaviour or possess unique implements, which are not common to other related groups, majority of the people at the different social levels share such behaviour and implements.

- **Culture is obligatory.** Here, every member of the society is more or less under obligation to accept it. A few, may however, reject it. However, when they do that, society looks at them as having deviant behaviour or social maladjustment.

- **Culture is variable and dynamic.** This means that culture is not static. It changes and evolves out of other cultural patterns.

From our analysis of these cultural characteristics, we can postulate that African traditional religion forms part of the cultural heritage of the people. Before the advent of Islam and Christianity in Africa, African traditional religion regulated the cultural lives of the people. As Agbodike (1999: 112) puts it, "Religion needs culture for its illumination and culture needs religion for its purification." African traditional religion can hardly be separated from African culture as the whole world of the African is said to be holistic and is constantly animated all round by religion. It is for instance, difficult to differentiate African traditional religion from traditional medicine, law, custom and government. African traditional religion is so intertwined with African culture that among the Tiv, for example, neither the culture nor the

social and political system of the people could be understood without reference to their religion.

Thus, the following significant roles of culture have been captured here for your consumption.

(i)   Culture provides the impetus of a people's thinking, speaking, behaviour, hearing, feeling, seeing, evaluating and interpreting of events and experiences.
(ii)   Culture spells out conditions for common agreement or consensus for establishing and maintaining relationships, interacting and cooperating, contacting and assisting one another as well as giving and receiving greetings and gestures from one another.
(iii)   Culture helps members of a community in accepting to integrate an individual into a group and consequently enhancing the unity of the group.
(iv)   Culture preserves historical and social ideas, knowledge, techniques, methods, beliefs, procedures, rules and regulations, rewards and punishments.
(v)   Culture assists in explaining a people's actions, conditions and experiences.
(vi)   Culture serves to maintain safeguards against attack and extinction of a people's values, norms, beliefs, moral codes, etc.

Dzurgba (1990: 4) asserted that every culture is designed to perpetuate the survival and solidarity of a people as well as to meet the needs of individuals for an orderly, peaceful, secure and stable way of life and for satisfaction of biological needs.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Write true or false to the following statements:

i.   All the scholars cannot agree with one definition of culture.
ii.   Only the anthropological definition of culture given by E. B. Taylor has been commonly accepted.
iii.   Culture includes both material and non-material components.
iv.   Culture is an abstract subject and so cannot have characteristics.
v.   Culture and religion are inseparable in African worldview.

3.4   Justification for the Study of African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion is no longer an exclusive preserve of study for Western scholars or investigators. Many African scholars, researchers and students of higher institutions of learning engage in the study. A number of reasons have been put forward for this sudden change of attitude. These reasons have been classified into cultural, academic and psychological.

Cultural Reasons

1.   This study will lead to cultural and religious rejuvenation. We have already stated that religion permeates every aspect of the African culture so much that the two concepts- religion and African culture are inseparable. However, Western scholars and investigators have not only failed to understand the concepts; they have also misrepresented them with all kinds of derogatory terms.

2.   The study of African traditional religion reveals the glorious aspect of our cultural heritage. Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (1990: 14-15) discussed the need for respect for heritage; they identified three dominant attitudes to African past: shameful rejection, romantic embrace, and realistic appraisal.

3.   The study of African traditional religion helps in re-shaping the African history and culture. African culture and history has come under serious attacks from the Western world and has been linked with such barbaric acts like slave trade, cannibalism, and so on. A careful study will reveal that African traditional religion is rich in morals, values, and upholds high moral standards on its adherents.

4.   Separation of virtue from vice: It is only an in depth study of African traditional religion that will reveal to scholars the virtues inherent in the religion and the attitude of the people towards virtue and vice. Hence, the misconception that everything African is backward, barbaric and that there are no moral values among the people will be erased.

Academic Reasons

1.   The study of African traditional religion is important to bring to the knowledge of learners basic information about the indigenous religion of the African.
2.   The study of African traditional religion is important to have fair knowledge of what our forefathers left behind in order to lend value to it.
3.   The study of African traditional religion is important to document for future records the beliefs and practices of our forefathers for the purpose of continuity.
4.   As an academic discipline, the study of African traditional religion and philosophy is offered as an academic discipline alongside others like mathematics, sociology, psychology, and so on. It uses the tools of scholarship in sharpening students' skills in identifying their roles in the contemporary society.
5.   The study of African traditional religion is necessary to provide the basis for dialogue with other world religions towards identifying points of convergence and divergence.

Psychological Reasons

1.   The study of African traditional religion is essential to eradicate prejudice or sentiments and errors of terminology.
2.   The study of African traditional religion eliminates psychological and emotional barriers between Africans and the Westerners.
3.   The study of African traditional religion gives clear understanding of a person's psyche or mindset to sell an idea to the person. Africans quickly embraced the Christian religion because they had a clear vision about the Supreme Being (God). A mindset had already been created.

3.5   The Future of African Traditional Religion

We have learnt that religion, in all cultures, has contributed to the origin and the development of arts, poetry, music, dance, drama and all the visual arts. Religion is central and fundamentally important aspect of culture. A people's culture cannot be divorced from their way of life. It therefore means that African traditional religion is a living religion. For this reason, it is not likely to become extinct like the religions of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Even though most of its adherents are ashamed or shy to openly identify with it when they fill forms in hospitals, for admissions in schools, for employments, or to embark on journeys. Instead of identifying with their religion (African traditional religion), Africans will rather identify with the Christian religion or

Islamic religion. However, in practical terms, many Africans visit *babalawos* or soothsayers, some wear amulets or charms around their waist or ritually prepared finger rings or bangles. This is an indication that the future of the religion is still very bright, as it still has a couple of practitioners.

Secondly, there is renewed interest in the study of Africa's past. The advent of Neo-colonialism and the agitation for reparations for Africa have opened a floodgate of opportunities and renewed desire to study the traditional religion and culture of Africa. The study of African traditional religion has become a global thing as it has been introduced into the curriculum of many institutions of higher learning in Africa and throughout the world.

Lastly, many scholars and students are calling for a return to the basics- the traditional religion for failure of Christianity and Islam to instill the right moral codes into the citizenry. Many African scholars have written to counter the derogatory terms hitherto used by the Western scholars to . The future of African traditional religion in our institutions is very bright.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

1.   List any five justifiable reasons for the study of African traditional religion.
2.   Are there any prospects for the study of African traditional religion?

4.0   CONCLUSION

In African traditional society, religion and culture are the hubs around which human personality, movements and institutions are organised and pursued. The traditions of the people are rooted in religion and culture and the corporate life of the people is determined by religion. Social and political relations, unity and solidarity are regulated by divinities or spirits on grounds of appeasement, expiation, propitiation, adoration, prayers and sacrifice. Religion dominates the people's worldview in cultural, social, economic and political spheres.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, we have discussed the:

- characteristics of African traditional religion which are beliefs, practices, ceremonies and festivals; religious objects and places; values and morals religious officials or leaders.
- importance of religion in any given society which is that, religion helps a people to relate very well with one another, and with God.
- role of religion in the society. As a functional system, religion performs the following functions or roles:
- importance and significance of culture. Culture is classified into three aspects – cognitive aspect, technological aspect, and ethical aspect. Three levels of culture have also been identified as human, social, and historical. Two major components of culture have been identified is material culture and non-material culture.
- basic characteristics of culture have been identified:
- significant roles of culture are as follows:
- justification for the study of African traditional religion under three headings-cultural reasons, academic reasons and psychological reasons.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

1.   Characteristics of African traditional religion are:

(i)   Beliefs
(ii)   Practices, ceremonies and festivals
(iii)   Religious objects and places
(i)   Values and morals
(ii)   Religious officials or leaders

2.   Importance of religion in the society:

(i)   Religion permeates into all the departments of human life.
(ii)   Religion helps people to relate harmoniously with one another.
(iii)   Religion promotes peace and avoids conflicts.

3.   Roles or functions of religion in the society:

(i)   Religion introduces a new life-style
(ii)   Religion establishes new relationships
(iii)   Religion introduces new institutions

(v)   Religion creates new social groups
(vi)   Religion disseminates ideas and information
(vii)   Religion transforms the society.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

i.   True
ii.   False
iii.   True
iv.   False
v.   True

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

1.   Justifications for the study of African Traditional Religion:

(i)   Cultural and religious rejuvenation
(ii)   Exploring the glorious aspect of our cultural heritage
(iii)   Reshaping of African culture and history
(iv)   Separation of virtue from vice
(i)   Provision of basic knowledge to learners
(ii)   Fair knowledge of fore-father's religious practices
(iii)   Documentation of beliefs and practices
(iv)   As a branch of academic knowledge
(v)   Providing common grounds for dialogue
(vi)   To eradicate prejudice and sentiments
(vii)   Clear understanding of mind-set
(viii) Breaking of psychological and emotional barriers

2.   Future prospects of African Traditional Religion:

(i)   It is a living religion with practitioners in every part of
        Africa.
(ii)   There is renewed interest in the study of the religion by
        Africans and foreigners.
(iii)   There has been a clarion call for a return to what is truly
        African.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1.   List and explain any five functions of religion in any given
        society.
2(a)   What is culture?
(b)   Briefly explain material and non-material culture, giving
        examples.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 4   THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

CONTENTS

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Objectives
3.0   Main Content
         3.1   The Basic Elements of Religion
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1.0   INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that every cultural group in Africa and in fact the world over has its own religion according to its way of life. The Africans have long past the time of pretending that they never had their own religion before the advent of Christianity and Islam. In an attempt to explain the state of affairs before the in-road of imported religions which in essence have the same theme but differ in approach, traditional religions are consciously cultivated and lived in order to enable the African to grow and remain rooted on earth, in relation with fellow men and with the Supreme Being.

People's way of life, most especially traditionally, is strongly attached to their rootedness. African traditional religion is not confined to the Africans. It can be found worldwide like Central Australia, East and West Indies, and so on.

This unit will bring to your awareness, the basic elements of religion, nature and features of African traditional religion.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

•   describe the nature of African traditional religion
•   identify its characteristic features.

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3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 The Basic Elements of Religion

There is a belief that religion has a great relationship with the beyond. This connotes that man cannot reach the beyond socially, physically or emotionally. It is greater than man. Based on the nature of man, he came to realise the beyond by reflection. Man is a complex human being made up of body and spirit; thus, his spiritual nature perceives the beyond. This is also why religion is a feature of every society.

When breath ceases, man stops being self-conscious. This alone is pregnant with a lot of questions such as "who is responsible for the removal of self-consciousness?" At this point, it is indeed quite clear that the power that gives life, also takes it. The consensus is that, the spiritual part of man goes to lodge with the creator, who is also a spirit. It is obvious that this "Great Spirit" or "Power" isolates Himself from people's affairs; He is called by different names by different cultures. He is God.

God is described as holy and kind; He gives inspiration. People reverence and feel unclean before God; He is thus regarded sacred. Sacredness of God exists in all religions. He has the powers to give His sacred nature to places and people. Many examples abound of sacred places in different religions. Moses at the burning bush in Midian and Jacob are clear examples. Moses saw a burning bush and heard a voice while Jacob had a dream. This message portrays that both of them were in sacred places.

Jacob's reaction was to erect an altar. The altar is in a sacred spot and there is a feeling of the divine there. Churches, mosques and shrines are good examples or the equivalent of such holy places. It is pertinent to note that anywhere people gather to meet with God is regarded as holy or sacred spot. Every religion has its sacred place.

At the meeting of God and Moses at the burning bush, he was instructed to remove his shoes because that place was holy. Wherever God meets people, such places are considered holy and all religions have such places.

(a) Sacred People

All the religions of the world have sacred people. These are the people who serve as intermediary between God and human beings. The level of sacredness may vary from one culture to the other.

Many a time, we are told that God revealed himself to Moses and afterwards, Moses' face changed, reflecting God's glory. God built into Moses, a feeling of awe. This feeling of Moses' change of face illustrates the change that goes on in the personalities of sacred people. They are no longer ordinary people. This ushers in the idea of "separateness." Thus, a sacred person is set aside from others to serve God. Abraham is indeed regarded as the founder of Judaism, Gautama Buddha founded Buddhism, Mohammed founded Islam, Christ founded Christianity, and Zoroaster founded Zoroastrianism. Thus, many religions have founders who are worshipped by their followers.

The encounter between God and Moses gave him a lot of self-confidence when he asked Moses to pick up the stick he made which became a snake. He (Moses) was afraid but God again turned the snake to become a stick and Moses was baffled. The miracle made Moses to be self-confident. This made Moses to accept the divine message he earlier rejected. When he went back to Egypt, he used the power God showed him to prove to everyone that he was God's messenger.

Some sacred people have others as assistants and these are intermediaries. They bring people closer to the beyond and they are no longer ordinary, but ordained by God himself.

In African traditional religion, the priests and diviners are sacred people. They are the intermediaries between God and human beings. They perform rituals and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people.

(b)   Sacred Things

Examples of sacred things include sacred books, which contain the word of God or words of its founders. For instance, the Bible contains a lot about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, while the Quran contains the words of Mohammed. Sacred books are no longer considered ordinary or common. Hinduism has *Vedas* as its sacred books and Buddhism has *Tripitaka*.

The symbols that are used have many religious meanings. For example, the cross used by Christians reminds them about Christ who sacrificed himself to save mankind, even though it remains a piece of wood.

There are also sacred objects found in sacred places. Sacred objects are used by sacred people. for instance, priests put on white clothes, which signify piousness or purity.

In most cases, people accord respect to sacred objects that these objects are assumed living. This is called animism. People pray to such objects, pour liberations and make sacrifices to them.

(c)   Sacred Commands

The relationship between God and man is very important. When this relationship influences man's relationship with his fellow man, it can be referred to as the social dimension of religion.

So many religious duties are presented and commanded by God. This is to enhance good social behaviours among men although; sometimes people do not attach much importance to these religious duties – intellectually or emotionally. An example of sacred command is a saying that says, "we should do unto others as we would expect them to do unto us." In addition, Muslims are expected to give one fortieth of their income to the needy; this is known as almsgiving (Zakat), it is one of the pillars of Islamic faith. The purpose of giving alms is that the giver may attain salvation. When he does this, he is considered blessed. The receiver feels no sense of debt since they are helping the giver to gain salvation.

Most religions provide inspiration for holy living to their adherents. They persuade their followers to "follow this way of life" and be saved while other religious systems have instructions for attaining the desired goal. The most popular sacred commands we are all familiar with are the Ten Commandments. While the first part deals with the relationship between God and man, the last part is concerned with man's relationship with his fellow man.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

1.   Why are sacred commands important?
2.   Describe one theory by which the presence of the sacred in an object is explained.

3.2   The Nature of African Traditional Religion

In considering the nature of African traditional religion, it is quite pertinent to note that when the foreigners came, they regarded African traditional religion as primitive and backward. They gave it derogatory names and some of them were unpleasant. For this reason, the situation spurred some scholars to action to really find out the true nature of the religion. African traditional religion is:

1.   A Revealed Religion

This religion appeared to our forefathers as they sought answers to the mysteries surrounding the creation of the universe. Based on this however, our forefathers came to realise the presence of a Supreme Being who ordered, controlled and maintained the whole world. The religion has no founder and it evolved over several years.

2.   Traditional

This religion developed as a result of people's experiences within their environment. It is also a religion that has a lot of connections with the forefathers. Almost all the Africans are born into the religion and their total lives are influenced by it. It was handed down to us by our forefathers thereby making it traditional. It is not imported and it has great affluence over the entire society.

3.   No Written Literature

Unlike other religions, the African traditional religion has no sacred books, probably because it is traditional. The religion is not written in black and white but it is written on peoples' minds, sacred places and things.

4.   Oral Transmission

African traditional religion was handed over to the Africans from generation to generation. It was orally transmitted; apparently, some facts might be lost, distorted or exaggerated. Nevertheless, there is still enough information to guide its adherents about what happened previously. There are no missionaries in this religion and it does not appoint preachers; it does not make converts the way other world religions do. African traditional religion is in the hearts of believers. It is therefore almost impossible to take it from them without destroying them or recreating them wholly. This explains why if by force one is made to worship in a new way, one necessarily brings large elements of his/her traditional beliefs and practices with him and in the core remains a traditionalist.

The truth is that, the African method is different. They allow the influence of the good deeds experienced, which are communicated by word of mouth in interpersonal relationship to move individuals and communities who hear them to seek the religion or to reject it, if its influence is harmful.

Elemi, E. (1980:15) states that, African traditional religion has two defined views as in the nature of the religion. He stressed that, there is the school of thought shared by non-African authors writing on African traditional religion. One of the popular authors is Parrinder, E.G. His opinion is that the religion is polytheistic (many gods); and that there are many high gods, each is autonomous and interacts with one another in a hierarchical order of intermediaries. The high gods are deities, not true Gods. They are men's creation in a modelled form. The other school of thought teaches that African traditional religion is an original idea of monotheism (one God). This Supreme Being communicates directly through intermediaries in a hierarchical way.

Elemi goes on to say that, the concept of one God is complex, but the confusion and influence from contact with world religions like Christianity and Islam does not prevent Africans from the original idea of one God. This God permeates all dimensions of personal and collective lives and institutions. Idowu, E.B. (1973) calls this "diffused monotheism." In some parts of Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba, Ibo, Efik and the Hausa, the belief in one Supreme Being is so clear that it becomes so impossible to admit influence in this regard from major world religions.

Apart from the expression coined by Idowu as "diffused monotheism," others see it as mitigated monotheism. Whatever term that is used, monotheism is not left out. This is the belief in one Supreme God who rules and controls the world through intermediaries of no human spirits, souls of ancestors, forces, special persons, and so on.

Mbiti J.S. (1990:11) adds that, the nature of African religion can be viewed through the following: beliefs, practices, ceremonies, festivals, religious objects and places, values and morals, religious officials and leaders. In the belief system, people exhibit their thinking ability about the inverse and towards life itself. African religious beliefs deal with topics like God, spirits, magic, human life, the hereafter, and so on.

Religious practices show how people express their beliefs in practical terms. These include praying, offering sacrifices, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs, and so on. Festivals sometimes mark harvest time, beginning of raining season, birth of a child, and so on. In African traditional religion, religious objects and places are set apart as being holy or sacred. Some objects and places are made by man while some are natural. Some belong to private individuals and families while others belong to the whole community. These include shrines, groves, sacred hills or mountain, then objects like amulets, charms, masks, and so on.

Values and morals according to Mbiti, deal with ideas that uphold the life of the people in relationship with one another, and with the world. They cover topics like truth, justice, love, right, wrong, good, evil, beauty, decency, respect, praise and blame, crime and punishment, character, integrity, etc. They help people's interaction with one another to settle disputes, maintain peace and harmony. These are all necessities in human life.

There are many people who have in depth knowledge of the conduct of religious matters. These people are respected and rated in high esteem; they hold offices as priests, rainmakers, ritual elders, diviners, medicine men, and so on. They are not paid for their duties; rather they are given gifts by their clients for appreciation. Without them, religious functions do not function well. They are specialists in religious affairs.

Mbiti continues to say that, African traditional religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers. They formed religious ideas, formulated religious beliefs, observed religious ceremonies and rituals, told proverbs and myths, which had religious meanings. They evolved laws and customs, which upheld the life of everyone in the community. The earliest records show that Africans who live according to their traditional ways are also said to be very religious, even those who live up to date. Religion is found everywhere; it deals with the world and experiences in life, it is found wherever people are. African traditional religion belongs to the people within which it evolved. It is not preached, does not have missionaries and a person must be born in an African community to follow African traditional religion in that group.

It is quite difficult to try to transplant religion to an entirely different society outside of Africa, unless African peoples themselves take it there. Even among Africans, religion takes different forms according to different tribal settings. So another person cannot automatically adjust himself to the religious life of other African people. People move with their religion to any destination. The Africans do not just abandon their religion completely even if they are converted to other world religions.

Mbiti says African traditional religion gives its adherents a sense of security in life. In this manner, they know how to act in different situations and how to solve their problems. Some Africans are not willing to abandon this religion quickly because it provides them with answers as to directions in life.

In its function, African traditional religion functions more on a communal than individual basis. Its beliefs are held by the community; and ceremonies are carried out by a group, family or relatives.

The religion covers all facets of life from birth to death of a person. People spread it freely and happily because they find solace in it. They inculcate it to their children, brothers, sisters, and so on, through conversation, proverbs and myths, and practice. African traditional religion arose and took shape as a result of man's search for certain calamities, epidemics, diseases, birth and death, wars, famines, etc.

People are free to hold different views and beliefs about African traditional religion because it has no sacred scriptures. It is realistic because it applies to a particular situation when need arises. The adherents are not bound to any authority, which goes back in history. They just follow it as it was handed down by the forefathers, changing the unwanted ideas in order to suit their circumstances in life.

In essence, African traditional religion has been accorded the desired respect by the people who cherish and practice it. Its ideas and openness have met the needs of the people and they all feel they have obligatory roles to play for its survival. After all, it is an ordained religion, handed over to the Africans by their forefathers.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Explain what is meant by a revealed religion in relation to African traditional religion.

3.3   Features of African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion centred so much on community that it has often been regarded mistakenly as purely social. This can be an exaggeration, because there is a large social element in rituals, festivals, societies and brotherhoods. All these show that the religion lives to its concept of rootedness in relationship with fellow men.

This religion contains original ideas of monotheism with a mixture of worship of the Supreme Being through various forces and material objects as symbols of God's presence and contact. This traditional worship is intimately associated with the veneration of the living-dead, good ancestors and benevolent spirits and forces because of their favour with the Supreme Being.

Some features of African traditional religion as enumerated by Idowu include beliefs in God, belief in divinities, beliefs in spirits, beliefs in ancestors, magic and medicine (Course book on CRS by 4:78).

(a)   Belief in God

Virtually all religions believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. He is equally referred to as the creator and controller of the universe. Every one or locality accords him a great name and he is given full respect. The names given to God vary from locality to locality. Some of them are listed below.

Country		African Names for God
Burundi	-	Imana
Botswana	-	Modimo, Urezhwa
Ivory Coast	-	Nyame, Onyabkopon
Mozambique	-	Muungu
Liberia	-	Yala
Nigeria	-	Aondo, Chukwu, Olorun, Owo, Diwocho, Ojo, Ubangiji, Osowo, Olodumare, Hinegba
Rwanda	-	Imana
Sierra Leone	-	Leve, Meketa, Ngewo, Yatta
China	-	Bore-Bire, Dzemawon, Mawu, Onyame, Na'angmin
Angola	-	Kalunga, Nzambi, Suku
Burkina Faso	-	Na'angmin
Cameroon	-	Njinyi, Nyooiy
Gabon	-	Anyame, Nzame
Ethiopia	-	Arumgimis, Igziabher Magano, Tel, Tsuossa, Wagua, Yere, Yere Siezi.
Kenya	-	Akuj, Asis, Mulungu, Mungu, Ngai, Nyasaye, Tororut, Wele (were)
Lesotho	-	Molimo (Modimo)
Madagascar	-	Andriamanitra, Zanahary Cauta, Chiuta, Lexa, Utixo, Unkurukuru, Mulungu
South Africa	-	Inkosi, Khuzwane, Modimo, Mwari
Sudan	-	Ajok, Bel, Dyong, Elo, Tok, (Juok, Juong), Kalo, Kwoth Mbori (Mboli) Nhialic, Nguleso, Ngun, Tamukujen.
Switzerland	-	Mkulumncandi, Umkhulumncandi
Tanzania	-	Enkai, Ishwanga, Kyala, Kyumbi, Mungu, Ruwa
Uganda	-	Akuj, Katonda, Kibumba, Ori, Rugaba, Ruhanga, Weri
Zaire	-	Akongo, Arebati, Djakomba, Katshonde,

		Kmvoum, Leza, Nzambi
Zambia	-	Chilenga, Chiuta, Tilo
Zimbabwe	-	Mwali (Mwari) Nyadenga

The above are the names of God; some mean only God while others are descriptive. The names clearly indicate that Africans strongly believe in God and they hold him in high esteem.

There is at least one personal name for God in every African language. Sometimes the names are considered ancient thereby losing their meaning. In most cases, descriptive names often have particular meanings, and in some languages, there are up to 10 names for God. This shows the level of belief and love the Africans accord God. For this reason, books of assorted types have been written about God to show his uniqueness and infallibility.

The origin of the belief in God arose as a result of people's reflections about the universe. Based on the enormity and continuity of the earth, and heaven at large, people began to think that the world is controlled and sustained by an invisible hand. People believe that without God, the world would have fallen apart. They therefore concluded that the world had a wonderful creator.

Man's limited nature and weakness made him to have belief in the Supreme Being. Man discovered that he had limited power and knowledge, this particularly is seen in the case of death, calamity, and the forces of nature, like thunderstorm, earthquakes, forests, and rivers, which man could not control. Man's limitedness made it necessary for him to believe in someone who is mightier than him. Hence, people felt that they needed the help of someone whose power is immeasurable and greater than them.

The belief in God may have also arisen by the powers of the weather, storms, thunder and lightning and the idea of day and night, the appearance of the stars, moon and sun. These heavenly bodies and powers made people to start having a re-think about God. People depended on heavenly bodies and power for light, warmth, rain, and so on. It then became clear that there is an invisible God who is responsible for providing man with his needs. People started believing in God and as such, the belief began to make sense and fit into man's continued attempts to understand and explain the visible and invisible universe.

All Africans have ideas about God and his activities. This includes what he does, his human pictures, his nature and the relationship he has with everyone.

The question is, what does God do? God is considered very wonderful and powerful. He controls and tenders all that he has created. Many people opined that God had some substance from which he created the world while others said he had helpers and some said he did it alone. All these point to the fact that God protects and sustains every visible and the invisible things in the world.

In addition, people perceive God as their father and thus consider themselves his children People believe that man was made in his image. They believe that God has eyes, ears, nose, etc. and that he hears and see everything. People also describe God as being merciful, kind, limitless. He can be far and near, he does not change and he is the most powerful. Since God is considered to do all things, it is therefore significant to note that, God should be pictured as if he has human characteristics. Such mental images will aid our understanding of God. He is not looked upon as a human being. The mental images also assist the mind to have a working knowledge of God and help people in communicating their ideas about God. Some images make people to be close to God. Even the names, which describe God as maker, potter, architect, helper, giver, protector, pastor, king, judge and a host of others, carry human images, which are transferred to God in order to clarify certain ideas about him.

God in no small measure cares and keeps the universe together so that it does not fall apart. Because of this belief, people refer to God as the keeper, upholder, protector, preserver, guardian, caretaker, pastor, doctor and saviour. For this reason, people feel that the universe has no end because God keeps them and sustains them.

The provision of God for His creation is referred to as providence. This depicts God's goodness to mankind. He provides life, sunshine, rain, water, good health, fertility of people, animals and plants, food and protection. Everyone believes that God gives only good things to people therefore, He is considered the giver of good things, healer, helper, guard, source. People fervently pray to God so that He can give them good things, this is because they believe that He is the great provider and he can rescue them at any point in life.

God is the ruler of the universe. For this reason, he has been named king, governor, ruler, chief, master, lord, judge, and distributor. There is no spot which is not under God's control, who or what can rebel against him? Because he rules in perfect justice, he is considered a judge. He judges justly and distributes justly. He also rescues the oppressed and punishes the culprits. His ways are not our ways therefore; He punishes wickedness by means of sickness, disease, calamity, famine, draught,

storm, war, or even death. The idea of God as a king is commonly found among Africans who have traditional rulers. For them, God rules the world like their chiefs or kings.

People believe that God is a father, mother or parent. Africans especially look upon God as a father and themselves as children. This shows a serious relationship between God and man. He can also be called the great ancestor, the elder, the grandfather to mean that everything originated from Him. Prayers are administered to Him in a manner in which children communicate to their parents. When in difficulty, people turn to God. This is an image, which depicts confidence in God. He can be termed "a good friend" because they can speak to him freely as he is always available for everyone.

The sky, sun and moon are taken to be God's eyes. They (sun and moon) symbolise God's ability to see. These symbols of God's eyes may have been suggested by the fact that the sky is full of light, both at daytime and night. In fact, one popular name for God in Uganda is "the great eye" which means God's ability to know everything.

In most parts of Africa, some activities are believed to be carried out by God himself. These include, eating, sleeping, playing, walking, rejoicing, getting angry, speaking, and so on. All these have been put in place to mean that God does all things in human terms, even though he does not do all these literally. For this reason, people can sacrifice to him, feel his presence, make offerings to him and call upon him. They pour libation and involve Him when in need. They feel confident that He is really the maker; His activities are full of life.

In majority of the African homes, everyone believes that God is omnipotent, supreme and omnipresence. All the things He is involved in are beyond our imagination. That is the more reason why he is awesome. Every community holds Him dear and He is respected and referenced.

(b)   Belief in Divinities

There is a general belief that divinities are a derivation of the Supreme Being. They assist him in the control and maintenance of the universe. They can be termed "intermediaries"; they have the attributes and characteristics of God. A host of others considers them to be off springs of the Supreme Being. The Ewe considers the *Vodu* (divinities) as the children of *mawu-lisu*, and the Yoruba describes *orisa-nla*, as the son of *Olodumare*.

There is a belief, most especially in Yoruba land; that divinities are real. Divinities are found in different categories.

- **The Primordial:** Their origin is not known but most people believe that they are of heaven and thus, helped God in his creative activities.

- **Deified Divinities:** They can also be referred to as deified ancestors. These are believed to have lived long ago in the area, leaving indelible marks. They also make or leave some kind of legacy for the benefit of posterity. They are worshipped and reverenced by everyone. Thus, to become a divinity in this regard, the ancestor must be deified. For example, there is the god of *Sango* in Yoruba land (god of the thunder).

- **Personified Divinities:** In this manner, natural forces are accorded to them. There is the *Oke-Ibadan* in Ibadan and *Olumo* Rock in Abeokuta. Priests are dedicated to their cults and festivals are celebrated in their honour. Prayers are also made for protection and other needs in this category.

The Africans believe in the existence of divinities. These divinities have names and these names depict their characters as well as functions. For example, *Sango* is known as *Jakuta* , one who fights with stones. To the Nupe, they are called Sokogba meaning, "Soko's axe or the axe of God."

Divinities are seen as great gods. People contact them in times of calamity and in good time as well. They form part of heavenly creation and since they are regarded as intermediaries, prayers offered to them are channelled to the Supreme Being through them. They also serve the people or the community in various degrees and facets of life. They are a link between God and man and they have easy access to him than ordinary people.

3.4   Beliefs in Spirits, Ancestors, Witchcraft and Sorcery

In African traditional religion, spirits are believed to exist. They are said to have been created by God himself either as spirits or as human beings of the distant past. There are native spirits, which are personified in line with natural objects or forces. They are given adequate attention and people regard them as living beings. They are also invisible. There are the sky spirits and these are believed to possess powers that cannot be measured.

These are categorised into the long dead and the living dead. The long dead are regarded as the ones who died long ago but might have been forgotten. The living dead are who died recently but are still being remembered. They are believed to be around the family, watching over them. They are remembered by their friends for up to four or five generations. Sacrifices are made to them so that they can avert any evil.

Aside from God the father almighty, there are people who occupy the universe. They are the spirits people often speak about spirits as though they are human beings and they are treated as if they have human characteristics. They can speak, think and are endowed with great powers, which they use at will. God is the creator of the whole universe including the spirits so they are his subordinates.

Types of Spirits
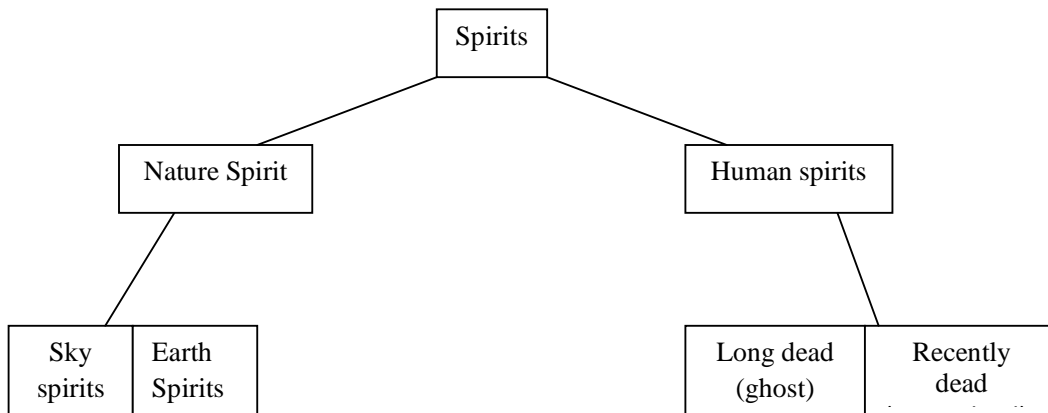
The above diagram shows the types of spirits that abound (Mbiti, 1990: 70).

Nature Spirits

These are associated with natural forces and objects. People make them personal as they are given personal characteristics. They are regarded as though they are living, intelligent beings of the invisible world. Their population is on the higher side.

Nature spirits of the sky

The natural objects and forces associated with these types of spirits are the moon, sun, stars, rainbows, rain, storms, wind, thunder and lightning, and so on. Many people have a belief that such objects and forces are spirits themselves; or there are spirits controlling them.

In Africa, spirits exist but some people do not believe that there are nature spirits of the sky. They feel that every heavenly object is an act of God. Some people do not even pay attention to these spirits. They do not sacrifice to them. They feel that spirits are mere myths, legends.

For those who finally hold that sky spirits exist, it helps them explain the mysteries of the forces of nature in line with the sky. They look at these explanations religiously and not scientifically. They ask many questions about nature and are quite satisfied by certain issues like that of thunder and lightning having religious connotation.

Nature spirits of the Earth

These spirits are close to human life. They have a link with the earth, hills, mountains, rocks, trees, forests, metals, rivers, ponds, lakes, waterfalls, lagoons, animal, insects, certain diseases, and so on. They are spoken of in human forms as if they can be pleased, offended, or informed.

Some nature spirits of the earth are rated higher than others and may be viewed as divinities. These can be spirits of the sea, lake and forest. Even though earth spirits exist, it is not everyone that believes in them. It is not everyone that pays attention to them. The earth spirits also explain many things concerning the world.

There is a connection between the Africans and the inanimate things and forces of nature, and living things. Some people do not acknowledge the presence of spirits. Spirits are sometimes at the mercy of people, they often ignore the spirits and look beyond God for help and answers to the mysteries that surround the world.

Human Spirits

These are the spirits that were once ordinary men, women and children; they have no link with humans. In the African belief, there is the notion of life after death and that is the reason why human spirits exist. They appear in legends, myths, and folklores and sometimes possess people or appear to people in visions and dreams. These types are of two fold.

The Long dead (ghosts)

Even though these types of spirit are not remembered, people still believe that they exist in the invisible world. They can be recollected through myths, clan founders, legends, and so on. They are thought to have been invisible and become nature spirits. Others are said to have

disappeared into the unknown. Naturally, people dislike the spirits of those who are long dead (ghosts). They are feared by everyone because people think that they can possess human beings, with or without an individual's permission or approval. Illnesses like lunacy, meningitis, and so on, are ascribed to these types of spirits in most societies. Most diviners and medicine men acquire their knowledge from spirits. To sum it all, spirits are not bad as people think. They can be of benefit to people but sometimes act in an unpleasant manner, depending on the situation they find themselves.

The recently dead (Living dead*)*

The recently dead (living dead) are remembered by their families and friends for a duration of four or five generations. They are also referred to as the living dead. They are believed to be part of their families as they live close to their homes where they lived when they were alive. These spirits show a lot of care in their families and they are remembered by pouring out drinks and food for their consumption. They are benevolent to their families as long as they are well treated. When people fall sick and face calamities, the cause may be ascribed to these spirits except if magic, sorcery and witchcraft are held responsible. When things go wrong, spirits are usually held responsible. For this reason, (for peace to reign), these spirits have to be appeased by performing rituals.

To sum it all, spirits have many roles to play. They are invisible and can be either malevolent or benevolent depending on how people experience the forces of nature and how they act towards human beings. They have neither shape nor physical form but they appear to people at will. They may look like human beings, animals, insects, or other things and they can change to other forms if need be. They are always described in exaggerated forms. If any spirit becomes bothersome to people, they try to get rid of it.

The belief in spirits provides people with concrete explanation of the universe. They fill up the gap between God and man and are an integral part of the religious heritage of Africa.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Comment briefly on the belief in divinities.

Belief in Ancestors

Ancestors are departed relations who are no longer visible on earth but have become spirits. Africans believe that ancestors play a number of roles in their lives. Thus, families build shrines for their ancestors where they offer sacrifices to them when necessary. It is obvious that some of them might have been priests or kings who after their departure on earth become deified over a period. Ancestors are like deities whom people respect and regard as gods. Food items such as rice, beans, etc are offered and sacrificed to these ancestors in their graves. They are venerated, not worshipped. Those who died accidentally are not regarded as good ancestors but those who die quietly (while asleep) are the good ones, therefore, there is good and bad death in the ancestral cult. In someone's ripe age, when he dies, he can become an ancestor (this is what is accepted as moral standards of the group [ancestors]) after which an appropriate funeral rites are made. In most societies, the funeral rites are regarded as "rites of passage" by which the departed are made ancestors.

In most African societies, old age, offspring, good moral life and funeral rites are the four requirements to qualify one to be an ancestor but some societies add the fifth requirement, which is good death. Death after ripe old age is considered the best. Death before this time is unnatural because some unnatural deaths are punishments from God for one's sins in his life. Death by suicide, leprosy, dropsy, small pox, epilepsy, HIV/AIDS, and so on, is regarded as bad deaths. Victims of such deaths are not given the full funeral rites and cannot be made ancestors.

The above requirements do not apply to all African societies; they vary from one society to another. Among the Ashanti, although the father transmits the "*Ntoro*" spirit to his children and takes direct responsibility for their upbringing, it is the mother's brother to whom the stool may be dedicated as an ancestor, not the father because the Ashanti are matrilineal. The mother's brother not the father is venerated as an ancestor. Some Africans may honour their ancestor by way of liberation and sacrifice. If a would-be ancestor was a criminal, witch or did anything that expelled him from his lineage, group or community, he cannot be regarded as an ancestor. On the other hand, if someone was an adulterer, quarrelsome, if he dies, he would be rated as an ordinary ancestor of equal standard with others.

A man's status in life determines whether he would be an ancestor in the spirit world or not.

Role of Ancestors

Ancestors are responsible for the welfare of their kinsmen. They are close to the Supreme Being and deities and act as intermediaries between the deities and their families. Because of the in depth knowledge they have, they normally inform heir kinsmen of an impending danger and what to do to avert them. They are custodians of traditional laws and customs, which the clan depended upon and would punish them with calamity when these laws are flouted. They have interest in what happens in their families and even share their meals with them. They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities.

Altogether, it is important however to note that, ancestors are very important even though they are invisible. They can curse and bless when the need arises. Their blessings for those who obey them consist of plentiful crops, children and prosperity while calamity befalls those who disobey them. This punishment is meted on the individual or community according to their discretion.

Ancestral Cult among the Igbo

Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, ancestors have a very significant role to play. They also have an important place in Igbo traditional society, which is organised on the segmentary lineage system. The council of elders are vested with an authority under the presidency of the eldest male (the *Okpala*). He is usually the mouthpiece of the ancestors.

The "*ofo*" which represents the staff of office is the symbol of authority of the ancestors since it has been handed down by the founder of the lineage through the succession of the lineage heads. The *Ofo* according to the Igbo, is a cult symbol handed over to man by God for communicating with him through the ancestors. Before laws are made, the *Ofo* is hit on the ground because the earth deity and ancestors are guardians of traditional laws and customs and owners of the land. Anyone who departs from cult faces the wrath and vengeance of the ancestors. Many people have ancestral shrines in their homes.

Any adult male who has children and does not disobey any taboos may become an ancestor as long as he receives appropriate funeral rites. Without these ceremonies, the restless ghost of the deceased may harass and hunt the living. The ancestors (*Ndichie*) are normally males but women can set up private shines for their death mothers and sisters called *Umu Okpu*. Offerings are usually made to ancestors. During the daily prayers with the *Ofo*, simple offerings of kola and chalk are made

to the ancestors. Also, at the beginning and end of every rainy season, annual festivals are organised for them.

The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria venerate the ancestors as though they were gods. They are held in high esteem and people or the communities at large are afraid to offend or go against the laws of the land for fear of being punished or harassed. When the ancestor is angry, he is appeased in numerous ways depending on the locality.

Ancestor Worship or Ancestor Cult

This is a name, which Africans use in describing their dead ones. Ancestors are regarded as glorified living dead. They are venerated, respected, honoured and approached like comrades and elder kinsmen who have much interest in the family welfare.

Ancestors are associated with the moral order; however, they do not govern the moral order. They intervene only where they have the authority among their descendants. The term "ancestor worship" can hardly be retained as adequate term to express the ancestral rites in African traditional religion. Many authors have suggested alternative terms. Kenyatta suggested the term, "communion with spirits." Others suggested names are veneration of ancestors, ancestral rites, ancestor cult, and so on.

The term "ancestor cult" adequately expresses the significance of the rituals offered to ancestors in African traditional religion. Ancestors are intermediaries between God and man and elder members of the family; they are venerated and not worshipped.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4

Comment briefly on the belief in ancestors.

Witchcraft: Definition and practice of witchcraft

Witchcraft has no definite definition but one can explain the term as used in this unit. Witchcraft is an innate tendency in an individual accompanied with wickedness. The term is broadly used to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical powers generally in a secret fashion (Mbiti, 1969: 202).

As to its acquisition, it could be through the following ways: (a) by purchasing it from those who possess it in abundance; (b) through hereditary means. A father or mother begets it to a loved child before

death. (c) The elders may simply choose any young man and initiate him into witchcraft in some societies.

Witchcraft is practiced by men and women, the old and the young, the illiterates and the educated, the poor and the rich. However, those who are mostly accused of witchcraft are old women, mothers and fathers-in-laws, co-wives, handicapped people, poor people, beggars and lepers. Witchcraft can be classified into good and bad witchcraft. Good witchcraft is the one, which is practiced for socially approved goals for the protection and defense of the poor, orphans, widows and the entire society. Good witches detect and check the activities of the evil witches. Bad witchcraft on the other hand is that which is used for socially disapproved goals. To harass widows, the poor, orphans and the entire citizens of the society. The bad witches cause a lot of havoc in the society such as deaths, accidents, pests, impotence, barrenness, thunder, lightening, all sorts of misfortunes and bad harvests. Bad witches even accused of eating human flesh in some African societies.

Although witchcraft is practiced day and night, it is mostly practiced at night. Witches are "looms of darkness." A witch can metamorphose into an animal, a bird, fish, a tree or any other object to accomplish her mission. While his/her spiritual part goes out at night, the physical person remains intact on his/her bed. If the spiritual part is attacked, that would affect the physical part too. Witches have several instruments, which they use to achieve their aims. Some of these include night horses, aeroplanes, stars, night bicycles, and so on.

Witchcraft has tremendous influence on the social, moral, psychological, religious, economic and political life of the Africans. Witchcraft for the Africans is fundamentally evil and unjust (Metuh, 1987: 169). The attacks of the witches in Africa are always considered unjust aggression. Witches even confess to have killed their children whom they would not normally hate. It is due to the negative effects of witchcraft on the people that different groups of witch hunters emerged in some African societies. The aim of these witch hunters was to stop the practice of witchcraft.

Other remedies for witchcraft include prayers to God and fire, slack from furnace, sand, and charms among others, which are kept near the house to scare witches. Despite all these, witchcraft is still in practice in most African societies to date.

Sorcery and Medicine

Sorcery usually takes on the form of spells, poisoning or other physical injury done secretly to someone or his crops, animals, and so on. Sorcerers are one of the most feared and hated. Sorcerers prepared and used bad medicines.

Medicine and Its use in African Beliefs

There are medicine men who are engaged in the positive use of mystical powers. They are referred to as herbalists, diviners, mediums, rainmakers, priests, and so on. They help to stabilise the society by their skills, knowledge and religious activities like prayers, rituals and sacrifices. They pray for good fortune, fertility, peace and welfare. They are meant to counter the nefarious activities of the enemies of the society.

Normally, medicine is used to some extent to cure the sick; sometimes, one is asked to perform rituals or given the medicine, which is believed to deal with the mystical causes of one's troubles. The sick person may ingest the medicine, dug into the floor of his house, place it on the rooftop, or carry it about, depending on the directives by the medicine men. The medicine can be physically applied in the house to drive out the evil forces operating there. There are different types of medicines. There is medicine for love, to pass examinations, to heal, to kill, for good fortune, for success, and so on. People get these medicines depending on the situation at hand. Some use it for love portions on their wives or girl friends, for business, employment, protection from accidents. Medicine can be used for so many reasons. For instance, for flying like birds, turning into animals, disappearing and reappearing at will, communicating with the dead.

After medicine has been used, there is full confidence and a big sense of security. When one believes in the efficacy of the medicine, then it works for him or her. It is believed to give courage to the person who is travelling, a sense of security to the one who is surrounded by mystical forces, etc.

Traditional medicine has helped in the treatment of diseases, help on the farmlands, or help people in their psychological trauma. The medicine man in Africa thus has a lot of respect. The medicine practitioner is seen as a doctor, a physician, a gynaecologist, ophthalmologist, dentist, a wonder healer and performer of rituals. The medicine man performs to role of healer, success maker and judge in most African societies. Some medicine men combine the roles of healing and divination.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 5

Briefly explain the use of medicine in African traditional society.

4.0   CONCLUSION

Religion is an important feature, which holds the society strongly by its tail. The African man feels that without religion, there can never be peace in the society. Religion has played significant roles in the life of an African man both socially, politically, psychologically, emotionally and otherwise. Wherever the African goes, his religion goes with him. He eats and drinks it symbolically as if it were real food.

African traditional religion is an original picture of monotheism. Although there are pantheons of deities in different localities, they all depend and serve the only God the father almighty. The religion was handed down to Africans by their by forefathers who were not literate enough to record all their traditional practices. It is fully integrated with dimensions of personal and collective lives as with all institutions of private and public life.

This religion can enrich a person's attitudes and practices. It is open and tolerant, accommodating and has a positive sense of the word.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that religion involves a sense of the beyond. God has the power to confer the sense of the beyond to people things and places. People meet God in sacred places. Sacred people are those who meet with God. The objects used in worship are also sacred and they have symbolic connotation. You also learnt that religions have sacred commands, which depict socially acceptable behaviours. African traditional religion is a revealed religion born within the environment; there are no founders, reformers, or sacred books.

Various belief practices in African traditional religion were also discussed in this unit. These include beliefs in ancestors, divinities, spirits, magic and medicine, among others. The religion does not spare the belief in the Supreme Being concerning his protective nature, his creative ability, sustenance. Thus, the Supreme Being (God) has been given a number of names based on different localities. The religion also has a strong hold on the entire society based on its beliefs and practices.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

(1)   Why sacred commands are important

- They regulate human behavior in the society.
- In some societies, they are also equivalents of taboos.
- They ascribe to people their dos and don'ts.
- They prescribe punishment for people who break them.
- By obeying sacred commands, some people believe that they can attain salvation.

(2)   Description of one theory in which the presence of the sacred in an object is explained.

- Animism: These are objects that can assume spiritual life because of their association with the sacred.
- This theory portrays that, an object like a stick can be vested with a sense of the beyond. This object normally assumes the posture of a living thing.
- The object can punish and reward people who believe in it.
- All non-living things around this object have the same quality.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

The Nature of African Traditional Religion

- This religion was born as a result of man's experiences and interaction with his environment.
- That people wonder at the mysteries surrounding creation, the living rocks, trees, rivers, plants, etc.
- They assume that created things have an order and life itself seem to have a pattern, the mystery of birth, growth and death.
- In seeking answers to these mysteries, people came to realize that there is a Supreme Being somewhere who is in charge of all these.
- He is all powerful, controller, and creator of everything.
- The religion has no founder and no need for a reformer.
- The religion emanated from the answer4s to the needs of the society.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Beliefs in Divinities

- They are divine beings derived from the Supreme Being.
- They carry out God's will and assist him in the control and maintenance of the universe.
- They also serve as intermediaries between God and man.
- They have the characteristic features of the Supreme Being.
- They are real as assumed by other4 people.
- As soon as an ancestor is deified, he becomes an ancestor.
- Each divinity has a name – example in Yoruba "Sango" – God of thunder. "Sokogba" – meaning God's axe (Nupe).
- Some are personified e.g. natural forces like "Oko" – Ibadan – Olumo rock in Abeokuta.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4

Beliefs in Ancestors

- They are departed relations who are no longer visible on earth and have become spirits.
- Their families sometimes build shrines for them and offer sacrifices when necessary.
- Some of them may have been priests or kings who after their departure, are deified.
- The living are believed to have communion with the deceased.
- They are consulted through diviners.
- Called upon when calamity befalls the society.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 5

The Use of Medicine in African traditional Societies

- This is employed to conquer all evil forces existing in the society.
- They can be used to achieve what cannot be achieved in an ordinary way.
- Medicine can be used negatively as well as positively.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss (a) the African beliefs in God; (b) What God does; (c) His human pictures; and (d) His nature.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 5 SOURCES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING ITS STUDY

CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction
2.0 Objectives
3.0 Main Content
    3.1 Sources for the Study of African Traditional Religion
        3.1.1 Material Sources
        3.1.2 Non-Material Source
    3.2 Problems Confronting the Study of African Traditional Religion
4.0 Conclusion
5.0 Summary
6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0 References/Further Reading

1.0 INTRODUCTION

African traditional religion is not a religion of the books. It has no sacred scriptures like other world religions– Christianity and Islam. The religion was handed down to the Africans by their forefathers when the art of writing was yet to be developed. Aside from this, the African man is deeply rooted into his religion. He carries his religion wherever he goes. The religion is depended on every aspect of his life's endeavour. One would be right to say that, everything done by the African is depicted through religion as in his relationship with his family, the clan and tribe, law, morality, worship, politics, social status, wars and peace, etc. so that the source of this traditional religion is no other than the whole of African life.

This unit will in no small measure, discuss the sources of African traditional religion and examine the problems besetting the study of the religion.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- list and discuss the sources of African traditional religion
- examine problems besetting the study of African traditional religion.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Sources for the Study of African Traditional Religion

This religion depends on the handing over of information from generation to generation by word of mouth or practice (oral tradition). Idowu, E.B. (1973: 83) postulated that, these oral traditions are our only means of knowing anything about people's interpretations and the supersensible world as well as what people think of that unique relationship between the two.

Oral traditions can be explained under two headings: the material and non-material sources.

3.1.1 Material Sources

Emblems of worship are always found in places of worship such as temples, shrines and groves, which are good sources for the study of this religion. They also tell us stories about the pattern of worship. Temples are used for worship unlike shrines, which are sacred places where sacrifices are offered.

Shrines are necessarily not buildings; rather they are places dedicated for use as shrine. They are marked with objects of worship in line with their divinity. For example, shrines of *Ogun* (god of Iron) in Yoruba land are found all over the country. Iron pieces are set on top of a large iron piece, which is buried in the ground near "*Akoko* or *Peregun*" tree. For offertory purposes, pots are placed on a tree. Hunters, blacksmiths and warriors worship this frequently. The shrine is usually found in grooves and small clearing in the forests with open and inner section; emblems are kept in the shrine. Secret rites and human sacrifices are made in the groves.

Some shrines belong to particular families such as those connected with the departed members of their families. Others belong to the community, which are often in groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, under trees, etc. Offerings of fowls, food, utensils, tools and money are made in such places and prayers are said there as well. These are places where people meet with God so they are considered holy. Some of these places are manmade while others are natural which are isolated from people's homes. There are priests in charge of these places. They are kept clean, they receive people who come for prayers or make offerings and sacrifices.

Temples also contain shrines. They are small buildings of mud with two or three rooms, one for the priest and the others for emblems for communal shrine. Only the priest can enter a shrine; worshippers normally stay in the outer part.

Religious articles and objects are many. Some of them are tied round the neck, arms, legs and waist. Some are kept in pockets, bags, on house roofs or gates. Other religious objects are swallowed and thought to remain in the stomach or dug into the ground in the houses. Others hide their religious objects where it is convenient for them.

Oral traditions are also preserved in the works of arts and craft, paintings, carvings, mouldings, gravings and artistic works in shrines and sacred places. Each artistic work reveals the culture of a particular environment and its religious practices.

African arts and craft convey many messages of the African heritage. Religious ideas are expressed in woods, tools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handicrafts, domestic animals and human body. Masks are not left out and cravings on wood, ivory, and so on.

Symbols work hand in hand with artwork. Some are likened to insects, birds, animals, certain trees, figures, shapes, colours of all sorts, and so on. For example, white colour is the symbol of death. The chameleon is a symbol of protection and security. Sound of an owl is considered a symbol of bad omen or death. Different localities have their symbols, and there are some that can only be interpreted by few people such as the symbols used in initiation into secret cults.

3.1.2 Non-material Sources

These include myths, liturgies, and recitals.

Myths

These are stories, which explain the important aspects of the origin of religion. These stories are told to help listeners remember some facts. Idowu (1973: 84) says myth is from a Greek word, "*mutos*" which means, "anything derived by word of mouth." Legends are not left out. They all convey religious meanings in the oral manner. When people listen to them, or read about them, they are listening to religious ideas found in them.

Myths are generally concerned with the people's worldview including their religion. They are popular and familiar stories. They reveal a people's understanding of their environment, their geography, history,

medicine, social organisation and religious facts. These facts are embedded with their religious beliefs. Some myths are like the creed, which is learnt and recited always; and these make them authentic. Without myths, transmission, preservation and conservation of religious ideas would not be on a high side.

Liturgies

Through liturgies, people can learn the prescribed forms of rituals, names and attributes of deities as well as the relationship that should exist between God and man. They are important and are frequently used by the priests.

Songs

Songs are sometimes related with religious festivals and ceremonies, which reflect religious and non-religious activities such as naming ceremonies, marriage, group work, war, worship and burial. They convey a lot about the faith of our past adherents and deities as well as worship.

Recitals

This is connected to the cult of the oracle of divinity. In Yoruba land, *Odu Ifa* is connected to the cult of *Oraminyan*. Recitals contain stories of the chief deities. Riddles, proverbs, adages are all connected with the recitals. One can learn a lot about the culture, beliefs and religious practices. These sayings can be educating and for settling of disputes or warning against impending danger. Examples of such proverbial saying include "If you want to tell God, tell it to the wind; God is in front, the wind is at the back". God drives away flies from a tailless cow. "God shelters with the cattle under the same tree," "An enemy may want to sound the drum of your downfall but God would not let it sound," and so on.

Other oral sources of African religion include riddles, daily speech, prayers, invocations, blessings, curses, oaths, spells, among others. A lot of them contain information about religious beliefs and ideas. Prayers for instance are found in all religions of the world. They are made to the Supreme Being for almost everything such as health, children, wealth, rain, good harvest as well as success in trade. They are also said for protection, good fortune, or to ward off a misfortune. African prayers are meant to expose and explain African religion. Prayers can also be found in acts of worship like sacrifices, rituals, purification rites, initiation rites oaths, blessings. All these explain the religious

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importance of the rites performed as well as the beliefs, which inspire them.

Apart from the above, African religion is found in the rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people. Africans are always engaged in celebrating life; events in the life of the individual or the community in particular. These may include occasions such as birth of a child, naming ceremonies, circumcisions, initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain, and so on. Some of these rituals are performed individually while others are done collectively in a community. They convey a lot of religious meanings and through them, religious ideas are passed from generation to generation.

Music and Dance

Rituals and ceremonies accompany religious ceremonies while festivals are always accompanied by music and dancing. Music gives outlet to the emotional expression of the religious life, and it is a powerful means of communication in African traditional life. It unites both the singing and dancing groups. Drums, flutes, rattle, whistle are all used as musical instruments. Wherever an African finds himself, his music and dance follows him. Through these, many religious ideas are retained and celebrated.

Names of People and Places

In almost all African societies, names of places and peoples have religious meanings and these are given to mark religious ideas and experiences. For instance in Nigeria, precisely in Tiv speaking area of Benue State, the name "Terhide" means "father returns." It is given immediately after the death of a grandfather. For a girl, it is "Ngohide," meaning "mother returns." These names show that death is not the end of life and the departed return to be born in their families.

In Uganda, the name, "Muwanga" means the "one who puts things in order." It comes from the legend that one day the sun and moon were fighting, when darkness came over the land, people cried for help from God. Then God sent Muwanga (son of Wanga) to separate them. This legend is a religious type and there is now a divinity known as Muwanga who symbolises the idea of order and harmony or peace.

African religion is therefore found in people's names and places.

Proverbs, Riddles and Wise Sayings

These are short sayings, which are sensible and common; they can easily be recognised. They are the voices of the people that deal with their principles and conduct of life. The Zulu said that without proverbs, the language would be like a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul. The Yoruba sway that proverbs are horses for chasing missing words while the Igbo put it that proverbs are vegetables for eating words. In Ghana, proverbs are believed to give a great insight into people's belief.

Many proverbs speak about the moral attributes of God. Some affirm God's mercy, his goodness, justice and rightness. For instance, an Igala proverb says "what a frog will eat, God does not put it on top of a tree." Another says, when God fights, there is no raising of dust.

The theme of some proverbs includes the deities and their relationship with man. For example, the power of *ogun*, the deity of iron, a Yoruba proverb says, "the deity that ignores *ogun* will clear his farm with his bare hands." There are a lot of religious beliefs, concepts and values embedded in proverbial saying. For instance, the proverb "a land sold by a deity cannot be ransomed by man." means that deities are real and stronger than men.

Proverbs are set within a cultural and social environment of the people who have produced and use them. Since they can easily be passed one from one person to another, we would discover that many of them go back several generations. Some of them are religious and contain religious beliefs, ideas and warnings. They speak about God, the world, man, human relationships, nature of things, etc.

Riddles are used mainly for entertainment and stimulating people's thoughts; they contain religious ideas. Wise sayings on the other hand, are often sayings about the world, looked upon from a religious background.

Beliefs and Customs

These are essential parts of religion. Even though customs are not always religious, they contain religious ideas. Religion strengthens and perpetuates some of the customs; customs perform the same function in religion.

Beliefs and customs often go together. Beliefs talk about topics like God, spirits, birth, death, magic, the hereafter, witchcraft, among others. They are also a hand over from older generations; however, they can be

modified. Without them, there will be no religious inspiration on the followers. The beliefs in African religion are quite different from those of other world religions. Some beliefs can be superstitious while some may be true.

A study on beliefs would give us more insight not only into religion but also into the people who follow it. In addition to religious beliefs, there are beliefs in other areas of life. They include political beliefs, economic beliefs, social beliefs, etc. They are very significant for everyday life.

Taboos/Prohibitions

These are regarded as forbidden things. There are certain things, which are prohibited in some societies.

The term "taboos" or "tabu" is from the Polynesian term, which means forbidden things, or avoidance. They are called different names according to their localities.

1.   Ewo or Ese   -   Yoruba
2.   Musuo   -   Akan
3.   Mbamtswer/Iyangenev   -   Tiv

All these term given above, describe avoidance or prohibitions. Taboos are like moral laws in African traditional religion or societies. They deal with human relationships and God.

In every society, there are laws that govern the lives of people. These are known as taboos. Taboos can be classified as both religious and cultural. In African traditional religion, they are religious because they are sanctioned by the deities and any breakage attracts stringent measures. Punishment is meted out to culprits by the deity himself, ancestors or the priests.

There are various taboos on various aspects of human behaviours. We shall examine some of these.

Sex taboos

• To have sex with a menstruating woman
• To have sex in the bush, farm or field even with one's wife
• To have sex with a woman while cooking
• To have sex with a nursing mother

Food Taboos

- To eat civet (cat among the Igbo)
- Certain birds (adzembe, tsough, apu, and so on) among Tiv
- Pork/among the Hausa
- Dog (Tiv)
- To eat food prepared by a menstruating woman or food prepared by a nursing mother
- To eat meat partially offered for sacrifice
- To eat egg (Tiv women)

Taboos on death

Among the Tiv, it is a taboo for a woman to kill a dog or walk across its bones or blood. It is also a taboo to see a corpse on its way for burial. Even inside the grave, women are to stay clear and not to see inside until the person has been buried. It is also a taboo to mourn the death of one of the twins. It is believed that if a Tiv woman sees all these she will not be productive.

Since taboos are cultural and religious, they are tied to traditional beliefs and customs. The elders are therefore responsible to take charge of the culprits and punish them accordingly. Taboos are guided by the deities according to African beliefs. Ancestors and elders are not left out as well. Taboos help maintain moral laws because they are social order in the traditional religion.

It is pertinent to note that if one obeys taboos, then he/she will be blessed but if one disobeys, he/she will face the wrath of the law.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Assess the contributions of the following to our sources for the study of African traditional religion.

i.   Music and dance
ii.   Taboos and prohibitions

3.2   Problems Confronting the Study of African Traditional Religion

Religion is vital and controls the African life. Whatever an African indulges in, religion is always part of it. When the foreigners came with their religion, they misinterpreted the African traditional religion and

gave it derogatory names like native, tribe, pagan, idolatry, primitive, and so on.

Therefore, it is quite significant to elaborate on the problems confronting the study of this religion. In spite of the problems or difficulties besetting its study, it is important to state that African traditional religion according to its worshippers cannot be measured or compared with others on the basis that it is still the best. Some of these problems are as follows.

Geographical problems

The geographical location of Africa made it difficult as Africa remained unknown and in the remote area. That was the reason why the foreigners gave it derogatory name, "the dark continent". Some of the explorers exaggerated the African continent misinterpreted the religion and gave it derogatory names. These explorers faced problems of communication and it was not easy for them to have a balanced picture of the continent because of its large size. Their visit to Kano and Kumasi made them to speak for the whole of Africa, which gave them wrong notions about Africa in the books they wrote. They faced intense heat and mosquitoes, which eventually led to the death of some of them. Although they faced challenge in the course of their assignment, these explorers help conserve some African traditions and cultures.

Furthermore, documenting the findings of these explorers constituted a problem to the study of African traditional religion. This because Africa is a vast continent; its origin cannot be traced, even the indigenes themselves could not trace the origin of every tribe in the continent. As such, there were no written records for them to base their studies. They could not cope with many languages that abound.

Historical Reasons

People who are interested in studying African traditional religion usually suffer from authors who imbibe the habit of generalising issues. Western education in no small measure, contributed to the problem of studying this religion. Educated sons and daughters took up jobs in the cities and migrated to big towns. They loosed contacts with their homes and tradition as well.

In addition, the death of important people like priests and old men who were custodians of knowledge affected the study of this religion. Those who remained could not remember or remembered less about African traditional religion. The absence of any written record was a major

setback to the study of African traditional religion. . African traditional religion does not have sacred scripture such as Bible and Qur'an as in Christianity and Islam respectively. This absence of a sacred scripture or literature in general is a big challenge to the religion.

It could be recalled that some students of African religion as well as some practitioners are often ashamed of practicing the religion. They are not proud of it like the Christians and Muslims do in their religion. Not only that the religion is full of mysticism; it is often shrouded in secrecy as many of the practitioners do not practice it in the open. The religion should be demystified to avoid this problem.

Finally, the problem of founders and reformers of the religion too is a serious setback. In other world religions, the founders and reformers find ways of propagating their religion but this is not the case with African traditional religion.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Elaborate on the historical reasons that created problems for the study of African traditional religion.

4.0   CONCLUSION

The sources for the study of African traditional religion are basically oral traditions which can be classified into material and non-material.

 Problems besetting the study of African traditional religion. Some problems are geographical and historical in nature. The geographical problems had to do with the isolation of Africa which earn the continent the name "dark continent." while the historical problems dealt with the painful experiences in Africa such as slavery, war, deaths, absence of founders/reformers, and sacred scriptures.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, we examined the sources of African traditional religion as well as problems confronting its study. In spite of the fact that there are no founders of African traditional religion; no reformers, missionaries or preachers could change the religion. Everything that concerns the religion erupted as a result of historical changes in the lives of the people concerned.

The religion has no written records or sacred scriptures as it is in other notable world religions. It is a living religion and for this reason, it is not

likely to become extinct such as the religions of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome.

Chiefly among the problems besetting the study of this religion were geographical and historical problems. The African continent or climate posed many problems to the foreigners as they were attacked by mosquitoes and heat. Despite all these, the African man is still a strong practitioner of his religion. It is dear to his heart and is still practiced till date.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

The contributions of the following to our sources for the study of African traditional religion, music and dance, taboos and prohibitions.

Music and Dance

- Music gives outlet to the emotions and expressions of the religious life.
- It is a good means of communication in African Traditional Religion.
- There is unity between the singing and dancing troupe when music is sung.
- Drums, flutes, whistle, etc. are used as musical instruments.
- Many religious ideas are retained through this means.

Taboos and Prohibitions

- They are forbidden things.
- They are called different names based on their localities.
- They deal with human relations and are like moral laws.
- Can be classified as religious and cultural concepts.
- They are sanctioned by the deities.
- Any culprit is always brought to book.
- There are various taboos on different aspects of human behavior. For example, on sex, food and death taboos.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Historical Reasons that created problems for the study of African Traditional Religion

- Reports were generalized by a few available writers on Africa.

- Many educated Africans were indoctrinated against their own religion and cultures.
- Educated Africans went to seek for jobs in the urban areas and as a result, they lost contact with their homes and their traditions.
- The influence of other world religions made the Africans had difficulty in discovering their beliefs and customs.
- Death, which is inevitable, took away priests, kings, elderly people who could have been serious custodians of this religion.
- The religion had no written records or founders like the other world religions.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the geographical reasons that created problems for the study of African traditional religion.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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MODULE 2   GOD AND MAN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

Unit 1   The Concept of God in African Traditional   Religious Beliefs
Unit 2   Ancestral Veneration in African Traditional Religion
Unit 3   Revelation in African Traditional Religion
Unit 4   God and the World in African Traditional Religion and Culture

UNIT 1   THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

CONTENTS

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Objectives
3.0   Main Content
       3.1   Definition of the Concept God in African Traditional Religion
       3.2   Names of God across Africa
              3.2.1   Names of God in West Africa
              3.2.2   Names of God in Central and Eastern Africa
              3.2.3   Names of God in South African Groups
       3.3   Attributes of God in African Traditional Religious Beliefs
       3.4   God and the Deities
       3.5   God and Morality
       3.6   The Basis of African Morality in Relation to God
       3.7   God, Life and Worship
       3.8   God and the Afterlife
4.0   Conclusion
5.0   Summary
6.0   Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0   References/Further Reading

1.0   INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will study the concept "God" in African traditional religious beliefs with a view to knowing who is God as conceived by Africans. This unit shall also reveal the names of God among the various African groups namely West Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa and South African. A study of the attributes of God shall also be made

alongside God and the deities God and morality, God, life and worship and finally, God and the afterlife.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this study, you should be able to:

- explain the concept God in African traditional religious beliefs
- mention the names of God among the different African groups
- describe the attributes of God in African traditional religion
- discuss how God is worshipped among Africans.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of the Concept God in African Traditional Religion

The concept "God" simply means the ideas or notion that convey the nature of God. In African traditional religion, like other religions, such ideas of God are popular and common Africans have the belief in a Supreme Being who is the creator of all things – both heaven and earth and all things that inhabit them. To this end, many African tribal groups have personal names and praise names for the Supreme Being – God. Some of these names are old and are carved or weaved from images drawn from the environment.

The concept God in African traditional religion, apart from being contained in names, is also expressed in proverbs, prayers, songs as well as the daily speeches of many African people. According to Gbenda in Shishima (2008: 1), the centrality of African religion is the belief in the supernatural power of God. The Supreme Being or God is the originator and sustenance of everything in the universe including man.

In African traditional religion, God is the Supreme Being, the creator and controller of all things in heaven and on earth. He is the "wholly other," and above all divinities. All African people believe in the existence and supremacy of God. Idowu (1973: 47) says, "I do not know of anywhere in Africa where the ultimacy is not accorded to God." In many tribes, everything is referred to God as Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 34) says, all are from Him, by Him, for Him and responsible to Him. As such, every locality has a name for God or the Supreme Being. These names vary from locality to locality.

According to Mbiti (1975: 43) Africans have ideas about God and His activities – what God does, human pictures of God, the nature of God and people's relationship with God. It is strongly believed that God is the creator of the universe. Some believe that he created it out of nothing (*reatio ex-nihilo*), others said that he had some substance from which he created while others said he had helpers and some believed he did it single-handedly .There are also various stories of the origin of the earth. However, one thing we know is that God is the sustainer and protector of all created things. He created both the visible and the invisible world.

People have some mental images of God as one in human shape or form who is capable of doing all things mentioned earlier. Some look to God as father and happily consider themselves as his children. This can be seen in the type of prayers they offer and the way they offer them. Again some believe that God, like human beings, has eyes, ears, and as such; He hears and see them at all times. Concerning his nature, they believe He is helpful, merciful and kind. He is also limitless. He is everywhere, He never changes, He is self-existent, omnipotent and immortal.

3.2   Names of God across Africa

Each African tribe has a name for God, which describes Him. Many of these names are meaningful showing what people think about God. These special names express their idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes they give to Him. The attributes may appear different from society to society, but there is actually complete unanimity among them concerning God's nature. In essence, God is thought of as the Supreme Being, the one who is pre-eminent in all things.

3.2.1 Names of God in West Africa

Below are the names given to God by each tribe in Africa.

The Akan of Ghana

Onyame: The Supreme Being, God the creator of all things, the Deity.
Nana Onyakopon: Grandfather, Nyame who alone is the Great one.
Amosu: Giver of rain.

The Ene of Ghana

Mawu – God
Mawuga – The Great God
Se – The Supreme God

The Mende of Sierra Leone

Ngewo: God, the Great spirit who existed from the beginning and is the author of all life, of the visible world, of men and the invisible spirits.

Mahawa: Great chief
Maada -Tenda: Grandfather

Yoruba tribe of Nigeria

Olodumare: The Creator, Almighty, Supreme
Olorun: Owner or Lord of heaven

The Bini of Nigeria

Osanobua: Creator of the world, sky and earth and of life and death
Osa-Nakpame – Osa: The Great Artist or the Arch moulder
Osa Neghouda: The Source Being who carries and sustains the universe

The Igbo of Nigeria

Chineke: God who creates
Chi-wawu: Great Spirit
Chukwu Okike: The person who creates

The Tiv of Nigeria

Aondo: God the creator and sustainer of all things

The Idoma of Nigeria

Owoicho: The Supreme God

The Etulo

Mgbasho: The Supreme Being

The Urhobo of Nigeria

Uku: The Great one

The Hausa of Nigeria

Ubangiji: God the creator

Personal names and praise names of God are found among the various Nilotic people. Among the Nuer, the Supreme Being (God) is called "Kwoth" meaning "spirit who is in the sky." Some of their praise names for God are "Cak Ghaua" (the creator of the universe), the Great omnipotent one, and "Cak nath" (the creator of men).

The Dinka people call God "Nhialic" which means the "sky or the above." God is also addressed as "Nhialic aek" which means "God the creator" and "Nhialic wa" meaning "God my father."

Among the Koalib and adjacent people of the Nuba mountain regions, the names "Bel Epit" and "Elem" are used for God. The name "Bel Epit" means, "He who causes to appear or to grow" while "Elem" means 'the "fashioner or moulder."

In Cameroon, the Bamun call God, "Nyi" which means "He who is everywhere," "He who hears, sees and knows everything." The "Banen" call God "Ombang," which means "ancestors of days the one who has been there from the beginning." Another name for God is "Ebasi" which means "Omnipotent father."

3.2.2 Names of God in Central and Eastern Africa

Among the Congo tribes, the Ngombe believe in a Supreme Being whom they call *Akongo* meaning "the creator of the universe," "the moulder of men like a potter," the "beginning, and unending, almighty and inexplicable; a guardian spirit, giving good or bad fortune.

The Kikuyu of Kenya call God *Murungu*– The Supreme Being who is believed to live on four sacred mountains. In Malawi, God is also called "possessor of whiteness", perhaps because of his association with the sky. He is the creator of all things who shows his power in the sun, moon and stars, in the storm and rain.

In Malawi, God is called *Mulungu* – the creator, the God of storms and rain whose voice is heard in the thunder. They believe God is everywhere, can do all things and is formless. In Zambia and Tanzania, God is popularly called Leza– "The cherished one." This name *Leza* is used by the Tonga for God, which means the "first cause, creator of all, heat and cold, famine and disease." In Zambia the Ba-ila tribe speak of *Leza* (God) as the moulder or constructor, who created all things and established the customs of the tribe. He is everlasting, everywhere, the

one whom all comes, and the owner of all. The Basuto call God *Molimo*, which means "light, protector and father."

The Tutsi and Hutu of Rwanda and Burundi have *Imana* as a name for God, which "means the maker of all things." His praise names are *Rugba*– "the giver," "the doer of all things," "the one from the beginning," "the one from the olden times," "the ancient of days," "the kindly deposer" and "the father of little babes."

The Baluba of Zaire calls God *Vidye Mukulu* which means the "first father."

3.2.3 Names of God in South African Groups

The Zulu of South Africa call God *unkulu nkulu*, which means "great," "great one," or "old one." This ancient of days is said to have created all things, and to be the ancestor of men whose society he ordered. They also call Him "Lord of Heaven" or "Chief in the sky."The Ngoni call God *Umkulumgango* which means "the great deviser," "original source," "greatest of all," "owner of all things, "originator of all creation," "great spirit" and "the one who has power than any other being."

The original name for the Supreme Being among the Hottentots is *Tsu/goab.*. The Xhosa speaking people call God *Utluxo*. They also have other names such as *Udali*-maker, and *Umenzi*– worker who produced the great works of nature.

In conclusion, it could be said that there are thousands of other names for God in Africa. Some are personal and others are descriptive. From the above names, a clear picture of God as conceived by the Africans emerges. These names also show us clearly that Africans are very familiar with the belief in God and that over the years; they have formulated certain ideas about God. These names show that African has idea of God right from the inception and as such, they worship Him (God) from their different concepts of his existence and characteristics.

3. 3 Attributes of God in African Traditional Religious Beliefs

You have studied the names of God across Africa and you will observe that there are thousands of names given by Africans to God to demonstrate their understanding and conception about Him.

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To fully explain the African ideas and concept of God, some qualities of God will also be considered in this section. The attributes of God point to the fact that God excels and transcends all other beings in power, honour and majesty. He is a being of unique character, possessing noble qualities noble, He is credited with omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent qualities and He is the just and impartial Judge, sometimes meting out judgement on the wicked. We now consider the attributes of God in specific terms.

God is Creator

God is conceived as the infinite self-existent creator of everything else that exists. In this doctrine, creation means far more than fashioning new forms from an already given material (as a builder makes a house or a sculptor a statue). Rather, it means creation out of nothing (creation *ex nihilo*) the summoning of a universe into existence when otherwise there was only God. There are two important corollaries of this idea.

First, it entails an absolute distinction between God and the creation, such that it is logically impossible for a creature to become a creator. That which has been created will forever remain the created and that which is the creator will forever remain the creator. Any thought of human beings becoming God is thus ruled out as meaningless by this conception of creation. The second corollary is that the created realm is absolutely dependent upon God as its maker and as the source of its continued existence. Hence, we find that this radical notion of creation out of nothing expresses itself in prayer and liturgy as a sense of dependence upon God from moment to moment. We have a part in the universe, not by some natural right but by the grace of God, and each day is a gift to be received in thankfulness and responsibility toward the "Divine Giver."

Africans believe that in creating the world, God delegated or commissioned certain divinities to carry out specific assignments. Africans express their concept of God as the creator. The Yoruba call Him *Eleda*– creator, or owner of creation. The Igbo call Him *Chineke* in His capacity as creator.

God is Immortal

When we say God is immortal, this means He can never die. This is a universal idea throughout the African world. Africans believe that if God cease to exist, nothing else will remain. They hold that God is eternal or ever living entity whose being extends to eternity. The

immortality of God can be inferred from the Nupe song "God is far away, God is in front, He is in the back."

Africans also conceive God's immortality as one with no beginning and without ending; He is ever lasting. Some Africans draw out this concept of God metaphorically to praise God as the everlasting one of the forest. Yet some Africans conceive God in terms of the sun to depict His eternity and infinity.

God is Omnipotent

Africans conceive God as omnipotent meaning "He is Almighty", "The All Powerful", "The Strong One". His power is seen in His great work of creation. The wonders of the world tell of His greatness. The sun, moon and stars, the seasons, the immense sky – all are the work of His hands and are dependent on Him. Hence, His most common and most appropriate personal name among the Igbo is *Chukwu*, the Great Providence.

According to Metuh (1999: 63), the Igbo do not see God's greatness and omnipotence only in relation to the material world. They also see God's omnipotence in His relation to the spirit world. His omnipotence as an inherent nature reveals Him as being able to do all things.

God's omnipotence in many African oral traditions describe Him in political terms such as "The Irresistible", "He who bends down", and He who roars so that all nations be struck with terror.

God is Transcendent

God is not only omnipotent but also transcendent. He is not only distinct from the world or any other creature but infinitely excels over them in power and excellence. No limit can be put to his power and excellence by any human imagination. The transcendence of God in relation to the universe is implied in some of His personal and title names. For example, the Igbo name "*Osebuluwa*" – "Lord Carrier of the World" is a metaphorical way of stating that God surpasses the world. He is called "*Ezechitoke*" "king, Lord and Creator." He is "*Eze-Enu*"- "King of the Heavens." He is also called "*Eze bin'igwe Ogodo ya na'a kpu' ala*"- "King who lives in the sky and his clothes touch and roll over the ground". His transcendence and his immanence seem to be contradictory and some writers on African traditional religion try to emphasize God's transcendence at the expense of his immanence by talking of a withdrawn God. However, as far as Africans are concerned, God is far

above in the heavens in His kingly majesty and exaltation, yet he fills the whole earth with his presence.

God is Omnipresent

Africans believe that God is everywhere, and as such, attach a lot of importance on this fact. They say that God is in heaven, He is on earth and He is beneath the earth. He is on the mountains; He is on trees, rivers, oceans, seas and indeed everywhere in the world. Though invisible, He controls all the affairs of the world since He knows every bit of it. The ubiquitous of God makes a Tiv man to say *Aondo ngu hanma ijiir* – God is everywhere. Air and wind are two common ways of expressing metaphorically the omniscient nature of God in African traditional religion. Hence, some Africans believe that God is invisible but present like air and wind.

God is Omniscient

God is believed by Africans to be omniscient, because He knows all things. This gives Him the position of honour, which is unrivalled, unequalled, absolute and unique. Anything that happens in the African community is believed to have been done by Gold based on the fact that He is the all-knowing. When a new baby is born, God is said to be responsible for causing the baby to come out. This is because Africans also believe that power belongs to God. This is why the Tiv man would name a child "Terfa" meaning "God knows."

Africans also believe that God cause rain to fall as opposed to the notions of Geographers. For whatever happens on the African soil, God is aware of it, otherwise, it cannot happen. Certain expressions indicate that God knows the most hidden secrets, understands the most incomprehensible facts and even thoughts in men's hearts. For example, a Tiv man would say *Aondo fe hanma kwagh u alu ken asema a ior cii* – "God knows everything that is in the hearts of all men." The Igbo man would say *Onwere ihe gbara Chukwu ghari*? –"is there anything, which could come as a surprise to God?" When a person suffers an injustice or is falsely accused, he may in despair exclaim, *Chukwu omuzikwori anya*? – "Is God no longer awake?" These and other expressions by Africans attest to the fact that God is the all-knowing among Africans.

God is regarded as the impartial judge who dispenses justice and punishes sin. The Yoruba say *Oba Adakedajo* – "The king that executes

judgement in silence." A Tiv man would say *Aondo ka orjir wase* – "God is our judge." The Akan believe that God is the only person that rewards righteousness and punishes sin. He is not a respecter of persons. Some divinities are believed to represent God's wrath. These are anti-wicked divinities. Among the Yoruba, we have thunder divinity called *Sango*. The same divinity is called *Sokogba* by Nupe. Africans believe that God uses these divinities as agents of punishment.

Other Moral Attributes of God

God is a personal being, a conscious being, who knows everything and can reason; He decides, guides and directs the universe according to His inscrutable purposes. By His divine providence, He directs the destiny of every person, even down to the least creature in the world.

More than this, however, Africans believe that goodness, love, kindness and mercy are other essential attributes of God. Only things, which are good, pure, and noble, can be, and are attributed to God. Similarly, nothing, which is considered bad, impure or ignoble, can be associated with Him. It is rather absurd, a contradiction, to predicate any evil of God. One cannot ever say that is God is wicked, unjust, deceptive, or that He is a liar. Rather, when an African is in faces a crisis, he wonders why God has permitted it, but finally assumes that it is God's will. In such cases, Sympathizers say to the bereaved "Be comforted, God has done His will". Death is the greatest evil in the African experience, but "God's death" is never questioned and sometimes is even seen as an occasion of great rejoicing.

God's moral attributes – His goodness, kindness, mercy, love, justice and so forth, are acclaimed in many proverbs, expressions and personal names of Africans.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Give any four reasons to prove the existence of God among Africans.

3.4   God and the Deities

Africans generally recognise the relationship between God and the deities but their conception of this relationship is not very clear. God created the world and infinitely transcends it. He created the deities and is far above them in power and excellence, and yet, the deities have divine attributes and receive worship, which shows recognition of their divine nature. This is a fact about African traditional religion, which nobody with the Judeo-Christian background would find it easy to

believe, or most perplexing. If African traditional religion is monotheistic, how do we explain the deities? If it is polytheistic, how can one explain the high monotheistic concepts found in their beliefs? This paradox of the unity and multiplicity of the Divinity is seen in the religious systems of many African societies and may well be a characteristic feature of African traditional religion as a whole.

The Ashanti of Ghana, for example, believe that the world is full of divine beings. The Supreme Being (*Onyankopon*), who created all things, manifests his power through a pantheon of deities (*abosom*). According to Ashantio beliefs, the *abosom* derive their power from the Supreme Being, and they come from Him and are part of Him. A god is but the mouthpiece of the Supreme Being (*Onyankopon Kyeame*), a servant acting as an intermediary between creator and creature.

Similarly, for the Nuer, *Kwoth Nhial* (the Supreme Spirit) is the creator and mover of all things. Under God, there are lesser spirits, which can be classified into two groups: *Kuth Whial* (Spirits of the sky or of above) and *Kuth Piny* (Spirits of the earth) who are the most powerful of all the lesser spirits and are thought to be the children of God. The form the Nuer use to express this relationship, *goat Kwoth* (sons or children of God), is a clear indication that these spirits are regarded as something lesser and lower than God. They are not regarded as creative spirits as in God, but as beings that derive from Him (God). Thus, they are both distinct from and identical with God. God is manifested and in a sense is, each of them. Evans Pritchard (1970: 51) expressed his perception of the paradox thus: "I receive the impression that in sacrificing or in singing hymns to an air spirit, Nuer do not think that they are communicating with the spirit and not with God. They are, if I have understood the matter correctly, addressing God in a particular spiritual figure or manifestation."

The Yoruba Supreme Being, *Olodumare*, is the creator, Lord and Father of the deities, *Orisa*. According to them, at the beginning, *Olodumare* lived with *Orisa* in the heavens. It *Olodumare* was who sent them (*Orisa*) down to earth with different assignments to perform, swing them responsibility for supervising different parts of the universe and different aspects of human life. The *Orisa* are therefore regarded as his deputies and messenger (Idowu, 1962: 62).

For the Igbo, according to Metuh (1999: 89) this paradox presents no problem. For they see no contradiction in accepting one creator of all things and at the same time recognising many deities. They say that *Chukwu* (God) is not a jealous God. On the contrary, it would seem that in line with their ideas about kingship and mobility, the number and power of the subordinate deities enhance the importance and supremacy

of *Chukwu*, just as the prestige of a king is sometimes measured by the number and power of his subordinate chiefs. Therefore, it would be normal and logical for the Igbo to affirm in one breath the unity and supremacy of God, and the greatness and multiplicity of the deities. This is very well illustrated by the Igbo morning prayer during which God, the deities, and the ancestors are invoked according to their order and rank.

Chineke taa Oji	God eat kola
Chukwu Abiama taa oji	God of the universe, eat kola
Anyanwu na Ezerue taa oji	Sun, and king of the sky, eat kola
Ala ekere!	Earth deity greeting!
Igwe ekene!	Sky deity greeting!
Taa nu oji	Eat kola
Nde mbu, nde abuo	Up to last three generations
Nna Nnaa ha	Great grand fathers
Taa na oji	Eat kola

(Arinze, 1970: 25)

The question is what exactly is the role of the deities in relation to the Supreme Being? African beliefs are very clear about this. Africans hold that God is distinct from the world and distant from it as the sky is distant from the earth. All creatures, including the deities are in the world and that is where their activities take place. They are thought to reside in different natural phenomena, and are there as God's representatives. As spirits, the deities are believed to have easier access to God, yet heaven is not viewed as a court where the deities and the ancestors act as councilors and courtiers. Rather, they are like administrators in distant provinces. God is thus transcendent but at the same time immanent in creation through the deities.

The deities enjoy a great measure of sovereignty and independence in the aspect of life over which they have charge. Sometimes, they are offered acts of worship and in prayers are credited with attributes, which those with Christian or Muslim monotheistic traditions would think belong to God alone. However, African beliefs generally emphasise that ultimate power and authority rest squarely with God.

3.5   God and Morality

What has been gathered about the origin of evil in the world has given us a clue to the relationship that exists between God and morality. God is not responsible for the presence of evil in the world. He is given credit for all the good that there is in the word and the presence of evil is blamed on the irresponsible behavior of the creature. The irresponsible
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behavior of the creature (man) brought death into the world. The natural inference from this is that God, the creator, is all good and perfect. Moreover, He requires moral goodness from his creatures.

The existence of moral consciousness in African traditional religion can further be shown by analysing more of the terms, sayings, stories and practices which illustrate conscience, moral values and the moral code in African traditions. Some Africans believe that moral conscience is innate in man although this is not a logically reasoned philosophical conclusion, but more of a simple affirmation of belief, which has grown out of the experience of life.

For example, the Yoruba believe that in order to aid man in ethical living, *Olodumare* has put in him *Ifa aya*, "the oracle of the heart" or "the oracle which is in the heart". It is this oracle of the heart that guides man and determines his ethical life.

According to Metuh (1999: 134-135), the Igbo are also aware of this small voice in man which directs him to good deeds and warns him of evil. They believe that this voice comes from the heart; hence, the Igbo word for conscience is *obi*. A good conscience is *obi ocha*, a clean heart and bad conscience is *Ajo obi*. The normal state of a man's conscience affects his character. A wicked man is called *Onye Ajo obi* – a person with a bad heart, whereas a good and kindly person is called *Onye obi orna*. The Igbo are very conscious of the necessity of having a good conscience, for God punishes those with bad conscience.

The African moral code, unlike the Ten Commandments, is not written down. Rather it is preserved in oral traditions 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. As in many pre-literate societies, proverbs, names, sayings and folktales are not merely instruments for preserving moral ideals, but are very effective methods of teaching them. Many of African proverbs and sayings praise, virtue and vice approve of religion and disapprove of irreligion. They predict blessings for goodness and warning for evil consequences of bad behaviour. Sin, punishment and forgiveness feature in African proverbs. For example, the Igbo proverbs *Isi kote ebu, ya gbaba ya*-"the head that disturbs the wasp, let it take the sting" and "mmechie adighi mgbaghera agaghi adi"- "If there were no offences, there would be no forgiveness."

Folktales were traditionally a very effective means of instructing the young. In formal storytelling, sessions took place during moonlight games, and children would sit, fascinated, for long hours around an elderly person and listen to thrilling and interesting tales. It was a leisure

activity as well as a learning exercise. Most of the folktales have moralistic themes and values and tell how the trials and sufferings of the virtuous are finally rewarded and how the irreligious, the proud and the wicked are punished. Most of African children learn of God's omnipotence and man's total dependence on him for his protection, existence and survival.

3.6   The Basis of African Morality in Relation to God

Some anthropologists hold that the traditional moral law of the Africans can be traced not to an interior divine law but to the common good of the group. In this sense, the idea of sin does not exist for him outside the notion of injury to the community or more personal selfish interests.

Margaret Field (1960: 115), for example, credits the Igbo with the lowest form of moral consciousness when she tells of a local council clerk who went to a diviner's shrine to seek protection from the malice of those from whom he had extorted money, but who neither expressed contrition nor received censure. Generalisations drawn from the particular can be misleading, such opinions do not seem to distinguish between principle and practice.

According to Tempels (1969: 118), the orthodox ethical norm does not consist in the ordinary behaviour of men. There may indeed be some elements of utilitarianism in an individual's approach to morality. However, 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.

According to another opinion, sin consists principally in the harm done to the welfare of a group, or 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. This is only one of several aspects of the African view of morality. Crimes such as witchcraft, murder and theft also require ritual purification for their expiation because they are considered offences against God or the deities. Those with hidden sins are believed to be forced to deathbed confessions by their consciences.

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 man himself is a vital force. Certain principles in man link him with the different forces: his *obi* (breath) and with other cosmic forces. His *chi* (spirit guardian) links him with the creator; his *Eke* (ancestral) links him with the rest of the human community, dead and living. The basis of all morality is therefore seen as the maintenance of harmonious relationship between man and these other groups of beings. One therefore finds that although morality is conceived in the idiom of a relationship with the mystical forces, it has at the same time supernatural, social and personal dimensions. However, one aspect may be emphasised in a particular case, depending on the case in question.

Some offences are primarily seen as offences against God, others are seen as against the deities or ancestors. Still others are deemed to be directed against human society and some compromise the integrity of the individual. However, all offences are disruptions of the harmonious relationship in the ontological order. Indeed, one could say that the gravity of an offence is judged by how far it disturbs the ontological order. The greatest offences are those, which threaten the moral order itself. The question now is "Is morality referred to God or other subordinate beings? (Monica Wilson, 1971: 76) writing on the above argues that since the traditional religions of Africa were not monotheistic, the sources of retribution conceived were diverse. They include the shades, the heroes, living senior kin and village headmen, neighbours and age-mates, all of whom were thought to exercise mystical powers. This statement is basically true as long as it does not exclude God completely from the sphere of morality.

One God does not *ipso facto* exclude the deities, as the concept of Western monotheism implies, nor does the interest of the deities in human affairs exclude the intervention of God. This again is an error, which results from applying western preconceptions to African beliefs. Writing about the Igbo, Correia (1923: 880) complains, when an African admits that God exists, this belief does not bring him to wonder what God wants. However, in discussing morality, Parrinder (1968: 24) says of West African people. "Though God is generally regarded as upholding the moral laws, and judging men after death in accordance with their actions, many practices seem to have little to do with him."

Africans believe that order and harmony in the world are under the control of God and are ruled by fixed laws. Good deeds bring order and attract peace, happiness and prosperity. Evil creates disorder and brings suffering, misfortune and death. God is indeed, in charge of morality as far as Africans are concerned.

3.7   God, Life and Worship

Africans generally believe that God is the giver and taker of life. That is why anytime a woman gives birth, the family of such a woman appreciates God. Not only the immediate family but any other person who goes there to see the family joins in the appreciation. An unexpected child is usually believed to be a special gift from God. After all, man has at his disposal, all the traditional medical and spiritual techniques known for producing children. When this fails, the African knows that his only hope is the mercy and benevolence of God. One Igbo proverb, according to Metuh (1999: 151) sees God as the only hope of the hopeless. He mentions a case of a colleague of his, an only son, who was born unexpectedly when his parents who were not Christians had lost hope of ever having a child… In gratitude for God's kindness and mercy, and in appreciation of His power and majesty named the boy Ifeanyichukwu – nothing is impossible with God.

In relation to worship, there are hundreds of tribes in Africa which, though have some beliefs in common, have developed different habits of worship over the years. One group may emphasise one form of worship – response more than others. Some have highly developed ancestor cults others have elaborate pantheons and very organised cults of their different deities. Anthropological reports show that some African communities have developed organised public worship of the Supreme Being while others have not. This does not mean that we already know everything that is to be known about the African communities and their religious beliefs. Generally, our knowledge as it stands at present allows us to affirm that deism in the sense of belief in God without worship is not a distinguishing characteristic of African traditional religion. The types of worship given to God vary in different African societies and groups. Every African society has some form of worship of God, be it direct or indirect, private or public.

Beliefs in many deities and the ancestral cults has obscured and overshadowed the worship of God. Mediation is a common feature of the African way of life. The number and status of the intermediaries enhance the prestige of the one addressed and though no organised public worship of God exists other than that made through the intermediary deities – this may surely be described as indirect worship of God. To the African, this does not mean worship of secondary importance. The two explanations given for this are that the Africans think that the exalted position and dignity of God demands that He be approached through intermediaries, and that the African presumably has the pious feeling that he is inadequate and the intermediaries will present his offerings better than he can.

Even in societies where only indirect public worship exists, individuals do approach God directly in their private devotions. Some would say that this happens only in extreme situations or crises, but this is not necessarily so. Writers have reported many Africans' awareness of the presence and role of God in their lives. This is shown by the constant mention of the Supreme Being in everyday life in proverbs, greetings, exclamations, the naming of children, oaths and invocations of His name. These are forms of worship – responses and are included in the definition of worship in its broadest connotation.

There are many societies, which have organised public direct worship of God. It is also true that since the introduction of Christianity and Islam, certain forms of worship of the Supreme Being (in traditional religion) in some communities have ceased. It is also reported that in some places, believers in traditional religion have been labelled "idol worshippers" and they have reacted by confining themselves to the worship of the deities and ancestors, leaving the worship of God to Christians.

One would accept the suggestion that vast number of sacrificial offerings in traditional religion are directed towards the restoration of the ontological order. Taylor (1969: 80) caps it all by saying since God, the founder of this order, is believed to be above its laws, having handed over its control to the intermediaries, man is more concerned with propitiating these intermediaries whenever the order is thought to have been used.

3.8   God and the Afterlife

The African tradition's belief in the existence of the human person after death, in ancestors as the "living dead" and in reincarnation suggests that there is a strong belief in the afterlife. Most writers today admit that all African societies believe in an afterlife, but with varying degrees of emphasis. Generally, the afterlife is viewed from the point of view of the continuing relationship of the dead with the living and not as the final end of man or of the world. There is very little speculation about the 'last things'. Eschatology either in the sense of the culmination of individual lives or of human history in general is of marginal interest in traditional religion. This is understandable given the African conception of life as a cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth. What is, was and will be. The centre of concern is the eternal now. Since the past and the future are not different from the present, the fulfillment of man is ought to be in the present. Consequently, the afterlife is conceived in terms of the present life. The environment and social structure of each society are projected into the visible world and form the framework of its

conceptions of the afterlife. In this context, ideas about immorality, judgement and retribution play very little part.

There is not a single reported case of a belief in the end of the world as we know it in the near or distant future. Beliefs about the fate of man in the afterlife involving a last judgement and retribution do exist, but they seem to be exceptions rather than the rule. For the most part, these exceptions are found in West Africa. According to Griaule (1965: 189), the Dogon of Mali believe that after the spirit of the dead has been ushered out of the world of the living with the appropriate funeral rites, it engages in an arduous journey which is a form of retribution for its misdeeds on earth. Even for the good, this lasts for at least three years, after which the spirit is admitted into the *Manga*, the *Dogon* paradise. Similarly, the Yoruba believe that the ancestral soul, *Iponri*, goes before *Olodumare* after death for judgement in accordance with the saying, "All that we do on earth, we shall account for in heaven." Those who lived good lives go to *Orun Rere* (good heaven), while those who had lived wicked lives go to the *Orun Buruku* (bad heaven of broken post herds) which is said to be hot like pepper (Bascom, 1969: 89).

Metuh (1999: 169) says Igbo ideas about the afterlife involve belief in a kind of judgement and retribution. The good go to *Ala Mmuo* (spirit land), where they continue a life similar to their earthly life and are allowed to reincarnate, while the bad are banished to *Amaa nri mmuo na mmadu* (the Igbo hell), and turn into frustrated wandering spirits.

The above explanations suggest that there is an afterlife, which is a general belief of the Africans. The terms "this life," "next life," "after life" and "eternal life" are terms borrowed from Euro-Christian philosophy, which are foreign to the African system of thought. As far as Africans are concerned, life is one continuous stretch of existence and is not split up into "this life" and "the next life." To the Africans, the concept of time is cyclic, not lineal, what happens after death is not the terminal, definitive stage of man's life; it is only a phase in the continuing round of existence. There is no idea of "heaven" or "hell" as a place of reward or punishment – the spirit – land is not a place of eternal repose and happiness, it is rather a transit camp for those awaiting reincarnation to continue the life cycle.

Africans want to live and continue to live with a strengthened life – force with each cycle of life. The living are happy that they are alive. The visible world is preferable to the spirit-land, even though the ancestors who live there are believed to be more powerful. Their enhanced powers are used to obtain better living conditions for their living kinsmen in anticipation of when they themselves will reincarnate

to enjoy the prosperity thus given to their families. In this sense, African traditional religion is said to be life-affirming in contrast to Asian religions and Christianity, all of which can be said to be life-denying.

Africans' ideas of retribution are worked out in the context of this cyclic conception. Retribution for human conduct is not limited to life after death, but is spread throughout the life cycle and carried over to successive cycles. The greatest evil is to be thrown out of the life cycle through denial of reincarnation. Whether a person may reincarnate or not depends entirely on the Creator. It is not known how God determines this, but it is believed to be linked with one's conduct during earthly life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

1. Explain the relationship that exists between God and the deities in African traditional religion.
2. How would you explain the concept of afterlife as understood by Africans?

4.0   CONCLUSION

Having said much on the concept of God in African traditional religious beliefs, we have established the fact that all Africans have a firm belief in the existence of the Supreme Being who is given different names by different tribes on African continent with attendant attributes that He is known for. God is in charge of everything that concern Africans and as such He is revered and given due attention in all matters concerning Him and His relationship with man as far as Africans are concerned, is cordial.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this, you have learnt that all Africans have the belief in the Supreme Being whom they call God in their various dialects. He is believed to possess attributes, which distinguish Him from other gods or deities. Personal names and praise names of God are found among various tribes across Africa. Africans generally recognise some relationship between God and the deities and affirm that these deities are God's representatives on earth. Africans also view God as a vital force in the moral consciousness of man in the world, not just in Africa alone. In relation to worship, we have established that there are hundreds of tribes in Africa which though, have some beliefs in common, have developed different habits of worship over the years, such that one group may emphasise one form of worship – response more than others. While

some have highly developed ancestral cults, others have elaborate pantheons and organised cults of their different deities. On the issue of afterlife, we have established that as far as Africans are concerned, there is an afterlife; what happens after death is not the terminal, definitive stage of man's life, but is only a phase in the continuing round of existence in the next world.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Reasons to prove the existence of God among African peoples:

(i)   They pray to him in times of need.
(ii)   They worship God in different ways.
(iii)   They give him different names across Africa.
(iv)   God is believed to be the Creator of the world and all
        things in the world including men.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

The relationship that exists between God and the Deities in African Traditional Religion is that of Master Servant relationship. The deities are the messengers of God to the Africans.

The deities are believed to have been created by God. They thus are intermediaries between God and man in African Traditional Religion. They (deities) come immediately after God in the hierarchy of spirits in African religious beliefs.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

State and explain any five attributes of God in African traditional religion.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2   GOD AND THE WORLD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

CONTENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you studied God and man in African traditional religious beliefs. In it, you learnt the names and attributes of God among Africans, the relationship that exists between God and the deities, God and morality, God, life and worship and finally God and the afterlife.

In this unit, you will study God and the world in African traditional religion and culture. In x-raying the above topic, we will see how God controls and maintains the world so that peace will prevail. We will look at God and the problem of evil in African religious beliefs; and why there is the obligation to work (dignity of labour) among Africans. We will finally look at God and social change. Here, we will see whether changes have taken place in the world and in Africa in particular.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

•   discuss how God controls and maintains the world
•   explain how God created the world
•   describe the social changes that have taken place in the world
•   explain why there is evil in the world.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   God and the World

Africans believe that this world did not come into existence by itself, but by a superior or supernatural being or force. To this end, every African ethnic group has a story or myth of how the world came into being.

For example, the Igbo story of creation has it that, *Chukwu* created the universe. He is *Oke Abiama* – maker of everything. He made the universe in two parts – Earth (*Ala*) and Sky (*Igwe*) after which he created two messengers – the Sun (*Anyanwu*) and Moon (*Onwa*) to travel across the sky, to bring Him back news of what happens on earth.

The Yoruba story of creation has it that, before the world was created, *Olodumar*e, the Supreme Deity was and He still is. And there was a watery swampy void or waste which the divinities which lived with *Olodumare* in heaven came regularly to make spots on. These divinities were able to transverse to the marshy waste through the aid of the spider's web. Then *Olodumare* with the thought of creating the world ordered and commissioned *Orisa-nla* (the arch-divinity) of Yoruba land to go and create the solid earth with accompanying materials loose earth (wrapped in a leaf or snail shell), a hen with five toes and a pigeon. Accordingly, *Orisa-nla* complied with this and it took him four days to complete this work. Then *Olodumare* sent a chameleon to come and inspect the work. The chameleon in turn reported that the earth was wide and dry enough for further operations.

Certain trees were to be planted on the earth to supply the inhabitants with drink, food and shelter. The hen and pigeon used in the work of creation were to increase, multiply and produce meat for the people on earth. After this task was accomplished, *Olodumare* sent others down to the earth under the headship *of Orrelúéré* (the first human head) to inhabit the earth. *Orisa-nla* appealed to *Olodumare* to improve the earth by supplying water for the plants and animals; in response to *Orisan-nla*'s request, *Olodumare* sent rain. *Olodumare* again commissioned *Orisa-nla* to mould man's physical parts from the dust of the earth after which it was *Olodumare*'s prerogative to give life to the physical, lifeless forms. But when *Olodumare* discovered that *Orisa-nla* tried to spy on how the lifeless forms being humans, he caused an deep sleep on *Orisa-nla* only for him to wake up and find that all the forms in stock became human beings. Life then began on earth uninterrupted between man and *Olodumare*. However, something happened that disrupted the

existing peace of the created order; this put a barrier between *Olodumare* and man.

An examination of this story of creation shows that:

(i)   God is the creator of all things
(ii)   A subordinate being is involved in the process of creation.

In this case, the arch-divinity is believed to have been commissioned by the Supreme Deity. This is so because in Africa, the king had to delegate some of the functions to his chiefs or functionaries. The two stories of creation have clearly attested to the fact that God is the creator of the world and everything that is in the world.

3.2   God's Control and Maintenance of the World

God controls and maintains the world. This is because the world and all the creatures are His. If He cannot control and maintain it, He will not be doing good to His creatures. This will also make the creatures to conclude that God is dead and inactive in the affairs of the world He had created. All the creatures and all that goes on in the world are directly under His control. He sustains and upholds the things He has created.

Placide Tempels (1959: 33-47) making his contributions on the above subject matter says, it is a metaphysical causality which binds the creature to the creator. The relationship of the creature to the creator is a constant… the creature is by his nature permanently dependent upon his creator for existence and means of survival… The sage "par excellence" is God who knows every being, comprehends the nature and quality of the energy of each… God is force, possessing energy in himself, the mover of all other forces. He knows all forces, their ordering, dependence, potential and mutual interactions. He knows, therefore, the cause of every event.

According to Middleton (1960: 27), the absolute control of the universe and of all beings is due, in African thought, to the fact that all other beings exist in consequence of God. In addition, whatever power or authority exists, they exist because God permits; this is because all power derives its source from Him. God is the ultimate fountainhead of all power and authority, of all sanctions for orderly relations between men.

Evans Pritchard (1956: 27) lays particular stress at this point on the Nuer concept of God's will. He says, when they say, "It is His world," they mean that everything is in being and continues in being by the supernatural prerogative of the Almighty. Thus, although *Kwoth* (God)

is in the sky, He is at the same time on earth and this resolves for the Nuer the paradox of His transcendence and immanence as one who is far away and at the same time actively and effectively rules and governs human affairs. He is the giver and, naturally, the sustainer of life. The Ashanti of Ghana summarise this by saying of *Onyame* "the Supreme Being," upon whom men lean and do not fall".

The control and maintenance of the world by God is also fully expressed in the sayings, proverbs, myths, songs, and names of God in African societies. For example, the Edo name for God *Osanobua* means "The Source-Being who carries and sustains the universe." The transcendence and immanence of God is emphasised by the Nupe in the saying "God is in front, He is in the back." They also say of God, "a being which *Soko* did not create, neither did the world create it… should you do anything that is beautiful, *Soko* has caused it… should you do anything evil, *Soko* has caused it to be evil." The above implies that God is the creator, sustainer, controller and maintainer of the whole world.

Idowu (1962: 154) tells of a Yoruba myth, which brings out clearly the relationship between Deity and the divinities and the controlling and maintaining power of God over His creation. This myth says that:

The one thousand seven hundred divinities conspired against *Olodumare* (God), and decided that He must abdicate power and authority. They went before him and demanded that He should hand over power to them at least, for an experimental period of 16 years. *Olodumare* suggested to them that it might be wise for them to experiment for 16 days in the first instance. This suggestion they joyfully accepted. *Olodumare* then told them that the world was theirs to run the way they chose for that period of 16 days. They immediately set about their task. However, after only eight days, they discovered that things had gone so wrong that the machinery of the universe was in fact at a standstill. There was nothing else they could do but to go back to *Olodumare*. Therefore, in shame, and with drooping heads, they went back to Him and confessed their folly, acknowledging His absolute sovereignty and supremacy over all, and pleading for mercy. The Benevolent Father laughed at their foolishness and forgave them. He then switched on again the machinery of the universe and it immediately resumed normal running. The divinities went away singing:

Be there one thousand, four hundred divinities of the home.
Be there one thousand, two hundred divinities of the market place.
Yet, there is not one divinity to compare with *Olodumare*.
Olodumare is the King Unique.
In our recent dispute,

Edumare it is who won.

Yes, *Edumare*.

The divinities could not control, sustain and maintain the world for a second, no to talk of 16 days granted to them. Thus, in the control and maintenance of the world, God has delegated powers to the divinities to govern the affairs of the African world. The world is organised and maintained by the spiritual forces and powers who do not carry out such functions on their own. For they do not have absolute power and authority to function but depend on God and are responsible to the Supreme Being who is the controller, maintainer and unifying force of the world.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Discuss two ways in which God controls and maintains the world.

3.3   God and Peace in the World and in Nigeria

There is every need for the maintenance of peace in the world in general and Nigeria in particular. This is because for a harmonious relationship between man and man, tribe and tribe, nation and nation, to be maintained, peace is needed. When there is peace, everything goes on well in our societies, but where there is no peace, everything turns upside down.

In Nigeria, we have three basic religions namely: Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. All these religious groups believe in one God who is regarded as the Creator and Giver of life to all and sundry.

In Christianity, we are made to understand and believe that God created the heavens and the earth. God created man in his own image and likeness and patterned him after Himself, male and female, He created them. After this creation, God made man the crown of all creation, when He charged him to have dominion and control of every other created thing. In Islam, the Qur'an recognises God as the one and the only Lord of the entire universe, Creator, Owner, Organiser, Master, Planner, Sustainer and the Judge of the day of recompense. In African traditional religion, God is also known to be the Creator, Sustainer, Controller, Maintainer and Owner of the universe and all its creatures. Each African tribe has a name for God.

Therefore, the three religious practices in Nigeria are God-centred and so it behoves on all of us to believe and see God as our creator, and sustainer. He is the giver of life to all of us who are His creatures. What we should be doing now is to come together as one towards the

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achievement of peace and unity of our dear country. However, the contrary is the case. This is clearly evident in the growing increase in religious crisis all over the nation.

Accordingly, Awolalu (2005: xxv) quoting Moon said
all worshippers must regard themselves as representatives of world religions and they must endeavour to form themselves into cooperative unity for the sake of world peace… and that all religions must provide a stable, universal foundation of values upon which governments can build true peace and harmony and that all religious leaders and scholars must accept to play the role of bringing about peace…

If the above clarion call by Moon is accepted, peace could be maintained in the world. If religion in essence is a means of communion and communication between believing souls and the creator spirit in order to have peace and wholeness, all worshippers must aspire to attain the one goal. Adherents of different religious groups in the world should use religion as a means of strengthening understanding and bringing about perfect peace in our large society and thus establishing God's kingdom here on earth.

3.4   God and the Problem of Evil in African Religious Beliefs

The problem of evil covers the whole range of philosophical and religious enterprises from the ancient period to the modern times. This problem which is associated with the belief that God is absolutely good and compassionate, who controls all events in history, and who is both all powerful (omnipotent) and all knowing (omniscient) cannot be associated with evil. The problems arising from the concept of God and the problem of evil can be summarised in the following hypothesis: Does evil exist? Is it God or other being who created evil? Why does He want to punish the evil doer? If God does not like evil, why does He not eradicate it once and for all since He is all powerful? If evil is created by other being different from God, does that not mean that such a being created what God Himself could not create? Then if God is all powerful, why does He allow such a being to create what He could not create or to create what He dislikes?

In African religious beliefs, many societies say categorically that God did not create what is evil nor does he do any evil whatsoever. For example, the Ila of Zambia holds that God is always right and cannot be charged with an offence, cannot be accused, cannot be questioned. He does good to all at all time. God created the knowledge of good and evil in every person and allowed him to choose his way without forbidding him or forcing his will on him.

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Mbiti says that there is an evil divinity, which God created good but later on turned against Him and began to do evil. Thus, a kind of duel exists between good and evil forces of the world. According to Akinseye (2005: 394), there are other people who regard death, epidemic, locusts, pestilence and other major calamities as divinities in themselves or as caused by divinities. According to him, in nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil or agents of evil. Aside, as a principle or rule in African society, one may offend a person of the same status, never or rarely does a person or being of a higher status do what constitutes an offence against a person of a lower status. What is considered evil or offensive functions from a lower level to a higher one. If a witch, for instance, bewitches a little child, this act puts her on a lower level than the child. That is the philosophical understanding concerning what constitutes evil in the context of relationships. Therefore, according to this principle, God does not and cannot commit evil against His creation.

The problem of evil and headship of God attracts less debate and controversy in the creed of Yoruba religion. In Yoruba religion according to Labeodan (2002: 5), the problem of evil is attributed to the two concepts namely: the concept of *ori* (head) and the concept of *akunleyan* (fate). It is upheld in Yoruba belief that before man is born, he knees before *Olodumare* (God) requesting for his fate during which he asks for his needs and wants for his existence during the period of his sojourning on earth. Whatever he asks for on that occasion becomes his lot on earth. According to Adekunle (2005: 422), this is the reason for the Yoruba wise saying that goes: *Akunleyan ni adayeba a de ile aye tan, oju nkan gbogbo wa*, meaning "Despite this, we do not want to accept the fate when we got to the earth."

After choosing one's fate (*akunleyan*) man goes to *Obatala* (the god of creation) to choose *ori* (head) according to his desire. By this, whatever occurs to him on earth, whatever evil or good, depends on his choice of *ori* when he was choosing his fate.

The Yoruba also uphold that there are cultic-practicing people who could bring evil to man by changing envious attitude of such a man through the misbehaviour of such a man to them. These cultic people are known as *aje* (witches) and *oso* (wizards). They are ever ready to deal with anybody stepping on their toes by casting spell on him during the night when they use to assemble for their cultic meetings. It is in these meetings that the fate of their offender would be decided and dealt with accordingly. In short, Yoruba traditional belief alienates God (*Olodumare*) from the blame of evil and misfortune befalling man. The

evil is not naturally caused but through man himself or from his fellow man in the society. Based on the above, we may make the following deductions:

- It is an indisputable fact that God is the ultimate Being behind everything that occurs in the world, as nothing can take place without His knowledge. Despite this, God does not command nor wish human beings to cause evil to themselves not to talk of causing evil to his fellow beings. Both goodness and evil are created by God. He does not condone evil.

- God, the omniscient and knower of secret and manifested things is fully aware of any action taking place in the world on every dire minute and second. Whatever action that affects man is for the man's benefit, though he may not be aware of this due to his short-sightedness and his inability to know what is hidden from him. What man regards as evil may be a form of goodness to him at the long run.

3.5   God and Dignity of Labour

The term "labour" can be viewed from different perspectives. In the first instance, it can be assessed in terms of work or vocation embarked upon as a source of livelihood in a private or public affair of mankind. In addition, it refers to work done for wages. Besides, it is equally a generic word for employees and trade unions as a collective.

However, dignity of labour is fundamental to the nature of man, because, man often lifts himself when he does his work well. In line with the above observation, Utomi (2004: 29) writes, "The dignity of the human person is tied very closely to work. And when we work well, when we recognise the dignity of other human beings as they work, we essentially elevate the ordinary to the level of the engagement of the divine".   This implies that the principle of dignity of labour is particularly tailored towards the nature of man, to work for his goodness and the society at large. Thus, it can be deduced that the subject of work or labour is man, but man is not the object of labour. It is equally inferred that dignity of labour to man has a natural divine pre-occupation or commission. Thus, God and dignity of labour conveys the idea of the equality of all types of labour or work before God.

It is beyond any reasonable doubt that God cherishes work and hard work. This is because He, as the creator, is continually at work due to his vast responsibility of caring for his creatures. He is the giver and man perpetually depends on his giving. It is also pertinent to note that

God himself instituted labour or work at creation, when he took man and put him in the garden to keep it. This makes it imperative for man to work to sustain himself, because man cannot pretend to be living in a dream world, which is filled with everything at his disposal. Man by implication owes God the obligation of having a positive attitude to work; hence, God says "You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands…

Dike (1988: 11) asserts that, work is a challenge to all creatures of God, being the basic fulfillment of the laws of duty as given by God. He says when one works for one's daily bread, one will get food and other social evils caused by idleness will be curbed in effect. He concludes by stating that work is the mortar of development, in it, man expends his sweat and his energy to transform the raw material provided by nature into a human product.

Having laid the background on which to work, we will now focus our attention on the real issue at stake: God and Dignity of labour in African traditional religion and culture.

According to Gyekye (2002: 101), dignity of labour in the traditional African society finds expressions in maxims, proverbs and various ways of greeting people at their work sites. He cites an example of a Swahili maxim which states that "Treat your guest as a guest for two days. On the third day give him a hoe." This assertion is a typical moral obligation of traditional African society on how man should acquire the habit of hard work. In collaboration to the above observation, the Ewe of Ghana says that "the person who goes to draw water does not drink mud." It implies that through labour one gets what he wants and enjoys the fruit of one's labour. Other Swahili maxims according to Gyekye (2002: 104) are "He who goes into the forest comes back with firewood", "He who gets blister from the hoe handle will not die of hunger". This is the reflection of strong moral base of labour in African traditional society. As a result, African traditional religion inculcates the spirit of hard work, which directly or indirectly make a nation and a people great.

Among the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, folksongs usually are used to extol and instill the spirit of dignity of labour into their children. A typical example is "farming is our forefathers' work"; "he who does not work will steal." Besides, another glaring case is this rhyme:

Work is cure for poverty
Be hard-working my friend
For one can become great

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Only through hard work.

Magesa (1998:231) argues that impressiveness of manners, cheerfulness, wit and geniality are invaluable values in African work ethic. It should be noted that as far as the entire African society is concerned, dignity of labour entails wealth in crops, animal and children. It also involves absence of diseases and other social afflictions. Then in essence, dignity of labour connotes practical evidence of abundant life through labour or work.

Socio-culturally, according to Shishima (2005: 522) Africans uphold hard work and encourage it while they abhorred laziness. The African necessarily believes that hard work pays, which accounts for the Tiv proverbs. "Tim tyo u or saan ishe ga" meaning "no labour is fruitless."

The Tiv in recognition of the above fact in the dignity of labour engage in different types of labour through which they get their daily bread as well as income to solve other problems. These include farming, which is the primary occupation of the Tiv, hunting, fishing, livestock rearing, and domestic industries such as weaving, smithing and carving, and so on. To effectively carry out farming on a large scale, the Tiv man would marry many wives who together with their children take care of the vast farmlands. Significantly, the number of wives and children one has coupled with his vast farmlands and livestock largely determine the social status of such a man. Thus, to maintain his dignity in the community, the Tiv is generally hospitable and generous. Tseayo (1975: 29) sums up this as he observes: "The Tiv set great (yam) store by entertaining liberally. A man who regularly gives plenty of food to his guests will always be a man of influence and prestige."

Undoubtedly, the Tiv could not effectively feed such a large number of people if they were lazy. In a further demonstration of the Tiv positive outlook on labour, Iortyom (1978: 18) emphatically stressed that, before a girl was betrothed, her parents made thorough investigation, which included among other things, whether or not their son-in-law was hardworking. This was because the parents of the bride would like their daughter to be in the hands that would protect, clothe and feed her very well.

Another area of human endeavour, which aptly captures the Tiv's attitude to work was hunting. This work demanded dedication, diligence and hard work on the part of the hunter as he left his house at the first cockcrow to check his traps. Admittedly, no lazy man could do this, and the Tiv abhorred laziness in totality.

The Tiv deeply cherish hard work and as a result of this fact, laziness has no place in the vocabulary and dictionary of the Tiv. To be lazy meant one having to undergo a daily round of insults, mockery, ridicules and fun from age mates and the community at large. Because of his, everybody tried to live above board in the performance of his/her duties.

The Tiv scenario finds a replica in the Igbo traditional society. Dike (1988: 11) asserts that "In our culture there is respect and high regard for work and achievement, native poetry, sang the praises of the laborious artisan, farmer, wine tapper, etc". He stated further that, the lazy person in Igbo was mocked and ridiculed.

From the above, it is evidently clear that, African traditional culture had a positive attitude to work. Moreover, Africans never considered any form of work as being inferior or superior over the other hence they played complementary roles. For instance, the farmer knew the hunter provided him with meat, the hunter in turn knew that he depended on the farmer for his yams. This positive attitude to work by Africans greatly minimised, if not curbing completely, social vices such as armed robbery, pick pocketing, corruption and commercial sex from their communities. This is not the case today.

African's positive attitude to work is largely drawn from their idea and conception of God who is widely acknowledged by them as the creator, moulder, maker, excavator, hewer or carver of the world. For instance, the Tiv would say "Aondo gba tar" (God created the world); thus, portraying God to be physically carrying out the work of creation just as a carpenter who fashions wood into different kinds of shapes. The African therefore reasons that if God worked in creation, nothing stops man (His creature) from being hard-working. This thought spurs the African to form positive attitude to work.

3.5.1 Importance of Labour

It is evidently clear from what has been gathered that, man has always realised that labour is necessary to life, because man sustains his life with the work he does. Work does not only create satisfaction and joy, it also provides for the basic necessities of life: food, clothing and shelter. Labour indeed adds to the quality of life.

Labour creates fellowship through co-operation on the job through sharing the result of labour. It makes possible the joy of rest and relaxation, recreation and festivity. This can be seen clearly from the communal labour in African villages, which expresses the spirit of partnership. Through labour, we serve others. This means that work or

labour has a positive and enabling character. For instance, there will be a vacuum if there is no work, hence the services attached to such work will be missing from the community. For example, the public uses automobiles, radio and other industrially produced appliances. This same public needs skilled workers to install or service these complicated devices when they are out of order.

Labour also develops man's capabilities. He practices clarity by serving his fellow men, thus in a sense participates in the creative work of God. The wealth of a nation originates from the labour of workers whose energy and effectiveness are of incontestable importance.

Labour is a key source of identity, self-respect and social status. It provides security, predictable and increasing rewards for efforts. It is also the mark of civilisation and culture, which is the end product of development.

3.6   God and Social Change

Within any given society, there is usually an alteration of direction, implementation of plans, complexity, roles and functions, to a limited or greater extent. This is referred to as development, progress, social change or evolution. Herbert Spencer formulated the theory of social evolution in 1860 in an essay on "The Social Organism." In organic evolution, organisms of more complex structure and function have been developed by progressive steps from simpler ones, vertebrates from invertebrates, warm-blooded from cold-blooded animals. Brown (1983: 179) asserts that in social evolution, societies with more complex structure or organisation have been to do and undo. Changes have taken place from time to time and such changes have positive and negative effects on the lives of the people of Africa.

3.7   Agents of Change

No change takes place without the action of human beings. Such human beings are called agents of change. According to Ottaway (1970: 45), no social change results without the accompanying influence of human interests and attitudes. The coming of the white man soon had an effect on industry, politics, religion, education, home, life, the class structure and the whole balance of social forces within the African culture. Indeed, the influence of colonial masters seriously affected the whole of the African culture, leading gradually to adaptation and change. In this case, the white man is an agent of change in Africa. He brought economic, political, social as well as religious changes on the continent of Africa, which in turn have grossly affected the lives of the Africans.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the social changes that have taken place in Africa are traceable to the coming of the white man who came and met some African groups in the task of governing and in the long run Africans themselves were involved in the government, thus becoming agents of change. Because of the social changes that have taken place in Africa, a lot of good is witnessed. For example, the educational sector has witnessed dramatic improvements over the years with the result that more and more people are having university education today and more tertiary institutions are being established to cater for the teeming applicants. These efforts are in the right direction and education provides the citizens the basic background to understand government policies and the social changes that come with them.

In the health sector, changes that have taken place are in the interest of the people. Even though, drugs are not found in government hospitals, it is crystal clear that the modern hospitals have brought a social change that has benefited the people. Modern health care delivery systems have reached in not only towns and cities but also villages.

In transportation industry, people can now travel faster and easier using aeroplanes, buses, lorries, cars, motor-bikes; farmers can now carry their produce to the markets easily using heavy machines like lorries, trains, trailers, trucks, wheelbarrows as opposed to the olden method of trekking long distances carrying foods on heads, travelling by horses, camels and so on. A network of roads, tarred and untarred, now link villages, towns and cities. No longer is any place isolated from others.

The communication sector has improved tremendously with the introduction and use of mobile phones, the internet system, the radio and television. With all these, it is easy for the people to get in touch with the outside world. We are now in a global village in which no part of the world is hidden from other parts.

Social changes have also negative effects. These could be seen in politics, economic and even in the religious realm. Changes such as corruption, abuse of power, cultism, bad governance, immoral dressing, human trafficking, and so on are found among African people. All these have reduced the high position God had in the life of the Africans.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Discuss any three importance of labour in the life of a person.

4.0   CONCLUSION

God is believed to be the creator, controller and the maintainer of the world and as such, He is given different names by different peoples of Africa. As He is in charge of the affairs of the world, He maintains peace, and He is in charge of all the affairs of the world. He knows everything. This makes Africans to call Him the knower of all things. He is believed by Africans to be the ultimate cause of everything and is treated as such. That is why, when anything happens to the African, he says, it is God that has caused it. God works through His representatives – the divinities, priests/priestesses, elders, ancestors, and so on to whom He delegates power and authority to act on His behalf.

5.0   SUMMARY

The central idea in this unit is hinged on God who is seen as the creator, controller, maintainer and sustainer of the universe. In the process of creation, He involved His representatives – the divinities who helped Him to complete the process of creation. God is the source of peace in the world. This is because every African society recognises God and worships Him. On why there is evil in the world, it has been established that God does not command or wish human beings to cause evil to themselves. On dignity of labour, we have established that as far as God Himself worked in creation, nothing stops man (His creature) from being hardworking and this thought spurs the African to form positive attitude to work. Lastly, we have seen and established that many social changes have taken place (both positive and negative) on the African continent as a result of the coming of the white man. Positive changes in the educational, health, transportation, communication and negative changes seen in areas such as corruption, abuse of power, cultism, bad governance, immoral dressing, human trafficking and so on. All these have reduced the status of God among the African people.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

God created the world and he has continued to maintain his creature. God controls and maintains the world through his protection of human beings and through the supply of fool for his creature. All people through their expressions, their sayings, proverbs, myths, names and attributes of God, songs and dances, feel the existence of God. Indeed the good order and functioning of the world shows that God is in control and has continued to maintain it (i.e. the world). God sometimes delegates this function to the deities.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

There is dignity in labour. The Bible says, there is no food for the lazy.

Due to the importance of labour, the Bible says the labourer deserves his wages. Labour is important because:

(i)   God himself is not lazy. He labored to create man and the universe as a whole.
(ii)   Labour sustains life. It is through labour that food is produced to keep life going.
(iii)   Labour provides security, cooperation, partnership and joy. Labour is a form of exercise for a healthy living.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the relationship that exists between God and the world.

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**UNIT 3   REVELATION   IN   AFRICAN   TRADITIONAL
             RELIGION**

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you have learnt that God is the creator of all things,
the universe, man, plants and animals. You also learnt how God
delegates His authority to divinities and other spiritual forces to partake
in the governance of the universe and how these supernatural beings do
not have absolute power in themselves and act as intermediaries
between God and man.

In this unit, you will learn what revelation means. We shall examine the
origin of religion, the agency of revelation, the idea of revelation in
human history. We shall also be looking at God, healing in African
religion, God the spiritual world and traditional African medicine.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

*   explain the meaning of revelation
*   identify the media of revelation
*   give some examples of revelation among your own people.

3.0   Main CONTENT

3.1   The Concept of Revelation

Revelation can simply be defined as God's self-disclosure. Africans believe that God is the creator, he created and revealed himself to man. There is an agent who reveals and there is a mind, which interpret the revelation. Among the Africans, revelation is an act of God and through the condition in the environment, divine messages can be received. Africans believe that their religion is a revealed religion, which came to existence as a result of man's experiences within his physical environment. It appeared to Africans' forefathers as they sought answers to the mysteries surrounding the creation of the universe. They eventually concluded that there must be a supreme power i.e. creator, a living being who ordered, controlled and maintained the universe. Man reacted intuitively but separately to happenings in his immediate environment. It appears such reactions went on at various locations all over Africa around the same time.

The traditional religion, therefore, evolved over several years. It has no founder. Over time, it underwent changes because of peoples' educational and spiritual growth. In that wise, the traditional religion is a living religion. It has not suffered any reverses for not having founders such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, for example. Sometimes, a powerful king or priest might bring about some changes. You should know that the religion has no reformers or missionaries that bring constant changes as in other religions of the world. Changes occur naturally when changes take place in the general lives of the people.

It is clear to the Africans that God manifests himself to them in various ways and this fact is expressed in many languages and different names. In the experience of religion, we assume that there is something rooted in springing up out of human nature. The expression will depend upon local and temporary conditions, physical, mental, and social conditions.

3.2   The Agency of Revelation

Generally, there are two principal agencies of revelation. The created order and man's inner link with God. However, in African traditional religion the media of revelation are many. These include:

(i)   **Nature:** God reveals Himself through the works of nature. This nature includes hills, valleys, rocks, forests, oceans, and so on. African people eventually came to the conclusion that there must be a Supreme Power that is, creator, a living being who ordered,

controlled and maintained the universe or that there is a divine force that is behind nature.

(ii)   **Created order:**   God manifests Himself through the created order; the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of wholly different order from natural realities. Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly profane. Thus, the experience of rain, sun, light and darkness, hot and cold weather indicates the manifestations of God, which the Africans are conscious of and express through the names of God.

(iii)   **The course of human history:** God manifests himself through the course of human history. In the myths of some Africans, experience of what God has done is expressed. They have experienced protection and deliverance in the tribal or racial war, which has been attributed to divine province. The experience of adversity in form of poor harvest, infant mortality, epidemics call for religious consciousness among the African people. Also in the course of human history, man has had encounter with God through dreams and visions. Individuals have also claimed to have dreams and visions at different times to do a thing, which has eventually formed part of history.

(iv)   **Man's inner links with God:**   God created man and he put essence of life in him. This essence of life that is put in man makes him a living being. Among Africans, the essence is believed to have come from the Supreme Being. In Igbo mythology, the essence of being "*Chi*" is derived from "*Chukwu*" (God).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

In your own opinion, what will happen if there is a lack of communication between God and man?

3.3   The Idea of Revelation in Human History

Revelation can simply be put as God's self-discourse. Africans believe that God is the creator, he created and revealed Himself to man. There is a God who reveals himself to man; and there is a mind that receives the revelation. Among the Africans, revelation is an act of God through the conditions in the environment, divine messages can be received. In every individual, there is the presence of consciousness of the Supreme Being. This awareness and consciousness is the reason for the

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emergence and development of African traditional religion, which is found in all spheres of human life.

The idea of revelation in human history will be discussed under the following headings.

(i)   The Creator: In the myth of creation story, you learnt that the pre-cosmic was dark in chaos; there was no existence in them – no life, no being. The spirit of God appeared like a mother bird and sat upon the dark chaos and as a result of God's creative energy. God in his creativity brought about cohesion, order and meaning through the divinity.

Thus, from the point of view of creation story, the seal of God's self-disclosure has been stamped over the face of the created order. There are so many myths all over Africa among the people, which state how God brought into existence the created order. Among the Yoruba, it is believed that *Olodumare* handed over a quantity of earth to *Orisa-nla* and with that *Orisa-nla* i.e. arch-divinity used to create the physical earth. This is a pointer to the fact that *Olodumare* left his own seal all over the surface of the created order.

The experience of the African people about the works of nature, the sun, light, moon, darkness, trees and forest, hills and valleys, mountains and rocks, the rainy season, and the dry seasons gives the people the consciousness of an order which is superior and divine in nature. Furthermore, the awareness of the divine providence good harvest, plenty of food for human beings and animals, procreation, growth and development arouse in man the awareness of a superior and unique power manifested in the universe.

(ii)   Man's inner link with God: You have studied how God created man and he put the essence of life in him. This essence of life that is put in man makes him a living being. It is this essence that gave meaning to the existence of man. Among the African people, this essence is believed to have come from the Supreme Being.

This means man is made a rational being, intelligent, equipped with will and purpose, there is something of divine in man, which made him addressable and responsible. Therefore, the spirit of a man is in communion with God. The fact is expressed in the African concept of God. For instance, among the Yoruba, it is *Orisa-nla* (the Yoruba name for arch-divinity), who was commissioned to create the physical body but it is Olodumare who gives man the spirit, i.e. the essence of being.

In Igbo mythology, the essence of being 'Chi' is derived from *Chukwu* (God).

Revelation pre-supposes a personal communication between God and man. Man is a necessity in revelation, because without a personal mind to appreciate and understand revelation, the whole process would not be meaningful to man. Hence, it is believed that God may create the universe without nothing (*ex nihilo*), but he cannot reveal himself without understanding (*ad nihilum*). This is saying that God requires a human mind to communicate, without it, revelation of God to man would not be complete and would become meaningless.

(iii)   The Course of Human History: In every age and generation, there is direct contact with God and human soul. What the African people know about God and what was discovered about God comes as a result of God's self-disclosure. There are events in the life of an individual and in the life of a group of people or a nation, which points to the fact that God is working out his purpose for the individual and for the nation. It is in this case we come to learn the lesson of history.

Historical events reveal the purpose of God for man or for the nation but it is left for the minds of men to interpret the will of God. If wrongly interpreted, it will bring destruction and chaos into the life of an individual or the nation. However, if these events are correctly interpreted, it brings meaning, order and life to the people.

In the course of human history, man had encounter with God through dreams and visions. Through this medium, people have claimed to have communion with the Supreme Being and received instruction concerning migration and settlement, which have become permanent record of their life history up till today. Individuals have also claimed to have dreams and visions at different times to do one thing or the other, or restrain to do a thing, which has eventually formed part of history. African people are capable of receiving and responding to the revelation of God, which is a universal phenomenon.

3.4   God and Healing in African Traditional Religion

The traditional religious practices are a unique integration of beliefs found in many African societies. They have a subtle orchestration of notion about God as the originator and prime source of healing. Rituals concerned with controlling and harnessing this force for the well-being of tribal members are done in correlation with nature spirits and other alien benevolent forces.

The belief in and the practice of healing is certainly, therefore, one of the most outstanding features of popular religiosity in the contemporary African scene. Apenda and Shishima (2003: 151) are of the opinion that the notion of medicine, disease, illness and healing among Africans is very often associated with the people's world view. This is existentially demonstrated in their value system, such as social conduct, myths, rituals and healings.

In Africa, the basis of medicine is religion in as much as it came from the Supreme Deity, and operates through tutelary divinity or spirits. It is significant among the Nupe people that in preparing or administering medicine the name of God (*Soko*) and other divinities are mentioned (i.e. medicine is applied with reference to God). Idowu quoting Nadel says that the Nupe medicine without augmentation with the traditional procedures becomes automatically inefficacious. This is why ritual invocations have their significant place in *Cigbe* (medicine) practice. Whenever the *Cigbe-ni* (doctor) discovers a new remedy, he must perform a sacrifice, speaking these words:

Sokpo, the medicine that has been prepared here it is. May the medicine be successful. I am sacrificing to Kpara, I am sacrificing to Tswana Malu, I am sacrificing to Twako Dzana (Nadel, 1954: 132).

Among the Yoruba, the tutelary divinity of medicine, *Osanyin*, is believed to be associated with *Orunmila*, the oracle divinity. *Osanyin* is in charge of all roots and leaves and possesses more knowledge of the use of the plant materials to cure illness. The emblem of *Osanyin* is usually kept in a room in a puppet from which the priest manipulates by means of ventriloquism (the art of speaking without moving ones lips). During the consultation, the priest addresses the tutelary divinities in supplication tone, saying: Father of children (our father) prepare medicine for us children. We (children) have no medicine.

The Igbo also have a firm belief in the power of medicine (*Ogwu*) for curative and protective purposes. All medicines are made from herbs, hence the Igbo proverb *Ogwu n. ofia, affia na aku ogwu* (medicine in the bush can never be exhausted because medicine is extracted from herbs).

The contemporary discussion of God and healing in African religiosity is undoubtedly a significant episode in the history of religious interaction in Africa. In spite of the measure of the enormous socio-religious and cultural changes with its attended degree of destabilisation that have swept over the entire society, the practice and the role of God and other deities have been repositioned in traditional medicine and healing .

Our focus here has been deliberately focused on the place of God in traditional medicine and healing. And the position which we have tried to sustain is that the great unprecedented, widespread practice of healing in African traditional religion is closely tied to certain indigenous cosmological underpinnings. Interestingly, however, a close examination of the phenomenon shows that the widespread practice is embedded in the traditional worldview of the different African groups. The spiritual healers have been making usual inputs into the health care delivery system in Africa in spite of the cultural conditions coupled with changing religious beliefs, which have tended to undermine the effectiveness and impact of traditional health care system in some African societies.

3.5   God the Spirit World and Traditional African Medicine

The role of God is becoming very popular these days. It is even becoming more popular in African traditional medicine because if God does not heal, the efforts of the healers would be in vain. African traditional medicine in a nutshell is the medicine of the indigenous African people. It is variously known in Yoruba as *Oogun* (medicine) *ewe ati egbo* (herbal medicine) or *Oogun Ibile* (indigenous medicine). It is different from the modern medicine since the latter depends on various laboratory activities while the former does not need laboratory tests before its efficacy becomes acceptable. The African medicine is an acceptable medicine among the people because there are some ailments that have their cure in the corridor of the practitioners of African traditional medicine alone. It should be stated at this juncture that spirits and spirit phenomena play very important roles in the anatomy of African indigenous medicine and that is why God is very vital in the proper understanding of indigenous medicine because God is the grand commander of the spirits and spirit world.

Again, to ascertain the role of God and the spiritual realm in the scientific analysis of African indigenous medicine, one can easily be carried away by the activities of the indigenous medicine men to the point of concluding that these supernatural encounters cannot be traced outside their qualities and traits. It should however be noted that though African medicine has some supernatural qualities, these supernatural qualities are only traceable to the spiritual realm. A scientific investigation into the impact of spirits in the efficacy of indigenous medicine has revealed that Albert Einstein's formula $E=mc^2$ is applicable to the practice of African indigenous medicine. The success is also attributed to the roles played by God and the spirit realm without which African indigenous medicine will become inefficacious.

4.0   CONCLUSION

Revelation can be simply defined as God's self-disclosure. Revelation is the centre of all religions. Africans believe that God is the creator, he created and revealed Himself to man. This means that there is a God that reveals himself to man; and there is a mind that receives the revelation. In addition, God reveals himself to Africans in many ways such as through nature, created order, and the course of human history.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- God reveals himself any time, any where He wants
- God's self-disclosure is the universe because He is the creator and source of being
- the revelation of God to man accounts for the origin of religion which is expressed in many languages and in different African names.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What will happen if there is lack of communication between God and man?

(i)   The existence of man will lost its meaning.
(ii)   Man will miss his good relationship with his creator.
(iii)   The essence of life in man will be lost.
(iv)   God will no longer reveal himself to man.
(v)   There will be communication breakdown between God and man and this will bring the downfall of man.
(vi)   Man will lose his moral qualities and attributes.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Identify the different ways Africans receive revelation from God.

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UNIT 4 ANCESTRAL VENERATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be studying the concept of ancestral veneration. You will also be looking at whether Africans do worship or venerate their ancestors. We shall examine the qualifications to be venerated as an ancestor. Ways by which Africans venerate ancestors, role of ancestors among the African people and lastly a case study of ancestral veneration among the Benue people of Nigeria.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the concept of veneration and ancestral veneration
- list qualities of veneration for ancestors
- discuss ways of venerating ancestors in African traditional religion
- explain how ancestors can be venerated in any African community.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   The Concept of Ancestral Veneration

The beliefs in the ancestors are fundamental religious tenets in most African societies. The religious institutions surrounding this religious beliefs is what others call the "cult of the ancestors" and the form of worship as 'ancestor worship' or 'veneration'. However, the term "ancestral worship" does not adequately express the ancestral rites in African traditional religion. In this regard, many African authors have suggested alternative term such as communion with ancestors. This includes ancestors as instruments between God and man and elderly members of the family who are venerated as much and not worshipped. Hence, the term of submission and pleading supplication, which appears in prayers to God and the deities, are significantly absent. In addition, they may be rebuked, insulted or even threatened.

The term "veneration", according to BBC English Dictionary (1992: 1307) therefore is placing value on someone/something or feeling great respect for them. It would therefore suggest that the term ancestral veneration is a kind of respect given to the ancestors in African religion as the saints are venerated in the Catholic theology.

3.2   Do Africans Worship or Venerate their Ancestors?

Those who say categorically that Africans do not worship or venerate their ancestors are forgetting the complex nature of the working of the human mind. Worship and veneration, as we have observed, are psychologically closer than the next door to each other.

Ancestors are those who have attained the highest spiritual status regarded by African traditional religion through death at ripe age, good conduct and have left off springs. The beliefs in the ancestors are fundamental religious tenet in African societies. The religious institution surrounding this religious belief is what others call "the cult of the ancestors" and the form of worship as "ancestor worship or veneration." The questions therefore are: "Whether the recognition of the ancestors with sacrifices and offerings is reverence or worship or do Africans approach the ancestors as the ultimate source of the powers, which they exercise over them or are they merely intermediaries?"

The religious ceremonies surrounding the ancestors are merely family affairs involving family members or a 'clan or an ethnic group'. They are not universal and general. Burial ceremonies, rites and rituals only

facilitate the onward journey of the dead to the land of ancestors. Should there be no proper burial, calamities may befall the living.

Improper burials according to Turaki, 1999: 177 would cause the ancestral spirit to linger in the vicinity, haunt the family, take revenge on enemies and generally make life miserable for the living. Memorial ceremonies of the dead vary among the Africans from six months to a year or more.

Africans would normally offer libations to the ancestors before eating any food or sometimes libations are offered at the tomb of the ancestors or at certain sacred places for blessings. The ancestor is regarded as the father of the clan, lineage or ethnic group. As a father, he should be loved, cared for and protected. In African belief system, there is a network of relationships. Everyone is related with the other in this network. God, the Deities, Ancestors, the lineage, the clan, the ethnic group to infinity. If there is any breakage in this relationship, there would be trouble for everyone. Thus, any misfortune or evil was interpreted as a warning or punishment from the ancestors. Therefore, prayers, sacrifices and libations are offered as means of atonement to the ancestors.

Although the ancestors are recognised in African traditional religion, the term "ancestor worship" does not adequately express the ancestral rites in African religion. Many authors have therefore suggested alternative terms such as communion with ancestors, ancestral rites, cult of ancestors veneration of ancestors among many others. According to Metuh (1987:747), the term "ancestor cult" adequately expresses the significance of the rituals offered to the ancestors in African religion. Ancestors are intermediaries between God and man and elderly members of the family and are venerated as such, not worshipped. Metuh maintained that the tune of submission and pleading supplication which appears in prayers to God and the deities is significantly absent. They may be rebuked, insulted or even threatened.

Africans do not actually worship ancestors but rather venerate them as the saints are in the Catholic theology. As Metuh righty puts it, the term "Dulia" used in Catholic theology to describe the worship given to saints is in contrast with the term "latria" which is worship given to God. Ancestors are to the Africans as the saints are in the Catholic theology. They are only venerated, not worshipped. One would therefore suggest the term "ancestral veneration" for the kind of recognition given to the ancestors in African traditional religion.

3.3 Conditions for veneration as an Ancestor

The ancestors are believed to be good spirits, which look after the welfare of their kinsmen and families. The funeral rites of their descendants have helped them reach the spiritual home of the clan, which is in intimate communion with its living members. They are closer to God and act as intermediaries between God and members of their families.

The African's belief about man is that man is made of two parts: the material and immaterial substances. Though there may be different views of this idea from one African society to another, yet the basic assumption among the African peoples is the unity of this personality of man. It is believed that man is a material being as well as a spiritual being. It is the material part of the man that dies while the spiritual continues to exist. This is to say that death does not end life; it is an extension of life. This means that there is a belief that there exists the community of the dead people alongside the community of the living and there is mutual relationship between them.

Man is the most important creature of God. He is composed of the material and immaterial parts. The material part is that which is tangible and which can be described in concrete terms. It can be called the body. Any damaged part can be cured or replaced. The other part is the intangible or the visible if this part is lost in man. It indicates death and cannot be regained. The personality – soul which is the essence of man is directly derived from the Supreme Being. This makes man what he is. This is described as human double or the guardian angel associated with birth to warn and guide man through his journey in life. Among the Yoruba, the personality-soul is regarded as *ori* meaning the 'physical head' the physical head is the symbol of inner head, which they call *ori inu*. The Yoruba name *Orise* indicates only the Supreme Being can put *ori,* the essence of being into man. Among the Igbo, the personality-soul is called *Chi. Chi* is derived directly from the Supreme Deity- *Chineke*. God puts *Chi* in man. Man's prosperity or failure depends on the competence of his *Chi*.

When the tangible part of man is lost, this leads to the death of man. The tangible part is separated from the physical body, the body decays and the personality-soul returns to the Supreme Being from where it came. Africans believe that death only brings a change of life and man passes from this physical world to a new life where the conduct of man is judged and therefore qualifies as an ancestor to be venerated.

As discussed earlier, death does not totally end man's existence. It only brings a change of life in a new world. It should be noted that there are two categories of death: bad or good death - the death of the young and of the aged. If one dies a bad death, one is not given befitting funeral rites. Such person is not venerated as ancestor. For instance, if a child dies, the corpse is disposed of quickly because it is a bad death. Bad deaths may occur through serious diseases like leprosy, small pox or falling from a palm-tree or any accident, women dying during childbirth or suicide. This is regarded as bad death. Hence, they are to be buried by special people who are to perform essential rituals.

The living-dead, as spirits of all the deceased who are still remembered could be venerated by the living members of their respective families, clan or ethnic group. These are usually termed as ancestors.

An ancestor is one who has attained the highest spiritual status regarded by African traditional religion through some requisite qualifications. In the general African beliefs, an ancestor is one who attained a ripe age before death. One who dies a good death (usually death not linked with suicide, diseases like small pox, leprosy, epilepsy, accident, drowning, HIV/AIDS or strucked by thunder and lightning), etc; one who receives proper burials and burial rites.

It is important to note that these living-dead, called ancestors in African worldview are a part from the Supreme Being (God) and the deities; they are next on the ladder in the hierarchy of beings. The relationship that the living in African beliefs has with the ancestors is so important to the Africans. Life has no meaning apart from ancestral presence and an ancestral power. They also function as guardians of the family traditions and life. They act as disciplinarians and channels of communication between man and the Supreme Being.

3.4   Ways by which Africans Venerate Ancestors

As a father is supposed to be loved, cared for and protected, and he in turn should love his people, bless, counsel and or advice them, Africans do venerate their ancestors. These venerations are accomplished in several ways. These include amongst others:

(i)   Offering libations to the ancestors before eating food or before drinking palm wine or any other alcoholic drinks
(ii)   Sometimes libations are offered at the tomb or at certain sacred places for blessings

(iii)   It is the African belief that such veneration is important because if there is any breakage in this relationship, there would be trouble for everyone.

3.5   The Roles of Ancestors among the African People

The ancestors are believed to be good spirits, which look after the welfare of their kinsmen and families. The ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in peculiarity 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 of relating with his kinsmen.
The funeral rites of the descendants have helped them to reach the spiritual home of the clan, which is in intimate communion with its living members. They are closer to God and act as intermediaries between God and members of their families.

Ancestors return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however, symbolically. They usually know what is going on in their families. They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who in that capacity act as invisible police of the families and communities.. As senior elders of the clan, the ancestor functions as the guardians of the family traditions and life. They are believed to be guardian angels who show love and protect their people from danger.

The ancestors are called upon to guide the family when in danger or any other predicament because they are believed to be next to the Supreme Being. They show love and interest in the members of the family hence they are consulted when major family or societal decision is to be taken. They are called upon when the community is afflicted with calamity and epidemic. In this case, sacrifices are made to them and rites are performed to put an end to the disaster that has befallen the people. The ancestors are approached through divination when there is crop failure or poor harvest. Through divination, prescribed sacrifice is offered and people thereafter enjoy good harvest. When progress is not being made in life or when people feel that they have bad luck, the ancestors are contacted. In this case, sacrifice may be prescribed for the affected person to go and venerate his ancestors if he wants his lot to be improved in life.

Africans believe that the ancestors can show displeasure thereby bringing calamity on people. This makes people to venerate them and offer sacrifices to them in order to please and appease them. This makes people to pour libations or any food materials for them as part of their

share so that the ancestors would continue to show mercy on the living. In times of war and other emergencies, Africans look to their ancestors for deliverance from enemy and assistance in recovering their land or property. The ancestral spirits may also serve as intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being.

As elders, the ancestors serve as the owners of the land, fertilising the land and causing the food to grow. The living-dead receive requests from the living and request offering from the living. The living-dead communicate with the living by revelation, dreams, calamity, ecstasy and trance, possession prophecy and divination.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Who is an ancestor? What qualifies one to become an ancestor?

3.6   A Case Study of Ancestral Veneration among the Benue People

Benue State comprises of many ethnic groups. The most populous ones are the Tiv, Idoma and Igede. The worldview of the Benue people is almost similar with that of the Africans. However, contrary to that of the Kadun of the Jos Plateau, their (Benue people) worldview is heavily spiritualised. The Benue people generally believe in the Supreme Being who is called by different names across the state. These include *Aondo* among the Tiv, *Owoicho* among the Idoma, *Olu Oluhye* among the Igede and *Mgbasho* among the Etulo. The people also believe in other spiritual beings, the ancestors, traditional medicine, magic and witchcraft. The beliefs in deities is not present among the people as it is with other ethnic groups in Africa. We now examine ancestors veneration among the Tiv, Idoma, Igede and the Etulo respectively.

Ancestral veneration among the Tiv

Ancestral veneration is not very expressive among the Tiv. However, there are little expressions, which look like ancestral veneration among the people. Indeed, because of the little attention given to ancestors, many writers have concluded that the people do not venerate the ancestors.

Ancestors are called *Mbayiase* and ancestral veneration is called *Mcivir u Mbayiase* among the Tiv. In time of danger or misfortune, a Tiv man or woman would go to the grave of his or her father and communicate with him/her. This is done symbolically by crying on top of the grave, rolling or sitting on the grave and stating one's plight. At the end of this,

it is believed that person's problem would be solved by his/her ancestor. In this case, both men and women could be ancestors but not children.

In some parts of Tiv land, if one dies without handing over one's trade to another relation, it is believed that if the person is venerated, the creator will symbolically hand over his/her trade to any family member related to the dead person. Oral interview at Ikyorkpev village in Mbakyondo district of Gwer-West Local Government Area of Benue State showed that a diviner could be venerated in order to hand over his trade to the living. This could also apply to traditional healers as well. In this case, food is cooked with chicken and taken to the grave of the ancestor. It is believed that the ancestor would come out at night to consume this food.

Furthermore, the *Akombo Biam* or *Ibiamegh* (rituals) which are symbolised in pool Biam is an example of ancestral veneration. It is believed that the pool Biam houses the heads of all the ancestors of the clan and the most senior elders take charge of the relic. The pool Biam is constructed with pillars and six across woods. All these are believed to stand for human beings. On top of the construction is placed an *Adudu* (a basket) in which the heads of the ancestors are kept.

In Tiv land, the *Akombo mku* (rituals for the dead) are connected with the departed. The ritual is performed to improve the relationship or re-establish the relations between the dead and the living members of the family. Indeed, the *Itimbe mku* (shrine for the dead) a symbol of ancestral veneration erected near the home as could be found in the Tiv villages. Thus, if one had a bad dream about one's ancestors, one goes to the *Itimbe mku* to venerate ones ancestors.

Ancestral veneration among the Idoma

The Idoma are the second largest ethnic group after the Tiv (but an effective minority group) in Benue State. The Idoma land is bounded in the north by River Benue, on the west by the Tiv, on the south by Nsukka and Abakiliki areas respectively. The people are bounded on the east by the Igala of Kogi State.

The Idoma believe in *Owoicho* as the Supreme Being. Apart from him, *Alekwu* are the spirits of the dead, which are venerated. There are other spirits like *Ajenu* (water spirits). *Ajenu* is believed to be the giver of children, god of protection and healer of deranged people. Newborn babies are dedicated to it. The *Ajenu* is the earth goddess. It is the god of fertility and protection. It is responsible for good harvest. *Ajenu* forbids adultery, witchcraft, theft, murder among others. It is also a taboo to till

the land during the *Ajenu* festival. The shrine of *Ajenu* is called *Ikpaaje*. Other spirits include *Ukpo* (god of knowledge), *Ene* (god of justice) who catches/punishes thieves, *Uloko* and *Ugwu* (goods of protection) against evil charms and *Enyanwu* (punisher) of evil doers in some clans.

The ancestors are called *Alekwu* among the Idoma. As to the origin of ancestral veneration among the Idoma, there are several accounts. One of the accounts says the cult could be linked to *Apa* and the people who share a common origin with the Idoma, the Igbira, the Jukun, the Abakwanga and the Igala. The second account says that cult of *Alekwu* was adopted after the people have settled in their region. A third account suggests the adoption of the ancestral mask (*akwuafia*) from Igbira in the 17th century. The material was used for the installation and funeral ceremonies of the chiefs and closely connected to *Alekwu* ancestral cult. Another account says the cult of *Alekwu* is of Idoma origin and not loaned or inherited from *Apa* ancestors, or any other place. The different accounts all suggest that the *Alekwu* ancestral cult is as old as Idoma history and central to Idoma religion.

The term "*Alekwu*" implies the spirits of the dead. Etymologically, the word *Alekwu* is a coinage from two Idoma words: *Ale*, which means men, and *Ikwu,* which means the dead. *Alekwu* means the spirits of the dead. However, since children/women cannot be regarded as ancestors, it is the spirits of the dead men that are regarded as *Alekwu* among the Idoma.

There are different types of *Alekwu*: *Ekwunokwu* (big masquerade) in Edumoga district operates mostly at night from the forest. Only initiates can observe its ceremonies. The uninitiated and women do not observe the ceremonies associated with *Alekwu*. Other types of *Alekwu* include *Obekwu* (strongest mask), *Onyankpo* (security mask), *Ekwu* (mask) the nature and form of venerating *Alekwu* differ from one area of Idoma to the other.

Generally, in most Idoma communities, the oldest in the family is honoured and respected. He is often vested with the responsibility of the family head. As the head of the family, he performs religio-socio and political roles. He is either called *Ohiokwute* or *Ad'Alekwu*. As a religious leader, he is the priest of *Alekwu* and performs sacrifices in connection with *Alekwu* on behalf of his people. Thus, he acts as an intermediary between the ancestors and the living in his community. As a sacred personality, the *Ad'Alekwu* is consulted in all spiritual matters. He is an embodiment of the presence of God to the people. He and he alone fix the dates for the celebration of *Alekwu* festival in consultation with other elders. His other functions are to perform all rites associated

with *Oopia* (reincarnation) to administer oaths to culprits who violate traditional norms that attract sanctions such as murder, witchcraft activities, adultery, stealing, etc.

The *Alekwu* festival is performed at different seasons in different communities of Idoma. The *Alekwu* festivals involve offering prayers, sacrifices and dances. Prayers are said to solicit for blessing and protection for the people by the *Ad'Alekwu*. At the end of the prayers, sacrifices are made to the ancestors with such items as kola nuts, palm wine, chicken, gruel, etc. Dances also take place during the *Eje-Alekwu* festivals, funerals and installation ceremonies. All these occasions demand sacrifices (*ofidaka*) and rituals (*oha*). At these festivals, there is a lot to eat and drink.

The *Aje* is the divinity of the land; thus, the ancestors live in the land where the *Eje-Alekwu* festival is celebrated to honour the ancestral spirits of the land. The *Eje-Alekwu* festival is a very important festival to the Idoma. It is believed that the ancestors come to visit their families during this festival. Another festival in honour of the ancestors is *Enyanwu* festival. This festival is associated with the ancestors especially in Orokam district. There are shrines of *Enyanwu* in private homes (*ole*) and at Central Square (*Oju*). The festival of *Enyanwu* in Orokam is celebrated in August and is in relation with new yam festival. Food items and libation are poured on the land as a sign of veneration to the ancestors.

Ancestral Veneration among the Igede

The Igede live mainly in Oju and Obi Local Government Areas of Benue State. There are three Igede dialects: *Oju* (central), *Ito* and *Uworku*. While the ancestors of the *Ito* spoke a form of Idoma, the *Uworku* clan says their ancestors spoke an Igbo dialect. The Igede are said to have descended from one ancestor- *Agba*. Their ancestors lived beyond a big river – *Ihu*, next to the Ora people. *Agba* is believed to be the father of the Igede.

The Igede believe in *Olu Oluhye* (Supreme God) and other lesser gods. Among the lesser gods is *Ohe Ogbaogogo*, which is said to be the preserver or the ancestor; they also sought for blessings on marriage from the god. Others gods among the Igede include *Ojiga*, *Utoji* (the god of medicine), *Ebina Onmeno* (good harvest), and so on. The ancestral cult is called *Achukwu* or *Alegwie*. The *Ogabo* (Chief) of each lineage is the custodian of the ancestral cult of the lineage. Only initiates can be members of this cult. The *Achukwu* is represented by masquerades, which are to be seen only by the initiates. *Achukwu* is

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capable of punishing anyone who is problematic to the village. Sacrifices are made to appease the ancestors in the *Achukwu* cult.

While the abode of the dead is called *Eji-egwu*, the ancestors are called *Alegwu-Ileji* (Oral interview). The abode of the dead is divided into two parts: one for the wicked and another for the good. The Igede believe that the ancestors must be venerated in order to get benefits from them. In fact, failure to appease the spirits of the ancestors is believed to incur their wrath. This may be in form of misfortune or calamity in the family.

The main festival in Igede land is the *Igede agba* celebrated on the first *Ihigile* market day in the Igede traditional year; this is usually in the first week of September. The *Igede agba* is celebrated in honour of the ancestor (*Agba*). The aim of the festival is to commemorate the migration of the Igede ancestors, to recall and preserve basic aspects of Igede culture like traditional moonlight games, Igede masquerades and dances. The Igede agba festival coincides with the traditional new yam festival and so many people mistakenly attach the festival to the new yam festival.

The beliefs in ancestors among the Igede is so strong that one cannot divorce one's first wife for the fear of ancestors' wrath. Usually, if a man marries his first wife, a chicken is killed and offered to *Ohe Ogbadogogo*; the gizzard and kidney of the chicken are given to the couple to eat. This becomes a marriage sacrament to the ancestors, which must not be broken by divorcing the first wife.

The Igede believe in reincarnation, but they only expect that good people should reincarnate. Therefore, if a woman has lost several children in a row, she is asked to leave her room for a new bedroom on the day the last child is buried in to prevent the bad child from reincarnating. Children aged three to nine years are buried within 24 hours. The elders gather to pray to the ancestors to receive the child's soul with a pot of locally brewed wine provided to the ancestors. For those aged 10 to 17 years, burial is done the next day. For such people, a second funeral rite is held two weeks later. Locally brewed beer is provided by the bereaved, kola nut is split into halves and thrown on the ground. If one half of the kola nut faced down and the other turned up, it means the spirit of the deceased accepts the rite. Certain incantations are then said and the local beer is poured on the kola nut. However, if the two halves fall on the same side, even if another person throws it, the village diviner will be consulted for further necessary action. At the end of the ceremony, the remaining beer will be consumed by all witnesses.

The second burial ceremony (for those aged 10 to 17 years) called *Ida-Oburwu Burwu* is done anytime the relations can afford it. However, this rite is very important and must be done. It is believed that if it is not done, the soul of the deceased will keep wandering around and would not be received by the ancestors. During this rite, prayers are said to the ancestors and *Olu Oluhye* libations are poured to the ancestors. The elders are given their share of beer and meat. It is indeed a big ceremony where people dine and wine with masquerades and dancers from different clans performing dances.

In the last rite, food and beer are prepared, and consumed. Libations are made to the ancestors and the deceased property is shared among his children and some of his paternal relations. This rite is called *Ereji*.

Ancestral Veneration among the Etulo

The Etulo are mainly found in Buruku and Katsina-Ala Local Government Areas of Benue State. Their cultural identity is different from the Tiv, even though they live in their territory. Though their language is closely related to Idoma, they are said to have originated from Jukun. Almost all Etulo speak Tiv, a few of them speak Hausa. The Etulo are classified into two divisions: Etulo Idoma, and Etulo Udam. The Etulo Idoma once lived among the Idoma before migrating to their present home. On the other hand, the Etulo Udam before coming to join the Etulo Idoma in the Katsina-Ala River Bank.

The Etulo believe in the Supreme God (*Mgbasho*) and other lesser gods. Among the lesser gods is *Agashi*, which is the god of fortune. Apart from the *Agashi*, the people believe in magic medicine and witchcraft. The Etulo believe in the ancestors as the custodians of their culture. Their ancestors are venerated but the Supreme God, *Mgbasho* is not given the same respect. According to the Etulo, *Mgbasho* is too good. Having created the earth, *Mgbasho* has no problem with human beings and does not need anything from them. Their attention is now directed towards their ancestors (*ingikuse*). The Etulo believe that when one dies, his soul (*onozi*) leaves him and goes to reside among the dead. The *Onozi* goes to a good or bad place and later reveals itself to a relative but not in a physical form. The people believe in reincarnation.

The greatest cult of ancestors among the Etulo is *Agashi*. It may cause impotence and poor harvest if the ancestors are not appeased. The initiator of *Agashi* is said to be a man called *Ayipola*. This man was stroked with bad luck such as poor harvest to the extent that sometimes his house would burn down due to lightening. When he consulted a diviner, he was informed that his dead parents were demanding sacrifice

from him. *Ayipola* performed that sacrifice and became very rich. All his misfortunes ceased. He became the chief priest of the *Agashi* cult. The *Agashi* ceremonies take place usually in the months of June and July, and lasts for three days. It is a big festival in which participants wear masks, dance, wine and drink locally brewed beer. The women are not however expected to see the *Agashi* masquerades. However, oral history has shown that the ceremony is conducted in a manner where they sprinkle beer on the shrines and prayers are offered to the ancestors to bring fortune to the people. Another cult associated with the dead among the Etulo is *Atsuku-Etulo*. Tradition says that *Atsuku-Etulo* was brought from Apa, the place of origin of the Etulo. Another ceremony in which the Etulo honour their ancestors is *Opeleka*. In this ceremony too, the Etulo ancestors are appeased.

4.0   CONCLUSION

The Africans generally venerate their ancestors. They do not worship them. Ancestors play important roles among their families. They are guardians of tradition and life. They correct mediate between God and humanity. While the Tiv like other Africans do not expressly venerate the ancestors, the Idoma, Igede and Etulo like other Africans publicly venerate their ancestors. It is important to see that despite the advent of modernisation and education, ancestral veneration still exists in Africa.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- Africans believe that death is not the end of man's existence in this physical world
- those who die a good death that is, those who attain old age will be admitted into the spiritual world as ancestors
- at death, the Supreme Being will judge the character of the dead. If it is a good one, he would be admitted into the ancestral spirit if the character is bad he would go to bad heaven and will not be allowed to join the ancestral spirit
- that ancestors are venerated to show love to their people.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

An ancestor is a spirit of the departed that is qualified to be venerated. He is the spirit of the dead who died and was given the necessary burial rites.

To qualify to become an ancestor one has to live good moral life while alive, one must not die of an infectious disease or through accident, one must die a good death and one must have lived to ripe old age with children and finally, one must be buried with the proper funeral rites.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Mention and discuss the roles of ancestors in African religious beliefs.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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MODULE 3   THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

Unit 1   The Relationship between Religion and Culture
Unit 2   Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religion
Unit 3   Proverbs in African Religious Beliefs
Unit 4   Symbols in African Traditional Religion and   Culture
Unit 5   Totems and Taboos in African Traditional Religion and Culture

UNIT 1   THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE

CONTENTS

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Objectives
3.0   Main Content
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       3.2   Components of Culture
       3.3   Definition of African Traditional Religion
       3.4   The Relationship between Religion and Culture
       3.5   The Role of Culture in National Development
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       3.8   The Impact of Western Culture on African Traditional Religion and Culture
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1.0   INTRODUCTION

Culture as an important manmade element; it is the way in which group of people lives. It is a pointer to where a person comes from and explains why he behaves the way he does. It also defines his aspirations. This explains why people often say that people without culture are people without direction. Culture evolves as people develop from one stage to another. It is either borrowed or learnt from one's environment.

Religion as an institution of symbols, beliefs, values and practices pay attention on issues about the meaning, importance and purpose of the supernatural. Religion and culture are related in the sense that religion itself evolves from a people's culture. This explains why Christianity owes its origin to the culture of Western Europe. Islam evolved out of the Arabian culture and African traditional religion out of the African culture.

This unit defines some concepts such as African traditional religion and culture and thereafter examines the relationship between religion and culture.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of the unit, you should be able to:

•   define culture and African traditional religion
•   discuss the relationship between religion and culture.

3.1   Definition of Culture

Culture refers to the total way of life of a group of people. This includes their values, norms, skills and belief systems. Each society has its own unique culture peculiar to it; culture differentiates a particular society from another. Thus, culture can be said to be the set of rules that embody the basic ideas that give a society its distinct identity thereby binding such a society into a unit. In other words, they are manmade prescriptions designs and responses deliberately fashioned to guide all aspects of a people's life. This is developed by a people's quest to meet the difficult life challenging task of living in their environment. It subsequently gives order and meaning to the social, political, economic and religious norms and mode of organisation of the people as a mark of their identity.

Culture as a way of life reflects people's distinctive genius and spirit, their fundamental character, value orientation, their worldview, institutions and achievement in the various fields of human endeavour. It is the basic structure of the people's ideas, belief systems, skills they acquire and use, tools they work with, how they think, eating, talking, music, festivals, houses and their transport system.

Culture is also a part of an environment created by man. This means that man uses his ideas, initiatives, innovations, inventiveness and creativeness through hard work to make achievements in life. Dresses, house dishes and all the other properties one has acquired for

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himself/herself or family can be shared with others generously. This shows that what people do for their interest are all involved in the culture.

3.2   Components of Culture

While culture cannot be broken down into tiny pieces, we can nevertheless classify it into major components as material and non-material culture. Material culture includes all objects, physical qualities in one's personality, working tools or implements, which have been variously designed by a people for their use in the day-to-day running of their community life. For example, instruments like hoes, shovels, axes, knives, hooks, drums, pipes and so on. All the artifacts in its broadest sense are in the material culture. It also includes religious objects like charms, calabashes, emblems, etc. These are the concrete objects culture produces. The non-material culture disconnected with the processes and ideas that are not physical but are abstract and not visible which nevertheless form part of a people's way of life. For clarity purposes, non-material culture can be further grouped into the following:

(a)   Normative aspect or dimension consists of the standard or the accepted ways of doing things in the community. It embraces the rules, regulations, governing social actions that are tailored towards approved norms of the community. They are the ideals about normal behavior.

(b)   Cognitive aspect involves the conviction of things that are true such as beliefs, knowledge, ideas, values, attitudes that are commonly found among a particular group of people.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

List and explain the basic components of culture.

3.3   Definition of African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion is a religion of the African people, which had been in existence before the advent of Islam and Christianity. It describes the religion that was found by the forebears of Africans as an expression of the religious experiences, conserved by the founders of various tribes in Africa. The religion is called African because, it is practiced throughout the length and breadth of the African continent. It is traditional because it has been transmitted from one generation to another from time immemorial as the religion of the people. It is a religion that is communicated to the Africans by their ancestors.

African traditional Religion is an indigenous religion, which has developed from the way of life of the Africans, which has been transmitted from their ancestors to children from time immemorial. Though African traditional religion is a distant past, its academic study and documentation is of recent past. It is a religion that has permeated every aspect of African life.

In some European countries in Europe, African traditional religion is referred to as natural religion. Furthermore, because of the oral transmission nature of the religion or lack of written literature, its sources are found everywhere in Africa, some of which may include: shrines, arts, crafts, and symbols, songs, proverbs and myths. In postmodern scholarship, African traditional religion is known as African religion. It is simply a set of beliefs and worship patterns practiced by various African societies as a response to the Supreme Being as manifested in their environment and experience. The purpose of African Religion however, is to be in harmony with the Supreme Being, the Deities, the Spirits, the ancestors and the environment. Their constant interaction creates harmonious relationship that facilitates peace and happiness in their existence.

3.4   The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Some scholars argue that religion is not part of culture but only related to it. However, seeing that religion evolves out of a culture, we submit that religion and culture are related; hence, religion is a core element in culture.

It is obvious that Islam, which owes its origin to Arabia, is basically built on the culture of the Arabians just like Christianity which owes its origin to the West is built on the culture of Western Europe. This is also the same with African religion, which is embedded and enshrined in the culture of the Africans.

Religion is a source of culture. God (*Aondo*) among the Tiv is the highest spirit who creates, sustains the universe and is in charge of all the other primordial spirits like *Adzov*, *Tsav*, etc. The Tiv traditional religion has put in place rites (in form of sacrifice) that are meant to request or appease primordial spirits in times of crisis when they are believed to be angry. These rites are not only performed but are also organised by the priests (*Mba soron kwagh*). For example, when the rains set in properly for cultivating and planting, farmers and the land had to be ceremonially consecrated by the priests and sacrifices made in order to expect bumper harvest at the end of the cropping season.

Not only that the fortunes of the community are determined by this good work of the priests but also that the religious system makes the society stable by the general blessings received from the priests and the harmonious relationship engendered at the beginning of planting season. Here, respect for authority, order and manifestation of belief in the Supreme Being is clearly exhibited and upheld.

Stability was also sustained through oath taking as a means of settling disputes by way of proving one guilty or innocent in crime and other offences. This shows that religion is not just essential or important to culture but also necessary or forms an integral part of culture. This is because religion performs the function of bringing about completeness of culture. Concisely, culture may not be complete without religion. This is because it does not only keep cultural values alive but also serves as an agent of orders declaring officially what the community forbids as a helping measure in the maintenance of social relations of members of a particular community. This order is maintained by taboos some of which are religious and others cultural. Therefore, religion cannot be separated from culture.

3.5   The Role of Culture in National Development

Culture, as a way living together in a community, has certain peculiarities with which a community is identified with. It is a group knowledge passed from one generation to the other through parents either by personal experience as in initiation or by teaching as in farming. For instance, teaching a young man various methods of making a ridge by instructing him at home or taking him to the farm. Culture has a tremendous part to play in the development of any nation. Culture represents the most important feature of a people. It binds them together and serves as a pointer to where they come from, their present position and where they are going. By its normative nature, culture brings order among members in the community and makes people to stick together for a common goal without which national development cannot be actualised. The culture of a people constantly reminds them of their oneness biologically, economically, politically and religiously. It rallies them round in pursuance of community set goals to their subsequent actualisation. This is because it gives them ready -made solutions to their problems, helps them to predict the behavior of others and what to expect from others.

Culture also shows clearly the extent and value or quality of development of a nation materially and non-material wise. In other words, it evaluates man's improvement or advancement in technology and in ideas that are abstract and non-visible.

It must however be noted that not all aspects of culture promotes physical survival. Some exactly do the opposite by leading people to destruction. However, any cultural practice has to be functional in order to contribute to the survival and the development of the community. Each culture divides nature according to its priorities. What is a favourite in one culture may be disliked by another. For instance, while a dog meat is a favourite among the Igbo, the Tiv Women do not touch a dog when killed or dead. Knowing the dislike of others promotes unity and avoid crisis.

Every culture is a precipitate of history. The past are extended to the present in altered forms and meanings. Discoveries and inventions through historical contacts with other people or among members of the same community are manmade which serve the need of the people for survival, development and become aspects of the people's culture.

Though every society may have different cultural values, some are similar to others. For example, in Nigeria most communities have the following as their core values: discipline, honesty, hard work, respect for God and elders. These values lift high the moral standard among members of the society thereby improving efficiency in the nation's rise and development. The case in Nigeria is the non-practice of these moral virtues in public and private life that has left the nation worse off.

Discipline, which encourages orderliness by adherence to set regulations, promotes productivity that gingers development. A disciplined man will naturally be ready to follow strictly the rules of any contract or government as a patriotic citizen of his country to attract investment from foreigners and show commitment to duty for an increased productivity, which is an agent of development. A moral and disciplined person will improve the country's productivity. A country with immoral and undisciplined people cannot develop. Honesty as the opposite of unfaithfulness enhances transparency and accountability of all members of the society in public and private life. This promotes religious use of a nation's resources, which fastens the pace of development of the society. By this virtue, people are expected to hate lies and fraudulent acts, be sincere in their dealings among themselves and to outsiders of the community, instill trust in the minds of people free and fair transactions, and boost the economy as a means to development.

In Nigeria, insincerity is clearly shown in keeping marriage vows, while in public life it is seen in different forms of corruption due to greed and impatience. If most of our public officers were honest to themselves and their dear nation, they would have preserved a reasonable amount of our

national resources, which would have led us to national development. Respect-discipline entails respect to God, respect to the laws of the land as well as to the constituted authorities. The result of this is a total promotion of social order that transforms the economy and encourages political unity for a steady development. Hard work apart from being a means of earning one's living, increases productivity of labour and in turn raises national productivity. In Nigeria however, the case is different because of the lack of respect for hard work brought about by "get rich quick syndrome." More so, lack of balanced appreciation as an encouragement for hard work has given rise to the sacrifice of efficiency and goal attainment for personal enrichment. Here the real cultural practice is in variance with the ideal which indicates that the set goal of the society can hardly be achieved, thus bringing underdevelopment.

3.6   Culture and Moral Values

Religion as an element of culture is the communication of an individual or group of individuals with the supernatural to find answers to life's unending problems. It stands out as a powerful force that shapes one's beliefs and behavioural patterns. It therefore, exerts great influence on how people in a community think or behave.

Culture is a refined way of doing things. Philosophically, it is a unique quality possessed by human beings when the innate ability to imagine, think and form an opinion about something without having the details of it, are put to use. To social anthropologists, culture refers to the things human beings do, which are learnt and adopted through the influence of the environment and are passed down from generation to generation as acceptable ways of life of a people. For instance, the function of a hand is biologically arranged but its usage for communication to one another in symbols is learnt as a people's culture. Such learnt patterns of behaviours, beliefs, norms, values, etc. undergo slight changes from time to time as the new members grow up and later internalise them as acceptable ways of life common to them as a group but different from people of other societies. Man learns through interaction by way of comments of others in certain social situations. For example, "dress like a woman or eat as a man". Man gradually changes to conform to the societal living standards. Thus upholding order and preserving culture.

Cultural differences are exhibited in two ways. The real culture is what is practiced at the time in question. It is the reality of people's behaviour. The ideal culture however, is the expected or what is supposed to be practiced, but is hardly carried out. For instance, in Nigeria, there is the ideal of discipline but there exist the reality of indiscipline in private and public life.

There is also conflict between the sub-culture, which forms the groups that do not fully recognise the dominant central norms of the society. They counter culture because their religious and economic differences completely reject dominant values.

Ideally, morality as an acceptable way of judging the right and wrong actions in the community comes from an individual or group expressions of what it believes and what it does. It deals with the principle of what is right and good and what is wrong it deals with evil in the behaviours of people in particular places and situations. It involves carrying out moral duties.

Moral values are pointers to what the community desires or strives for. Norms are ultimately expressions of a society's values. They are means to an end while values are the ends. The difference is that while the values are abstract, general concepts or ideas, norms are concrete behavioural rules or specifications for a group of people in a given social. Values are determinants of norms, which help in shaping the norms as a means of maintaining order and preserving culture. They determine the norm, which in turn help individuals attain the values in the right manner. For instance, the value of society may be to have children, the norm to this may be to encourage marriage and put in place rules that would usher peaceful conditions to marriage as an institution. Education as a value may have schooling as its norm. Morality as a societal value may have strict religious practice as its norm. The set goals of the society automatically become the standard of measurement or judgement. The attainment of such heights is counted as success of social fulfillment that gives one certain status and privileges while non-attainment is regarded as a social failure, which receives reactions in different ways as a result of the social stigma and sense of personal unfulfillment.

In African traditional religion, moral values are seen as ethical standards, which guard the way people behave in a society. This moral sense in Africa has over the years produced customs, traditions, taboos, laws that are practiced and believed to have come from God in the beginning of the world. This unchallenging authority of the morals is supported by the living dead and spirits who keep watch to make sure people observe the laws by rewarding the obedient ones and punishing the offenders. The cultural values existed before Christianity and Islam came to Africa because of the homogeneity of the societies saddled with their moral implications. The values were derived from the people's worldview, which believed in the existence of the visible world inhabited by man and the ancestors, the invisible world inhabited by the Supreme Being, deities and spirits and the ancestors. The maintenance

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of societal values is fostered by beings in the invisible world. As a result, people honour God and the lesser beings by offering elaborate sacrifices with good approved behavior. To the traditionalist, the laws were God given and therefore, form the basis of cultural values. Dishonouring these values was being disobedient to God. People were expected to be good and receive God's reward who was Himself good. Therefore, members strive to achieve goodness having being conscious of God's omnipresence.

God in the people's opinion gave the laws and delegated powers to the deities for punishment. Different groups used different methods. The Tiv people used *Swem* (god of justice) to administer oath to an individual as a means of dispensing justice. The Tiv also used trial by ordeal as another means. Victims of thunder and lightning were believed to have been punished by God. People ran away from sin because of the fear of being punished by God himself or a deity. Therefore, stealing was not an issue, adultery or incest were abhorred. Honesty was believed to be rewarded by God. Cases like rape, prostitution and other immoral acts were almost absent. The punitive measures against offenders of social laws were melted on the victims by the society. The communal lifestyle interpreted sin as affecting the whole community, so was a good behavior. Slavery, nepotism, favouritism, etc. were hardly noticeable. Some of the common ones are patriotism, truth telling, kindness, chastity, before and in marriage, greeting of elders, honesty, faithfulness, self-control and a pursuit of good name on family and tribal level".

3.7   Culture and the Rights of Women in African Traditional Religion

Virtually all societies have cultural traits that serve as their identity and a means of integrating individuals into the community. Individuals learn and imbibe the societal norms and values as they grow up from birth. Religion as a source of culture and its permeation of all aspects of African life reflects the way of life lived by the people the religion originates from. For instance, Christianity and Islam came from the Western Europe and Arabia respectively. Culture is a learned behaviour and is not biologically arranged. Therefore, it remains a relative concept with environment as a determinant factor. This is because what is called good in a particular society may be abhorred in another community. For instance, greeting in Yoruba land is done by prostration while the Tiv give a handshake or simply embrace. This explains why wife battering may be abhorred in some societies but seen as normal in others. A girl child born in Africa suffers cultural inhibitions that touch her life until

death. This is because in some societies a girl or woman is only seen not heard. Below are some infringements upon female child in Africa.

Education: In most African societies, girls are denied education (formal) while boys are permitted to whatever level. This is because women in some African traditions are regarded as visitors who have no share of inheritance in their father's house. In stringent financial condition, the parent would prefer the male as the heir to the female. Early marriages are arranged by parents for their daughters without the girls' consent. This practice is responsible for the spread of vesico vagina fistula (vvf) – a disease associated with early marriages.

Inheritance: A girl child in most African societies like the Tiv has nothing as her share from the father's properties both as a spinster and as a married woman. Her share is said to be in her husband's house.

Taboos: In Tiv, girls are not allowed to see the grave of their brother, sister or the man they were in courtship with. This as that would offend the *swende* (a blood related illness) which will prevent her effective delivery when pregnant. Culture also demands in Africa that though women contribute greatly for the upkeep of the family, they are not to be allowed to take part in decision making in the home regardless of their age. They are not consulted and not allowed to participate in decision-making. These inferior treatments are enshrined in most communities as laws and are enforced.

Sexual discipline: Women are expected to be obedient and submissive to men in sexual and other matters. While men have the right to engage in extra-marital affairs that are unquestionable by the wife, it is however forbidden for women to engage in extra marital affairs in Africa. This is increasing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

Male child syndrome: This is the preference of a male child to a female. Lack of male children has displaced women in families and some are ready to do anything to have children to avoid a broken marriage. In Tiv society, a man is not considered to have children without a male child. Women are denied right to land even though they work on it.

The plight of widows: Widows in Africa undergo several humiliations and bad treatments after the death of their husbands. They are made to sit on the floor mourning for many days; they are denied sleep, deprived of food and water, accused of killing their husbands and above all (in some cultures) asked to drink the water used in washing their dead husbands as an affirmation of guilt or innocence over the husband's

death. Among the Tiv however, legislation by the Tiv Traditional Council has banned in-laws from carting away the properties of their deceased relationship. This subjugation violates human rights enshrined in UNICEF Convention of 1989. It makes women worst victims of poverty, unemployment and involvement in other social vices.

Therefore, government and parents should encourage girl-child education, discourage forced and early marriages with stiff penalty. Widows should also be empowered to cope with the demise of their husbands.

3.8   The Impact of Western Culture on African Traditional Religion and Culture

As we appreciate the gains of Western culture and think about its future, it should however not deter us from making an assessment of the problems it has created for the African community and ways through which they may be solved. As an individual learns in the socialisation process for many years, he absorbs and adopts the essentials of his cultural heritage through the influence of his environment. The individual internalizes the arts, beliefs, laws and customs, habits and knowledge in economic, political, social institutions and activities that have been in transmission since the societal existence.

Fafunwa (1991: 13-17) was right in his assertion that a group that lacks the knowledge of its past can hardly have a good sense of direction that imparts on their public and private decisions which lead to greater success. Religion is a determinant of culture. Therefore, it is adversely affected when culture is injured. Africans believe that the Supreme Being has created the divinities and spirits who act as his functionaries in the world. Also in the world are mysterious powers. To be happy and successful demands a close touch with the Supreme Being through constant interaction with the divinities and spirits and the ancestors. This consciousness makes an African man extremely religious. The practical feature of religion also makes it dominate African traditional society. It is interesting to consider how Africans reacted to foreign influences, which came into the continent in the wake of Western civilisation.

Four disruptive forces attacked traditional beliefs and practices in Africa. The explorers who came to open up the so called "dark continent" of Africa to civilisation; the administrators and the imperialists who introduced a new system of government, law and order; the merchants who established trade (legal and illegal) between Africa and Europe and other parts of the world; and Muslim and Christian

missionaries who brought in new religions against the indigenous African religion.

In Nigeria for example, after the introduction of Christianity by the freed slaves in the southern part of the country, the slaves asked and were given missionaries from Europe. This group jointly promoted the spread of Christianity. The explorers, merchants, administrators and missionaries were from a common Christian background which explains why they gave overwhelming support for its spread. Conversion and evangelisation was followed by education, which was effectively used by the missionaries for disrupting traditional beliefs. All new converts were taught Western precepts in mission houses and were encouraged to look down upon their traditional religion. Such men and women became the stars of the community and bade farewell to old faith. They preached against the idolatrous practices of their people. They became friends of the whites and belonged to small social groups, which detached them from their tribal roots. This undermined traditional life and prevented the smooth flow of the African family structure.

In addition, Western medicine and technology also came through the activities of the missionaries. The new drugs improved people's health, controlled the deadly diseases like small pox and malaria, discouraged superstition and improved the people's living conditions. The schools established everywhere became the centres of change with the students as vehicles of conveying the new changes to their villages.

This Westernisation exposed Africans to the changes in Europe. After the political sharing of some African nations by the world powers at Berlin in 1885, the European settlers in the name of businessmen, gold and diamond diggers founding of new cities, railway and road constructions, the introduction of new laws and economic systems stood out clearly. These set the pace for African transformation. Opposing societal members were either slaughtered or imprisoned or had their villages burnt down. Africa actually paid heavily for the change, which originated outside and was initially forced on her.

Africa could not be the same any more. Some colonialists developed fully their colonies while others only exploited theirs and did no significant efforts educationally, medically and economically. Though some countries are legally independent, Europe and America has continued her control and influence over Africa especially in economic and religious terms through the aid we receive with attached strings of control.

Media in China, America and Japan are also fast making headway. For whatever happens in the above-mentioned countries has its impact on Africa; this is because they are increasingly involved in world affairs. Lamenting on Western influence in Africa, Mbiti (1969: 218) insists that it has detribalised the African society. The deep undermining of the traditional life is giving way for other identities to take over on the individual and society level. The corporate existence of the family is severely affected. For instance, in a family where children are in the university or have become medical doctors and the parents are peasant farmers, their economic standards, cultural understanding and practice cannot be the same. This manifests in health care, clothing, houses, food and moral behavior.

On the individual level, the detachment from the society to work elsewhere produces dehumanized individuals who are either cut off or separated from corporate morality, customs and communality of the Africans. Though living as individuals in the cities the corporate humanity of their forefathers that makes life meaningful is forfeited. Therefore, he becomes a foreigner in both traditional and postmodern life.

Politically, the traditional political institutions that existed were either suppressed or destroyed by the colonial masters. With African nationalism, which came after the Second World War, most African states partly removed colonialism but inherited the colonial structure of government. Changes are still expected until the ideal structure of African cultural frame is achieved.

The effect of money economy is far reaching on African continent. People in the rural areas grow cash crops like cocoa and beniseed while others take up employment. African states believe that their prosperity and progress depend on their economic life. The temptation of receiving economic aid of little amount with attached strings makes it difficult for a meaningful development to take place. Therefore, the richer countries are becoming richer rather at the expense of the poorer ones since they oppose the equal sharing.

Urbanisation, which succeeds rural dwelling, is another aspect of Western culture. In the past, we had fewer cities in Africa and fewer problems; however, today, towns are fast becoming cities and more problems are generated as a result of the massive movement to cities. People are far removed from the security of the village and offer of sacrifices thereby leaving most functions unperformed.

In the religious realm, Christianity and Islam in varied African traditional religion have no common ties. A division now exists between the religious and the secular, which was never found in traditional life. Some people in cities are today trying to live without religion though the member is negligible. Genuine offices are dying out. For example, hereditary priestly positions are in most cases forfeited for school.

Culturally, the African tradition had a background, which they operated freely but has been changed at the detriment of its values. For instance, traditional regulations and taboos are no longer seriously observed. The culture of computer, radio, television and the internet with pornographic films, individualism of the West have taken over at the expense of communalism and economic competition of mass production, etc. Consequently, the African man or woman is now living in two worlds: Western, which was given in part and African culture, which is originated from Africa. For instance, a Christian will be receiving treatment from a western designed hospital for his sickness and would still want to consult an oracle to know the cause of the sickness.

Western culture has also introduced a future dimension of time to Africa, which they work for progress and wait for an immediate realisation of their hopes. People's familiarity with the scientific approaches to issues in solving their problems is fast replacing the old ones. For example, more patronage is given to hospitals now than traditional medicine men. Thus, the fundamentals of culture, economy, religion, politics and value system is being distorted or replaced by Western value systems and structures.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Culture is the sum total of a people's way of life and that religion serves as its source and therefore, an integral part of culture – as opposed to the claim by some scholars that they are not related. Culture is a binding force of unity and a pointer to a people's past, present and future goals. Culture has positive and negative religio-cultural change towards the rights of women in the post-modern society as a mark of national development.

Towards national development, we emphasise that cultural and religious values encourage orderliness by strict adherence to set regulations that promote productivity, which is an instrument of national development. Therefore, changes experienced in the two concepts due to their interrelatedness cause improvement or retardation on living conditions depending on its direction of flow, to the positive or the negative.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt the definitions of culture and African traditional religion. You have also learnt the elements of culture and cultural or moral values as well as its relationship to religion. The role of culture in African traditional societies and national development were also discussed. We successfully argued that religion and culture are closely related hence religious tenets are built on a people's culture and values.

ANSWER TOSELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

The basic components of culture are:

1. Material culture e.g. working tools like axes, hoes, knives, etc. or other instruments like drums, charms, etc.
2. Non-material culture: These are not physical objects but ideas, and abstract things which are not visible. It could be the way of behavior of a people also.
3. Non-material culture could be further divided into: (i) normative dimension i.e. accepted way of doing things in a community; and (ii) cognitive dimension i.e. beliefs, knowledge, values, attitudes of a people, etc.

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Explain the relationship between religion and culture.

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UNIT 2   RITES OF PASSAGE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

In Africa, man is understood in relation to the group which he belongs. For one is first considered a member of a particular community which in turn explains who he is and what he would become in the future. His biological growth exposes him to changes in his physical appearance and social responsibilities. This movement from one state of being to the other is celebrated with a set of rituals known as rites of passage. Some of these rites include the following: pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage purification, naming, initiation, etc.

In this unit, we shall be examining the rites of passage with particular reference to African traditional religion.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define the rites of passage
- identify the rites of passage in African traditional religion
- state the significance of the rites of passage in African traditional religion.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of Rites

A rite (rites plural) is a ceremony carried out by a particular group of persons commonly used to accomplish a religious purpose. Grainer (1974: 20) asserts that "the rite is the rock upon which public religion is built". A rite is therefore a performance by individuals meant to have religious connotation.

3.2   Definition of Rituals

A ritual is a pattern of behaviour of an individual or group of individuals. They are a series of actions that are regularly performed in the same way, either for religious or non-religious purposes. It could be symbolic to mean a presentation of ideas in practical life situation performed daily or at given intervals. Religiously, rituals are symbolic actions that convey very powerful expressions of a religious belief and faith. Basically, rites and rituals are the same.

Onwubiko (1991:P 41) an educational anthropologist refers to rituals as the "effective instruments of education…" The rituals in African traditional religion not only educate the adherents on the religious values but reveal very deeply and express strongly African thought as well as facilitating their transmission from one generation to the other. For example, ritual songs sung at unique occasions or events are hardly forgotten by the group.

3.3   Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religion

In Africa, life is full of ceremonies, which help them remember important events in the life of the individual or community at large. These events are coloured by rituals that convey in strong terms ideas or beliefs of the group as was conceived and practiced by their forebears. As man passes through several stages of biological and social

transformation from embryo to the time of his death, these rituals, called rites of passage, become more meaningful as marks or indicators of change from one stage of life to the other. This agrees with the African view that life follows a particular route made of several stages that are ritualised and anointed by the rites. This explanation is a confirmation to the statement of Van Gennep, a French scholar who sees rite of passage as series of ceremonies carried out to facilitate one's change in status upon any of the several highly important occasions from the beginning of his life to its logical end.

Mbiti (1975: 1) refers to rite of passage as set forms of performing religious activities or ceremonies. They are actions that are performed at particular times for particular purposes, which are meant to celebrate or prepare one to move from one stage of life to the other. Therefore, African traditional religion helps not only in preparing the individual metaphysically, socially and religiously into all the important stages in life but also confers new roles that nature provides for the individuals in the society.

However, rites of passage should not be confused with life crises rituals. There is a significant difference worthy of note between the two. While rites of passage celebrate transition from one phase in the life of an individual to another, life crises rituals on the other hand specifically celebrate the major turning points in the life of an individual such as his or her birth, puberty, marriage and death. Rites of passage as carried out and understood in all African societies are not only concerned with the individual. They include changes in relationships of all peoples in the community that have common ties of blood, marriage and other institutions.

If carefully scrutinised and analysed in their context, it is possible to establish the fact that the ceremonies involved in these rites can be grouped into three major phases of separation, transition and incorporation. The rites of separation show that one no longer belongs to the particular phase in which she or he was. For instance, keeping one in a private place, shaving a person's hair among others are expressions in rites that one has left behind one stage in life. The transition stage shows that one has left his former group or status but he is not yet received into a new one; therefore, he is between the two. Symbolically, one's new clothes are stripped off and he or she is waiting to put on new ones. Incorporation rites symbolically expresses that one has attained the status he was aspiring for. He is worn the new clothes or may be given new working tools (paraphernalia).

In some societies, to mark the end of the rite, a public festivity attached to the function is ceremonially carried out. Sometimes it could be only a sacrifice or prayer of installation and so on. Though the three major phases of a rite separation, transition and incorporation are clearly marked out in theory, the practice shows unequal degree in development, emphasis and significance and varies in form from society to society. While separation rites are fully expressed in death, and transition in pregnancy, incorporation rites feature prominently in marriages. Besides, some rites may have associated rituals with different objectives. For instance, birth may have protective rituals while marriage may have fertility rituals.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Differentiate between rites of passage and life crises rituals.

3.4   The Significance of Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religion

Passage of life refers to meaningful transformation in the life cycle. The rites of passage in African traditional religion are very significant in the sense that each stage in the life is seen as a sudden increase in the attitudes of life, due to the intervention of the divine. In other words, it is remarking the initiates into new beings with new social roles that are divinely given and humanly approved. This explains why each stage is marked by magico-religious ceremonies which bring out in practical terms the understanding and approval of the divine order by the society. Similarly, it does not only unite the members of the community but also pictures life as a continuous process that never stops but keeps going on. It is also a time the profane and the sacred are brought closer into a conflict free contact.

The initiates are also reminded that life continues as a reflection of the one lived in the previous stage with little modifications especially at the transition or luminal phase. Here, they are socialised into their new roles as they imbibe the associated norms and values. Through this, the society also shapes the individual's consciousness and moral behaviour so that he or she possesses the way of life acceptable by tradition of the society. Rites of passage principally ensure a change in condition (status) of an individual or group of individuals from one magico-religio-secular group to another.

3.5   Some Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religion and Culture

3.5.1 Pregnancy Rites

The desire in Africa to have children is very great because, children do not only continue with the family rituals but also give happiness and joy in the marriage. Children in Africa are taken as God's blessings to mankind while unfruitful marriage is not only a misfortune but also a curse. A barren woman whether rich, generous, respectful, beautiful is considered a shame to her race. Therefore, she moves from one diviner or medicine man to another in search of the reason and the cure for her misfortune.

When a woman conceives, she shares with the husband and immediately they start taking precautions. They receive the pregnancy as God's gift and expect the ancestors to guide it. It indicates the coming of an additional member in the society and makes the mother a respected person with special treatment from everybody. This phase in one's life is important to celebrate because to an African, birth of a child is not an event but a process, which begins before the child is subsequently born into the world and continues long thereafter.

Pregnancy in some African societies is regarded as the final seal of any given marriage. It is also a symbol of complete integration into the husband's family and kinsmen circle. The pregnant woman, for her protection and the unborn baby, is to observe many taboos ranging from her sexual relationship with the husband, dietary, social, agricultural to religious prohibitions. In some African communities, the wife from inception is not allowed to have sexual intercourse with the husband until three years after birth; though the practice varies from group to group.

There are certain things she cannot eat for fear of misfortune to the mother or the child during pregnancy or even after birth. For instance, among the Akamba, pregnant women are forbidden to eat fats, beans and meat of animals killed with poisoned arrows. The reason is to avoid the poison particularly from having effect to both the pregnant woman and the unborn child. Among the Gikuyu, pregnant women are not allowed to use certain working tools especially iron implements to avoid their being affected by lightning. Among the Tiv, the diviner is consulted especially the first pregnancy, and gives the pregnant woman some useful herbs and sometimes rituals in form of sacrifices. Apart from forbidding the woman from looking into the grave, crossing a dead dog, she is not supposed to step over the blood of a man who died a

violent death. The above violation of *Akombo* (mystical forces) attracts *swende* (a blood related ritual). She might have miscarriage. Other implications include non-movement of the unborn child at midday and in the night because that may cause miscarriage or she may give birth to abnormal children. Women who are unfaithful during pregnancy have a hard time during labour, which sometimes require confessions from them and ritual prayers from well-wishers.

The above implies that a violation of traditional norms and values is capable of upsetting the balance of things in the universe and can result to disease and miscarriage in women. After the count of 10 lunar months by expectant mothers, they traditionally know that any moment they will give birth.

3.5.2 Birth Rites

The blessings and the fruitfulness of marriage in African societies is measured in terms of the number of children a couple have from such marriage. The birth of a child is therefore regarded as an important event in the life of the Africans. This explains Mbiti's (1969: 110) expression that children are the buds of societies. Every birth announces the arrival of a spring when life shoots out for the community to continue. The birth of the child therefore becomes the concern of the whole community.

Barrenness as earlier mentioned is not entertained because it discontinues the biological or family line by preventing the ancestors from reincarnating and thus causes personal immortality when the victim dies. As a result, women fight it by consulting oracles to change the situation. Among the Yoruba, many of their divinities are credited with the ability to give women the gift of children. She approaches them with the promise of bringing back thanksgiving if her request is granted. After divination and strict compliance to the prescriptions she takes in. "The Yoruba are rich in such medicine believed to procure pregnancy" Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 173).

The way people handle actual birth (child delivery) vary from society to society. Among the Tiv, at delivery time the woman goes into her house or the house of her parents and sits in *dagbaikon* (a Tiv traditional chair). The old woman acting as a midwife sits on a stool accompanied by other women like the mother in-law, wives and others from the compound assist by holding the woman in labour. Leaves are spread all over to prevent the placenta from dropping on the bare ground. The cord is cut by the women with a sharp bamboo splinter or cornstalk. The baby

is washed in hot water and rubbed with camwood. The placenta is buried to the left of the door by a small boy who has not reached puberty.

Palm oil, camwood and salt are given to the midwife as token of appreciation. The Tiv have a simple ceremony called "ember mar" (rejoice at birth). This is done few days after the birth or before the child walks. A meal of *nune* (locust bean seeds) is prepared particularly for the mother-in-law, the midwife, the other women present at the birth and the boy who buried the placenta. For twins and triplets, some societies welcome them while some kill the mother with the babies because they are considered a misfortune. After the advent of Christianity, things have changed. In most societies today they are regarded as a blessing to manhood or womanhood.

3.5.3 Naming Ceremonies

Among the Igbo, a month after birth is a confinement period to the child and the mother to replenish all she lost during pregnancy. This period is called *Omugwu*. After this period, the child is named and allowed to be taken out. To the Yoruba and the Ga people, the child is named on the eighth day after the confinement period. It is called *Ikomojade* meaning "ceremony of bringing out the child". The name corresponds with the day of the week, the event closest to his birth after the leader of the society the feelings of the parents, describing child's background and so on. For example, the Yoruba name someone "Ajayi," for those born face down, "Babatunde" (male) for a child born after the death of a father or grandfather and is believed to be the reincarnation of the deceased, "Yetunde" (mother returns) with the same connotation, "Taiwo and Kehinde" for twins, "Idowu and Alaba" are used for those born after twins.

The naming of a child varies in form as well as in materials from one community to the other. However, the most common materials for naming a child include palm oil, salt, kola nut, alligator pepper, yam, fish, and water among others. Friends and relatives of the family are invited before hand; naming ceremony usually takes place where the birth occurred. Among the Wolof, the ceremony starts before noon. On the fateful day, the mother of the child sweeps the house, takes a bath, extinguishes the fire, the child is then washed with medicinal water. These are symbolic acts showing the end of one phase of life and the beginning of another. Visitors and guests offer their presents, followed by presents from men to the father and women to the mother of the child. On a mat placed at the centre of the compound sits the midwife holding the child in her lap. The child is washed and shaved as a sign for purification, separation and newness. A clay bowl containing red and

white kola nuts, cotton and millet is placed beside the midwife holding the baby. An elderly person rubs hands on the child's head and spits in his ear to implant the name in his head. The name is then announced loudly to the gathering followed by prayers for long life and prosperity.

Dancing and feasting with food and drinks follows all through the day. The baby is identified with the name given to him on this day. He is detached from the mother and henceforth belongs to the family and community. A common feature in naming ceremony is the officiant address to the child and the use of water, wine and kola nut. After pronouncing the name, the officiant dips his hand in the water and puts three drops on the child's tongue, the same is done to the wine as a mark of introducing the child into the truth.

3.5.4 Puberty Rites

After the ceremonies of the naming rite comes the puberty rite. In some societies, boys are circumcised on the eighth day or within the first month after birth. However, in most cases, the circumcision is not performed until the puberty time. One who has handled circumcision for many years is called for the cutting of the foreskin from the penis. It is the passing from boyhood to manhood. Among the men, great care is taken to make sure they are developed through teaching. This is done before the ceremony day when the boys are secluded from the rest of the society. The girls experience the same separation to a different location as the boys and girls are exposed to the social responsibilities accruing to each other by the elderly men and women in the society. Here, roles in the family and society are explained to prepare them before marriage. The girls are also thought their roles as women, wives, mothers, their skills in home management, and so on. The circumcision of women (clitoridectomy) is done in some African societies such as the Mende of Sierra Leone and some Nigerian groups but it is not common. Puberty, therefore, becomes a good ground for training and learning where traditional education is powerfully given and received by both. For example, the initiate among the Yoruba learns the goodness of endurance, being sociable, exposure to societal secrets and sex education and personal hygiene as preparatory knowledge into adulthood.

3.5.5 Marriage Rites

In most African societies, marriage as an important social institution is viewed as a social agreement that seeks to unite a man to a woman and their families. It could be a union of one man to many women at a time but not one woman to many husbands at a time particularly in West Africa. The institution makes lawful sexual intercourse between couples

and confirms the family and community approval of the issues born by the couples. This makes marriage a public rather than a private affair.

Before marriage is contracted among the Tiv, search for a partner is principally the work of the man. The decision to getting married either comes from the man himself, his parents, friends or close relatives. However, the enquiries and proposals are mostly carried out by the parents. They try to know among other things, the biological relationship of the two families, their moral and health conditions, their social and religious balance. If they were not satisfied with their findings, the marriage preparations were discontinued. In endogamous societies, people are expected to marry only within their particular group. Marriage outside is outlawed. Whereas, in exogamous societies like the Tiv people, marriage within one's own clan is a taboo. It is likened to incest and is ritually cleansed by openly burning the man and the woman in an open hut. The naked escape from the burning flames by the victims to different directions symbolising the burning of their evil deeds. To the Tiv, children as a product of marriage, which has continuity as the central purpose of the union means eternal life. Therefore, its importance cannot be overemphasised.

3.5.6 Purification Rites

The final seal of marriage in Africa is giving birth to a child. This is followed by many ceremonies. The first after birth ceremony starts with seclusion of the mother and the new child for some time. When the period elapses, then the purification rite accompanied by feasting begins. Among the Igbo for example, the senior sister comes out with a yam in her hand. Motioning, she prays for pleasant things to come to the mother and the child. She also prays against evil spirits. Children in the neighbourhood also feast with yam and soup outside the compound as a symbol of inducing the ancestral spirits to reincarnate.

One of the girls, if the baby is a girl quenches the fire in the mother's hut by taking a mouthful of palm wine each time she spits on the flames of the fire. After which the mother sweeps the house and throws away the ashes with the sweepings as the girl goes for a new fire from the next compound close to it. Rubbing the baby's head, with chalk, the boy warns the baby not to refuse an errand from the parents but from the spirits. He concludes that the food eaten by the parents should give the child good health and steady growth. The following morning, the boy returns to escort the mother to the yam farm where the mother proclaims that "Today the taboo against my touching yams has been removed." Only then has she the right to move out of her hut freely in the

community. At this time, the husband is free to buy her ornaments and other gifts as he may wish.

3.5.7 Initiation Rites

Initiation is a ceremony performed to symbolise entering into a solemn agreement or covenant by shedding of blood. The blood used either of a human being or an animal binds the person to the land and also to the ancestors is like the departed member identified with the child through reincarnation wishes to be tied to the community and the people with whom he or she has come back to stay with.

Initiation is also an indication that the person is now passing from childhood to adulthood. The cutting of his flesh shows this. Once this is done he is regarded as an adult and can be given responsibility at home and in the community. He enjoys all the privileges of the community, which he would not have tasted as a non-initiate.

Initiation also prepares the young ones for marriage. The period of seclusion or confinement (separation) prepares them as they are thought the history of their people, the beliefs, culture or tradition, the secrets of marriage and most importantly how to raise and maintain a family. This prepares them for marriage for one cannot marry without being initiated. Initiation is a bridge between youthfulness and adulthood. It links the youth with adult both in girls and in boys. It also serves the living and the dead too. It is a mark of unity and identification. It identifies an individual as a member of the group and unites him or her with the departed members. It instills consciousness and confidence in the new member to perform having known that the society has accepted him or her.
Among the Tiv, there is the *kwav* (age group). Though there is no formal initiation rite, they are autonomous, protecting their people from *tsav* (witchcraft). They are exposed to social rights and responsibilities. They acquire the intelligence to fight injustices against the negative use of *akombo* (mystical forces).

3.5.8 Girls Puberty Rites

This rite is meant to announce that the assembled girls will soon join the married group. During this time, they are separated from the rest of the community. Among the Igbo for example, six months of fattening follows while they sleep in a separate place. At the village square, they from time to time assemble to receive teaching as their roles as women and to learn dances, songs, other traditional and cultural qualities. They

are well fed to make them fat to attract meaningful gifts from their proposed husbands on the last day of the parade.

These girls spend the period preparing and rubbing themselves with cam wood, making their hairs, beautifying themselves with ornaments. The last seven days however, they are properly dressed in traditional outfits, decorated with beads and ornaments, move about on the streets accompanied by their maids of honour to show in public their beauty. The peak of the whole rites is that on the last day, they all assemble at the public square to perform their dance. On the seventh day during the last day period of serious activities, all the girls return to normal routine of daily life.

According to Mbiti (1969: 130), though the missionaries have attacked the circumcision of females, it is still been carried out in secret and in other places publically too. Clitoridectomy he maintains, if not performed, it is believed that the clitoris grows long and have branches and children of uninitiated women would become abnormal. She is laughed at and still considered a child. Any misfortune to them or their family is attributed to the lack of circumcision.

While the girls were in seclusion, marriage arrangements were going on among their families and immediately they were initiated, they got married. The non-initiates are usually held responsible for any misfortune to them or their family. Although, modern life has brought a change to this practice.

3.5.9 Funeral Rites

Africans do not see death as the end of life. It is not a complete destruction of an individual. Death is therefore viewed by Africans as transitional movement of an individual into a new stage of life in the spirit world. Death is the permanent physical separation of an individual from other human beings. Life continues beyond the grave. From the physical and the visible, the deceased moves into the invisible and the spiritual world of the ancestors. This ideology is expressed by the Tiv phrase *a saa ku* (he is lost to death) what is lost is the physical body that decays in the ground. Physically, *kera ngu ga* (he is no more), but spiritually he continues to exist in a mysterious way in the visible and the invisible worlds.

Burial is accompanied by special rituals with the performance of elaborate funeral rites depending on his or her status in society. These are intended to draw attention to the permanent physical separation. These are fully carried out to those who have died a natural and good

death that would eventually lead them to the ancestral land. It is not done to strangers, murderers, witches and all who died abnormal deaths.

Among the Tiv, the corpse is prepared for burial by washing with water or with some other traditional medicine. He or she is dressed properly and disposed as custom demands at the chosen sight after the ceremonies. In the olden days food and many other belongings of the deceased accompanied the corpse to make him lack nothing in the next world. Before burial, work is ceased a few days alongside with fasting in some communities. Mourning continues with shaving of hair, followed at last by feasting to comfort the bereaved and bring life back to normal and as a thank you for those who officiate and attend the burial.

The Africans believe that the deceased does not settle down until he is given befitting funeral rites. As a result, African societies ensure that the prescribed funeral rites are performed to expectation in order to secure a free passage of the deceased into the ancestral cult and avert any misfortune due to the unappeased soul.

There are activities that portray death as a rite of passage. They include among others the following:

- Announcement/heralding
- Special notification/information
- The burial
- The mourning period
- The funeral

Announcement/Heralding

The first problem a bereaved man or woman confronts is the shock of the loss of a dear one. The emotions that follow are the outburst of crying aloud, wailing and lamenting. This announces the death and brings the surrounding relatives to the spot. To other deaths however, people are stopped from crying. For example, if one is alleged to be entangled with an idol, heinous crime like one that is killed by thunder and lightning.   It is considered a curse to the family and people are not expected to cry aloud, no elaborate ceremonies are expected. In some traditions the corpse are thrown into some evil forests, not even buried. The crying assembles people to plan for the declaration and formally inform them of the death.

Special notification

If a man's wife dies, he sends his brothers or their children to notify the middleman among the Tiv. The middleman in the marriage notifies the parents of the deceased, except if he complains of having no one to send, he may request that the message be passed to the in-laws. In case of a husband, the message will be sent to the eldest man of the family, his matrilineal home, to in-laws and others. The elaboration of the notification depends on the position of the deceased in the society.

Mourning period

At this time, both the nuclear and extended families suspend all working activities to stay together in one place. The duration and nature varies from community to community. The wife or husband is confined to sit in a particular place while arrangements are made as to the feeding and drinks. People are exposed to hardships especially grown up daughters, except pregnant women and those nursing newborn babies. Cultural dances are displayed.

Burial

This is putting the corpse into the grave and covering it up with earth. The corpse is given the last ritual bath, it is dressed properly, there could be other rituals if he were in a cult or title holder. Gunshots are released as sign of his last respect.

Funeral ceremony

This is where the deceased is given his or her final respect. It is a combination of socio-religious activities which one spends a lot of money if it is to be successful. The level of the ceremony varies from individual to individual. The general conception is that it should be colourful to depict the last respect.

For the deceased, the ceremonies are gradually making him to settle down in the ancestral land. The dressing up of the corpse indicates rites of incorporation, while the wailing symbolises his death and thus his separation, the lying in state and other activities are transitional phase.

4.0   CONCLUSION

The unit focused on the rites of passage in African traditional religion. These rites are important because they regulate not only the social relationships between individuals but also the one between human and

the invisible world of spiritual beings and powers. The constant performance of these rites at the appropriate times promotes unity, continuity of life between man to man and stabilizes the balance between the visible and the invisible beings.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- the rites of passage in African traditional Religion celebrate transition from one phase in the life of an individual or a community to the other

- the major goal of the rites of passage is to ensure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-religious or secular group to another

- some of the rites of passage in African traditional religion include: pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage, purification, naming, initiation, girl's puberty rites, ad funeral rites.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

The difference between rites of passage and life crises rituals is that rites of passage celebrate the passage of time but life crises rituals celebrate the different changes in the life of an individual.

Good examples of rites of passage include independence celebration, celebration of new yam festival, new moon, etc.

Examples of rife crises rituals include birth rites, circumcision rites, marriage rites, puberty and death rites.

Again, rites of passage are more general than life crises rituals.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

What is the importance of rites of passage in African Traditional Religion?

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UNIT 3   PROVERBS IN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

CONTENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Proverbs as wise sayings occupy an important place in African traditional religion and culture owing to the fact that African traditional religion is not a faith with written sources. As such Kayode (1984: 3) notes that Africans frame proverbs and wise sayings of God's personality and power as manifestation of the important place God occupies in their worldview. In total agreement with the above line of thought, the Ashanti of Ghana have a proverb, which states that "if you want to tell God anything, tell it to the wind". In addition, the Yoruba have a wise saying that "if you run away from God, you are still under Him".

This unit therefore examines the place of proverbs and wise sayings in African traditional religion. Owing to their importance, no discipline is complete in African circles without the use of proverbs.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain what proverbs and wise sayings are
- distinguish between proverbs which give an idea of God and his personality from those which speak of the dignity of labour and other aspects of African life
- mention some proverbs and wise sayings from some African societies.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of Proverbs

Proverbs as wise sayings are said to be one of the most reliable forms of oral tradition. This is true because they are short and can easily be remembered and passed unto another people or generation. This makes them serve as vehicles of authentic beliefs particularly of people that had existed in preliterate societies. Africans have a collection of these proverbs of ancient wisdom and beliefs dating back to past generations. Proverbs are therefore referred to as short but wise sayings or expressions that have come into use. They are the wisdom of many and the wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. Proverbs are common ways of expressing religious ideas and feelings. According to him, it is in proverbs as wise sayings that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African traditional religion and philosophical wisdom and feelings. They are understood to be indexical counters that are embedded with symbols that indirectly convey a people's socio-cultural and religio-political attitudes and philosophy of life.

To Nwoga (1978: 71), the commonest way of looking at proverbs is that "they are the palm oil with which words are eaten". They are best understood and appreciated when they are correctly used at the right time in the right place. This entails that an African communicates to his fellow man more easily, freely and faster in proverbs. In his own submission defines proverbs as "a short, well-known saying, expressing a truth" be it moral or religious. These truths contained in the proverbs are strikingly presented. In everyday life of the Africans, their utterances contain a lot of proverbs which reveal a lot of their belief particularly about God. They are sayings that are not long but are commonly used in everyday life in conveying a statement of fact that is known by many and accepted by all. From the foregone, proverbs spring from the people and they interpret the people's belief system.

3.2   The Role of Proverbs in African Religio-Cultural Beliefs

Basically, proverbs provide us with a rich source of African wisdom. Some of these proverbs are religious. Their content has beliefs, ideas, morals and warnings that are mostly religiously inclined. Therefore, proverbs in African traditional religion function as an expression of the knowledge of God. They reveal to us God, his attributes and works. The world, man, human relationships, relationship of man to the world and to God. They spring up from a people's culture who use it to facilitate their daily transactions. Their shortness in nature shows they are easy to

remember. Many people are versed in proverbs and use them skillfully at the right time for the right purpose. Since they can easily be passed to a person without much stress. Most of the proverbs we put to use today may go back several generations.

The use of proverbs in Africa is like a skill that is developed which is considered as a good characteristic of a powerful and effective speech that contains traditional knowledge and the wisdom of the ancestors. For the Tiv, the wisdom, wit and sense of humour an old man is known and appreciated for, is his use of proverbs which comes intermittently during discussions, particularly during *ku oron* (death inquisition) aimed at finding out who caused the death. Discussions are heavy laden with proverbs such that non initiates would not understand the deliberations. Of all verbal art forms employed by the Tiv, such as singing, storytelling and proverbs, the last are the most consistently used in everyday situation Yina (2008: 148). Hagher (1981: 42) in a similar way posits that among the Tiv one frequently hears the elders exchanging proverbs in greetings. For example, *Anshoho zenden aber a wura gbirin ga* meaning "a toad does not travel in the rain for no reason…" This is said when receiving an important visitor who refuses or is yet to make known his purpose of visit. It is an indirect question of why the visitor has come.

Outstanding traditional poets are always made reference to in everyday discussions because of their effective usage of cultural or religious idioms and metaphors in the analysis of the human condition during their own time. They clearly indicate the awareness of the pains experienced by human beings in form of sickness, poverty, torture, endurance and oppression at the time.

The Tiv believe that witches, the *mbatsav* and their agents are the forces that have the strong desire to harm and thereby conspire to spoil the universe. This idea is profoundly expressed by a famous and traditional poet called Obadiah Orkor whose type of poetry is filled with grief that clearly shows a serious sensitivity to the condition of the ordinary Tiv man that is said to be tortured by the forces through their agents.

There are proverbs that exist to advice against abstractions and generalizations in order to maintain the observance of particular moral codes and behaviours. Many of such proverbs exist in Tiv. Two examples will be used here to buttress this point:

(i)   *Or meen inyam tenge hondo ga* meaning "one does not whistle while stalking a spoor."

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(ii)   Atungwa ngu a vaan, iyo ngi meen zan meaning "whenever a frog croaks, the snake stalks nearer."

These expressions are meant to teach young people how to behave at a particular time and in a particular place. For instance, "One does not whistle while stalking a spoor" indirectly condemns boastful attitude as foolishness while still in pursuit of an ambition or to think you are through with a particular thing and start misbehaving when the whole thing is yet to come to an end. It dismisses one's chances of being successful in life when one is impatient and cannot hide his/her feelings to the end. This is saying that for one to be successful means one must have to be careful alongside an organised disposition as one plans for the future.

The second expression in the examples given above, "Whenever a frog croaks, the snake stalks nearer," is an advice for one to be careful and make confidential his problems or else greater troubles with damaging results may follow. This also means that one should be more cautious especially when things are abnormal as in pains, afflictions and suppression. He should keep his problems to himself or herself particularly as he or she speaks out otherwise greater victimisation awaits him or her. The above Tiv proverbs like other groups must be understood taking into full cognizance their egalitarian culture and traditional religious world view.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Explain the role of proverbs in African traditional religion and culture.

3.3   Religious Beliefs Expressed in Proverbs

We have mentioned earlier that the basic function of proverbs in African beliefs is their conveyance of African knowledge of God. The view as held by all Africans is that earth consists of two worlds. The visible (physical), the one we can feel and touch and the invisible (spiritual) which is not felt or touched. Man lives in the visible world with other familiar material beings. The creator (God), deities, spirit forces (good and evil ones) and the ancestors, however, inhabit the invisible world of the spirits. The spirits, men and other material beings are always interacting to keep a harmonious relationship between the visible and the invisible. This is done through offering of sacrifices by the priests, activities of diviners and medicine men to the deities and God to keep the relationship. Most of this immeasurable knowledge of God is partly housed in proverbs, which is opened to those who have the skills of

using them. Proverbs from African ethnic nationalities will briefly be used to give credence to this opinion.

Among the Tiv as earlier mentioned there is a proverb that says, *Aondo wam shidi, iyor ve gbam hendan tso* meaning God has saddled my back, people can ride me as they please. This proverb sees God as not only being aware for one's devastated or frustrated condition by allowing it to happen but designs one's destiny. All the harassment, betrayals and torments by strains of life and evil people are not unconnected with the knowledge of God. This proverb also describes the omnipotence (all-powerful) quality of God. He can make someone vulnerable to oppression by others without opposition.

Another proverb among the Tiv says *Aondo nôô kon ôô iyol* meaning the tree also bath because of rainfall from God. This means that the Tiv acknowledge *Aondo* (God) as the source and sustainer of all things. It also shows that one's comfort and pleasure, which would ordinarily have been impossible in life or at that time in question has been supplied to the person indirectly through the advantage or work of another person.

Furthermore, *Aondo nee inya, kpa nya ngi nee un ga* meaning, "God waters the earth but the earth cannot do same to God." This is a Tiv proverb, which shows power and providence of God. God is pictured as the source of blessings to His creation because He is all-powerful, but the creatures cannot return same to Him; they can only worship and thank Him.

In addition, the Igbo proverb or saying "Maduabuchi" (man is not God) expresses the idea that man lacks the type of power and wisdom that God has. Therefore, man and God cannot be placed on the same level as equal partners. "Ifeanyi Chukwu" is another Igbo wise saying, which means nothing is impossible to God. It shows the all-powerful nature of God (omnipotence).

The Akan of Ghana have a proverb, which says "If you want to tell it to God, tell it to the wind". Another proverb from same Akan of Ghana says "nobody shows a child the high God, no body shows a child the sky". The former proverb emphasises that God is everywhere (omnipresent) whereas the later lay much emphasis on the close link between God and the sky. It also means that everybody (even the children) is aware of God's existence almost by instinct. The above short expressions contain in them a religious worldview of a well-organised group of people.

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A Yoruba proverb says, "an enemy may beat the drums of someone's downfall but God will not let it sound". This proverb testifies the moral perfection as the quality of God. This proverb shows the defence of God for the defenceless. Another Yoruba proverb states that God has both the yam and the knife only those whom he cuts a piece can eat it. This proverb means our survival is in God's hands. He gives it to any person He chooses. This saying places man under God's control.

Among the Kalabari there is a proverb, which says, "If a spirit (idol) becomes too troublesome it will be shown the tree from which it was carved." This means every object has a guardian spirit which when they are put together can produce a very powerful spirit through invocation and expensive offerings. It also follows that if the worship of any spirit is not bringing out or producing good results, it should be abandoned.

The Tiv have some proverbs that encourage unity in their midst. For example, *kon mom ngu lu iko ga*. meaning "one tree does not make a forest." A forest being a divine place that is revered as the habitat of certain spirits or deities. When people come together there will be respect and may have strength to keep their dignity in the eyes of others. Another says wegh *mom ku woo iji ga* meaning "one hand does not kill a housefly." This shows that one man's ability is not enough when people collectively work together there are greater changes of achieving that which they wish. It shows cooperation as the vehicle to greater heights.

Another proverb is used to advice the government to initiate measures of encouraging the youth. It says "a flying bird that gets tired lands on the nearest tree." This is a moral truth. The young ones in the community that are frustrated for one reason or the other become victims of various vices perpetrated in the society. Those who cannot find work in order to earn a living turn to vices like armed robbery, thuggery and prostitution for a living. Another proverb has to do with greed. It says "if you want to rob a monkey of its baby, you must first throw it a handful of peanuts." This means to expose the different methods the leaders in our society oppress the poor masses. They deprive them of their rightful wages and just give them little to make them continue with life. They give the masses little to deprive them of their rightful privileges to continue being in control.

Another proverb has a teaching on retribution. It says, "the earthly debts must be paid here on earth." This proverb is emphasising the fact that nobody is going unpunished for the evil he has committed. In other words, it pays to do good on earth and that people should be conscious of the decisions they take because every wrong action we take has its

consequences. Therefore, the consequences of every wrong action must be brought to bear on one's life here on earth before he finally leaves the stage.

Though the absence of written records has greatly affected African religious beliefs, a vast wealth of data can still be found in proverbs and other forms of oral tradition like myths, names, prayers and so on. The above examples have given much light on the experience and wisdom of many past generations summarized in few expressions.

3.4   Some Proverbs and Their Meanings

Proverbs as short expressions of a people's worldview have meanings that take bearing directly or indirectly from the environment, though it may also have universal significance. We now consider some proverbs with their meanings to buttress our point.

Agbo Kpile kaa sha Ukuna er zwa kaa kwagh mom ga meaning Agbo Kpile of Kunav once declared: "the mouth does not only say one thing." This is often quoted by elders when they are confronted with a challenging situation in which they want to renege on their earlier stand or promise. Actually, the mouth that hauls praises on an individual is the same mouth that sometimes advances insults on the very person.

One Tiv proverb also says *Nyinya ngu angahar anyiin kpa gbe*, meaning "the horse falls despite its four limbs." This proverb is used in situations where forgiveness for an offence is needed. It serves as an excuse that man is fallible and seeks reconciliation. It is frequently used when people are remorseful and would like to be pardoned for offences they have committed. It fosters community living and respect for interpersonal relationships. A similar proverb also among the Tiv says *wan ka nana nyia u ambi sha nam kpa u tende u te kera ga.* This means when a child defecates on your lap, you do not amputate your leg. Its emphasis is more especially when one discovers he or she has done something wrong and he is asking for forgiveness. Even though your child, a brother or any of your relatives hurt you, you do not need to destroy yourself. What you do in essence is to find a way to come to terms. Destroying "yourself" here is built on the premise of the African belief of communality. What happens to you has happened to your neighbour and vice versa.

The Igbo say *Ozi ruru awuru oku erugwo igwe* meaning, "A message that has reached the smoke has reached heaven, God's abode". This implies calling God a witness to what has been said. This is prominent in promises and agreements. The Igbo also have a proverb, which says

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Onye chukwu nyere odu egbu brin naya kpuru ya gaba meaning, "If God gave you a tail, drag it along, don't cut it off." This Igbo proverb explains the fact that there is a reason attached to whatever God has done to an individual. Therefore, human being should not reject whatever or anything given to them by God whether it is good or bad. Learn how to use for your benefit whatever God has given you for he knows that you need it. Therefore, man is not expected to effect a change on what God has given him no matter how inconvenient that may be to him/her.

Another proverb says, "Shall we offer food to the ancestors and also settle the fight between them and the dogs?" This has several meanings. It clearly means that, the part of man is to make food for the ancestors. When it is given to them, it is not the duty of man again to continually protect the food from the dogs. He has played his part what is left is God's. However, this proverb also implies that wherever you find the ancestral shrine is in an open place not indoors. Another interpretation could be that what is of interest to the ancestors is not the physical or material substance or food but the spiritual essence of the meal. The dog may eat the physical food but may not endanger the spiritual or destroy the effectiveness of the sacrifice. Again, *Ehin Enweghi odu chi ya na achiru ya ejiji* means, "God drives away flies for a tailess cow". This is understood to mean the problems of one who is not strong in whatever form or one who is defenceless is solved by God. In other words, God cares for those who are powerless and neglected. God is the hope of the hopeless, the voice of the voiceless. He therefore attends to those who are not given attention because they are in one way or the other defected.

Names of persons in Africa have deeper meanings, which in most cases are derived from problems reflecting situations the parents, or the family was in when the child was born. It could be the name of the king or leader of the time. For example, one Igbo proverb says *Ngu chukwu Gbunyeru Onye ka ka oji ekole ife* meaning, "God has a hook which He always supplies to the people he chooses that helps them in plucking things with." This means any man that is successful in an endeavour has been given a hook by God and vice versa. This shows that success in anything depends on God.

Also the proverb *Ka wea tuhwa orimande mbaamandev cii ve vaa* (if you insult a leper, all the lepers cry), shows the unity of the people which is seen in the pledge "I am because we are and since we are therefore, I am". A good or bad thing done to any person in the group is done to all the rest. This shows the African life of sharing both in pains and in joy. The proverb *Mba lee ahi sha ashe a bagu ga* (one does not

sow groundnut when the monkey is watching) establishes the fact that monkeys like groundnuts very well. Once they discover there is groundnut in a place, they never cease to destroy it. If a monkey sees you planting groundnut, immediately you turn your back, to the monkey will remove the groundnut and eat. This means you cannot plan very well for your future and be successful when your enemy is right there watching your steps. He or she will dislodge you thereafter. In other words, you cannot be discussing your strategies for improving your life condition in the midst of your archenemies.

The following is another Tiv proverb which says *Wan igo hiin ahom sha to*, meaning "the fats of a pig starts at the ear). This is meant to advice the young ones that wisdom, brevity, and so on start at their youthful age. In other words, a well morally behaved person starts his good behaviour at childhood. Generally, it means everything we see has a beginning or a starting point. For example, a student who is aiming at making first class degree in the university must start being serious in the primary school in order to develop a good reading culture.

Ka wea za ayem u zor ijov I oron ato, meaning, When you are in a haste, you pluck a mushroom with its ears broken." This is a Tiv proverb which means when you take hasty decisions, though you may advance them the result may be bad. This is an advice for one to be honest and systematic in ones approaches in life. It teaches that one should avoid short cuts that are meant to achieve what is not in one's destiny. This brings disaster at the end.

4.0   CONCLUSION

The absence of documented sources has been a major setback in the study of African traditional religion. However, a vast form of information is presented in oral traditions like myths, legends, names, songs, symbols, prayers as well as proverbs and wise sayings.

It is through these proverbs and wise sayings that African beliefs in God are expressed. Therefore, they are one of the most reliable form of oral tradition in which authentic beliefs of people living in preliterate societies are preserved for generations yet unborn.

Proverbs and wise sayings express African beliefs in God. They also give a clue to the understanding of the significance of such beliefs. Proverbs depict God as the creator and sustainer of the world. He caters for the welfare of his creatures. The proverbs in Africa emphasise one universal Supreme God who is the creator of the universe. There is therefore the need to collect together these proverbs in written form now

in order to present them for posterity and generations of Africans yet unborn.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt:

- what proverbs and wise sayings are
- some proverbs and wise sayings from some African societies.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

The role of proverbs in African religio-cultural beliefs are:

(i)   They are a source of African wisdom;
(ii)   Proverbs teach about beliefs, morals, ideas, warnings and general knowledge about the people's culture.
(iii) Proverbs further teach Africans about the Supremacy of God and His relationship with human beings.
(iv)   They reveal the attributes of God and God's works.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Mention some proverbs and give their meanings in African religio-cultural beliefs.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 4   TOTEMS AND TABOOS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you learnt about proverbs in African religious beliefs. You learnt some proverbs about animals (totems) and taboos. In this unit, you will study in detail about totems and taboos as they relate to African traditional religion and culture. Taboos are subsets of totemism. These two terms are used in African traditional religion because religion is defined and seen as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices, which unite into one single moral community and all those who adhere to them.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

•   define totem and taboo
•   explain the relationship between totems and taboos in African traditional religious beliefs
•   discuss the classification of taboos
•   explain the role of taboos in African religion and culture
•   discuss the significance of taboos in African religion and culture
•   discuss the impact of change on totems and taboos.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of Totem

Colman (2003: 748) defines totem as a physical object having ritual significance or a symbolic representation of such an object, especially a type of animal plant or natural structure representing a clan in certain cultures such as those of North American Indians.

Durkheim (2001: 57) cited in Otite and Ogionwo argued that totemism consists in complex religion by which man's relation to his fellow men and to nature is organized. Totems such as species of lizards, animals, of plant are, like flags, important symbols of unity.

3.2   Definition of Taboos

Taboos are cultural and religious phenomena, which help in maintaining order, cohesion and integration in African traditional religion. They are obeyed because apart from being sanctioned by God, and the deities, they are guarded by the society as well. This is because African societies are corporate in nature.

According to Parrinder (1969: 172) the word "taboo" originated from the Polynesian term "tabu" meaning forbidden thing or person or place. It applies to special prohibitions. In many societies, certain actions and behaviours are prohibited or tabooed. In this case, one is not free to do his or her wish always. A person is expected to exercise some restraints in order to conform to the laws of the land. Many taboos are associated with the divinities. religious functionaries, ancestors, trades and crafts, agriculture and many other departments of life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Define the terms "totem" and "taboo."

3.3   The Relationship between Totems and Taboos in African Traditional Religious Beliefs

Totemism involves the mystical and ritual relationship between such a class of species of animals or plants and a social group. Such relationships include taboos, projected kinship, and so on. Hence, totemism is a basic organisational principle relating man to nature and to super-human forces in his environment.

From the above, you can see that taboo is one of the instruments of social control in the society, for maintaining shared values and moral beliefs which form the collective conscience. Taboos are an aspect of totemism, which the society sets things apart. In their (taboos) absence, there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation. In short, there would be no society.

Durkheim uses the religion of various groups of Australian aborigines to develop his argument. He sees their religion, which he calls totemism, as the simplest and most basic form of religion. Aborigine society is divided into several clans. A clan is like a large extended family with its members sharing certain duties and obligations.

Each clan has a totem, usually an animal or plant. The totem is a symbol. It is the emblem and flag of the clan. It is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others. However, the totem is more than this; it is a sacred symbol. The totem is 'the outward and visible form of the totemic principle of god'.

3.4   Classification of Taboos

Taboos, according to Shishima (1999: 3) are a cultural phenomenon, which help in maintaining moral standards in traditional societies. Since the deities are the custodians of morality in traditional societies, taboos are obeyed. To run away from sin, most Africans do not deviate from these taboos. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, there are different taboos concerning sex, food, death and so on. Some of the prohibitions or taboos are as follows:

3.4.1 Religious taboos

These are prohibitions that deal with ones practice of his or her religious duties or obligations. Olajubu (2006: 240) citing instances of religious taboos in Yoruba land states that:

(i)   Palm kernel oil is a taboo to *Esu*. It must not be taken near his shrine to avoid the wrath of *Esu-laalu*.

(ii)   Palm wine is a taboo to *Orisa-nla*. It must not be taken near his shrine neither should worshippers consume it to avoid incurring the wrath of the divinity.

(iii)   Medicines used for wickedness are taboos to *Soponna*, the small pox divinity.

(iv)   Nobody is allowed to hunt, fish or cultivate land in the *Osogb*o grove violation of which will result in grievous consequences.

(v)   No worshipper of *Oya*, a finer divinity, must eat ram meat to avoid death.

(vi)   *Osun* worshippers must not eat fresh fish from the Osun River to avoid destroying the children of *Osun*.

3.4.2 Cultural Taboos

In African traditional religion, like most religions of the world culture is an integral part of religion. The two are intertwined. Cultural taboos are prohibitions that deal with the everyday living of a particular people of society. Some of these taboos regulate how we eat, what pregnant women should not do, what the royalty should not do, prohibitions about sex and so on.

Cultural taboos emanate from particular peoples' worldview, which through a divinity or deity imposes prohibitions to regulate life according to the peoples' beliefs and worldview.

3.4.3 Sex Taboos

These are prohibitions that regulate the use of the male and female reproductive system. Shishima (1995: 5) outlining the sex taboos in Tiv land states that, it is a taboo:

(i)   To have sex with a menstruating woman

(ii)   To have sex in the bush, field or farm even with one's wife
(iii)   To have sex with a virgin girl before marriage
(iv)   To have sex with a close relative (incest)

Among the Yoruba, Olajubu (2006: 240) lists other sex prohibitions as follows.

(i)   Sexual intercourse immediately before worship is a taboo for both priests and worshippers.
(ii)   No one should have sexual relationship with a pregnant woman who is heavy to avoid perennial poverty.
(iii)   It is a taboo for a pregnant woman to have sex with another man apart from her husband. The child will be born dumb until the woman confesses her sins and proper cleansing rituals take place.
(iv)   It is a taboo for a mother to resume sex after delivery before the child is weaned; this will hinder the growth of the child.
(v)   It is taboo to have sex on the farmland, which is the sacred earth (*Ile ogere afokogeri*). The source of livelihood, it will defile the land.

3.4.4 Death Taboos

These prohibitions have to do with the departed loved ones, their corpse, grave and ceremonies. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, Shishima (1995: 5) lists the following prohibitions.

(i)   A woman cannot see a grave while it is being prepared until the person is buried.
(ii)   A woman is not to see a corpse on its way for burial.
(iii)   A woman cannot kill a dog nor walk across its blood.
(iv)   To mourn the death of one of the twins.

Among the Igbo, Metuh (1983: 80) lists some death prohibitions:

(i)   To bury a woman with an unborn child in her womb.
(ii)   To bury those who died during the month sacred to *Ala*.
(iii)   For a woman to go outside the compound during mourning period.
(iv)   To mourn those who die of infectious diseases especially small pox, leprosy or elephantiasis of the scrotum.

3.4.5 Food Taboos

These are prohibitions that regulate our eating and eating habits. Metuh (1985: 8) states further the following food prohibitions.

(i)   To eat horses – certain parts of the internal chest organs may cause madness.
(ii)   To eat *edu* (civet cat) among the Nri people and *ewi* (bush rat) among the Nnewi people. Other Igbo towns have their own animal prohibitions.
(iii) To eat food prepared or touched by a monstrous woman.
(iv)   Nobody may eat new yams until sacrifices are made to the ancestors and *Ala*. Breaching this was punished by one year exile and sacrifice of a ram to *Ala* and to ancestors.

Shishima (1999: 5) lists other food prohibitions among the Tiv as follows.

(i)   To sing while eating
(ii)   To eat food prepared or touched by a menstruating woman that is for adult males
(iii) To eat eagle (*tsoughul*), hawk (*azembe*) and owl (*Ivungu*) among the Tiv of Kwande in Benue State
(iv)   To eat eggs, especially by women
(v)   To eat meat partly used for sacrifice

Other towns have their own animal prohibitions. Violation of which may cause madness.

3.4.6 Royal Taboos

These are prohibitions that surround the conduct of social etiquette of the royalty that is, the king or queen, prince or princess and the likes. Olajubu (2006: 241) lists prohibitions classified as royal.

(i)   Kings in Yoruba land must not eat publicly because they are second in command to the "*Orisa*".
(ii)   It is a taboo for a king to see or touch a corpse, such a king becomes defiled until cleansing is ritually done.
(iii) It is forbidden for kings to see the hair on the newborn baby's head when he or she is born.
(iv)   A king is forbidden to curse except in rare and deserving cases, the duty of the king is to bless all the time. This is to ensure and maintain the well-being of the society.
(v)   A king must not see the inside of his crown, to avoid death. This explains why the crown is placed on the king's head from the back of his head.

3.4.7 Taboos for Pregnant Women

Olajubu (2006: 241) lists prohibitions for pregnant women in Yoruba land as follows.

(i)   A pregnant woman is forbidden to walk in the hot sun or at night to avoid having her baby exchanged with an evil spirit.

(ii)   It is forbidden to flog or beat a pregnant woman for any reason to avoid the marks of the cain showing on the baby's body at birth.

(iii)   It is taboo for pregnant women to eat snails to avoid giving birth to children who spit all the time.

(iv)   A pregnant woman must not sleep on her belly or else the baby will die.

(v)   It is forbidden for a pregnant woman to sit or stand at the doorpost of a house to avoid difficulties during delivery.

3.4.8 Taboos for Mothers

(i)   A baby must not knowingly or by accident drop from the mother's back else she will have seven spouses, each would die after the other until the seventh time before it will stop.

(ii)   An infant is forbidden to grow the upper jaw milk teeth before the lower jaw milk teeth, because it is a sign of authority.

(iii)   It is a taboo for a mother to curse her child touching her breast and, or private part, because such a cure is irrevocable even by the mother herself.

(iv)   It is a taboo to abuse, ridicule or beat one's mother; any child that does that never prospers.

3.5   The Role of Taboos in African Traditional Religion and Culture

Taboos vary in forms within different African societies. They cover many facets of human endeavour. Taboos play significant roles in many African societies; they are religious and cultural tools for social integration. African traditional religion reinforces the collective conscience. The attitude of respect towards the sacred is the same

attitude applied towards social duties and obligations. Herein lies one of the roles of taboos in African religion and culture.

Taboos strengthen the values and moral beliefs, which form the basis of social life. By terming them as sacred or divine injunctions, taboos have the greater power to direct human actions and sayings. Another role of taboos in African traditional religion and culture is that, they help in maintaining law and order in traditional African societies. They ensure the peaceful ordering of the society. They may however, be relaxed during festivals as corrective measures.

In Nigerian traditional societies, punitive measures were applied to check offenders of the social laws - taboos. They are called social laws because man is a social being. Thus, any violation of the divine laws would automatically affect the society as a whole. In which case the wrath of God will befall the whole society.

Taboos consist of morality, which is difficult to separate from religion. A person maintains a harmonious relationship with God, the ancestors, the deities, divinities, the clan, tribe, family and indeed the whole of nature, guaranteed by taboos in the society. For the African, the greatest evil is bringing disequilibrium into the universe or within the physical and spiritual worlds.

African morals lay a great emphasis on social conduct. Basic moral principles and practices in form of taboos – the dos and don'ts of society, therefore guide people's activities and help them to choose between right and wrong. For instance, during initiation of children in African societies, they are taught basic principles of morality embedded in taboos. A system of taboos and sanctions held in honour of the ancestors, divinities and spirits is used in African society to enforce morality because they are agents of morality in traditional African societies. Taboos are the laws, which operated principally during the pre-colonial era, and are still operational in some African societies.

3.6   Taboos as Moral Laws

Taboos help in maintaining law and order in traditional African societies. Taboos are societal laws in traditional African because they perform the function of the constitution in today's society. In traditional Nigerian societies punitive measures were applied to check offenders of social laws- taboos, they are called social laws because man like elsewhere in Africa is a social being. Thus, any violation of the divine laws would automatically affect the society as a whole. In which case, the wrath of God will befall the whole society.

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3.7   Significance of Taboos in African Traditional Religion and Culture

In the pre-colonial African society, taboos served as moral laws. They helped in the maintenance of law and order. During the colonial and post-colonial era, they were significant in this aspect but with varying degree as a result of changes in African traditional societies ranging from Christianity, modernity, westernisation and the likes.

Of importance is the fact that, since African traditional religion has no sacred scriptures and is based on oral tradition, taboos come in handy for the provision of moral law to guide the steps of man. These have been handed down from generation to generation, in different African societies orally and through practice.

a.   The Impact of Change on Totems and Taboos in African Traditional Religion and Culture

Traditional African societies have gone through many changes, which have been monumental ranging from colonialism, westernisation, modernity, and so on. These agents of change have adversely affected the beliefs in totems and taboos in African traditional religion and culture.

Many Africans do not believe in their societal taboos and totems because of their beliefs in Christianity and the impact of western civilisation.

4.0   CONCLUSION

Totems are animals, which are seen as sacred in African traditional religion. Taboos are moral laws, which regulate the behaviour of people in traditional African societies. Totems refer to the mystical realm but taboos perform the role of social control and adjustment in different African societies. There are taboos on different aspects of life: religious taboos, cultural taboos, sex taboos, death taboos, food taboos, royal taboos, etc.

At present, taboos and totems do not have a strong hold on African societies. This is due to the advent of Christianity, civilisation, education, modernity and urbanisation.

5.0   SUMMARY

Our discussion in this unit centered on totems and taboos. Totems are animals, plants and other natural phenomena that are deified and held sacred whereas taboos are the moral laws of traditional African societies. The terms were defined, the relationship between the two terms were established. The classification of taboos in African traditional religion and culture were discussed.   The role and significance of taboos were examined together with the impact of change on totems and taboos in African traditional religion and culture.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

(i)   The term "totem" can be defined as "a physical living object with ritual significance" or an animal, plant or natural structure representing a clan in some African cultures.
(ii)   A taboo is a prohibition or cultural law, which guides the behavior of a people. It could also be seen as code of conduct or ethics of a society.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the main roles of taboos in African traditional religion and culture.

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UNIT 5   SYMBOLS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL
**   RELIGION AND CULTURE**

CONTENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

African worldview is replete with symbols. African symbols are sources of insights into African orientations to life. Buttressing the above view point, Mbiti (1991: 24) says there are many kinds of symbols. They are found often where art is found, since they are part of art. Some are represented by insects, birds, animals, certain trees, figures, shapes and colours of all kinds, masks and carvings.

Each tribe in Africa has its own symbols, whose meanings are generally known to almost everyone. However, there are other symbols, which can only be interpreted by a few individuals, as for instance, symbols used in initiation, divination and secret societies. Religious ideas have gated many of the symbols, and in turn the symbols themselves help to communicate and strengthen religious ideas.

Nabofa (1994: 45) says man is the only creature who has the ability to reflect on his experience and express it with symbols. This creature power is part of the divine consciousness within every human being. It

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is this element of divine consciousness which distinguishes man from all other living things either in the animal or in vegetable kingdoms. Symbols in African traditional religion and culture are overt expressions in African contexts of the people's inner divine illumination.

In this unit, you will learn the definition of symbols, the differences between signs and symbols, the role of symbols in African traditional religion and culture as well as the significance of symbols and some selected symbols in African traditional religion.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define symbols in African traditional religion and culture
- distinguish between symbols and signs in African traditional religion and culture
- discuss types of symbols in African traditional religion and culture
- discuss the role of symbols in African traditional religion and culture
- discuss the significance of symbols in African traditional religion.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Definition of Symbols

One of the things, which distinguish man from all other animals, is his ability to symbolise memory, imagination and religious experience. This involves using function of the human mind. Religion, science, art, myths, dreams and rituals are all manifestations of symbols.

Etymologically (the root of), the word symbol comes from the Greek word *symbolon*. It denoted such tallies as the two halves of a broken coin, which were exchanged by contracting parties. A symbol is something we can perceive and which we can connect a meaning of significance.

Cohen (1969: 215) defined symbols as "objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings". This definition tries to indicate that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several interpretations and these interpretations could be given at different levels depending upon the level of the interpreter's consciousness and intelligence.

Nabofa (1994: 6) defined symbol as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. It is quite usual for a perceiver to express his inner experience sight or visions and mystical or religious experience in symbols. It should be noted that a word is a symbol, and a word can be either written or spoken. Myths, proverbs, and parables are very powerful and enduring symbols. Otite (1979: 179) sees symbols as agents, which are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and act. When decoded in the social and cultural context, symbols are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. For instance, the axe of the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of God and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and represent the purity of God and his impartial justice.

In addition, the sight of such symbolic forms inwardly reminds and urges the devotee, especially the cruel and the savage to live a pure and honest life to avoid the wrath of God. They likewise urge the believer to guard against perjury and falsehood when it comes to the question of settling disputes in any shrines that houses such symbols.

Carly Gustar Jung quoted in Nabofa (1994: 7) defines a symbol as:

What we call a symbol is a term, name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us… Thus, a word of an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.

A symbol is something, an idea, a sign, a ritual or a behavioural pattern that stands as an outer representation of an inner essence or experience of the unconscious. Symbols are relatively unknown.

3.2   Distinction between Symbols and Signs

Most often than not we have seen the two terms being used interchangeably as if they mean the same thing. It is erroneous. They are similar but different. An important distinction between symbols and signs according to Nwaorgu (2001:2) is that, the former (symbol) directs our manner of thinking about an object, whereas the latter (sign) merely points to something.

A symbol is not created arbitrarily in the way that a sign can be. Symbolic language attempts far more than signs. It attempts to reach out to grasp that which is not immediately known, whereas sign language expresses man's understanding of the nature of things.

Symbols go beyond the empirical meaning and value – the essence and mystical elements of things whereas signs are concerned in dealing with the observable and measurable aspects of human experience.

A symbol has one to many or one to one relationship. For instance, if the sign (+) becomes plus and cross, it becomes now a symbol. When it has more than one meaning, it becomes a symbol. Contrarily, sign can mean a visible mark intended to convey a message, a reminder. Signs are denotative; they stand for or point to a specific object, event or person. They are therefore a clear means of recognition. While the symbol is an abbreviation of something that is relatively unknown, the sign is an abbreviation of that which is relatively known.

3.3 Types of Symbols in African Traditional Religion and Culture

In order to make for a more meaningful study of our subject matter, it is quite proper and expedient for us to attempt a classification of the symbols that feature quite frequently in traditional thought patterns and cultic activities. Some of the types of symbols we shall be discussing are animal symbolism, ritual symbols, number symbolism, royal symbols, ancestral symbols and cultural symbols.

3.3.1 Animal Symbolism

According to Mbiti (1999: 50), animals constitute human food and their importance is obviously great. African have many religious associations with them. The buffalo and lion, for instance are associated with God by the Langi and Turu, who consider them to symbolise God's manifestation in His immanent aspect. The Hindu also respects and venerates the cow. Animals feat are in religious concepts. The snake is thought by some people (such as the Vugusu and Sidamo) to symbolise immortality. Others have sacred snakes, especially pythons, which may not be killed by the people. A considerable number of societies associate snakes with the living-dead of other human spirits; as such, snakes are given food and drink when they visit people's homes.

In many myths of African traditional societies, the lizard symbolises the messenger who brought news from God that men should die. The chameleon, on the other hand, symbolises the messenger who should

have brought news of immortality or resurrection, but either lingered on the way, altered the message slightly or stammered in delivering it. Furthermore, the spider, though a small creature, appears in many myths and stories. Among the Akan and Ashanti, the spider symbolises wisdom. For that reason, God is given the title of *Ananse Kokroko,* which means the "Great Spider," that is the "Wise One."

3.3.2 Ritual Symbols

A ritual, according to Mbiti (1991: 131) is a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance, through symbol, word or action. Therefore, a ritual embodies a belief or beliefs. The ritual word is power since it is spoken in seriousness and solemnity, and it is repeated every time the ritual is done. Rituals embody what people believe, what they value, and what they wish to apply in daily life. Through rituals, people not only act their religion but communicate it to the younger generation.

Ritual symbols, according to Nabofa (1994: 9) result from the spiritual and psychic experiences of the people. A close study of any ritualistic symbol in traditional Africa will reveal that it is first rooted in an experience of an emotion and it is then used to express the experience or a concept that is associated with it. For instance, a man may experience the purity and holiness of the divine, he then uses a spotless white object, such as a white chalk, white powder or a white piece of cloth or robe to overtly symbolise or represent that divine quality he has experienced.

In addition, ritualistic symbols are the most value means for passing on the culture of a people from one generation to the other. In higher devotional rituals, which may involve higher mystical exercises such as divination, symbols aid the devotee in deep meditation and concentration. For instance, diviners use water, mirror, lobes of kola nuts, cowries, a glass of gin, shells or some other divination paraphernalia, etc. Quite often, diviners use their divination apparatus to achieve this purpose. When, for instance, a Yoruba *babalawo* (diviner) concentrates and meditates in the *opele*, which is his divination ensign, his understanding of the problem being diagnosed will be increased and he would be catapulted into the realm of higher atonement with *orunmila*, the divinity that knows all hidden facts.

3.3.3 Number Symbolism

This is the use of number to express religious facts and beliefs. It is also known as numerology. The number four according to Mbiti (1999: 56)

is sacred among the Nandi. Number six is sacred to the Shona and Jie who sacrifice six cattle or oxen to God. Both the Akamba and Vugusu have taboos attached to number seven, which the Akamba refer to as "the seven of dogs". The number nine is sacred to the Baganda, and all their gifts, offerings, sacrifices and sacred vessels must number nine (of the multiples). Counting people and livestock is forbidden in many African societies, partly for fear that misfortune would befall those who are numbered, and partly perhaps, because people are not individuals but corporate members of society which cannot be defined numerically.

Number symbolism in *Ogboni* confraternity is replete with the number three. In normal Yoruba custom there is an obnoxious number. Three is known as "eeta", and literally means "casting away" or complete rejection. They do not want to be cast out hence; they do not appreciate the use of that number. They do not offer three things to a person, especially a guest, if such is done it will be interpreted to mean that the host is casting his guest or any other person away. However, members of the *Ogboni* society take pleasure in giving three items to the fellow members. They do this in order to distinguish themselves from the non-initiates. They regard themselves as different from all others; as such, they do things in their own special way which is quite opposite of the usual manner.

At a given time as may be directed by the *Apena* (the head of the *Ogboni* fraternity), the members offer three kola nuts, three packets of alligator pepper, three rats and so on for some special rites. Apart from the fact of identification, members of the *Ogboni* society like every other Yoruba person attach some special importance to the number three. It shows the three stages in human life. The first is the period of his departure from the spiritual realm to be born on earth. The second stage is when he is in this mortal life and lastly his death and becoming an ancestor.

Furthermore, in Yoruba culture and understanding, three symbolises strength, unity and oneness. The Yoruba practice in re-enforcing the strength of a measure of rope or twine, three strands of the same are wound over the other to make a stronger piece. It is easier and quicker and indeed much more possible to use three pieces in this way than with any other number. A cord of three strings is not easily broken. This is another symbolic way that members of the *Ogboni* conceive and decode the number three. By using three symbolic forms and processes members of *Ogboni* would be encoding into the consciousness of their members the principle and doctrine of unity.

From field studies among the Tiv and Idoma of central Nigeria, even numbers symbolise good life or peace, whereas odd numbers are

associated with or symbolise death, evil or misfortune. That is why a Tiv or Idoma man would not give any gift to the number that amounts to an odd number, for instance, three, five, seven and the likes.

3.3.4 Royal Symbols

These are symbols or representations used in connection with the ruler or king or chief of a community or society. Many symbols are used in connection with the office of the ruler. For instance, the keeping of a sacred fire in the palace symbolise the nation's health, the use of scepters for authority, the use of leopard and lion skin. For instance, in some places in Igbo land, people may refer to the royal scepter as *Ofo-Eze*.

3.3.5 Ancestral Symbols

The *Ofo* bearer in Igbo is also the earthly representative of the ancestors of a particular community. His power, authority and sacredness derive from the people's belief that such an elder is standing firmly on the shoulders of their spiritual forces. Thus, the position and powers of the *Ofo* bearer are always propped up by both the visible and the unseen forces of the community, provided, of course, he, the bearer upholds the people's traditional norms and customs.

 Respect for the elders is often exploited and used as a symbol of repression and authority. For instance, in most traditional African societies the elders of every family or community are regarded as the representatives of the ancestors, who are some of the acknowledged spiritual guardians of the community. They are also believed to be the cohesive factors of the society and guardians of morality within the group. As part of the traditional African ethical behaviour, the young ones are quite often indoctrinated to accord due respect to these symbolic representatives of the ancestors and do not flout their authority lest they incur the wrath of the ancestors.

3.3.6 Cultural Symbols

Nwaorgu (2001: 3) defines cultural symbols as something, which expresses or stands for people's beliefs, identities traits, moral values, ethical ideals, virtues, religion, signs, sacrifices, arts, civilisation and the likes. For instance, in Igbo symbolism, the socio-political life, within the cultural context, is symbolised by a drum from which the elders must beat out the music and the pace at which the young must dance. Old age and grey hairs may symbolise a fulfilled life and often may earn one the right to courtesy and politeness.

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Furthermore, in Cross River State of Nigeria, *Lekoi* (drum) or its sound symbolises war or the appointment of a new chief. The yellow palm frond (omu) in Igbo cosmology symbolises peace. However, in other African societies it may symbolise peace, danger, decorative element, sacrifice or used to establish one's innocence.

It is interesting to note that, different cultural symbols can have the same meaning. For instance, assembled clay pots symbolise the unity of Anlo people in the Volta region of Ghana as *Ofo* symbolises the unity among Igbo people. Some cultural symbols are people's identity or emblems to several divinities. *Ofo* is the Igbo identity for leadership as the Golden stool is the Ashanti identity.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

List the main types of symbols you have studied and explain their meaning.

3.4   The Role of Symbols in African Traditional Religion and Culture

Symbols play the role of mirroring social and religious reality but they also play other roles to maintain order and coherence, for communication, preserving knowledge to be transferred from one generation to the other. Man needs order and coherence in whatever he does and this is achieved largely by the use of symbols. Perceptions, emotional and religious experiences are put into symbolic forms, which could be in form of language, works of art, icons, music, prayers and incantations during ritual drama.

Symbols are used as very powerful instruments for indoctrination to maintain order in some African societies.

One of the embracing roles of symbols is that of communication. The need for inter- and intra-person communication could be regarded as the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbols. Human beings are always communicating their thoughts, feelings and experiences not only to other persons but also to themselves. We quite often use symbols to transmit some basic ideas and principles of our inner-selves. Cultic symbols feature in what might be called self-communication.

Another role of symbols is that of helping to preserve knowledge, historical and religious occurrences. It is in this sense that ritualistic symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the culture of a

people from one generation to the other. Such symbols normally have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilised societies.

Religious symbols, especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals during which historical events are re-enacted, aid the memory of historical and important events and doctrines of the faith. In this context they are very essential in teaching and instructing the younger generations about the sect to which they belong.

3.5   Significance of Symbols in African Religious Beliefs

The significance of a symbol according to Nwaorgu (2001: 2) is not unlimited. A symbol operates because it bears a relationship with that symbolised. This places a limit upon its use. Religious symbols are used to convey concepts concerned with man's relationship with the sacred and his social and material world.

Another significance of symbols is that, man being a symbolising animal can only communicate through symbols – verbal or non-verbal and material and non-material symbols. These communicative elements of symbols bring themselves to bear on human activities in a multiplicity of human endeavours or spheres of life.

4.0   CONCLUSION

In this unit, we have discussed symbols in African traditional religion and culture. Our discussion began with the definition of symbols, the distinction between symbols signs, Different types of symbols in African traditional religion and culture, the role and significance of symbols in African traditional religion were also examined.

5.0   SUMMARY

A sign is an abbreviation of something, which is relatively known. A symbol is an abbreviation of something, which is relatively unknown. There are many types of symbols in African traditional religion and culture. Some of these are animal symbols, number symbolism, ritual symbols, ancestral symbols, cultural symbols, etc.

Symbols perform different important roles in African traditional religion and culture. They are thus very significant aspect of African traditional religion.

ANSWER TO SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

The main types of symbols studied are:

(i) **Animals symbol** e.g. the cow, lizard, leopard and crocodile in some societies. These are sacred to those societies.
(ii) **Ritual symbols:** These are used in carrying out religious duties. They are a medium of communicating with the deities in African traditional religion.
(iii) **Number symbolism:** Certain numbers either represent good or evil in some African societies. These are known and either embraced or avoided.
(iv) **Ancestral symbols:** These are used mostly by the representatives of the people's ancestors of the Otto among the Igbo is an ancestral symbol. It stands for authority.
(v) **Cultural symbols:** These are for different uses in different African societies. Some of these include the palm frond and some cultural art forms made by different African societies.

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

What is the difference between a symbol and a sign?

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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