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**MODULE 1**

- Unit 1 Introduction to Religion
- Unit 2 Introduction to African Traditional Religion
- Unit 3 Trends in the Study of African Traditional Religion
- Unit 4 African Traditional Religion: The Quest for Appropriate Nomenclature
- Unit 5 The Structure of African Traditional Religion

**UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION****CONTENTS**

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The need to understand religion in the context of African belief system and culture cannot be under-stressed. Man from its origin is born to worship God in the way his conscience and ability directs him to do. The study of religion is aimed at understanding the similarities and differences in religion, the truth in religion and its relevance to the human society. Africa with its diverse culture has religion as a factor that helps people to live in harmony and work towards corporate development of the environment and the people. Therefore an understanding of African Traditional Religion will create room for a clear understanding of the African people contextually within the framework of their belief system.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

- define religion from different perspective
- explain the different types of religion
- explain the need for the study of religion
- explain the significance of religion in society
- further explain the function of religion in society.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 What is Religion?

This section is to look at the various definitions of religion. There is no one definition of religion because various scholars see religion from their own perspective John Ferguson listed seventeen definition which can be organized into the following categories; theological, moral, philosophical, psychological and sociological.

#### **Theological Definitions of Religion**

Religion is believing in God

Religion is belief in spiritual beings

Religion is the life of God in the soul of man

Religion is a mystery, at once awesome and attractive

The above are the theological definition of religion because they centred on the idea that religion has to do with God or supernatural spiritual powers. Religion as a belief in God connotes a common sense answer to what is religion? As announced by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) who said that 'religion denotes properly a relation to God. Religion being a belief in spiritual being is a rough summary of the view of the nineteenth century anthropologist E. B. Taylor who held that in its earliest form, religion involved a belief in a hierarchy of spirits from the lower to the most powerful beings. Furthermore religion is said to be the life of God in the soul of man, an idea which comes from the nineteenth-century theologian W. Newton Clarke, who stressed the two realities of God and the soul as necessary for religion to exist. Further still, is the definition that related religion to something mysterious that is, religion is a mystery: awesome and attractive. This is an ideology credited to the twentieth century German philosopher, Rudolf Otto, who found the

essence of religion in the idea of the holy which he claimed attracts people owing to its mystery and its power.

In summary the four definitions can be summarized thus, a theological definition makes the central criterion of religion belief in a transcendent power which is usually personified as a Supreme Being, but is sometimes conceived as being diffused through powerful spiritual beings or is held to be an impersonal, mysterious, supernatural force.

### **Moral Definitions of Religion**

Religion is leading a good life

Religion is morality tinged with emotion.

Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands

Religion is a sum of scruples which impede the free use of our faculties

Morality deals with the provision of rules, norms and directives of how people should live their lives in an acceptable manner. According to moral theory, Religion is defined as leading a good life. This definition is pregnant because it does not specify what morality entails. Others say that religion is "morality tinged with emotion". This is an ideology by a nineteenth century British writer Matthew Arnold who expanded the moral definition of religion by insisting that human emotions or feelings must be added to morality before religion can become real. Religion is said to be the recognition of all our duties as divine commands, a theory of the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperative'. He contended that there is a moral law which we all 'ought' to obey. It continued that religion in essence exists when that moral law is interpreted as a commandment from God. Religion is defined as a "sum of scruples which impede the free use of our faculties? This definition is attributed to Salomon Reinach, an early twentieth century historian of religions. Although the negative reaction of religion is implied yet, it identifies the function of religion as the enforcing of external laws; attitudes or custom and thus can be classified as a moral definition.

The above examples of the moral definition can be summarized thus: A moral definition makes the central criterion of religion a code of correct behaviour generally affirmed by believers as having its source in an unquestioned and unquestionable authority.

### **Philosophical Definition of Religion**

Philosophically, religion is defined in terms of an abstract, usually as an impersonal concept. Some examples are as follow; religion is what a man does with his solitariness. This definition as propounded by the twentieth century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead identifies the abstract notion of solitariness as the fundamental religious dimension within human existence. When one achieves a condition of the solitary (as opposed simply to being alone or lonely) one has achieved a religious experience. Furthermore, Religion is defined as the relation of man to his own being, but as a being outside himself. This assertion is related to the nineteenth century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religion as a human projection. It defines religion as existing whenever human characteristics (such as love, power, knowledge) are transferred to an imaginary being conceived as being outside, yet perfecting those human characteristics. Religion is also defined as an ultimate concern. This definition is offered by the twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich, for him religion is a relationship which people hold with that which concerns them ultimately. Obviously, this could be God or spiritual beings, but since it is much broader than this it conveys an abstract idea, which can be embodied in a variety of specific objects, symbols or concept.

In summary, a philosophical definition makes the central criterion for religion the posting of an idea or concept, which the believer interprets, as ultimate or final in relation to the cosmic order and to human existence.

### **Psychological Definition of Religion**

Psychological definition of religion stress that religion has to do with the emotions, feelings or psychological states of the human in relation to the religious object, Ferguson provides the following examples; that religion is the result of seeking comfort in a world which, dispassionately considered, is a terrifying wilderness. This definition is attributed to the twentieth century philosopher, Bertrand Russell. It stresses that because of the misfortunes and sufferings they experience in the world, people seek comfort or consolation in religion. Furthermore, religion is some kind of profound experience. Ferguson attributed this definition to a schoolgirl but since it stresses inner experience, it can be classified as a psychological definition. The nineteenth century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher also described religion as "a feeling of absolute dependence". Religion has also been defined as a universal obsessive neurosis. This definition falls within the viewpoint of the followers of the psychoanalytic school of Sigmund Freud who defines religion as a psychological disturbance, one which



although universal, must be overcome if humanity is to attain psychological health.

In summary, a psychological definition of religion makes the central criterion of religion feelings or emotions within people, which cause them to appeal to forces greater than themselves to satisfy those feelings.

### **Sociological Definition of Religion**

Sociological definition of religion emphasizes on religion as a group consciousness embodying cultural norms or as a product of society in general. Ferguson listed the following definitions, which falls within this category. Religion is the opium of the people. This definition was classified by Karl Marx with an indication that religion results from the oppression of the masses by those in positions of social or economic power who use the message of religion to keep the oppressed content with their lot in this life in the hope of a just order in the next one. Religion thus plays a sociological function for both the oppressor and the oppressed. Furthermore, religion is defined as the conservation of values. This definition is attributed to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century German philosopher, Harald Hoffding, though it reflects a widely held view of traditional sociologists such as Emile Durkheim or the twentieth century anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski. He described religion as a conservative force within society which defines the fundamental values of the group and then maintains and enforces those values by an appeal to supernatural powers. Also, religion is defined as "a co-operative quest after a completely satisfying life". Though the emphasis of this definition seems to group it within the psychological, it falls within the cooperative quest in sociological category. There is no particular citation for this quotation by Ferguson but he places it within the definition of some contemporary scholars such as Martin Prozesky (1984), who said that religion is "a quest for ultimate well-being." This could be concluded by saying whenever societies seek to attain the most satisfying life for their members they are exhibiting religious concerns. Also the contemporary anthropologists, William Lessa and Evon Vogt (1965) echoed the definition of religion as a system of beliefs and practices directed toward the "ultimate concern" of a society.

In summary, the sociological definition makes the central criterion of religion the existence of a community of people which is identified, bound together and maintained by its beliefs in powers or forces greater than the community itself.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1**

Discuss the definition of religion from the various perspectives.

### **3.2 Types of Religious Beliefs**

There are different types of religious beliefs they include; atheism-those who deny the existence of God or gods, but who still hold to a personal ideology that provide a guideline to their lives.

**Deism** - is a system of thought advocating natural religion based on human reason rather than revelation.

**Humanism** - is the assertion of the dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization through reason. The humanist usually rejects supernaturalism.

**Monism** - recognizes only one kind of ultimate substance.

**Theism** - is the belief in God or gods.

**Pantheism** - is the recognition of God in everything. It equates God with the forces and laws of the universe.

**Polytheism** - is the belief in many gods.

**Henotheism** - is the worship of one supreme god in a pantheon of gods

**Monotheism** - is the belief in one God.

The three monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The living world religions falls within one or more of the different types of religious belief mentioned above and they include Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, African Traditional Religion, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, the concern in this paper is to major on African Traditional Religion (ATR) in detail for a through understanding and comprehension.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

Explain all the various types of religion.

### 3.3 Why Study Religion?

It must be noted here that religion is studied because religion is part of cultures and of all history of mankind. A study of religion will allow us to understand the differences and to see the similarities between nations and culture; psychologically, philosophically, theologically, sociologically, and morally.

It will also help us to appreciate our own beliefs by seeing them alongside those of others. Furthermore, it will help us to work for ecumenism via a meaningful exchange of ideas between religious group in dialogue, seminar and open discussions.

### 3.4 The Functions of Religion in Society

Religion is found in every human society in the world. It is one of the most important structures in all the established human societies that make up the entire social system. The major interest of religion from the theological point of view is about the sacred, the holy or the numinous. Religion is concerned with man's relation to and attitude towards God and the other spiritual beings. Because religion is concerned with the divine, its institutions have been the most viable forms of human associations.

Religion concerns itself with the most sublime of human aspirations; it is regarded as the source of morality and public order and the inner peace of the individual persons. It is regarded as a civilizing element. At the same time, it has been accused of being a stubborn obstacle, which retards progress and of promoting fanaticism and intolerance, conflict, ignorance and superstition.

In the Nigerian context, religion is regarded as one of the cohesive factors in society. However, the major significance of religion is to bring peace and harmony among men. There is no traditional society in Niggria that can do away with religion because it permeates all the activities of life.

It has been said by people that religion has some functions, manifest and latent in maintaining peace and harmony in society. It has also been a popular saying that what has no function ceases to exist in the society. Since religion has continued to exist from ages, it is then quite obvious that it must have important functions to play in society. Our attention then should now address those manifest and latent functions of religion. Thomas F. O'Dea distinguishes six functions of religion in the society, as follow:

Religion by its dealings with the divine beings which are concerned with human destiny and welfare, and to whom humanity may respond and relate themselves, provides support, consolation and reconciliation] Every human being needs moral and spiritual support in the face of uncertainty. They need consolation when they are disappointed and reconciliation with society when they are alienated from its goals and norms.

Religion provides important spiritual and emotional comfort and consolation in the face of failures and disappointment in life

2. (Religion makes relationship between humanity and the divine possible through cult and the ceremonial rituals and thereby gives humanity assurance for a new security and feels more confident in the midst of the uncertainties and impossibilities of the vicissitudes of life. Through its authoritative teaching of beliefs, and values, or dogmas, it also provides solutions to conflicts and ambiguities of human opinions and points of view. This function of the priest and dogmatic theologians contributes to stability, order, peace and harmony in the society and thereby help to maintain status quo.
3. Religion gives sacred backing or support to the custom norms and values of an established society, by maintaining or upholding the dominance of group goals or values or needs of the generality of the society over individual wishes and needs, and thereby suppressing the individual impulses for the general good of the society. That is, religion does not allow individual needs and impulses to over-ride the general interest of the society. Since there are many sinners in every society, some methods must always be found in handling such people of deviant behaviour. Religion also prescribes rituals in which guilt can be expiated and the individual or sinner released from bondage and reintegrated into the social group. Thus religion hallows the norms and values of the society; contributing to social control and thereby aiding order and stability; and helps in the reconciliation of the sinner.
4. Religion also provides a standard of values in terms of which the established norms, rules and values may be critically examined and found seriously wanting or lacking. This is especially likely to be true in respect of religions which emphasize the transcendence of God and His consequent superiority over, and independent of the established authorities in the society. The prophetic function in Judaism brought serious conflicts between the priests and the prophets. The prophetic function is always a source or means of important social protest against established forms and conditions. The African Traditional Religion is a

priestly religion and its dogma is rarely challenged. Whatever the priest says is accepted by all without questioning or rationalization. And in most cases the priest is always under the control of the secular authority. This is a common sphere in hierarchically organized societies such as that of the Yoruba and the Edo.

5. Religion aids self identify. When individuals accept religious values and the belief about human nature and destiny associated with them, they develop important aspects of their own self-understanding and self-definition. Secondly, as they participate in religious rituals and worship they openly dramatize the significant elements of their own identity. In these various ways religion affects individuals' understanding of "who they are" and "what they are". Davis, a sociologist has expressed the idea that religion gives the individual a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future. It invokes in people the sense of awareness. It expands their ego or spirit by making their spirit significant for the universe and the universe significant for them. Religion as in the above has in various ways contributed to the integration of the individual. In periods of rapid social enhancement and large-scale social mobility, religion helps in no small way to contribute to self-identity. For example, one of the important ways in which Nigerians have established their status in the society or established their identity or recognition is by belonging to one of the imported or foreign "civilizing" religions; Christianity and Islam. Very few people come out openly in the modern time as being adherents of African Traditional Religion. As Christianity and Islam are regarded as religions of the civilized and high-class men and women thus, many Nigerians attach themselves to them for self-identity as civilized individuals.
- 4
6. Religion is closely related to growth and maturation of the people and their passage through the various age grading which are recognized or identified by the society. Psychologists have said that individual development goes through a series of encounters which are related to the various age levels of people: a series of encounters from infancy to death?

In the passage of life many and new problems confront the individual. At infancy, the individual must learn the basic trust in other human beings; later on they must develop some ability to function independently, to stand on their own feet, and later still they must learn to defer some of their satisfactions and to discipline their impulses or urges while they pursue the approved social values. Religion give

spiritual backing or support to norms and values, it supports the disciplines in the society on many important respects; it also supports in uncertainty consolation in failures and defeats. It contributes to the development of the individual activities. In all, religion involves itself in educating and enlightening the individual. In short, religion helps man to grow into full maturity. The various rites-of-passage; birth, naming ceremonies puberty, circumcision, initiation to adulthood, marriage and burial rites in Nigeria have religious significance. They help to integrate man fully into the society to which he belongs. In Nigerian traditional society it is strongly believed that the well-being of the community depends upon the good will of God, the divinities and the ancestors. Therefore before any venture is embarked upon in the society, those spiritual powers are consulted and taken into confidence.

Having established the fact that religion is indispensable in the life of a traditional African, we should have to take note of the truth expressed by Professor Whitehead, that religion is not necessarily good. In fact many people have accused religion of bringing division and disharmony into the society as a result of schism consequent on different interpretations given to doctrines or ideas and the struggle for positions and power. As Whitehead said, "The uncritical association of religion with goodness is directly negative by plain facts." He argued that horrors such as human sacrifice, cannibalism, sensual orgies, object superstition and degrading customs could attend religion.

However, we could conclude that religion helps to integrate not only the society, but also the personality. It does this by giving release from sorrow and release from fear. It instils guilt and at the same time provides release from it. Religion also gives the individual a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3**

What are the functions of religion?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

This unit provides a general introduction of religion with emphasis on the definition of religion, types of religious beliefs, the reasons for studying religion and the function of religion in the society. Religion is seen as an indispensable institution in the society despite of its positive and negative influences.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The following are the major points of this unit:

- Religion can be defined from various perspectives.
- There are six types of religious beliefs: deism, humanism, monism, theism, polytheism and henotheism.
- Most functions of religion are sociological

## 6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Define religion with reference to its sociological, theological, psychological, phenomenological, anthropological and philosophical definitions.
2. Explain why religions ought to be studied.
3. Briefly explain the various types of religions which are regarded as living religions.
4. What are the functions of religion in the society?

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## **UNIT 2 INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

That religion plays a significant role in the lives of people all over the world is not an understatement. The truth of this is brought out much more in the life of the African. This unit introduces you to the religion that was and still being practiced in Africa prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam. The aim of this course is not to turn you to a traditional religionist but to give you an insight into the religious worldview of the adherents of this religion. This will on the long run give you an opportunity to minister to them at the point of their needs.

In this second unit you will be introduced to the study of African Traditional Religion. You will examine the relationship between the Africans and religion, the obstacles and the difficulties experienced in the process of the study of the religion, the stages in the study of the religion, the sources of information for the study of the religion as well as the issue of nomenclature.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- evaluate the relationship between Africans and their religion
- identify the problems facing the study of African Traditional Religion
- propose solutions to the problems facing the study of the religion
- identify the stages in the study of the religion



- identify the characteristics of each of the stages
- discuss the sources from where African religion can be studied
- discuss the issues surrounding nomenclature.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The African and Religion**

The African society is overtly religious. In African societies, religion is an integral part of the lives of the individual, the family and the community as a whole. African religion is best described by Dennis L. Thompson when he states, "Indigenous religion and the family are closely connected in Africa. In fact, African religion can be seen as a system of rites, rules, and practices that aims at preserving and strengthening the fellowship of the people, the tribe and the family, and at increasing power."

When this is properly understood, one would be able to understand why religion is central to the African life. For example, from birth through all the major phases of life, there is always a religious touch for the African. When a child is born, it is most natural to take the child to the diviners to have a glimpse of the child's destiny so as not to commit any error in the process of the child's upbringing. At puberty, the child also passes through another set of religious rituals. When it is time to get married, consultations would be made concerning the choice of the spouse and the ancestral divinities would be invoked to bless the marriage. Finally when death come knocking, religion also has a central role to play. In the whole of the African life, there is no sharp distinction between the secular and the sacred as it is in the West. The African life is totally soaked in religion.

#### **3.2 Obstacles Facing the Study of African Traditional Religion**

##### **The Dark Continent Syndrome**

The first problem that researchers have faced is the geography of the continent that has made it very difficult to move around the continent and gather necessary information. This made Africa highly inaccessible at the beginning and thus earned the sobriquet "the Dark Continent". By this it was meant that Africa was a continent that much is not known about. Despite the acknowledgement of this fact, many foreign writers still go ahead and publish incorrect information about the African religion. It is unfortunate that to date such information still makes rounds not only among foreigners but also among Africans. In other words, because of the fact that the early writers and even some now do

not have adequate knowledge of the people and the religion of Africa, most of what had been written is mostly or partially untrue or exaggerated or distorted for various reasons.

### **The Large Size of the Continent**

Microsoft Encarta Dictionary declares that Africa is the second largest continent with an area of 30, 243, 910 square kilometres. With this great size, the tendency to generalize among the early scholars results in fallacy. For example, it might be very difficult to have a general African view of God because there are some African societies that conceive God in feminine terms and there are some that thinks of God in masculine terms. This issue will also be discussed under the issue of nomenclature.

### **Direct and Indirect Colonial Indoctrination**

From the colonial days there has been a lot of indoctrination of the African mind against their culture and their religion. Even today in the post colonial era, the indoctrination still goes on abated and it is not uncommon to hear Africans referring to their culture as demonic and evil. As a result, most Africans are not even interested in studying the religion and those who do are looked down upon. This bias also affects the research work of the scholars most of whom today have become Christians or Muslims. The lack of interest in African religion and culture has led to the gradual extinction of the religion and all it stands for.

### **Death**

The next obstacle following indoctrination and which is much more devastating is the death of the faithful adherents of these religions. While indoctrination keeps away the youths and the crème of the society away from traditional religion death started to take away those who would have passed down the religion to them intact and undiluted.

Unfortunately as the generation of these adherents die one after the other, so does the tradition become remembered in fewer details. Naturally dislocations, distortions and gaps begin to occur in the body of knowledge of these religions. It is significantly unfortunate because African religions are highly oral and depends on oral transmission. As a result, where the priest has died, some religious values, items and knowledge may be lost.

**Secrecy**

Usually, the practices and information about most aspects of religion are guarded secretly. These secrets are revealed only to the initiates. Those who also have this secret information on these religions are also under oath not to reveal the secrets to any non-initiate. This secrecy makes it difficult for the non-initiates to have a true understanding of these religions.

**Multiplicity of Languages**

The multiplicity of languages in Africa is also a major hindrance to the study of religion. If you take the case of Nigeria as an example, there are at least 250 languages and 400 dialects. No researcher would want to master 250 languages because of interest in religion. Yet, a proper and in-depth study of any religion requires a thorough understanding of the original language of the adherents of the religion. The Microsoft Encarta Premium has this to say about the number of languages in Africa: "the number of distinctive languages spoken in Africa is open to debate. Some experts put the number at around 2,000, while others count more than 3,000".

**Influence of other Religions**

The influence of other religions, especially, Christianity and Islam on African religion cannot be overemphasized. As generation after generation of Africans come under the influence of foreign religions or embrace the foreign religions, one or two things happen: they either cut away completely from the old faith (which may lead to total neglect of the old faith until it gradually disintegrates) or practice the two religions and come out being syncretistic.

**The Influence of Western Education and Culture**

Western education has most of the time take the people out of their native homes and exposed them to foreign education and culture. Consequently, they lost touch with their homeland and culture and this leads to losing touch with their religion. There are times when people like this return home and are made rulers or chief yet they lack a proper understanding of the traditional religion and this has come to poses serious problem to the existence and the study of African religions.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1**

Discuss the factors that are militating against the study of African Traditional Religion.

### **3.3 Sources of Information**

Since Africa was largely oral and had no written record, the question then had been where we can gather facts from which we can bring out the teachings and concepts of African religion. The following gives us a wide array of physical and oral sources.

#### **The Physical Sources**

##### **Shrines and Sacred Places**

These are **the** places that are connected with the worship of the divinities. They could be found in the homes where family religious rituals are conducted or in the grooves that are normally hidden to the uninitiated. These places are important because religious concepts could be expressed through them.

##### **Music, Dance and Drama**

Africans are dancing people and their religion is usually embedded in religious festivals, rituals and ceremonies. The religious music, dance and drama are powerful media of communication especially in the traditional societies. The Africans sing and dance out of religious feelings. Thus when people participate it serves as an outlet for their religious feelings.

##### **Religious Articles and Objects**

Traditional religion does not frown at the use of religious articles and objects. These include objects worn round the neck, waist, on the arms and the legs. The importance of these objects lies in the fact that these religious articles and objects help the researchers to peep into the concept behind the objects.

##### **Art Works and Symbols**

Different categories of art works could be invaluable sources of religious beliefs. They provide a wealth of information on the past and present religious beliefs of the people. These include wooden and clay sculptures found in the family shrines and general shrines and grooves. These simple cultic objects and symbols could throw more light on the whole complexity of beliefs and practices connected with their use.

## **Religious Specialists or Cultic Personnel**

These are people that are found in every society that are encyclopaedia of the religion. They know a lot about rituals, ceremonial and religious matters. The list includes medicine men, priests, rain-makers, diviners, musicians and craftsmen. Each one of these people is a trained specialist in their profession and in most cases highly experienced. A lot can be collected about African religion from these set of people.

## **Non-Physical Sources**

### **Myths**

These are sacred tales that centres on spiritual beings and deities and are usually believed to have happen. Most African myths give explanatory answers to the questions posed to humanity by their physical environment. Myths serve as the practical way of documenting the oral beliefs and handing them down from generation to generation. Myths include aetiological myths (those that attempt to explain the mysteries of life), cosmogonic myths (myths explaining the origin of the earth) and creedal myths (those that are ritual formulae that are learnt and recited like prayers). Myths enjoy a high degree of authenticity and when these are properly studied, they could provide invaluable illumination on African religion.

### **Theophanous Names**

The importance of names as sources of African religion derives from the significance and impact of names among Africans. For the Africans, a name is an omen. It is supposed to represent the most cherished thought or the situation surrounding the birth of the child. Names thus reflect the African philosophy of life or a wish or prayer. Consequently, many names affirm the existence of God and also describe the African thought of Him. Examples are Igbo names such as Chukwuka (God is greater); Chukwudi (God exists); Yoruba names such as Oloruntopi (God is great); Olorunkoya (God decries oppression).

### **Proverbs**

Africans have a rich repertoire of proverbs in which are enshrined ancient wisdom, beliefs and accumulated experiences of past generations. The value of proverbs as source materials for the religious beliefs of the oral based people derives from the high regard in which proverbs are held in African societies. In different African societies there are different proverbs which have the belief in God as their themes. For example, the Akan of Ghana has a proverb that can be

translated to mean "if you will tell God, tell it to the wind". This is a proverb that establishes the omnipresence of God. There are also proverbs that have to do with the relationship of man to the deities. If a list of proverbs of Africa are collected and studied, they would yield highly important information on African religion.

### **Prayers**

Prayers are specifically religious activities and would contain a lot of information on religious beliefs. Prayers in Africa are usually made to God, the deities and the ancestors. 'through prayers one can see man's dependence on God and the belief that God has the ability to meet man's need being expressed.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you have been introduced to African Traditional Religion. You have studied about the religious nature of the Africans, the obstacles to the study of African Traditional Religion as well as sources from where data concerning the religion could be found.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points that you have learnt in this unit:

- Africans by nature are very religious
- There are many factors that serve as obstacles to the study of African Traditional Religion.
- The sources for the study of African Traditional Religion can be found in physical and non-physical sources.
- The physical sources include shrines, art works, religious artefacts and symbols as well as dances, music and drama.
- The non-physical sources include myths, proverbs and prayers.

## **6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

What are the sources from which data for the study of African Traditional Religion can be found?

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## **UNIT 3 TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
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- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Early European Christian missionaries
  - 3.2 The Effort of Early African Writers and Scholars
  - 3.3 The Contemporary Stage
  - 3.4 Key Issues in Contemporary Scholarship
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous units you have studied the general introduction to religion and a general introduction to African Traditional Religion. In this unit, you will now study the trends about the study of African Traditional Religion.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the trends in the study of African Traditional Religion
  - list some of the scholars that have been involved in the study of the religion
- evaluate the current trend in the study of African Traditional Religion.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Early European Christian Missionaries**

Early European Christian missionaries as well as colonial soldiers and administrators who worked in Africa are credited with having made the first real effort to study African Traditional Religion and culture. They were motivated largely by curiosity, personal interest and by the practical objective of gaining some knowledge about Africans in order to work and communicate with the host groups. Christian missionaries in particular, needed to understand the language, basic ideas and



concepts of the host groups in order to proclaim and preach the Gospel and thereby convert the people. A couple of them, especially those of the British and North American extraction, did in fact, spend sometime with liberated African slaves in an effort to acquire a working knowledge of the culture and religion of their respective groups. With the help of local interpreters and assistants, some were able to translate hymnbooks and catechism texts in local African languages. Rev. Thomas Jefferson for example, compiled a dictionary of the Yoruba language and wrote sympathetically about the traditional religion of the people in 1857. Several other missionaries who did not publish works supplied descriptive accounts of traditional religious materials in the periodic reports they sent back to the headquarters of their religious congregations, or sponsoring agencies. Most of those reports are still available in archives in Europe.

Several pioneer colonial soldiers and administrators also studied aspects of the tradition of different African groups. Major Arthur G. Leonard, Percy A. Talbot in Nigeria, and Captain R.S. Rattray in Ghana are typical examples. Major Leonard for instance, was a British colonial soldier from Scotland who spent about ten years mainly in south-eastern Nigeria, 1895 - 1905. A year after his departure from Nigeria, he published a book titled; *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (1906). It was a detailed discussion of aspects of the religious beliefs, ritual practices and customs of the peoples of the lower Niger River area.

### **Trained and Government-Sponsored Ethnographers**

The challenges of governance had prompted several local colonial administrators to seek the assistance of trained ethnographers and anthropologists. They were needed to provide vital data and information about the culture and customs, institutions, beliefs and values of indigenous groups to aid administration. In some territories like Nigeria, Kenya and Sudan, colonial officials were struggling hard to contain actual revolts and violent conflicts. The women of Aba in south-eastern Nigeria had actually revolted against the imposition of taxation in 1929. There was therefore, a felt-need in many parts of the Continent for accurate information about the people and their cultures to help in the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies.

A strong impulse in favour of engaging the services of experts in the colonial field was equally felt at the international level. After the First World War the focus of colonial interest shifted from the acquisition to the maintenance of control, and there began the first stirrings about development as a consciously-induced policy. Also, the respected anthropologist and propagator of the field work approach in social anthropology; Bronislaw Malinowski had insisted that people concerned

with developments in Africa must first understand the workings of the societies with which they were in contact.

A number of institutions were inaugurated, including The International Institute of African Languages and Cultures in 1926. It was later known as the International African Institute (I.A.I.) by representatives of scientific, missionary and official colonial bodies. It had Lord Lugard as its first chairman. Its defined objective was to bring about a closer association of scientific knowledge and research with practical affairs.

Several trained ethnographers and anthropologists got either recruited, or financially sponsored by the Colonial Office to provide accurate information to bolster the effort of local colonial governments. The development greatly benefited the study of African Traditional Religion. Some ethnographers delved specifically into certain aspects of the indigenous religion, particularly those provoking debate at the time. M.D.W. Jeffreys and W.R.G. Horton for example, contributed their findings on the origin of certain African traditional beliefs and symbols, as well as the debate on the belief in God respectively. Some other discussed issues like witchcraft and the belief in the ancestors.

Researchers like S.F. Nadel, K. Little, Monica Wilson, Mary Douglas and Godfrey Lienhardt incorporated substantial materials from the indigenous religious tradition in their respective works on other aspects of the indigenous culture of Africans they had worked on. Charles K. Meek, one of the official ethnographers who researched into traditional Igbo social, political institutions and legal systems published a book titled *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (1957).

The work of the anthropologists affected Christian missionaries in more ways than one. First, it helped to improve their attitude towards African traditional religion in general. A clear evidence of the better appreciation of traditional beliefs and practices was the incipient effort made to adapt certain local elements by a number of missionary church groups. More relevantly, several expatriate missionaries who had spent many years in Africa like Rev. George T. Basden (spent about forty years in Igboland), were encouraged to publish their studies of the beliefs and customs of the various groups and areas where they had lived and worked. Interestingly, the approach of the research of most of these missionary writers resembled very much the method of the ethnographers and anthropologist. The essays on the traditional African ideas and beliefs about God published in the edited anthology by Rev. Edwin W. Smith; *African Ideas of God* (1950) is a typical example.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

What are the contributions of the early Christian missionaries to the study of African Traditional Religion?

### 3.2 The Effort of Early African Writers and Scholars

The entry of indigenous African writers and scholars into the study of African traditional religion was a significant development in the evolution of the subject. The group includes African writers and scholars of the pre-independence era as well as ordained ministers and clerics with Christian theological background of training belonging to both the Francophone and Anglophone traditions. Given the prominent place of religion in traditional African life and culture, it was not a surprise that many early western-educated Africans should discuss and incorporate aspects of it in their publications.

Most of them were strong nationalist writers and include people like Mbonu Ojike, **J.B.** Danquah, and Kenneth Kaunda. They were keen to disabuse the minds of Europeans concerning the widely publicised inferiority of the black race and the distortion of their culture in the writings of colonial writers and some Christian missionary authors. Danquah (1944) in particular, was furious with those European authors who sought to discriminate against the belief of indigenous Africans in God. He strongly contended that Africans have as much genuine belief in God as Europeans.

The aim of the first and second generations of ordained African cleric-scholars with Christian theological background of training may be more religious than political. But, like the nationalists they also tried to correct misrepresentations of the indigenous culture in western scholarship, as well as show that Africa has viable traditional religious ideas, ritual practices, institutions and values that could be adapted to benefit Christianity in the Continent.

Vincent Mulago and A. Kagame were among the first generation ordained African cleric-scholars of the Francophone background who took up the study of Bantu cosmology from where the Belgian missionary author, Placide Temples left off. They tried to present the traditional worldview along the lines of scholastic philosophy. Their theory of vital force and hierarchy of beings drew mainly on the indigenous religious traditions of the peoples of Central Africa. Mulago for example, suggested that Bantu traditional religion is based on the belief in two worlds, one visible and the other invisible, the belief in the communitarian and hierarchic character of these two worlds; the

interaction between the two worlds, and the belief in a Supreme Being, Creator and Father of all that exists.

Other French-speaking scholars influenced by Temples' theory include F.M. Lufuluabo and E.N. Mujynya. African cleric-scholars of the Anglophone tradition have been more theological than philosophical in their approach. Between late 1950s and early 1970s, a number of these scholars including, Harry Sawyerr, E.B. Idowu, J.S. Mbiti, F.A. Arinze, S.N. Ezeanya, and E.C. Ilogu worked on a wide range of issues in African traditional religion. Mbiti and Idowu wrote general texts to guide the systematic study of African Traditional Religion. Others including Sawyerr, Arinze, Ezeanya investigated important aspects of the subject like the belief in ancestors, ritual sacrifice and traditional morality.

In addition to their individual writings, many of these early African cleric-scholars played notable roles, in the footsteps of a handful European pioneer scholars like E G Parrinder, in promoting the study of African Traditional Religion in institutions of higher education, including universities and theological faculties in different parts of Africa; Ghana, Nigeria, Congo and Kenya among others. Idowu, Mbiti, Ezeanya, Mulago and others designed and taught courses in African Religion in departments of religious studies and theological faculties. They trained successive groups of graduates and scholars to carry on research on different aspects of the traditional religion.

The interest and effort of anthropologists and sociologists did not completely cease in the study of African religion. Rather, with the ever-growing success of the missionary religions, mainly Christianity and Islam in many parts of Africa, a number of Western scholars diverted their attention to the study of religious change and conversion as well as new religious movements in Africa. Interestingly, their investigation of the cause, course and consequence of religious change often bring them face to face with the traditional religious culture of the people. It is pertinent therefore, to note that many of the published works, including those of R. Horton, **J.D.Y. Peel**, R. Hackett on the themes of conversion and new religious movements in Africa often incorporated considerable materials from African traditional religion.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

Evaluate the contribution of the early African writers and scholars to the study of African Traditional Religion.

### 3.3 The Contemporary Stage

The cumulative effort of researchers and writers finally led to the emergence of African traditional religion as a full-fledged academic discipline about four decades ago. African Traditional Religion has since become part of the curriculum of several academic institutions in Africa and other parts of the world. It is a major course offered in Departments of Religious Studies in Universities, Colleges of higher education and research institutes. Students are free to major in African Traditional Religion at diploma, bachelor, masters and doctorate degrees. In Nigeria for example, the "Minimum Academic Standards of the National Universities' Commission" places African traditional religion on a similar pedestal as Christianity and Islam, that is, weighted one third of the total credits required for a bachelor's degree in religious studies. African traditional religion is also a favoured area for research students, as several candidates register for their graduate programme on the subject.

The systematic study of African Traditional Religion has achieved a measure of acceptability as an academic discipline. It is generally classified in the group of traditional indigenous religions or primal world-views of humankind. The general aim of the study is to present systematically the authentic experience of the sacred by the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa (within the Continent and in Diaspora), in their different socio-historical circumstances and backgrounds. African Traditional Religion is essentially an oral and folk religion. A persistent effort is currently being made by scholars of different intellectual hues and backgrounds to push forward the frontiers of the subject through a critical approach to certain important issues of methodology and conceptual scheme that are adopted for the study.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Discuss the factors that have led to the contemporary stage of the study of the African Traditional Religion.

### 3.4 Key Issues in Contemporary Scholarship

Notwithstanding the progress already made in the systematic study, African Traditional Religion is still a relatively young academic discipline. It is barely forty years old as a subject in its own right. The volume of literature that has accumulated is sizeable, although this says nothing about the quality of the publications. The subject has no doubt, surmounted certain teething problems, including long-standing prejudice and discrimination to bring it to the present status. But there are a number of key issues, many of them deriving from the historical roots of

the subject, while others are part of the rigorous requirements of the subject as a serious academic discipline. For purposes of our discussion, I shall group these issues into three broad categories, namely; issues of nomenclature and terminology, issues relating to methodology and theoretical presuppositions as well as schemes of interpretation, and finally issues connected to the content of African Traditional Religion.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The study of the African Traditional Religion had been in successive stages beginning from the early European Christian missionaries. These were in turn followed by colonial soldiers and administrators. After this, the colonial government sponsored and trained some ethnographers to study the African culture including the religion. This yielded better results but was still tainted by racism. It was after this that the early African writers and scholars who incidentally were defensive of their culture and religion came and this eventually led to the contemporary stage in the study of the African Traditional Religion.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points that you have learnt in this unit:

- The first effort to study African Traditional Religion started from the early European Christian missionaries.
- The efforts of the missionaries were complemented by the colonial soldiers and administrators.
- These were followed by colonial government trained and sponsored ethnographers.
- These were also followed by early African scholars and writers.
- The emergence of the African writers and scholars led us to the contemporary stage.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the contributions of each stage in the study of African Traditional Religion to the development of the study of the religion.

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## **UNIT 4 AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE QUEST FOR AN APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
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  - 3.1 Errors of Terminologies
  - 3.2 Towards an Appropriate Terminology
- 4.0 Conclusion
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, you are going to focus more on the terminologies that have been erroneously used to describe African Traditional Religion. All these terminologies would be examined one after the other with the view of showing their inability to appropriately describe the religion. After this, you will be faced with an attempt to arrive at a terminology that would be suitable and appropriate to describe the religion.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- list all the terminologies that have been used to describe African Traditional Religion
- evaluate the appropriateness and otherwise of these terminologies
- offer a critique of current terminologies
- defend the use of a terminology that seems appropriate to you.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Errors of Terminologies**

As it has been stated in the previous unit, at the beginning of the study of African Traditional Religion the Western scholars dominated the field. Even after them the African that came on board were not better because a lot of them has been brainwashed or Westernized in their orientation that the best they could do is to carry on the tradition of the



Western scholars. Consequently, all sorts of terms have been used to describe the African religion. The following are just examples of them:

### **Primitive**

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines primitive as "early, ancient, old-fashioned, simple, rude; original, primary". In the light of most of the words used above to define primitive, it is obvious that it is not an appropriate word to describe African Traditional Religions. There is no group of people in the world today that could be appropriately called 'early' or 'ancient'. The bias in using this word stems from the notion that anything that does not conform to the accepted norms of the Western world is automatically primitive.

Primitive as used here means something like 'backward', 'rude' or 'uncouth'. Primitive in most Western writings is a derogatory term and therefore obnoxious. It is wrong to speak of the religion of any living people as primitive on the basis of racial and ethnic prejudice. Therefore, it is not only inappropriate but it is also offensive to describe African Traditional Religion as primitive.

### **Savage**

This is another word that has racial and ethnic discrimination at its root. The word 'savage' stands at the opposite end of the pole from 'civilized'. Savage can be defined as 'violent, brutal, undomesticated as is used for wild animals that cannot be controlled by human beings'. Finally, Microsoft Encarta Premium Dictionary agrees that it is an "offensive term meaning relating to a culture that is unfamiliar and perceived as inferior, especially one not using complex modern technologies". Though the developed countries usually are quick in applying this word to the whole of Africa, the truth is that savagery is present in the whole world and has nothing to do with development or underdevelopment. For example, if a fight ensues and an African man brings out his cutlass and strikes his opponent to death, is he any different from an American who brought out his pistol and shot his opponent to death? It is on this ground that one would reject the use of the term savage to describe African Traditional Religion.

### **Native**

In the West, the word native has been accepted and used as a derogatory nuance and has become one that is reserved for the underdeveloped non-Western world. Again the Microsoft Encarta Premium accepted that it is an offensive term for an original inhabitant of a place belonging to an

indigenous non-white people with a traditional culture, as distinct from a colonial settler and immigrant.

It is important to state however that the word native is derived from the Latin word *natives*, which means come into existence by birth and thus used to designate things that are innate and natural.

### Paganism

Paganism is perhaps the oldest of all the names that has been used to describe the African Traditional Religion. Paganism has its origin in the Latin word '*naganus*', this word originally means a village-dweller, a country man or a person who lives away from the civilized community. Though this word is originally used as a sociological term to make distinction between the enlightened and sophisticated city dweller and the rustic and unpolished village dweller it has come to have an exclusive religious connotation. The Microsoft Encarta Premium defines pagan as "an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody's non-belief in religion, way of life, or degree of knowledge, polytheist or pantheist: a follower of an ancient polytheistic or pantheistic religion". The following has to be noted about the inadequacy of the word to describe African religions:

One, from its very origin, the word is never intended to be used to describe religion of any sort. Two, the contemporary application of the word to religion has carried a derogatory comparison by those who believed their own religion to be superior. Whenever or wherever the word paganism is used to describe African Traditional Religion, it always carries with it a mark of social and racial discrimination.

### Heathenism

The word heathen came into being as an analogy of the word pagan. It comes from the German root. The suffix —en has the meaning of 'belonging to'. Heath on the other hand means the wasteland removed from the outskirts of the town, where outlaws and vagabonds and brigands live. Heathen then means a dweller on the heath. Heathenism as an adjective means the habit or the characteristics, or the disposition of heath-dwellers. As it is with its twin-word *paganus*, heathen which was originally a sociological term became an adjective used to describe religion. The Microsoft Encarta Premium defines heathen as "an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody who does not acknowledge the God of the Bible, Torah, or Koran" or "an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody's way of life, degree of knowledge, or non-belief in religion". It has to be noted that the dictionary agrees that the word has come from the German language.

Heathen is a word coined by races that look down from an Olympian height of superiority upon other races. As it is with *paganus*, the name heathenism is a most unsuitable and obnoxious misnomer as far as the African Traditional religion is concerned.

### **Idolatry**

The word idol has its root in the Greek word *eidolon*. In the Greek, the word means '*form, copy, figure*'; hence an object resembling a person or animal and worshiped as a god *idol, image*". The main problem with this word is if it is appropriate to use this word to describe the whole of African Traditional Religion? With the descriptions above, it is clear that the word idol never at the beginning carry the undertone of falsehood although it has acquired this meaning over time. Therefore in the light of the current derogatory and contemptuous nuance of the word, it should not be used to describe any religion whatsoever.

Apart from this, the word idol does not technically accurately describe African Traditional Religion. This is because the so called images and idols that are seen in the religion are mere symbols that are representative of the deity and absolutely meaningless apart from the spiritual connotations. Thus, it is grossly unfair to describe the religion as idolatry. For example, the images of Mary and Jesus in the Catholic Church have not turned Christianity to an idolatrous religion.

### **Fetishism**

This is another word that has been used to describe African Traditional Religion having made it depart from its original meaning. According to E. B. Taylor who traced the history of the word from the time it was first used by the Portuguese the word was adopted by the Portuguese who likened the African veneration of religious symbolic objects to the amulets and the talisman they themselves were wearing. These amulets were called *leitico*' a word which means charms and is in turn derived from Latin *factitius*. Since fetishes are things that are made with hands it does not apply to African Traditional Religion because to them deity is not something made with hands.

### **Animism**

This word is popularised by E. B. Taylor who defines it as the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings. In his use of animism however Taylor posits that animism is an attendant factor in any religion, in every culture at any level of development. This is to say that as there are traces of animism in African religion so are they in all other religions. He also maintains that anthropomorphism is predominant in animism. In regard

with this, animism cannot be said to be a monopoly of African Traditional Religion and so, it would be unfair to describe the African Religion as animism.

### Ancestor Worship

There are still other investigators who have defined African Traditional Religion as ancestor worship. According to them, all that the African people regarded as spiritual beings were no more than deified ancestors. Like other terminologies, this term is not true of the African Traditional Religion. Though one cannot deny that the belief in ancestors is a strong element in African Traditional Religion, it has to be stated that the ancestors are not worshipped but venerated; and veneration of ancestors is also not the monopoly of African Traditional Religion.

### 3.2 Towards an Appropriate Terminology

This may sound rather elementary, but the issue of the precise name of the subject has not been fully settled. A group of scholars, led by E.B. Idowu, insist that one could legitimately speak of African Traditional Religion in the singular. J.S. Mbiti thinks that there is no basis for such a position. He maintains that the title of the subject should be in the plural; African Traditional Religions, because of the heterogeneous nature of African Religion. J.V. Taylor had earlier pointed out that there is a remarkable number of features as well as the fact of a basic world-view which fundamentally is everywhere the same in sub-Saharan Africa. As far as Idowu is concerned, a careful look through actual observation and comparative discussions with Africans from various parts of the continent will show, first and foremost, that there is a common factor which the coined word *negritude* will express aptly. There is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa.

Idowu, like Mbiti, accepts the existence of a single, basic religious philosophy for Africa, he is emphatic that there are as many religions in the sub-Saharan African background as there are distinct ethno-language groups. We speak of African religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system". African traditional religions are not universal but tribal, each being bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. And there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another.

The views of scholars were for a long time split along the two positions, with authors like Benjamin Ray and E. Ikenga-Metuh supporting the

opinion of Mbiti. More recent scholarship appears however, to favour the use of African Traditional Religion in the singular. The argument being that the existence of a common world-view as well as similarities in belief-systems, ritual forms, values and institutions across the various regions of the continent, provide a sufficient basis for keeping the singular form of the name. There is no reason to single out African traditional religion, while accepting as normal a multiplicity of denominations, even rival sects in other religions of humankind, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

From the beginning of the study of African Traditional Religion, which of course was started by Europeans who did not give a good understanding of the religion, African Traditional Religion had been described with various wrong and prejudiced terms like primitive, savage, native, paganism, heathenism and idolatry among others. Since the coming of African writers and authors, attempts have been made by scholars like E. B. Idowu, J. S. Mbiti and J. V. Taylor to propound a more acceptable terminology in describing the religion despite the various criticisms against a homogeneous terminology.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points that you have learnt in this unit:

- Various erroneous terminologies that have been used to describe the African Traditional Religion are primitive, savage, native, paganism and idolatry among others.
- African authors and writers like E. B. Idowu, J. S. Mbiti and J. V. Taylor have attempted to propound a more acceptable terminology to describe the African Traditional Religion.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the applicability of the various terminologies that have been used to describe the African Traditional Religion.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## UNIT 5 THE STRUCTURE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The issues of the elements that are common to African Traditional Religion are without agreement. In his survey of the various positions that have been posited by foreign authors, Idowu made an analysis of Talbot, Parrinder and Rattray. Talbot advanced four main elements: polytheism, anthropomorphism, animism and ancestor worship. In Parrinder's fourfold classification you have belief in a supreme God; the chief divinities; the divinized ancestors and the charms and the amulets. While Talbot's classifications smirks of racism that of Parrinder is close to the truth. The same goes with Rattray. We will proceed to study these structures accordingly.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able:

- to identify the structure of African Traditional Religion
- explain and discuss the main elements in the structure of African Traditional Religion
- discuss why African Traditional Religion may not be classified as polytheism.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Belief in God**

Though we may not be able to talk of a monolithic but a multi-sided concept of God in Africa, you will still see and know that there is the belief in God in African Traditional Religion. You must also understand that the multi-sided concept of God in Africa comes from the basic fact that in each locality, the concept of God derives from the sociological structure as well as the climate of the area. For example, among the Yoruba and the Bini where the society is highly graded and hierarchical, God is thought of as the Supreme King over a theocratic world while among the Birom and Tiv such ministerial system is totally absent. Also, in the matriarchal societies of Africa like the Ewe, God is thought of in feminine terms whereas the masculine concept is widespread. The following are however true of the African concept of God:

##### **God is Real**

To the Africans God is real. Each people group has a specific name for God in Africa. The name could be unique to God and at times may be used partly by other divinities. When this is done however, it is to emphasize the fact that such beings derived their being from God.

The names of God in Africa are usually descriptive of God's character and an emphatic assertion that to the African mind God is not thought of in abstract terms. For example, the name Olodumare is used uniquely for God among the Yoruba while among the Igbo the name Chukwu is used. Chukwu is a combination of 'Chi' and 'ukwu' which will literally mean the Great Source Being. The prefix 'chi' is however used in other people's names, such as: Chibuzor (God first).

##### **God is Unique**

In the African mind, God is he to whom no one else can be compared; be it spirit or human. An Edo mythology is one of such myths that teach the uniqueness of God; it goes thus:

Olokun (the goddess of the river, who in Edo myth is an arch-divinity) is the beloved child of Osanobwa (the Edo word for the Supreme Being) and was therefore vested with all the glory and splendour of that position. Olokun was however overwhelmed by the majesty of this position that she challenged Osanobwa to a display of splendour and majesty at an open market space in line with African practice. On the day of the challenge, Osanobwa sent his messenger to tell Olokun that he was ready for the challenge. Olokun dressed up in what she thought



to be her best only to discover that her father's messenger was dressed up exactly as she was. She went back to change only to discover that the messenger has changed to what she had on again. After several attempts, she gave up admitting that she cannot compete with Osanobwa since she could not beat her messenger who turned out to be the chameleon. This myth is one way of saying that God is unique and incomparable.

Another issue that emphasizes the uniqueness of God is the fact that there are no images either graven or in drawing or painting for God in Africa. This is because in Africa, the issue is that no one can be compared with God. The concept of God as king is also another way to emphasize the uniqueness of God. Among the Lugbara, God (Leza) is "the one who does what no other can do". Another Ruanda proverb says "there is none equal to Imana (God)".

### **God is the Absolute Controller of the Universe**

In the African thought, God is the absolute controller of everything. He is the source of every power and authority. All other things exist in consequence of him and all events that come to pass come to be because he permitted them to be. In the attempt to express the fact that God is the controller of all things the Bantu of South Africa has a saying that: "Shikakunamo (God) sits on the back of every one of us, and we cannot shake him off". For the Nuer they believe that Kwoth (God) is the very spirit of the universe and that the universe belongs to him. This belief is the determinant of their attitude to life.

Another aspect of this belief is that it is only God that can give humanity the essential personality that makes them human and he is equally the only one that can determine when that part of human beings returns to him. For example according to the Konkomba, "*Ungwin* is that part of man which God gives". There is a cosmogonic myth of the Yoruba people that also teaches that God gives Obatala (the arch-divinity among the Yoruba) the responsibility of moulding the physical aspect of human beings and never questions him on what he does whether they are deformed or whole or different shades of colour. However, for the body to live and become human as we know it is God that puts the spirit or the soul into the physical body that has been moulded.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1**

What do the Africans believe about God?

### **3.2 Belief in Divinities**

In discussing the issue of divinities in Africa one will have to be very careful and even clear issues that could lead to misunderstanding.

Firstly, the existence of divinities is not common to the whole of Africa. In fact as Bolaji Idowu has asserted "West Africa may be said to be the home of divinities". It has to be noted that even within West Africa, there are different shades of pantheon from the crowded to the thinly populated ones and to the ones with doubtful existence. For example, the Yoruba and the Dinka has a thickly populated pantheon while the Ugandan situation is not clear.

Secondly, there is the issue of polytheism. The question is that does the pluralism of the pantheon suggest the idea of polytheism in Africa? It has been stated earlier however that to qualify for polytheism there has to be the existence of co-eternal and co-powerful gods that does not describe the African situation. At this point we will go on to examine the relationship between the divinities and God in African thought.

In African theology, the divinities were brought into being as a result of things in regard to the divine ordering of the world. For example, Orisanla also called Obatala in Yoruba pantheon is thought of as partaking in the nature of Olodumare (God). Ile is usually referred to as the son of Olodumare or his deputy. This also goes with Olokun in Edo and all Akan divinities are regarded as Onyame's sons. This is what qualifies them to be called divinities.

Thirdly, the divinities are derivatives from God. In other words, they have no independent existence of their own. They are only in existence due to the being of God. Consequently, they are nothing apart from God.

Fourthly each divinity has its own local name in the local language of the people. The name is usually descriptive of the functions allotted to the divinity or the natural phenomenon to which it is associated. Among the Yoruba the divinity that is representative of God's wrath is Jakuta. The same divinity among the Nupe is called Sokogba.

Fifthly, the divinities were brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. Consequently, the divinities are like ministers with their own department to look after and thus act as intermediaries between human beings and God with reference to their particular portfolio.

Finally, the divinities in African belief can be said to be made up of the following categories:

The first set is the primordial divinities. These are the principal who are part of the original order of things.

The second set represents those who are conceptualization of prominent attributes of God as discerned especially through the natural phenomenon.

The third and the last set are those who are deified ancestors and heroes. The deification usually comes because they have exhibited in their lifetime the attributes of the deities.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

Who, according to African Traditional Religion, are the divinities?

### **3.3 Belief in Spirits**

Spirits are apparitional entities which form separate categories of beings from those called divinities. In African belief spirits are ubiquitous. There is no area or object which does not have spirits of its own. For example, we have the spirits that inhabit trees, dwelling areas, heaths and other artifacts. There are spirits which dwells in rocks, mountains, hills and valleys. Generally it is believed that spirits can possess and can be used for either good or bad causes. Though they do not have specific names except for the generic local names, the following are the various categories of spirits:

#### **Ghost-Spirits**

The Africans believed that if the dead is not properly buried with the necessary rites, the dead will not be admitted to the abode of the departed ones and will therefore become a wanderer having an aimless haunting existence. Some other groups in addition to this believes that those who did not die naturally (like who died by hanging, drowning or of incurable diseases or during pregnancy) are regarded as accursed and will also becoming wandering spirits. This is also true of those that are considered to have died prematurely. The group also includes those who have been wicked while on earth and have been excluded from the fellowship of the good people.

#### **The 'Born-to-Die' Spirits**

This group is known among the Yoruba as *abiku* and among the Igbo as *ogbanje*. The belief here is that these are spirits of wandering children who find their way into the womb of pregnant women and thus began a cycle of being born to die repeatedly. In most communities in Africa where this belief is common, it is not out of place to see pregnant women looking for protection against such spirits.

## The Guardian-Spirits

The prevalent belief here is that the essence of human's personality becomes a sort of split entity which acts as the person's spiritual counterpart. There are the groups that see the guardian spirit as a separate entity entirely. This concept is known as "on" among the Yoruba; "chi" among the Igbo and "ehi" among the Edo. It can either bring good fortune and at times put obstacles in one's way. It is as a result of this that the guardian spirit is usually appeased.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Discuss the classification of spirits in African Traditional Religion

#### 3.4 Belief in Ancestors

The basis for the belief in ancestors lies in the general world-wide belief that communication takes place between the living and the dead and that the dead are able to be of help or otherwise to the living.

Before any elaborate discussion of this topic, you have to note that for the Africans there is a clear cut demarcation between the Supreme Being and the divinities on the one hand and the ancestors on the other hand. To them, the Deity and the divinities belong to the supra-sensible world while the ancestors are part and parcel of the existence of the living. In other words, the ancestors are related to the living in a way that Deity and divinities are not. The ancestors are still regarded as part and parcel of the family or community they belonged while they were on earth.

The ancestors, though still related to the living are no longer mortals. It is believed that since they have crossed to the supernatural world, they have been freed from all the restrictions of the physical world and can therefore be of help to their kith and kin who are still bound by these physical restrictions. It is also believed that for some reasons they can prove to be against their own family. By the reason of their having crossed to the other world, they can serve to some extent as intermediaries between the living and Deity and the divinities. In this way, they continue their role as leaders of the family—the role they have played while living. This is because while they were on earth they have been the priests or priestesses of the family.

You have to note that in Africa, the ancestors are factors of cohesion or unity. For example, the Akan sacred stools are the symbols of national unity. Again when serious disputes are to be settled in the families, the ancestors are called upon and as such it is easier to reach agreements.

Again, ancestors are approached as spirits in cognizance of the fact that they are no longer mortals.

As a result of the enormous responsibilities and the Isis of elevation to a spiritual status, it is not just anybody that can be qualified to be an ancestor in Africa. The following are required for those who will qualify as ancestors:

- They must have lived to old age
- They must have had children while on earth
- They must have died natural death
- They must have lived lives that are worthy of emulation

It has to be noted that the cult of the ancestors in African religion is a means of communion and communication between those who are living and those who have departed the land of the living. The belief in the continued existence of the departed souls is symbolized by various cults such as the Egungun (masquerade), Oro, Mmo and Ayaka. Some of these would be discussed in details later on.

#### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

Why do Africans believe in ancestors?

### **3.5 Belief in Magic and Medicine**

It has been universally acknowledged that human beings are aware that they needed to be aided by supernatural powers in order to cope with the complexities, complications and the riddles of their existence. There is the need for succour, deliverance and the mastery of environmental circumstances. To meet the needs of this existence human beings have recognized two principal powers. The first is the divine power which is approached via submission and appeal and the other is the power of the elemental spirits which is approached by harnessing and tapping it to use for their own ends.

In tapping the elemental power, the technique through which the elemental powers can be controlled is sought out. This is what is called magic. You have to note that in Africa, you cannot talk about magic and medicine without talking about religion.

As it has been in the ancient world, medicine has been closely associated with religion basically because the priest in most times doubles as the divine healer. For example, among the Babylonians, Ea who is the father of Marduk is the father of all physicians. Medicine in Africa is also seen

as having its root in religion. Medicine is seen as having its source in God and operated through a tutelary divinity.

Most traditional doctors in Africa often claim to have been taught the art of medicine by the divinities or in a dream or trance. Some claim to have been carried away by the whirlwind for a period of time ranging from seven days to seven years to be taught the art of medicine.

Finally in Africa, magic and medicine often go hand in hand because:

- The same divinity has both magic and medicine under his portfolio. For example, Osanyin and Agwu among the Yoruba and the Igbo respectively.
- The same word is usually used to cover the two phenomenon
- Medicine often involves specifications of time and rituals

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The structure of the African Traditional Religion is fivefold: belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors and belief in magic and medicine.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

Five main issues made up the structure of African Traditional Religion.

#### **6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the relationship between God and the divinities in African Traditional Religion.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

- Shorter, A. (1975). *African Christian Theology*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Ikenga-Metuh, E. (1991). *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: the Problem of Interpretation*. Jos: IMICO Press.
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## MODULE 2

Unit 1	God in Africa: Concept, Attributes and Worship
Unit 2	Cult of the Divinities in Africa
Unit 3	The Nature and Concept of Humanity in African Religion
Unit 4	Passage of Life Rites
Unit 5	Religious Leaders

### UNIT 1 GOD IN AFRICA: CONCEPT, ATTRIBUTES AND WORSHIP

#### CONTENTS

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4.0	Conclusion
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#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier Module you have studied the preliminary issues surrounding African Traditional Religion. This has to do with issues like nomenclature and the structure of the religion. In this module, you will begin to read about the major concepts. In this unit, you will be studying about the concept of God in Africa. To do this, representative groups like the Yoruba, Akan and Igbo concepts will be studied. After this, we will examine briefly the attributes and the worship of God in Africa.

#### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

- compare the concept of God among the Yoruba, Igbo and Akan
- discuss the attributes of God in African belief
- discuss how God is worshipped among Africans
- have a representative knowledge of African belief about God.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Yoruba Concept of God

Though it has often been said that the idea of God among Africans has been influenced by the advent of Christianity, one has to say that this is not completely true as Africans have their own ideas of God prior to the advent of the Westerners. This fact can be corroborated by the names given to God by the various people groups. Let us begin by examining the Yoruba names of God. The Yoruba have three distinct names for God namely: *Olodumare*, *Olorun* and *Olofin-Orun*.

*Olodumare* is a word that is made up of three clear words: *Olo*, *Odu* and *Are*. *Olo* in the actual sense is "*oni*" which because of the beginning of the next word with vowel 'o' has to change its form to "*o/o*". The meaning is 'owner' or 'Lord of something'. *Odu* can mean either of two things: main heading or chief or principal heading. This is why a full cell in the *ayo* board is called '*odu*'. The combination of these two words would then mean "the one who owns the principal thing" which in this case may be authority or power. There is a little ambiguity on the last word. This is because of the presence of the letter `ni. With this, the word could be taken as one word "*mare*" which will mean "do not go", hence indicating the unchangeable nature of the Lord. The presence of the same letter 'in' could also be taken as a particle indicating "plus" which would then indicate that the one who owns the principal thing and also owns the '*are*". *Are* in this sense would mean the symbol of uniqueness that is on the original crown of the King. If this is the case, as your teacher in this case holds, *Olodumare* is the name that signifies that God is the Lord and Supreme Owner of everything including all power and authority (as symbolized by the scepter).

*Olorun* also is a combination of '*o/o*' and *orun*. *Olo* has been explained as in *Olodumare* above. The only other word that needs to engage our attention is '*orun*'. *Orun* is the Yoruba word translated 'heaven'. The combination of these words will literally mean that God is the owner of heaven. This name depicts the transcendence of God and his sovereignty.

The last name which is rare in the common parlance is used more in liturgy. It is called "*Olofin-Orun*". With this name, the highest office in heaven is thus given to God. It also has a literal meaning of the one who owns the palace of heaven. Thus God is seen as the Supreme Ruler who abides in heaven.



### 3.2 Igbo Concept of God

Like the Yoruba people, the Igbo names for God are also indicative not only of their concept for God but also of the attributes of God. The most common Igbo name for God is *Chi*, a prefix which can be used with various suffixes to indicate the attributes of God. M. O. Ene, in his article titled "*Chi*" has this to say:

The concept of *CHI*, the Supreme Spirit or the formidable force of creation, is common in many religions and in scientific circles. The Igbo religion, *Qclinani*, is no exception. The name and the nature of the Force differ in many known beliefs. The Igbo ancestors probably preoccupied themselves with the arduous analyses of the nature of *Chi*. They tried to establish an acceptable notion of the nature of *Chi*. In the end, they most humbly declared that *Chi* exists (*Chi di*), but to know the nature of the Force would be the end of knowledge, hence the name *Amaamaamachaamacha*. This attribute endures to this day. We know God to exist, but no one really knows the true nature of God. All claims to the contrary are deep delusions.

From this submission, it is clear that to the Igbo people, the concept of God as Creator and also as one who cannot be understood by man stands out prominent. Two names would be treated here and these are: *Chineke* and *Chukwu*.

*Chineke* is a combination of '*chi*' and '*eke*' with a connecting particle '*n*'. It literally means the "Spirit that creates". It however has about four variant meanings as suggested by Ene. The word "*Chineke*" can be broken down as follows:

- |     |                    |  |
|-----|--------------------|--|
| (a) | Chi <i>na</i> Eke  | God and the Creator                            |
| (b) | Chi <i>na-eke</i>  | God who creates (God creates)                  |
| (c) | Chi <i>n</i> 'Eke  | God in (the morning of) Creation               |
| (d) | Chi <i>nne</i> Eke | God, mother of Creation (God the true Creator) |

Whichever applies, nothing should detract from the fact that in Igbo belief system, God is the genderless spirit that sits at the summit of the spectrum of all deities and spirits known and unknown.

The other common derivative of *Chineke* is *Chukwu*. It is the combination of *chi* and *ukwu*. *Ukwu* is an Igbo word which means 'great'; hence *chukwu* means the Great Source Being.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Compare the Yoruba and the Igbo concept of God.

### 3.3 Akan Concept of God

The Akan have a "high" reverence for God and He is commonly referred to as *Nyame*. Although God is considered omnipotent and omniscient, the Akan have several "praise names" which vary according to His numerous attributes. God is also perceived as an active Being who manifests Himself through what He does. Two prominent Akan names for God also stand out.

The first name is *Onyame* or *Nyame*. This is a combination of two words, namely *nya* and *me*. *Nya* means "to get" and "*me*" means "to be full". Literally, *Nyame* would then mean "If you get him you are satisfied". Through this name the Akan belief that God is the dependable one who satisfies all the needs of humanity both physical and spiritual stands out.

The second name is "*Odomankoma*". This word is also a combination of *Odom* and *Ankoma*. It means God is the author, owner and donor of an inexhaustible abundance of things. As indicated earlier, there are so many other names that describe the attributes of God.

### 3.4 The Attributes of God

While there are local variations, we can identify common elements that define African concept of God's attributes. People tell countless stories and myths to explain how the world began. First and foremost, this is a created universe and God is the supreme Creator. It is a religious universe, with its beginning in and through God. It is governed and filled by God, and there is no end to it. Of central importance is the creation and sustenance of life, with human life being most prominent. God is the Source and Sustainer of life. This is why the Yoruba call God, *Eleda'* (Creator or Owner of Creation); the Akan call God *Odomankoma* or *Borebore* which can be interpreted as Creator, Excavator and Originator among others.

To the African, God is unknowable. The Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania call God, *Engai* which can be translated "the Unseen One, the Unknown One". Likewise, among the Tenda of Guinea, God is called *Hounounga* which also means "the Unknown". People affirm that God is invisible, which is another way of asserting that they do not know God in any physical form. Subsequently, nowhere in Africa do we find physical images or representations of God, the Creator of the universe.

Another thought is that God is self-existent. God's unique nature and essence emerge in such a way as to be distinguished from all other beings. While these other beings are created and dependent on God, God is self-existent. The Zulu of South Africa point this out clearly, when they call God *uZivelele*, which means "He who is of himself, the Self-existent One".

God is both distant and near. Despite the fact that he is the wholly other yet individually and collectively, people approach God and have communion with God. They speak of God in personal terms, as: Father, Friend, Giver of children, rain and all good things, God of our ancestors, God of our forefathers and mothers, God of the skies (heavens), Great Elder, Great One, Healer, Helper, Mother, Parent, Protector, Ruler of the universe, Saviour, the Judge of all, the Just One and the Kind One among others. This is an affirmation, that God is personal and unique. The many personal and attributive names of God make this point clear. Other attributes are expressed directly through prayers, invocations and names of people and places.

People also depict God in ethical terms, and express this (as well as other attributes) in different ways, such as proverbs and short statements. For example. The Akan say: "God is not asleep". This proverb affirms the belief that God sees and knows everything; and in the case of wrongdoing, the justice of God is unfailing. In another proverb they affirm God's providence and mercy: "If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure." Equipped with such a word of assurance, they take courage in the face of hardships (like sickness, failure or danger). People are convinced that God loves them, and some simply point out that, if God did not love them God would not have created them.

The Pygmy prayer-hymn is a clear confession of the eternal nature of God with many attributes about God. They pray-sing:

In the beginning was *Khmvoum* (God)  
 Today is God,  
 Tomorrow will be God.  
 Who can make an image of God?  
 He has no body.  
 He is as a word that comes out of your mouth.  
 That word! It is no more,  
 It is past, and still it lives,  
 So is God!

According to Mbiti:

The overall picture of God is that of One who is above gender classification, neither male nor female. To grasp some aspects of God, people find anthropomorphic concepts useful and, according to the situation, may speak of God in male or female terms. They express their belief in and awareness of God through prayers, invocations, sacrifices and offerings, praise songs, and dedication of children to God. In some areas priests and priestesses officiate at religious ceremonies, pray on behalf of their communities, and pass on the theological, philosophical, and practical knowledge of their religion.

#### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Citing various examples, discuss the attributes of God in African Traditional Religion.

### 3.5 Worship of God among Africans

The acts of worshipping God vary from society to society. It includes Sacrifices and Offering, Prayers, invocations, blessing and salutations, expressions of worship, religious intermediaries and specialists, and the occasion and place of worship. These have sought to address the issues of what, when, how and where on the worship of God in the traditional society. Let us look at two different approaches to the worship of God in the African society:

The Yoruba is a typical example of an African society with no organized direct public worship of God. It has to be said however that elaborate indirect worship and private worship abound. Since the divinities are regarded as the messengers of Olodumare, the Yoruba belief is that once these divinities have been worshipped and sacrificed to, they in turn will transmit what is necessary of the worship and sacrifice to Olodumare. This is because as it is known and accepted in their socio-political environment, the King cannot be approached directly except through the various ward chiefs who formed the King's cabinet.

However, outside ritual contexts the Yoruba recognize Olodumare's readiness to intervene in human affairs and do make direct appeals to him. This is done especially in periods of personal crises and oppression or injustice. Redress is sought mostly in the courts of Olodumare.

The form of direct worship of Olodumare that is common among the Yoruba is that of pouring libation of cold water and praying with kola in

the centre of a circle drawn with white chalk. This is reportedly done by a priest in the palace of the Ooni (King) of Ife on a daily basis while individuals can carry this out on instruction from the oracle. However as Bolaji Idowu opines, this direct worship of Olodumare is dying out gradually.

The Akan is a typical example of an African society with elaborate public worship of God. According to S. R. Rattray, the Akan has shrines, temples and priests that are dedicated to the service and regular worship of Onyame. Almost every Akan compound has an altar for Onyame at which private devotions and daily offerings are made to God. The private altar is made of a forked branch of a tree called God's tree. A basin or pot is placed in between the branches and it contains an axe called God's axe that is used to bless the members of the house. Apart from these, private altars are also what is called the personal altars. The weekly worship of God among the Akan holds on Saturday which is known as Onyame's day.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3**

How do the Africans worship God?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

As we have stated earlier, it would amount to ignorance to say that Africans do not have an idea of God, prior to the coming of the Europeans. As you have seen above, the Africans have their belief about God that is akin to what we might have learnt in systematic theology. Though, these are not written down, but the names given to God and even their children express these truths about God. Manner of worship may also differ from locality to locality but all the same God is being worshipped.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points that you have learnt in this unit:

- Among most African people groups, God is seen as the source of all things.
- The socio-political organization of the African society goes a long way to determine the worship of God.
- There is the indirect worship of God, which is more prevalent.
- There is the direct worship of God.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the worship of God in the African Traditional Religion.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

- Shorter, A. (1975). *African Christian Theology*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Ikenga-Metuh, E. (1991). *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: the Problem of Interpretation*. Jos: IMICO Press.
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### On-line Resources

- M. O. Ene, "Chi" an internet available at [www.kwenu.com](http://www.kwenu.com)
- John Mbiti, "General Manifestations of African Religiosity" an internet available at <http://afrikaworld.net/afrellmbiti.htm>
- C. K. Rutledge, "African Traditional Religious Beliefs among the Akan" an internet available at [www.colanmc.siu.edu](http://www.colanmc.siu.edu)

## **UNIT 2 CULT OF THE DIVINITIES IN AFRICA**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Who are the Divinities?
  - 3.2 Selected Divinities in some African Localities
  - 3.3 Position and Duties of Divinities
  - 3.4 Relation of the Divinities with God
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

As you have learnt in the earlier unit, the second element in the structure of the African Traditional Religion is the belief in the divinities. The worship of the divinities is more obvious in the African religion than any other forms of the religion. However, it has to be noted that there are several divinities and form of worship from one people group to another. Consequently, this unit shall focus on select divinities from select groups.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

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

- define who the divinities are
- discuss the worship of some of the selected divinities
- evaluate the position and the role of the divinities in African religion
- give the historical background to the cult of the selected divinities
- discuss the relationship between God and the divinities according to African belief.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Who are the Divinities?**

Iya Olamide, one of the priestesses of African Traditional Religion in her response to the identity of the divinities has this to say:

The Orisha are complex multivalent beings. The Orisha are aspects of God. Since we cannot know God, and the Orisha are a little easier to grasp in our understanding people concentrate more on the divinities. They are forces of nature. As such they exist everywhere. They are also forces in the human mind. Ogun is will. Yemoja is compassion. Obatala is reason. Oshun stands for self esteem. The Orisha also embody values. They are also principles of life. Yemoja's principle is that of nurture; Shango is for truth; Obatala stands for ethics; Oshun is for connectiveness and Oya is for change. Some consider the Orisha laws by which we must live our lives. Oshun's law is love yourself while Shango's is use your head. The Orisha also have reincarnated on the earth and achieved Orishahood. There are stories about the apotheosis of Yemoja, Shango, Oya and Orisha-Oko, to name a few. Therefore the Orisha are also ancestors, however, a special category of ancestors.

This presentation on the identity of the divinities from this priestess has corroborated our earlier explanation about the nature and the categories of the divinities. The three different categories of the divinities are important facts that should not be forgotten. There are the primordial divinities, the divinities of natural phenomenon and the deified heroes and ancestors.

### 3.2 Selected Divinities in some African Localities

It is absolutely impossible to discuss all the divinities in Africa simply because they are numerous and in different localities. Some are identical though their names are different. For example, there is a Yoruba invocative hymn that attempts to indicate the number of the divinities of Yoruba land. It would be translated thus:

I pay homage to the two hundred divinities of the  
right side

I pay homage to the two hundred divinities of the  
left side

I pay homage to the two hundred and sixty  
divinities that dwell on the way to heaven.

If one goes by this hymn, there would be nothing less than six hundred and sixty divinities in the Yoruba pantheon. Others think that they may be more than that. As had been asserted earlier, the Yoruba pantheon is an example of a full divinity in Africa. We will now treat some of the divinities of Yoruba pantheon and mention their counterpart in other



parts of Africa. Other people groups will also be examined so that we can have a representative account of the divinities in Africa.

### **Obatala**

*Obatala* is the arch-divinity in Yoruba land. He is known by other names like: *Orisa-nla* and *Ogiyan*. *Obatala* is the creator-divinity. Myth has it that it was *Obatala* that *Olodumare* commissioned to create the earth and equip it with everything that humanity would need. He was also the one commissioned to create the physical bodies of human beings from the dust of the earth. It was however *Olodumare's* prerogative to make the physical form made by *Obatala* a living being—the secret that was withheld from *Obatala*. Another myth has it that when *Obatala* grew jealous and curious and attempted to spy on *Olodumare* to detect how He makes the physical forms turn to living beings, *Olodumare* made him to fall into a deep slumber only to wake up after all the physical bodies had come alive. Note that this myth is another pointer to the fact that the divinities were not considered to be Deity and were not independent from Deity.

*Obatala* is regarded as the divinity of purity. The name *Obatala* implies the King of purity. This is the reason for the white colour of everything associated with him. His temple or shrine must be white-washed. His priests and priestesses along with the followers are usually dressed in white. His emblems are white chalk and white beads. In fact it is a taboo for anyone to bring palm-oil close to his shrine. There is usually in the shrine water drawn from the spring in the early hours of the morning (that is before anybody gets to the spring). The water must be drawn by a virgin who has not started menstruation or an old woman at menopause. This again implies that blood of any kind do not come to pollute his shrine. The water drawn at dawn too implies unpolluted water. This nature of *Obatala* demands from his adherents a life of purity, honesty and one set apart from pollution. In all things, *Obatala* represents the holiness of God.

*Obatala* is worshipped all over the Yoruba Empire and beyond as seen in the resuscitation of African religions in the West today. Barren women, those afflicted with inexplicable diseases, and those facing problem during the crises of life take their petition to him for solutions. Water taken from his shrine is also given to the sick or invalids for their cure.

### **Orunmila**

*Orunmila* is the great oracle divinity and is also known *as ha*. This is a divinity which one can be said is worshipped throughout Africa under

different names. However, according to Yoruba mythology, he was said to have accompanied *Obatala* as a counsellor when *Obatala* was sent to equip the earth after it has been created. *Orunmila* is undoubtedly one of the most revered representatives of *Olodumare* on earth. Great wisdom and power are attributed to *Orunmila* and *Ifa* divination is associated with the cult of *Orunmila*. He is said to declare the will of God and the other divinities.

In addition to his skills and wisdom in matters pertaining to divination, *Orunmila* can reveal to the *Ifa* priest (*Babalawo*) what roots and leaves that can be used in healing a particular ailment. In this field, he is said to be assisted by *Osanyin* (another divinity that has variously been described as a brother, friend, partner or servant of *Orunmila*).

Yoruba myth has it that *Orunmila* was present when human destiny was fixed in heaven before they were born. This is why he is called "the witness of destiny" (*Eleri-ipin*) and this forms the basis for people going to him almost at every stage of life to inquire if they are on the track of their chosen destiny. This singular factor explains why the worship of *Orunmila* is the most widespread in Africa. *Orunmila* is believed to be able to give advice to all and sundry.

According to Bolaji Idowu, *Orunmila* constitutes one of the elements of the demands and sanctions of morality in Yoruba religion. For instance, an *Ifa* priest is constrained not to abuse his office in any way or use his position to enrich himself or refuse his services to anybody because of inability to pay the divination fee. It is believed that the *Ifa* priest should not tell a lie or bear false witness or do anything evil with his powers. They say that anyone who does will forever remain impoverished.

The shrine of *Orunmila* is usually found in the house of the worshippers or priests. His emblems include palm-kernels, cowries and a graven and beautified elephant's tusk. These are kept in a white plate or bowl. Sacrifices are offered to *Orunmila* from time to time. The fifth day (*orun*) is however his day of worship when sacrifices are more elaborate. At times through divination, he can be worshipped on request and things to be used in worship are also determined through divination.

## Esu

It is unfortunate that many observers and even Africans have misrepresented Esu as the divinity of evil of the Bible (New Testament). If it is compulsory to make a parallelism, Esu best fits the concept of Satan in the early beginnings of Jewish theology, when Esu is seen more as a messenger of YHWH. The biblical concept of the all evil personality that opposes all that is good and represents God does not fit

in to the Yoruba concept of Esu. The adherents of Esu see Esu as one of the divinities closest to Olodumare especially on matters of rituals and human conduct. He is therefore seen as the "Inspector General" of rituals. He is expected to watch over the behaviours and conduct of both human beings and divinities. He is expected to make a report on these to Olodumare. He has the authority to approve or disprove of any sacrifice he inspects and it is his recommendation that is finally acceptable to Olodumare.

There are two sides to this divinity that has been described more as a trickster. The one side cuts the picture of a divinity that is dreaded by the people. They believe that by virtue of his office, Esu holds the power of life and death over them as their prosperity or calamity depends on the reports he gives to Olodumare. Usually people attribute all their difficulties to the failures of Esu to perform his duties. People also invoke Esu to punish their enemies and also to offer protection to them against mishaps and mischief. It is also believed that Esu is difficult to placate and to predict.

On the other side, people see in Esu an element that can be utilized for human need and progress. And so as it is with other divinities, Esu is approached daily in prayers with gifts to secure his favour and to enable him to confer benefits on them. The belief that Esu can be a medium of having children makes the adherents give their children names like Esubiya (Esu has given birth to this one).

### **Ala**

This is the Igbo earth goddess. She is the arch divinity of Igbo land. She is regarded as both the spirit of the earth and the queen of the underworld who rules the ancestors that have been buried in the earth. As the mother goddess, Ala is the spirit of fertility. The Igbo believe that she is a powerful beneficent deity. She is also the custodian of public morality. The goddess is a giver and administrator of moral laws and her priests are the guardians of public morality on her behalf. Crimes, such as stealing, adultery, giving birth to abnormal children such as cripples and twins are offences that must be purged by necessary sacrifice.

The shrine of Ala fosters social unity among the Igbo group. Every Igbo village has communal shrine of Ala where she is depicted by a statue of a woman carrying a child on her arms and on her knees. Women pray to her for children. It is believed that the spirit controls the earth and as a result, farmers usually propitiate her before tilling the ground. The Igbo regard this divinity as a mother and a god and according to their belief all that they have derives from this divinity. It is also believed that when a child mistakenly falls on the ground, Ala will take care of the child

The priest of Ala is known as Ezeala and is the one that offers sacrifices to this divinity. The sacrifice usually comes up before the planting of crops, during the harvest of first fruits and finally at the full harvest during which special sacrifices are offered to Ala who owns the land on which farming had taken place. Ezeala takes the lead in every ceremony and he is a potent force in all aspects of village life.

### **Amadioha**

This is another popular divinity among the Igbo people. This divinity is also known as Igwe, Ofufe and Kamalu in other localities within Igbo land. Amadioha is highly regarded among the Igbo. He is regarded as the one in control of lightning, thunder and storm. He represents the wrath of God and the manifestation of divine justice. He is the one that punishes witches, thieves, sorcerers and other evil doers.

As it is among other African groups parallel of this divinity, the victims must not be mourned because they have been punished for their evil deeds. Their corpses are given to the priests of Amadioha for burial. The burial is immediately followed by sacrifices at the spot where Amadioha had killed the victims. It is also held that all the properties of the victims must be handed over to the priest's of Amadioha immediately after the burial of the victim.

It has to be noted however that Amadioha is not only known for his fearful dealings with the people, he is also regarded as a benevolent god. He gives rain to the people and is also prayed to for soil fertility by farmers. Barren women also pray to him for children while traders approach him for success in their trade.

### **Olokun**

Olokun is a divinity among the Edo people. The name, Olokun literally means "the owner of the sea". This implies that Olokun is the divinity of the ocean and water. It is believed among the Edo that Olokun has been in existence as the eldest of Osanobua's children, the rest being Esu, Ogun (the divinity of iron), Igiuwu (the divinity of death) and Obiemwen (the divinity of fertility). So it was held that when Osanobua created the earth and needed to appoint a representative from among his children it was easy for him to appoint Olokun who has already distinguished herself as being head and shoulder above other children in terms of wisdom and health.

After Olokun was appointed the vicar on earth, Osanobua endowed her with more wealth, power and wisdom and all that is needed to make life comfortable for people on earth. In addition, all other brother-divinities

were placed at her beck and call. This is why Olokun is seen as the divinity of fortune.

Olokun is regarded as a beneficent divinity. It is believed that Olokun has all the material well-being at her disposal and can distribute this to people according to her will. The divinity is believed to send rain and give the soil fertility. The association of Olokun with wealth has actually drawn a lot of people to the divinity. Apart from this, Olokun is regarded as a divinity of morality and purity of heart and body. This is symbolically seen in the emblems which include pots of fresh water drawn from the stream early in the morning, pieces of white chalk and white cloth. Special offerings to the divinity include white fowl and white pigeons. The adherents of Olokun are expected to put on white apparels except the priestess who wears crimson red parrot feather and crimson coloured velvet cloth. The white apparels signify that the adherents belong to a cult of holiness and they are also expected to be pure both in the heart and physically. The priestesses are supposed to be embodiment of purity and honesty.

### **Sokogba**

Sokogba is the thunder divinity of the Nupe. This divinity has a close resemblance to Sango among the Yoruba and Amadioha of the Igbo. He is seen as representing the wrath of God upon the disobedient. His presence is manifested in thunderbolts and lightening. He punishes moral offenders such as thieves, wizards, sorcerers and witches.

However, he is not always seen as a god of destruction the adherents believe that Sokogba is capable of procuring the fertility of women who are barren. Such prayers are offered on behalf of the needy by the priest of the divinity. When this is done, children that are born are possessions of Sokogba. The priest, Kuti as he is called, is notified of the birth of such a child who will in turn inform the divinity through a sacrifice asking for long life for the child. After the sacrifice, the child is handed over to the priest.

### **Tano**

Tano is regarded as the greatest of the Ashanti divinities. He is often described as king as his other name, Takora, signifies. He is also seen as the father of water gods. The Ashanti people see him as the creator divinity and the principal temple is located near the source of River Tano at Obuase. Other shrines are also erected near rivers. The emblems of Tano include stones taken from river beds, a brass pan or basket in which these emblems are placed and sometimes medicinal herbs are also included. Tano is worshipped by other ethnic groups. His worshippers

are expected to keep some taboos including the one which forbids the menstruating women from coming near his shrine.

### **3.3 Position and Duties of Divinities**

Divinities hold a prominent position in African Traditional Religion as far as the adherents are concerned. They are real to the people and are believed to exist with definite functions or duties and each of them functioning within its jurisdiction.

Firstly, the divinities function as intermediaries between God and humanity. They are always at hand. The people approach God through these divinities and as such they receive daily sacrifices. As such, the divinities can be described as semi-autonomous agents, each being the executive head of his or her department in God's monarchical government.

Secondly, the divinities are able to foretell the future and prevent misfortune. They however derive this power from God, from whom they derive their existence. This is one of the reasons the divinities are approached on all occasions of life. For example, they are asked to protect crops and in times of war they are consulted to ensure victory. Even in times of peace they are sacrificed to as a token of appreciation.

### **3.4 Relation of the Divinities with God**

The best area to look for a means of understanding the relationship between God and the divinities in African Traditional Religion is the sociological pattern of the people of Africa. For example, among the Yoruba, Nupe, Edo, Fon and Ewe where there is a hierarchical social structure, the religion also show the same trait. In the above mentioned societies, there is always a paramount ruler whether he is called King or Oba or paramount chief. He is followed by lesser chiefs, the village heads, the ward heads and the ordinary people. This concept is transferred to the religious or theological thinking. Thus in their concept God is seen as the Supreme Ruler of the universe who had appointed the divinities as the executive and administrative heads of the earthly theocratic society. Thus the divinities are not seen as having any independent existence apart from God. The relationship of the divinities to God in African religion can be summarized thus:

- They are brought into being by God and the people regard them as sons and daughters of God.
- They have no absolute existence apart from God because their powers and authorities are meaningless apart from God

- They are ministers of God in a theocratic government
- They act as intermediaries between God and humanity.

However, though they are subservient to God, the divinities constitute a powerful force in the supra-sensible world in the African thinking.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you have read about various divinities from various parts of Africa and what they are supposed to be to their adherents. Apart from this, you were exposed to the position and the role of these divinities as well as their relationship with God.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- The divinities hold a prominent position in African Traditional Religion.
- They are brought into being by God and the people regard them as sons and daughters of God.
- They have no absolute existence apart from God because their powers and authorities are meaningless apart from God.
- They are ministers of God in a theocratic government
- They act as intermediaries between God and humanity.

#### **6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss about the divinities of God's judgement.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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#### Online Resources

Iya Olamide, "Where Ogun Fears to Tread" an internet article available in *Roots and Rooted*, an internet magazine on [www.rootsandrooted.org.htm](http://www.rootsandrooted.org.htm)



## **UNIT 3 THE NATURE AND CONCEPT OF HUMANITY IN AFRICAN RELIGION**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 20 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Origin of Human Beings
  - 3.2 Yoruba Concept of Human Beings
  - 3.3 Akan Concept of Human Beings
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

One of the major concerns of all religions and people groups in the world have been the origin, nature and destiny of humanity as well as the relationship between humanity and God. This issue is not overlooked in African religion as the origin of human beings and the relationship between God and human beings is exhaustively dealt with. In this unit, you will study the origin of human beings and representative concepts of humanity in African Traditional Religion.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain the African understanding of the origin of human beings
- narrate Yoruba concept of human beings
- narrate the Akan concept of human beings.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Origin of Human Beings**

All over Africa human beings are regarded as the creatures of God. There may be marked differences in the myths about the manner in which they are brought into existence from one locality to the other but the fact remains that they are brought into being through the instrumentality of God.

Apart from this, it is also held that human beings enjoy a special relationship with God. They believe that God has placed them over all other creatures by giving them intelligence and freedom to choose. This relationship is often defined most of the time in terms of father-son relationship. It is not marked only by submissiveness, obedience and resignation to the will of God on the part of human beings but also with love, protection and care from God.

Africans also in various myths have pictured the separation between human beings and God. The idea is that in the beginning God lives among human beings in close fellowship but because of their way of behaviour, God eventually distanced himself from them thus still allowing them access to him.

In the area of essence, Africans generally hold that human beings are much more than flesh and blood. They hold that there is something which forms the essence of man's being. They hold that this essence is invisible but it is real as it is being manifested in sundry ways. To illustrate this view you will read about some concepts of man in Africa.

### **3.2 Yoruba Concept of Human Beings**

The first important concept of Yoruba about human beings is the division of man into constituent parts. According to them there are five parts that make up the human being. These are: **ara, ojiji, okan, emi** and **on**.

**Ara** is the physical body of human beings. This is the part of the body that is being shared with other animals. It is that which is used to act and react on the physical environment. It is however seen as the temple or the house for the other constituent parts. It is also held that after the death of human beings it is the physical body that is buried and allowed to perish.

**Ojiji** can be translated shadow in English. For the Yoruba the visible shadow that is cast by the human body is representative of the invisible human person, that is, the real man. The basis of this belief is the fact that at death, the shadow ceases to exist and vanishes with the essence of the person. While alive however, it is held that the shadow as a constant companion of the body can be used to cause harm to the body through charms and evil medicines.

**Okan**, the third component can be translated as the heart. This would mean the natural or the physical heart. This component is closely connected with the blood. However for the Yoruba, the material heart that can be seen and that is shared with other lower animals is only

representative of the immaterial and invisible heart. To them, the immaterial heart is the seat of intelligence, thought and action. The same word is also used to mean the mind or mentality of human beings.

The fourth part is the *emi* which is translated as the breath or the spirit. This to the Yoruba is the manifestation of life. This is what gives life to the physical body. It is believed that at death the breath ceases to exist because the owner of the spirit (that is God) has claimed it back. The spirit of human beings, according to the above statement ultimately belongs to God and he can demand it back from them at any time he wishes to.

The fifth constituent part of human beings is called '**on**'. This can be translated as head. In the physical set up, *on* is that part of human beings that contains the brain and is the seat of intellect. As with almost all other constituents, the physical head is just a symbol of the spiritual head which is usually called '*on-mu*' (literally the inner head). It is the inner head that controls the whole personality of human beings. It is believed that the spiritual head is closely related to God and is actually given to man according to his choice in the presence of *Orunmila* who is called the witness of destiny.

The Yoruba believes that a person's spiritual head may be good or bad depending upon so many factors. It is also believed that basically all spiritual head is good but a person's character may affect his spiritual head. When this happens, the corrupted spiritual head would then affect the whole course of the person's life adversely. Therefore the Yoruba often pray that their inner head would not affect the physical head negatively.

**OH** is sometimes considered to be the human being's double or counterpart or guardian angel. It is often referred to as "*enikeji*" which will literally translate "my second person". This is the basis for the prayer that "may your head be with you and prosper you" when people are about to undertake a journey or a business enterprise. In the same vein, young women going into marriage are usually advised that they should not take beauty with them to their husband's house but they should rather take their spiritual head along.

The place of **on** among the Yoruba is so important that it is believed that once your spiritual head is in good order, no human being has need of medicine or magic. In fact your head can protect you from anyone who wishes to harm or injure you. This is why at times among the Yoruba; *on* can be classified as a divinity. In fact there is a saying that people should have appeased their head first before appeasing any divinity. It is not surprising therefore to see people worship *on* among

the Yoruba. Those who are rich made a house for their *on* sometimes using 40,000 cowries. This is called *ile-ori* (the house of the head).

There is a very close relationship among the Yoruba between the spiritual head and the concept of destiny. Destiny is therefore called *iponri*, that is, the predestined lot. There is a Yoruba myth that teaches that after human beings have been created they go to the house of Ajala the smith of heaven to choose their head. It is believed that the choice that is made at this point is what determines their journey on earth. It goes a long way to determine character, occupation, success in life, the sum total of fortunes and misfortunes as well as the time of death. It is believed that once chosen this cannot be altered.

There are however some factors that can change a happy destiny to an unhappy one.

The first of these factors is one's guardian angel. A person's guardian angel is capable of altering the person's destiny from a happy to an unhappy one. This can be noticed when things suddenly go bad for one. In order to keep the situation normal, regular offerings are given to the spiritual head. It has to be noted however that one's spiritual head can make one to have an unfortunate incidence in order to keep one away from being harmed by other negative forces.

The second factor as indicated earlier is one's character. Yoruba believes that a person whose character is below expectation has already spoilt his own destiny. The Yoruba say that character is like a divinity which if given regular worship gives one prompt protection.

The third factor is the divinities. The divinities can altar a person's destiny if that person has violated divine laws. These divine laws are the laws that have to do with both God-humanity as well as humanity to humanity relationships. The divinities can by way of punishment alter a person's destiny. This however can be appeased by sacrifices and by propitiating the divinities concerned.

The final factor is the evil ones of the world that the Yoruba euphemistically call "*onto araye*", that is, the children of this world. In this category are witches, sorcerers, those that poison as well as all who engage in the business of destroying the lives of others. These factors can be put at abeyance by one's spiritual head.

### **3.3 The Akan Concept of Human Beings**

The **Akan** concept is a very complex one involving the interplay between the **Okra** or **Kra**; the **Sunsum**; the **Ntoro** and the **Mogya**.

The **Okra** is the essence of being, that is the personality soul. It is also the guardian angel or spirit protecting and guarding human beings. It is said also to be able to cause prosperity and adversity. The Akan believe that it is *okra* that receives human destiny before God. Such destiny is sealed as received and when the person comes into the world it is only *okra* that knows all about the person's destiny and it stands by the person to show the person how to achieve the destiny. It is believed that *okra* leaves a dying person gradually until the person takes the last breath. It is assumed that when the dying person is panting or gasping for breath, the *okra* is climbing the hill to the land of the spirits. As guardian and protector, *okra* receives certain sacrifices. *Okra* can also be purified from any form of defilement in a ceremony called **Kra dwari**, that is, the washing of the soul. This is done on the day that the person is born.

The **sunsum** is almost identical with the *okra* although it appears to be distinct. It is seen as the intangible element in human beings which accounts for their character and disposition. It is the **sunsum** that individualizes a child making the child what the child is: kind, stupid, eloquent, clever, lazy or hardworking. The Akan however believes that the child has the same spirit as the father. As a result-they hold that a child cannot live if separated from the father's **sunsum**. **Therefore, if** a child falls sick in the absence of the father and gets well as soon as the father returns they say that the father's **sunsum** has acted as a cover for the child. **Sunsum** is believed to be the spiritual cause of sickness. A strong **sunsum** is the most potent antidote against witchcraft and bad magic. It is also assumed that it is the **sunsum** of the witch that leaves the body of the witch to perform misdeeds that are associated with the witches. It is also assumed to be associated with dreams and perishes at the death of the person.

Another element is known as **Ntoro**. It is believed that during the process of procreation, **ntoro** is the part transmitted by the male while the blood is transmitted by the woman and the mixture results in pregnancy. Throughout life **ntoro** is said to exercise a creative function. When a child reaches the age of puberty, the child will observe the fathers **ntoro** or behaves like the father unconsciously. Those who belong to the same **ntoro** group is said to have the similar **sunsum**.

The fourth and the final component of human beings according to Akan concept is the **mogya**. The *mogya* is believed to be given by the mother to the child. The **mogya**, which can be translated blood from the mother, gives the child status and membership within the family. It also spells out the child's obligation as a citizen in a matrilineal society as the Akan.

In the Akan concept, a child is formed when the father's **ntoro** cooperates with the mother's **mogya** at the time of conception. It is also believed that at death the **mogya** of the person goes down to the mother-earth and the *okra* returns to the Creator.

In summary, in the Akan concept, a human being is made up of the **okra** (soul), the **sunsum** (spirit), the **ntoro** and the **mogya**. These different components however do not give a different personality but a united one.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit you have studied about the African concept of humanity as being created by God and being in perfect harmony with God from the beginning. After this, because of humanity's disobedience God eventually withdrew from humanity. You have also studied about the Yoruba and the Akan concept of man as having the physical and the spiritual parts.

#### 5.0 SUMMARY

The following are the major points that you have learnt in this unit:

- Africans believe that human beings were created by God
- The Africans believe that there are both spiritual and physical aspects to humanity.
- An example of this belief is the Yoruba concept that a human being has five parts, namely **ara, ojiji, okan, emi** and **on**.
- The Akan also name four aspects to human beings, namely: **Okra** or **Kra**; the **Sunsum**; the **Ntoro** and the **Mogya**.

#### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Using the Akan and the Yoruba concept of human beings, discuss the African concept of humanity.

#### 7.0 REFERENCES/FUTHER READING

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## UNIT 4 PASSAGE OF LIFE RITES

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The different stages of life that human beings have to pass through in life are usually referred to as the passages of life. They involved the crossing from one stage of life to the other. Religiously among Africans, these are the stages when people are metaphysically and sociologically made into new beings. For example, the new human beings are given new roles in the society. As a result of the importance attached to these stages, the Africans attached them to religious cycles and attached important rituals to them. These rituals are the ones called the rites of passage. There are four major rites of passage among Africans and these are: the birth rite, puberty or adolescence rite, marriage or procreation rite and death or funeral rite.

Of all the rites of passage it is only the first three that the human being concerned participates in. No one is able to participate in his or her own death rite. The importance attached to the death and funeral rites demand that it would be treated as a subject of its own.

As had been stated earlier, the rites of passage differ from one African locality to another. As a result of this we will also examine these rites as we have done in the previous chapter.



## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- define what rite of passage is
- narrate the various Yoruba rites of passage
- narrate the Mende rites of passage
- narrate the Ashanti rites of passage.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Yoruba Rites of Passage

#### 3.1.1 Birth Rite among the Yoruba

Among the Yoruba, great importance is attached to the birth of a new child because a new born child is seen as the reincarnation of some ancestors who are seeking a return to life. This singular reason is the basis for the Yoruba's handling of barrenness as a serious curse and a great misfortune.

From the point of conception until a child is finally delivered, great care is taken to ensure safe delivery. Medicine men are consulted to provide charms to ward off evil spirit and also all the needed medical care to ensure safe delivery. At this point, the pregnant woman is made to observe all family taboos and ones that are considered general taboos. Some examples are that the pregnant woman should avoid walking in the sun during the day and in the dead of the night to avoid the spirits of children that are 'born to die' from entering her womb. She is also expected to offer sacrifices to the husband's ancestral spirits who are believed to be capable of warding off witches and sorcerers who may want to attack the woman at the point of delivery.

Finally when the child arrives, the first eight days are the most critical ones. The baby during these eight days is regarded as a visitor to this world whose stay in this earth is still uncertain. On the third day of the birth, the Ifa oracle would be consulted. This ceremony is called "*ese n taye*". In this ceremony, the child's feet would be placed on the sand of the divination tray to determine what sort of child it would be and what should be done by the parents in order that the child may have a happy destiny.

The next ceremony comes up on either the seventh day (if the baby is a girl) or on the ninth day (if the baby is a boy); this is the naming ceremony. The name a child is given in Yoruba land depends on the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child or the situation in the

family as at the birth of the child. For example, a child born during festival period can be called "Bodunde" or "Abiodun". If a child is born shortly after the demise of the grandfather or mother and the child happens to be in the sex of the departed one, the child would be named "Babatunde" if it is male or "Iyabo" if it is female.

Elements used for the naming ceremony among the Yoruba people include honey, salt and sugar-cane (all of which symbolizes the sweetness of life); bitter-kola (which symbolizes a safe journey through life) and kola-nut which symbolizes the warding off of evil. As soon as the child is named with prayers using the elements, the elements are passed round for those present at the ceremony to eat out of it.

### 3.1.2 Puberty Rite

Unlike other African people, the Yoruba do not have an elaborate puberty rite. The principal adolescent rite for the male children is the circumcision rite. This is usually carried out when the boy reach the age of twenty or is about to take a wife. Due to modernization and western influence, the rite now takes place immediately after the birth of the child and without the attending fanfare. The female children too as a sign of maturity are expected to go through circumcision before they get married. Tattooing of the shoulders, back, trunk and thighs are also done at this time. It has to be noted too that western civilization has reduced female circumcision to the minimum among the Yoruba.

### 3.1.3 Marriage Rites

Marriage among the Yoruba is a very important event and it is a meeting point for the departed, the living and the ones to be born. In the Yoruba worldview failure to get married is a sign that the person has rejected the society and the society in turn has rejected the person.

Unlike the culture of the West, marriage is a family concern and not an individual matter. This is because marriage is seen as the unity of the two families and the responsibilities are also shared among the two families. The marriage bond for the Yoruba does not terminate at death of either or the two spouses.

When a girl is found to be of the age of marriage a group from the house of the would-be-groom would approach the girl's family to ask for her hand in marriage. The family would request for time to consider the matter. During this period the family would carry out their secret investigation about the boy's family and also consult with the oracle to ask about the viability of the proposed union. The investigation is specifically carried out to ascertain if the proposed groom's family had a

history of diseases such as insanity, leprosy, epilepsy and tuberculosis. It will also examine whether the family had been associated with any crime or unsocial behaviour which would bring disgrace to them if they get associated with the family. When all these had been ascertained and there is no obstacle, then the union may be allowed to take off and the negotiation for marriage proper begins

At this point the proposed groom would go to the bride's family and pay a token sum of money called "owo ibasoro" (payment for talking) and when this is taken, talks between the proposed couple would commence. If the girl consents to the marriage and the girl's parent too consent, another token sum of money called "owo ijohen" (the money for saying yes) would be paid along with two gourds of palm-wine or two bottles of hot drink. When this is received, it is assumed that everyone concerned and the tutelary divinities had given consent to the marriage.

The next stage is what is known as the engagement (called idana). The customary bride price (a token to say thank you for the girl's parents to have taken good care of her) which actually varies from family to family is paid. This legalizes the marriage because payment of bride price gives a man control over the woman and all her offspring.

The marriage proper takes place shortly after the payment of the bride price. The ceremony is characterized by prayers from both parents for fruitfulness, peaceful union and long life. The tutelary divinities are invoked to shower their blessings on the new home. At the end, the bride is delivered into the hand of the eldest wife from the husband's family or some other elderly women who will take her home. The new bride is usually accompanied by her friends and age group. This usually takes place in the night. On reaching the husband's house, she would go in only after she has been prayed for at the doorstep. Later she is introduced to every member of the family who will welcome her with gifts and she is also introduced to her domestic responsibility.

## **3.2 The Mende Rites of Passage**

### **3.2.1 Birth Rite among the Mende**

With the Mende people, as soon as a woman is pregnant, she is put under the care of an elderly woman who acts as midwife. At the point of giving birth, all men are forbidden to be present in the house. A male child is named on the fourth day while a female child is named on the third day. Like what obtains among the Yoruba a child's name indicates the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. For example, a child born shortly after the death of child is called Gilo (female) or Gibas (male) which means "let this one live".

The naming of a female child is usually done by a woman who will take the child out and face the sun. She spits on the child's face and gives the name. A male child is however named by his father, the father's brother or any elderly man in the family. The procedure is the same as for the female.

### 3.2.2 Puberty Rite among the Mende

Among the Mende puberty rites is very elaborate. It is during this period that both the males and females undergo a training and initiation into adulthood. The initiation usually comes up between the age of fourteen or fifteen.

At this point the boys are initiated into the Poro society. Let us first discuss that of the boys. During the Poro secret society initiation rite of the Mende the boys first face circumcision if they are not already circumcised. Those conducting the rites then force the boys onto the ground and cut their backs with razors while forcing their heads into a hole. The resulting scars signify the teeth marks of the Poro spirit that consumes the boys. Poro initiates undergo training periods during which they are considered dangerous. They play pipes and yell warning cries to prevent passers-by from coming into contact with them. Poro initiates undergo ordeals during this state. They are deprived of sleep, forced to labor, exposed to the elements, forced to seek their own nourishment in the bush, and instructed in Poro law. The initiates then reemerge, often through formal ritual procedures, to the normal social fabric with a newly defined identity and a changed social status.

The girls on the other hand are initiated into the Sande society where they are circumcised and prepared for motherhood. The initiation and socialization of females takes place in Sande camps, where young girls learn basic Mende female values. They are trained for marriage, in domestic and family issues, about economic pursuits, and in singing and dancing. The Sande maskers visit the camps periodically and the young girls learn to respect these spirits that guide and protect them. When the girls leave the camp it is a symbol of rebirth; they are then women ready for marriage.

The Soweï mask is worn over the head of a female dancer and represents Mende ideas of female virtue and beauty. The broad smooth forehead of the mask signifies contemplativeness and restraint. The neck creases of the mask signify full-bodiness and good health, while the smooth skin represents youthfulness. The small shapely ears, nose and mouth mean that women are not given to gossip and braided hair is a testament to sexuality and cosmetic skills. The bird figure perched on top of the mask

has several meanings that include love, discipline, laughter, danger, and power.

### **3.2.3 Marriage Rite among the Mende**

Under normal conditions, the Mende girl would have been betrothed very early in life. However, proper marriage does not take place until the girl has been initiated into the Sande society. It is believed that a girl or boy that has not been fully initiated must not have sexual dealings.

When a Mende boy is ready to get married he will take the bride price to his father-in-law. This is usually a lump sum of money and other goods such as clothes. The girl's parents in turn will call their daughter and present the bride price to her. The girl's mother would then ask if she is prepared to go with the man. About two days later, the husband will send an emissary, usually an elderly woman, to his parent-in-law to request that his wife should come to live with him. As soon as the parents give their consent, they will call the girl to get her set for her new home. When the girl is ready to leave, the mother blesses her by spitting on her hands and rubbing the saliva on the girl's forehead. The girl is then led to her husband's house by dancers.

## **3.3 The Ashanti Rites of Passage**

### **3.3.1 The Ashanti Birth Rites**

The pregnant woman among the Ashanti is subjected to many restrictions:

- She must not leave her compound during the first trimester
- When it becomes necessary to go out she must cover her head and breasts
- She must not be told that she is pregnant
- She must avoid adultery
- She must not abuse a divinity
- She must not see the sight of blood
- She must not look at ugly things

The Ashanti believes that failures to adhere strictly to these taboos could lead to miscarriage or an abnormal child.

When the pregnancy is eight months old, the woman must go to her parent's home where she has to remain till delivery. On the day of delivery female attendants are called in to assist. When the baby finally arrives, he is called by the name of the day it was born. For example, a child born on Friday is called "Kofi" and the one born on Saturday is

called "Kwame". For the first eight days of birth, no special attention is given to the new born baby because as the Yoruba also holds, the baby can return within that period of time. But when the first eight days are passed clothes are provided and name is also given officially.

### 3.3.2 The Ashanti Puberty Rites

The puberty rites for the Ashanti girl begin on the day she sees the first menstruation. She informs her mother as soon as she sees the menstruation. The mother in turn makes the news known to the village community. After breaking the news, she will return home to pour libation to Nyame (God) and then to the ancestors. After this the girl's hair shaved from both the armpit and the vagina. This shaving symbolizes that she is a new born adult. A ceremony is later carried out where everybody is entertained with foods and drinks. This ceremony also symbolizes that the girl is ripe for marriage.

### 3.3.3 The Ashanti Marriage Rites

As with most of the other tribes earlier discussed, when an Ashanti man is ready for marriage, he takes some gifts to the home of his would-be parents-in-law. Such gifts could be in the form of materials like tobacco, fish and meat or in the form of direct labour in the farm of the would-be in-laws. After the parents have agreed to give the girl to the man as wife, the ancestors are involved to seal the marriage. The girl is then allowed to follow the man home.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

You would have seen from these examples the cyclic view of life that permeates the African society. The birth of a child is a process that begins from the point the mother gets pregnant. The new born child is seen more as a reincarnation of one of the ancestors who is seeking a return to life and childlessness is seen as a big misfortune. Puberty is the transition from childhood to adulthood and there are many localized rites to mark this symbolic transition. Marriage is also seen as a religious duty and a responsibility for everyone.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

- The different stages of life that human beings have to pass through in life are usually referred to as the passages of life.
- Religiously among Africans, these are the stages when people are metaphysically and sociologically made into new beings.

- As a result of the importance attached to these stages, the Africans attached them to religious cycles and attached important rituals to them.
- There are four major rites of passage among Africans and these are: the birth rite, puberty or adolescence rite, marriage or procreation rite and death or funeral rite.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the significance of marriage rites among the Africans.

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## **UNIT 5 RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

### **CONTENTS**

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- 2.0 Objectives
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  - 3.2 The Medicine Men
  - 3.3 The Priests and Medicine Men Compared
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- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit you will be studying about the religious leaders that exist in the African Traditional Religion. These are the various leaders that see to the smooth running of the affairs of the various religions they upheld. In Africa, three major offices exist: the priest, the medicine-man and the diviner. We will be focusing on these offices in the main body of this unit.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- identify and describe a priest
- evaluate the functions of a medicine-man
- compare and contrast the person and the functions of a priest and a medicine-man
- discuss the role of the diviner as a religious leader.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Priest**

A priest is one who is especially consecrated to the service of a divinity and through whom worship, prayer, sacrifice, or other service is offered to the object of worship, and pardon, blessing, or deliverance is obtained by the worshiper. In earliest history the functions of priest were discharged by the head of the family; later the office became a public one and the office of the priest became a celebrated central office. As a



result of the diversity of language, each locality has a different name for the priest. For example, the Yoruba call the priest, Babalorisa; the Twi say Obosomfo; the Fon use the word Voduno and the Igbo use Atama.

The office of the priest in African Traditional Religion is actually gender free. This is to say that both men and women can hold the office of the priest. Priests may have been set apart from birth or called to the service of priesthood after some time in life. It is important to know however that there are two types of priests in Africa: the lay priests and the professional priests.

The lay priests are the heads of families both male and female who are to exercise the functions of the priest for the family. They officiate at the domestic or the ancestral shrines. By virtue of this office, they approach the ancestors on behalf of their houses or family clans. They are the natural link between the living and the invisible ancestors. Priesthood in this category is not hereditary but is based on age as the most senior member of the family clan automatically takes the position.

The professional priests on the other hand are concerned with the main divinity cults in Africa. Priests in this category are usually set aside from birth or called to the task. Apart from these, there are priests who have inherited the position from their parents. In this case the priest to be would have been understudying the parent priest in order to learn all the secrets of the cult and at the death of the priest step into the shoes as the next priest.

You also have to note that there are communities in Africa where the king is regarded as the deputy of God on earth. In this case, he has the divine right to undertake certain priestly functions. He thus may lead in rituals and ceremonies that involve the whole community.

In most cases where the priesthood is non-hereditary, certain signs are noted from the priest-elect as an indication that a particular divinity has chosen that person as a priest. The signs are usually varied and would certainly include strange behaviours from the person. For example, a priest-to-be can disappear only to reappear on the seventh day. In most cases, there would be no coherent explanation about his whereabouts within those days. When this happens, a diviner is usually consulted to ascertain the truth of the situation. Immediately it is confirmed that the person has been chosen by the divinity as a priest, the installation ceremony would be carried out.

Training of priests in Africa is done through apprenticeship which may last for as long as seven years. The priest-elect is usually affiliated to an older priest when he is young for proper training. While in training, the

priest-elect undertakes series of training in occult knowledge as well as proper performance of public rituals. The priest-designate is also during training subjected to strict observance of the taboos of the divinity and of the community; chastity and asceticism becomes the order of the day while there is abstention from certain types of food. Dresses that are used during this period are usually white.

The primary duty of the priest in the African community is that of a mediator. The priest is expected to be in touch with both the divinities and man. The priest is one that is able to hear and speak on behalf of both the deity and man and knows the two intimately. It is the duty of the priest to offer sacrifices on behalf of human beings and also turn to bless them in the name of the divinity.

The priest also intercedes with the divinity on behalf of humanity. The common belief in Africa is that any form of misfortune and pestilence is an expression of the displeasure of the divinities and the continuation of this is an indication of the ineffectiveness of the priest's mediation between them and the divinities.

It is also the priest's duty to offer up sacrifices, makes prayers and present offerings at the same time. The priest leads the worship during the annual festivals of the divinity. As a custodian of religion and guardian of religious treasures and knowledge, the priest looks after the emblems and symbols of the divinity and sees to it that they are properly kept in the prescribed condition.

It is also expected of the priest to uphold custom and traditional practices related to the divinity. Since the priest is the one in possession of the taboos surrounding the cult of the divinity, it falls on the priest to ensure that these taboos are not just observed but that they are also properly and correctly transmitted.

It is also expected of the priest to function as a diviner some of the time. It has to be noted that the divinity responsible for the cult of divination is different, when the issues borders on a particular divinity, then the priest may be looked upon to explain the mysteries surrounding the divinity he stands for as a priest. At times also, the priest may have to function as an herbalist or medicine-man.

Apart from this, the traditional religion priest is an important figure in the society. Most of the time, the priest is expected to be present at the cabinet meeting because membership of the community council is automatic. They are sought for as advisors on issues bordering on people's life vis-à-vis the society. They also settle conflicts and enforce morality in the community.

The priest also features prominently during the installation of a new king for the community. The priest is also expected to officiate and perform the necessary rituals at the death of the king.

In summary, one can say that life in a traditional African setting revolves around the priest as they feature prominently in the social and religious life of the community and of individuals.

### 3.2 The Medicine Men

Medicine-men abound in the African society and they are called by various names depending on the language of the community. They are also referred to as herbalists and traditional doctors. The Igbo calls them *dibia*, the Yoruba calls them *onisegun* and the Twi calls them *samankwafo*. More often than not, the male sex is predominantly found in this profession but there have been women also that have featured as herbalists.

One fundamental belief in Africa concerning the functions of the medicine-men is that all diseases and misfortune and even accidents are caused mysteriously either through the agency of witches, sorcerers and the effect of evil words. As a result, they are to be treated religiously. Consequently, the African medicine-man does not see his art and profession as exclusive of religion as is the practice in the West now. Thus, going side-by-side with the use of roots and herbs is the invocation of religious and mysterious powers. It is in line with this prevalent belief that there must always be at least one accessible and effective medicine-man in every African community.

There is no fixed rule governing the call of the medicine-man. The call may come when he is young and unmarried or in the middle or later stage of life. It is not also out of place to see the medicine-man passing on his powers and knowledge to his children, be they male or female. There are also some that are specifically chosen in mysterious circumstances to become medicine-men. Finally there are those who only feel interested and walk into the field to seek knowledge and are thus initiated. Whichever the means through which they become medicine-men, they are expected to be trustworthy, upright, moral, friendly, willing and ready to serve. They are not expected to charge exorbitantly but remain affordable to the poor.

Before any medicine-man can perform as a professional, he would have undergone training through apprenticeship from older medicine-men. It is during this apprenticeship period that they are taught the medicinal value, quality and use of various herbs, leaves, roots, fruits, barks and grasses. They are also exposed to the values of other objects like

minerals, dead insects, bones, feathers, powders, animal excreta and shells among others. They are also taught the causes, cure and prevention of diseases and other forms of sufferings like barrenness, failures in undertakings, poor farm yield and other forms of misfortune. They are also taught how to combat witches and sorcerers and the way they can turn the spirit world into advantageous use in the battle against evil. When the training is over, they are formally and publicly initiated into the guild of professional medicine-men. It is after this ceremony that they are recognized as medicine-men.

Medicine-men are first and foremost expected to combat witchcraft and other forms of social evil. This they do by frustrating their efforts at afflicting people with diseases and at times entering into open confrontation with them.

Since their primary training is the art of healing, they are also expected to be able to unravel the cause of diseases and misfortunes. They are expected to find out who is behind the sickness if it is not caused naturally. After this they are expected to diagnose and apply the right treatment of the ailment and apply a means that will prevent the ailment from recurring.

Thirdly, they are also expected to function as diviners. It has to be stated however that not all medicine-men are diviners but it is expedient for them to be in order to function properly and as expected by the society. By virtue of their profession they are expected to have access to the forces of nature and other forms of knowledge unknown or little known by the public.

Medicine-men also function as aids-giver in that they work to ensure the success of people in their various endeavours. They can provide needed medicine for increased farm productivity, treat impotence and various illness as well as barrenness and pre-natal and ante-natal care. In fact they work to ensure the all round success of humanity.

It has to be mentioned that as it exists in all other profession even to date, there are times that some unscrupulous elements within the medicine-men that uses their knowledge to the disadvantage of others. Usually this is the general knowledge that exists about medicine-men today. But it is professionally unethical for medicine-men to behave this way. In fact, it is believed among the Yoruba as an example that a medicine-man that hurts people will not be prosperous.

### 3.3 The Priests and Medicine Men Compared

Despite the similarities in the functions of these two seemingly indispensable religious leaders in African Traditional Religion, they are quite different personalities. In this section, you will learn the differences between the two of them and they are as follows:

- The priest is more functional in the various social gatherings of the society than the medicine-man.
- The priest lives within the society at a place in time while the medicine-man more often than not is itinerant.
- The priest has an established shrine while the medicine-men have none.
- The medicine-man carries both the knowledge and power of spiritual and chemical substances while the priest may be limited to spiritual powers alone.
- The priesthood is an institution while the medicine-art is a profession.
- The medicine-man operates empirically using substances that can be seen accompanied with words, but the priest operates dogmatically. He is more of a teacher of doctrines.

Despite all these differences, they both use their knowledge for the blessings of humanity.

### 3.4 The Diviners

As their name implies, diviners are concerned with the art of divination. Divination is the art of attempting to foretell the future or reveal the mind of the divinities or spirits and revealing of the unknown. As had been stated earlier, the diviner more often than not can be a priest or a medicine-man; but it is possible for a medicine-man or a priest not to be a diviner. This is why it is necessary to treat the diviner as a separate religious leader in African Traditional Religion.

In the African society, divination is the means through which various problems facing both the society and individuals are solved. It is thus a key provision in African religion and a widespread practice from community to community. Another factor that fans the embers of divination is man's natural inclination to know the future and the will of the divinities. Diviners are also contacted when articles are stolen and needed to be found; when spouses are to be chosen; and when the society wishes to embark on war among others.

Though there are many systems of divination, the most prominent of them is the HU system of divination which can be found among the

Yoruba, the Eon, the Ewe, the Bini and the Ishan. Other methods include divination through stones, sands, gourds and palm reading. Divination can also be done through forming or seeing images in pots of water, listening and interpreting sounds and clairvoyance.

Though it is sometimes hereditary, the choice and training of diviners depends on the will of the person. As a rule, any male or female who is interested can enlist for training to become a diviner. Anybody of any sex or age can enlist to be trained by going to an older diviner as an apprentice. During the period of apprenticeship, the trainee learns the name, signs and symbols of divination figures, the proverbs and stories connected with these figures and the practice and the rites of the cult of divination. To mark the end of the training, there is usually a ceremony to which all other diviners are invited. It is after this that the graduate can begin to practice.

Like medicine-men, the main function of the diviner is to act as an intermediary between humanity and the supernatural world. In most cases, the diviners act on the initiative of their clients and not of theirs. They also seek out hidden knowledge and pass them on to the people that need the knowledge.

Furthermore, they interpret the mysteries of life and convey the messages of the divinities and the Deity to the people. They are also involved in the settlement of disputes and act as seers by uncovering the past and the future so that people can live meaningful lives.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The three offices discussed above formed the main leaders of religion in the African Traditional Religions. Each one of them in their offices contributes to both the socio-religious well being of the African communities. They are specialists in their own field which though may overlap in functions but all have clearly defined roles.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- In African Traditional Religion, the religious leaders are the priests, the medicine men and the diviners.
- The priests are those who are consecrated to the service of the divinity and through whom worship is offered.
- The medicine men are herbalists and traditional doctors

- In Africa the use of roots and herbs goes hand-in-hand with the invocation of religious and mysterious powers for healing.
- The diviners are those who are concerned with the art of divination.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the role of the priest and the medicine-men in African Religions.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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### Electronic Resources

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## MODULE 3

Unit 1	Worship and Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion
Unit 2	Secret Societies in African Societies
Unit 3	Magic and Medicine
Unit 4	Witchcraft and Sorcery
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## UNIT 1 WORSHIP AND SACRIFICE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will be studying about the core of the African Traditional Religion which is the worship and the sacrificial system. Worship plays a significant role in the social life of the Africans. Worship is seen as a total response to God and it is expressed in words and action in the forms of rites and ceremonies. In this unit, you will be studying the various forms of worship and what are used in the worship as well as the various forms of sacrifices in African religion.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- define worship
- discuss the various forms of worship
- define sacrifice
- explain the various types of sacrifice
- analyze the role of worship in African religion
- analyze the role of sacrifice in African religion.



### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Worship**

According to Microsoft Encarta Premium, worship means to treat somebody or something as deity: to treat somebody or something as divine and show respect by engaging in acts of prayer and devotion. Worship is an expression of man's attitude towards God and other spiritual beings. It is also an act of communication and communion between man and the supernatural world. It is a means of retaining God-man relationship and the channel through which an upset of the balance of such relationship is rectified and restored.

As it had been stated earlier, since religion permeates all of life in Africa, it is believed that there has to be a balance at all times in the relationship between God and humanity; the spirits and humanity and the departed and the living. The effect of any misbalance in the African thought leads to misfortunes and sufferings of all kinds. Worship and offering of sacrifices is therefore a psychological device to ensure the restoration of this balance. Worship and sacrifices are done mostly in the temples, grooves and shrines and they can be daily, weekly, occasional and annual.

#### **3.2 Types of Worship**

##### **Daily Worship**

Daily worship is usually done before the tutelary divinities in the family compounds. The head of the family stands here as the worshipper committing the entire family and the affairs of the day to the spirits and the ancestors. It is usually not an elaborate worship. It consists of the offering of cold water, kola nut and bitter-kola to the divinities and the ancestors. After these are offered, the family head invokes blessings upon the family members. A lobe or two of the kola nut is placed in the shrine after the completion of the morning prayers. The other lobes are shared out between the family members so that they can partake of the worship.

The priests too in their family houses also perform daily worship of the divinity on behalf of themselves, their families and the whole community by extension. It is usually also not elaborate and consists of the presentation of kola nuts and invocation of blessings.

### **Weekly Worship**

The weekly worship follows almost the same format as in the daily worship but it is usually more elaborate with more worshippers in attendance and it is done under the leadership of the priests and priestesses of the particular divinity. The day of worship is determined by the day dedicated to the particular divinity and the worship takes place in the central shrine or in an open space in front of the central shrine.

During the worship, prayer is offered on behalf of worshippers of the divinity for life, health and protection from their enemies' attack. It often involves an offering of kola nuts and other favourite items of the divinity. The weekly worship is usually concluded with songs rendered in the praise of the divinity.

### **Annual Worship**

The annual worship is the most elaborate of all the worships as almost all the community and the neighbouring communities would want to partake. During this annual worship priests and priestesses from other communities would be invited to partake in the worship. The annual worship usually takes place in the central shrine of the divinity and special arrangements are made depending on the need of the occasion. It is usually an occasion of rejoicing, thanksgiving and renewal of covenant. Worshippers would come to show their gratitude for the blessings they have received from the divinity in the past year and call for guidance in the New Year. You have to note that there are certain festivals that are tied to the harvest period and must precede the eating or even buying and selling of particular produce. For example, in some communities the new yam cannot be found in the market or eaten in private without the celebration of the major divinity of the community.

## **3.3 Liturgy**

By definition, liturgy is the form and arrangement of public worship laid down by a church or religion. It is the prescribed form of rituals for public worship. It is a means of communication with God within the context of worship. In African traditional religion liturgy is made up of elements like: libation, invocation, offering, prayers and songs.

### **Libation**

Libation is the act of pouring out of a liquid such as water, wine or oil, as a sacrifice to God, the divinities or in honour of a dead person. While the libation is being poured, the officiating priest also pours out the

people's requests to God or the divinity in prayer. In most cases, water is used in libation but other items like palm-wine, spirits or liquor can be used depending on the occasion and the divinity. The importance of libation lies in the belief that since the liquor softens the ground, it symbolically opens the way to the presence of the divine powers. Thus in the process of worship, the family head can pour libation to the ancestral spirits on behalf of the family to sanction the demands of the family members. Libation is also poured during other social activities like marriage, naming, laying of the foundation of a new house and the opening of a new house.

### **Invocation**

Invocation is calling upon a greater power such as God or divinities or spirits for help or just to seek their presence. In African Traditional Religion the worshipper calls upon God or the divinities. It is usually done while libation is being poured out. The worshipper addresses God or the divinity as the case may be inviting God or the divinity to attend and accept their worship. This is sometimes accompanied by the sounding of a gong or a rattle to create a moment of silence whereby divine or supernatural presence could be felt. The sounding of the gong is also followed by the calling of the names, appellations and praise names of God or the divinity. After this the purpose of the gathering is stated and the supernatural is asked to come and be part of them. After this, the kola nut is split into its lobes and the priest casts them to determine whether the worship has been rejected or accepted.

### **Offering**

Offering involves the presentation of foodstuffs and other items except animals. Offerings are usually directed to God, the spirits and the ancestors. As the items are offered, the officiating priest invokes the recipients of the offering to come and accept the offering. The acceptability of offering is later determined by the priest through the casting of the lobes of the kola nut on the ground. If the offering has been accepted, part of the kola nut is laid on the shrine and the rest is shared between the priest and the worshippers that are present.

### **Prayer**

This is the most common act of worship in African Traditional Religion. Through prayers, the worshippers are able to communicate either directly or indirectly with God, the divinities and the ancestors. It is often said that prayers, like the making of sacrifices and offerings are at the heart of African religious life. Consequently, you can see people praying almost every time in every place. There are prayers of

thanksgiving in which people give gratitude to God; supplications in which people ask for material blessings; prayers of protection in which people ask for protection against sickness and death, victory over enemies and long life; and prayers of dedication in which belongings and children are dedicated to God.

Though people often pray directly to God, it is important to note that it is the priest that does community prayer because it will involve using the various liturgical names and attributes of God or the divinities during such prayers.

### Songs

Songs find an important place in the traditional worship among Africans. The songs are used more in communal worship and each divinity usually has its own sets of songs and music that are connected with its cult. Songs are sung as the occasion demands. For example, some are used only during the sacred day worship; others are reserved for the annual worship while some are for crisis period or funeral time. When the order of worship is strictly followed there are points in which songs are rendered. At these points the song is led by the officiating priest or one of his attendants and later the whole congregation joins in. The songs vary depending on what is to be done next on the programme.

When used in worship songs confirm the faith of the worshippers, their belief in and about the divinity as well as their assurances and hopes in the future life. The songs also enhance emotional and physical participation in the act of worship which some of the time leads to ecstatic experiences that often results to prophetic utterances from the divinity through the human medium.

### 3.4 Sacrifices

Sacrifices play an essential role in African Traditional Religion as it is of every religion in the world. It is inconceivable in the African mind to have a religion without a system of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the act of offering the life of animal or a human being to the divine power or powers. It is also seen as a means of communion between humanity and God. It is the highest means of establishing and maintaining relationship between human beings and God on the one hand and the divinity on the other hand. It can also be said to be the most effective means through which humanity can influence the divinities or other supernatural powers that may be interested in the affairs of this world. What is offered however and the manner of offering it depends on the nature of the cult, the occasion of the sacrifice and the injunctions given by the receiver of the sacrifice through the priest.

Unlike some other religions where sacrifices can be total burnt offering to God or the deity, in African religion sacrifices are usually shared by both the receiver and the worshippers. This is done by placing part belonging to the receiver on the shrine and the rest is eaten by the worshippers. The following are the different categories of sacrifices in African religion:

### **The Thanks-Offering**

This type of sacrifice is given to God or the divinity in appreciation of the blessings received or to solicit the favour of the receiver. It is usually accompanied by feasting where the worshippers and the divinity share a common meal. Through thanksgiving sacrifices Africans believe that beneficial relation is established between them and the divinity. The following are examples of occasions that warrant thanksgiving offering: abundant harvest, escape from death or an accident, successful hunting or fishing expedition and victory over enemies.

### **The Votive Offering**

In this type of sacrifice, the worshippers go before the divinity as supplicants to ask for favours. This may include blessings, money and material things as well as gifts of children. In the process the supplicant makes a vow of something to be given to the divinity for the favour received. The vow will dictate the items of the offering. Like the thanks-offering, the sacrifice is made in the midst of dancing and singing and merrymaking, eating and drinking.

### **The Propitiation or Expiation Sacrifice**

This is a kind of sacrifice that looks more of an atonement sacrifice. It is aimed at lessening the wrath of the divinity through the process of self-humiliation. It is usually offered when there is crisis signified by low or no harvest, protracted illness, famine, sudden death, outbreak of plagues or epidemics and diseases. During the process of the sacrifice efforts are made to locate the cause of the trouble and the best means of removing the trouble. It will also include how to calm the wrath of the divinities or the spirits responsible for the calamity and win back their favour. Through this sacrifice the worshipper can also express regret for past wrongs and mistakes and ask for forgiveness. It is usually held that after the sacrifice have been performed the worshippers or the one that has made the sacrifice have been transformed from the state of defilement to that of purity.

### The Foundation Sacrifice

This sacrifice is based on the African belief that any new venture that one lays his hands upon should be committed into the hands of God, the divinities, the ancestors and the spirits. Thus the following activities among others call for foundation sacrifice: laying the foundation of a new house building, cultivating a new land, setting out on a journey, taking a new wife and the commencement of a new career.

### The Preventive Sacrifice

As the name implies, this sacrifice is expected to prevent impending disaster or calamity. It is a means through which the one who offers it expect protection against enemies or the protection of the whole community from disaster. It is believed that as a sacrifice can remove evil and calamity so also it can prevent evil or misfortune from occurring. It has to be noted that most of the time this sacrifice is done through the instruction of the divinity from the oracle.

### The Substitution Sacrifice

This is a sacrifice that is expected to take the place of another person whose life is being threatened or is about to be terminated. The sacrifice is done on behalf of the person even if the person may not be able to perform the sacrifice himself. The sacrificial victim involved and other items of the sacrifice are usually rubbed on the body of the person and they are treated like a corpse and buried as if the person has actually being buried. The animals commonly used for this sacrifice are sheep, cows and oxen.

### The Meal and Drink Offerings

This is the most common type of sacrifice and it takes place almost everyday at the household shrines, sacred days and communal shrines. In this sacrifice, any type of food item can be offered and in most cases, the kind of food offered is what the people eat at home. To offer this sacrifice, the leader first pours libation after which the meal is offered to the divinities or the ancestors. The rest of the food is then shared among the worshippers as a sacramental feast through which they enter into communion with the divinity.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

There are various forms of worship in the African Traditional Religion. This is led by the family head at the level of the family and the priest of the divinity at the level of the community. It includes libation,

invocation, offering, prayers and songs. Sacrifice on the other hand is the act of offering of the life of an animal or human being as the case may be to the divine powers. Sacrifices are also various including thanksgiving, votive and foundation offering among others.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- In African Traditional Religion, worship is an expression of man's attitude towards God and the spiritual beings.
- Worship in African Traditional Religion can be daily, weekly, annual and occasional.
- Liturgy is the form and arrangement of public worship.
- In African Traditional Religion liturgy includes libation, invocation, offering, prayers and songs.
- Sacrifice is the act of offering the life of an animal or a human being as the case may be to the divine powers.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the various types of sacrifice in African Traditional religion.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## **UNIT 2 SECRET SOCIETIES IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 20 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Secret Societies in Africa
  - 3.2 Functions of Secret Societies
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

As we have said earlier, the African society has no demarcation between the sacred and the secular. It is as a result of this that we have to study about the secret societies in the African community because they play both religious and secular roles. In fact, most scholars agree that many of these secret societies are of religious inspiration. Some of them also have roles to play during socio-religious festivals such as the puberty initiation rites. In this unit, you will study about some of the secret societies in Africa.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- define secret societies
- discuss any of the secret societies that will be studied in this unit
- discuss the roles of the secret societies in the African society
- discuss symbolism in the Ogboni society.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Secret Societies in Africa**

The inability of the open relationship between people to fully give confidence in every endeavour actually is the origin of the secret society. The secret society in African society was brought about as a means of controlling the society. The following are examples of secret societies in Africa:

## The Zangbeto

The Zangbeto is the strongest secret society in the region of Port Novo. The Zangbeto was said to have been introduced by the founder of the kingdom. The name Zangbeto actually means "hunters of the night". In other localities they are also called "the spirits of the sea" because it is believed that they have come from beyond the lagoon, which is perhaps meant to indicate return from the country of the dead, across the water.

Members of the society are called the Zansi meaning "wives of the night". They usually go through the streets at night in their grass robes with rattles and gongs and the blowing of a horn called "night noses". They speak in a nasal falsetto tone. This is because it is a widespread belief that the noses of the dead are broken and so their impersonators speak nasally. The chief of the Zangbeto is the Zangan. His attendants are called "flies" that discover any danger to the society and spy out secrets. They meet in a grove in the bush, the path of which is private to the society alone. A small hut in the grove contains the belongings of the members.

The Zangbeto society serves as an initiation society for young men as well as representing the spirits of the dead. A candidate for initiation must pay gifts in cash or kind after which he is then told when to appear in the grove. On the chosen night, the Zansi assemble in their robes but their chief is usually in ordinary dress. He is the only person who is generally known to be a member of the Zangbeto while the names of the others are kept secret.

The initiate is questioned about the knowledge he has about the Zangbeto. The inexplicability of the Zangbeto is expressed in a ritual interrogation during such ceremonies. It goes thus:

If you wish to know anyone  
 You may do so, but the layman  
 Does not know Zangbeto.  
 This one here?  
 Chr.: He is Zangbeto.  
 That one here?  
 Chr.: He is Zangbeto.  
 And you yourself?  
 Chr.: He is Zangbeto.

After this chant the initiate is beaten with sticks to prove his courage and endurance. If he is strong and successful, then the person is admitted as a "wife of the night". Then follows a feast marking the person's admittance and then the cost of candidacy is paid.

### **The Ndako Gboya Society**

The Ndako Gboya is a secret cult that is usually confused with the Igunnu cult but they are not the same. The name actually means "Ancestor Gboya" or "Grandfather". This however does not mean that it is an ancestral cult; the name only indicates a sign of respect to the members of the society. One of the major tasks of the society is the administration of justice and punishment on women that are suspected of witchcraft. Such accused is taken into the bush by the masked members of the Ndako Gboya where she is made to scratch the ground with her bare fingernails. If after a time blood appears under her fingernails, she will be proved a witch. The proved witch is then executed or made to pay a heavy fine.

It is also incumbent on Ndako Gboya mask members to appear in the bush during the main ritual of Nupe religion to frighten novices, warn the youths to obey their parents and elders and whip the offenders. They frighten all women in order to discourage would-be-witches and to weaken the evil powers of witchcraft.

Initiation into the Ndako Gboya lasts for ten days. The prospective member would present himself to the Master of Elder, that is, the head of a lodge with the gift of drinks and fowls. After this presentation the candidate is then instructed in the secret of the cult. The candidate would also be taught the procedure of ceremonial manipulation of the mask, the dance steps, and the drum rhythms, ritual rules and obligation of respect to the elders. In a situation where an initiate fails to master all the instructions passed down within ten days the candidate would be turned down as being unworthy. If on the other hand the candidate is successful, the final sacrifice is performed on him by the Master. The candidate however does not become a full fledge member of the society until after three years when the candidate is finally taught the source of the society's power, the identity of the masked actors and the making of the masks.

### **The Mmuo Society**

This is the principal and the most preferred secret society among the Igbo people. The society represents the cult of the ancestors. Masked figures representing the spirits of the deified ancestors appear at funerals and seasonal festivals.

Initiation into the Mmuo society entails hardship and endurance. Only boys that are over the age of ten are eligible for admission into the society. The boys at the beginning of their initiation would be beaten by masked spirits after which they are paraded round the town or the

village. Through the beating, it is believed that the masker has instilled confidence and valour into the initiates. From that moment onwards the initiates would no longer hide from the maskers but would have the courage to follow the maskers.

After several years, the boys would be finally initiated into the cult. The ritual is one that symbolically pictures the initiates as undergoing a process of rebirth by a ceremonial death and resurrection into the society. The ancestors are invoked and they emerge from the underworld in the form of maskers. During this process it is important to note that the initiates would remain naked. The initiate would then be made to undergo ordeals that symbolize their visit to the world of the dead and also prove their powers of endurance. The ordeals include the eating of charcoal and bones while the initiated ones would be eating yams and drinking wine. The following morning, the initiate would emerge as if he had visited the underworld and was just coming from the place. He has already passed the test. At that point, he is then led into the secret of the society and also swears the oath of secrecy.

### The Poro Society

The Poro society among the Mende is purely a male organization and is responsible for the training of adolescents. The society is controlled by spirits who are represented by masked figures. It is the oldest secret society among the Mende ethnic group of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

It is important to note that every Mende male must be initiated into this society and until this initiation is done such a male regardless of the age is considered immature. The Poro initiation session begins from November and lasts till May the following year. To commence the Poro session, a senior member of the society offers a sacrifice to solicit the favour of the Poro spirits. When the session begins the huts where the boys to be initiated are kept are strictly out of bounds, although a small path would be cut from the place to the village.

On the eve of the Poro session, the Poro men would go from house to house collecting the candidates whom they will escort into the hut. At the entrance of the camp, the initiates are asked a number of questions to which they must respond in the affirmative. Examples of such questions are: "Can you carry water in a basket?" and "Can you uproot a full-grown palm tree with your bare hands?" After answering the questions, the initiates are then pulled into the huts. During all this process there would be great drumming and noise going on inside. As the boys get into the hut they hand over with a great shout their initiation fee which traditionally consists of a leaf of tobacco (though when paid in cash translates to several pounds). The initiates would then receive new

names by which they are to be addressed throughout the training and after.

Shortly after their arrival at the camp, the initiates would receive the marks of membership which consists of a series of short cuts made on the neck, the back and the breast. The making of this mark is usually painful and the older members would be clapping their hands to drown the cries of the initiates so that passersby, especially the women and children would not hear their cries. This marks the commencement of training.

While in training in the bush, the initiates would wear garments of red netting. They sleep in the special huts made for the purpose of initiation but are allowed outside during the daytime when they are not under instructions after the initial ceremony. As a practical example of their training, the initiates are not allowed to use any modern equipment. They sleep on a bed of sticks with clothes soaked in water; they remain out of doors if it rains; they receive severe beatings with sticks and they must not cry; and they eat dry and disgusting food. The singing and drumming during their training period would last until two or three in the morning and the initiates would be awakened again at dawn. They are expected to get up and begin to sing anytime they are summoned. During the night, they are encouraged to steal food from neighbouring farms but this is as a sign of bravery. In summary, the training that would be provided is based on the length of time the boys are able to remain in the bush. During this period also they are given instruction in traditional law and community life, singing, dancing and acrobatics. They are also taught handcrafts such as weaving, pottery, bridge-building, trapping and fishing.

The initiation rite and the period of time spent in the bush after the rite symbolizes a change of stature for the initiated. The young initiate is supposed to be swallowed by the Poro spirit when he enters the bush and his separation from the parents and kinsmen signifies his death. Thus the period in the bush marks his transition from childhood to manhood. As a result of his experiences, he would emerge as a full-fledged member of the Mende society. The trainings they would have received are both symbolical and practical. It inculcates them with deeper implication of manhood as well as the rules he has to observe as a man. The training is aimed at teaching the initiates discipline and ability to rely on themselves. They are also taught how to work cooperatively and also take orders from others.

Three separate ceremonies conclude the initiation rites. The first of this is the visit of Poro spirit to the town. The Poro spirit is accompanied by old and new members of the society. They would dance round the town

and then return to the bush where the next ceremony is performed. The next ceremony is the secrecy ceremony. For this ceremony to take place all the food contributed by the parents of the initiates are brought forward with the fowls. All the fowls are killed by severing its head from its neck with the means of a sharp stone. This act serves as a warning that the secret of the Poro society must never be leaked. This ends the first stage of the initiation proper.

A week later, the second stage comes up. Here the people in the town will cook rice and place them outside the bush. The Poro spirit then pays another visit to the town. People spread nets around to catch the spirit. The spirit sounds its pipe to indicate its presence and almost immediately another pipe is sounded from the bush to suggest that the spirit has flown away. The Poro group then returns to the sacred bush where the ceremony proceeds.

The final ceremony is called the pulling of Poro. This is preceded by a rite called "hitting the spirit's belly". The spirit is pictures as unwilling to deliver the boys that he has eaten and expected to give birth to; therefore force has to be used upon him. Consequently, all the members have to strike the spirit in the stomach. The initiates are warned not to sleep or else they would be dreaming of the spirit. Later at about four in the morning, the spirit would groan like a woman in labour would groan and sigh mournfully. The interpreter would now explain that the spirit is giving birth to the initiates. The women will clap their hands and the men would reproach the spirit for delaying their children. Finally, the spirit would give birth to the boys and fly away.

As soon as the spirit is gone, the new members would now be told the final secret they have to learn about the Mende society and they also take their final vow of secrecy. The new members are now lined up in a semi-circle in the deepest part of the bush and addressed by Mabile, the only female official of the Poro society. In her address, she invokes the spirit of the society on their behalf and prays that each one of them would be as strongly attached to the society as the thread of moss which now binds them together. As she speaks, she dips a fowl in a medicine composed of leaves and water and sprinkles the new members with it. After this each one of them would hold out his tongue in turn and the Mabile places some grains of rice on it in order to test his future. After this she kills the fowl by severing its neck with a stone and sprinkle the blood on the new members. Finally, she will prepare a ceremonial meal for the new members. They are expected to eat the food by bending down with their hands behind their back. As they do this they are warned that they will be choked by rice if they reveal the secret of the society. The boys are then given general ablution with the remaining medicine and taken to the steam for a bath. After this, they are given a

new set of clothes with head ties. This marks their rebirth into manhood and the Poro session is declared closed.

### **The Sande Society**

This is the Mende female counterpart of the Poro society and it is meant for the initiating and the training of the female adolescents. It is conveyed about the same time as the Poro society. It also resembles the Poro society in organization and function. It is under the control of senior officials consisting of the elderly women who have attained the higher grade in the society. These women are distinguished by the white head-tie they use in the public. The education given to the girls while the Sande is in session aims at training them for accepted pattern of life, hard work, dedication to duty, endurance and patience. They are also taught modesty in behaviour and obedience to elders.

The period of seclusion lasts for three months. After their initiation, the officiating priest sends back a piece of tobacco to the girl's parents as certificate. The girls are also sworn to secrecy and are also seen as being reborn after their training. They return to their families to take part in the life of the community as women.

Initiation in these secret societies carries with it some ethical responsibilities. First, the ethical purpose is to ensure that these immature boys and girls return to the society as full fledged members of the adult community who will now behave like mature men and women.

Secondly, during the initiation training of these societies, obedience and order are inculcated into the initiates. Thirdly, the virtue of secret keeping is also taught. The cutting of the head of the fowl with a sharp stone is a warning that anyone who reveals the secret of the society will have his or her head cut with stone. The fourth ethical purpose is the inculcation of the ethical expectations of the society. The wrong behaviours that are not expected in the society are espoused and rejected while expected behaviours are encouraged. Another ethical purpose is to warn against selfishness and encourage comradeship and team work. Brotherly love and seeing the other Mende as blood relations are also taught. All this expected to lead to a perfect sanity within the micro-community.

### **The Oro Society**

This is an ancestral cult. It is seen as the collective male ancestors who are seen as the protectors of the community. Formerly, the Oro society was the executive arm of the secret secular council of the Ogboni society. Evil doers condemned by the Ogboni society were taken away

by the Oro society and would be executed in the Oro grove after which their skulls would be nailed to a tree in the market place and their cloth hung on its branches. This society also rounds up undesirable elements of the society and also metes out punishment to witches.

The Oro society is a purely male organization and as such when it comes out all women must stay indoors, doors to all huts must be shut and all lights must be put off. Usually the members of the society come out only at night but occasionally they do come out during the day time. There used to be an annual festival of the Oro society which runs for seven days and no woman is expected to come out either in the day or in the night except during a short interval they are expected to go and gather necessary foodstuffs and items for feeding of their families.

The major public sign of the Oro society is the "bull-roarer" or rhomb. When this piece of wood is whirled in the air on its cord it makes an uneven roaring sound which is called the voice of Oro.

Any male may join the Oro society on payment of a sheep or fowls and may attend the meetings, but office is restricted to certain families. The grove of Oro is in the bush, guarded by palm fronds and sentries to stand on the path during meetings.

#### The Ogboni Society

The Ogboni is principally a political organization. The society served political ends meeting periodically to settle civil disputes, curb the powers of chiefs, deal with criminal charges, act as people's tribune, chose and install kings, maintain law and order, give judgement to anti social elements in the society and those found guilty for any serious offence.

Members of the Ogboni society were usually elders and so they effectively carry out laws and order. Members of the Ogboni cult worship the earth. They believe strongly in the earth. This is because the earth in Yoruba belief is regarded as a means of sustaining the whole being. This lies in the fact that people depend on the earth for agriculture, the man at birth lands on the earth and it is also the last place for man. The Ogboni belief in the earth makes them to use the earth as a means of oath taking. This is called "imule" which literary means "drinking the earth". During the oath taking, they exchange blood from members and eat the kola nut laced with blood. As a result of this oath no one is expected to speak ill of other members or reveal their secrets. To exchange blood is to share a common life and so they cannot act contrary to one another.



Initiation into the Ogboni cult calls for two human skulls, one for a male and one for a female. The initiate would be in the shrine blindfolded with a strip of red cloth. The skull of the male will be tied to the initiate's right arm while that of the female will be tied to the left. The initiate will then be led backward to recite some incantations. During the initiation the initiate is led to believe that he is now entering into a new life.

When this ceremony is over, the initiate will be ordered to open his mouth and his right hand is placed on the male skull while the left is placed on the female skull simultaneously. Meanwhile, blood will be drawn from old members and placed inside a wide basin. At this stage, both the old and new members will be naked. A designated official will dip his second left finger into the bowl of blood and put it into the mouth of the initiate three times. The leader will then address the new member that leaking the secret of the society will lead to death within three days. At this point the red strip of cloth tied round him would be loosened after which all the members would put on their dresses and this marks the end of the ceremony.

Three days after the first ceremony another ceremony would take place at the grave yard at mid-night. The new member would carry the two human skulls with palm leaves in his left hands. He would then be washed into a pit while his eyes are covered with white and red stripes of cloth. These along with the human skulls would be buried in the pit and this marks the entrance of the new member into the Ogboni cult.

### **3.2 Functions of Secret Societies**

In the African society, secret societies are not always evil because they have certain roles to play in the society. These roles are political, social and religious.

#### **Political Role**

Some of the secret societies in Africa were political organizations established for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society. As such they meet to settle disputes, discuss general matters concerning the welfare of their people and prosecute criminals brought before them. Secret societies also form a consultative assembly to assist the traditional rulers in their day-to-day administration of the towns. They act as king makers and also curb the powers of the chiefs and check kings that are becoming dictatorial. The members of the secret societies are statesmen that manage the affairs of the town at the approval of the kings.

## **Social Role**

There are certain secret societies that are connected with social uplifting of their respective societies. This role is seen in the areas of puberty rites which sometimes necessitate initiation into secret societies. A readymade example here is the Poro and the Sande societies which is meant for training of adolescents.

## **Religious Role**

Most if not all secret societies have religious background. This is to say that most of these societies are religiously inspired. They have a set of belief that is carefully guarded. These are the ones connected with the cult of the ancestors like the Egungun and the Oro society. Some of these societies take active interest in funeral and memorial services, they set up a standard for others to follow, they determine ritual behaviour and effect social attitudes.

These societies instil religious teachings of the societies into the members of the societies. They also administer ordeal on women suspected of witchcraft, frighten all women to discourage would-be-witches, discover and danger to the society and spy out secrets.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Secret societies are not seen in the manner at which they are conceived today with the coming of western civilization. In fact, secret societies are the cream of the leadership of the traditional society and they play a lot of role on the stability of the community and all that the community stands for. They play political, religious and social roles. They are not destructive except that they execute judgement on the evil doers in the society.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Secret societies in Africa play both religious and secular roles
- Secret societies arose because of the inability of open relationships to give full confidence to human relations
- Politically, secret societies settle disputes, discuss the welfare of the citizenry and assist in the daily administration of the town
- Socially, secret societies are meant to train the young generations into responsible adulthood
- Religiously, secret societies are connected with the cult of the ancestors.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the necessity for the secret societies in the African communities.

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## **UNIT 3 MAGIC AND MEDICINE**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Definition of Magic
  - 3.2 Forms of Magic
  - 3.3 Magic and Religion Compared
  - 3.4 Medicine
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Another realm of African religion is that of belief in magic and medicine. Belief in magic and medicine is widespread in Africa. This has been partly studied under the structures of African Traditional Religion. I will recommend that you go back and read Module 1 Unit 3 again as an introduction to this unit.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- define magic
- explain the different types of magic
- compare magic and religion
- explain what medicine is.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Definition of Magic**

Microsoft Encarta Premium Dictionary defines magic as a supposed supernatural power that makes impossible things happen or gives somebody control over the forces of nature. Magic can be subjected to various uses as again Encarta Premium says that magic is used in many cultures for healing, keeping away evil, seeking the truth, and for vengeful purposes. Robert S. Ellwood also defines magic as art of attaining objectives, acquiring knowledge, or performing works of wonder through supernatural or non-rational means. Techniques used in

magic typically include chants and spells, gestures or actions that often have a symbolic relation to the desired result, and the use of substances believed to have a special relationship with the powers needed to accomplish the intended purpose. Magic is the handling of nature and bending them to man's will to safeguard his welfare and shaping his destiny.

Magic involve at least a partial symbolic recognition of the society's spiritual world view and of its divinities and myths. In this respect magic often merges with religion, and indeed the line between the two is frequently blurred. Religion, however, is usually regarded as the public acknowledgment of spirituality, while magic tends to be private and oriented toward power and gain by supernatural means rather than toward worship. A distinction can also be drawn between white and black magic: White magic is employed for benign ends, and black magic is used to harm others. Black magic is sometimes referred to as witchcraft or sorcery, even though many people who practice witchcraft do not seek to cause harm. Magic in the supernatural sense is different from stage magic, in which apparent magical effects are produced for entertainment through such means as sleight of hand.

### 3.2 Forms of Magic

Though anthropologists distinguish three types of magical practice, some scholars identify two in that they see two of the other three as overlapping. The three types of magic are as follows:

#### Homeopathic Magic

This type of magic operates on the principle that like begets like. It is the use of small portions of a thing to represent and affect the whole. In applying this form of magic, a magician tries to produce an effect by merely imitating it with the aid of supernatural power. Working on this principle of similarity, a person can injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him believing that just as the image suffers so does the enemy.

Homeopathic magic can also be used for the benefit of the society. For example, a barren woman can be asked to carry a carved image on her back in imitation of a mother with a child. A person who has a compound fracture can be asked to produce a fowl whose leg would be broken at the same point as that of the patient. The magician then treats the wound of the fowl and performs the magical rites. As the fowl recovers so the patient recovers. In the same way, spotted leaf is used as a remedy for a spotted skin disease while twisted rings are worn on the fingers to prevent snake bites. In the case of severe drought,

thrown into the air while spells and incantations are pronounced by a magician inviting rain to come down. Rain could also be invited by making a thick black smoke in imitation of rain-bearing cloud to attract rain.

### **Sympathetic Magic**

This is the magic in which a symbolic action affects an object with which the symbol is in "sympathy" or harmony. This is used mostly in witchcraft where a doll or image can be made and with incantations be said to represent somebody and whatever is done to the image will begin to affect the person. It is also common in voodoo. For example if a pin is used to strike the doll, the person would begin to bleed and feel pain from that same spot.

### **Contagious Magic**

This is the influencing of one thing through contact with another that is believed to be magically charged. It is believed that whatever one does to a material object that has been used by the person or that the person has come in contact with will affect that person. This type of magic is based on the principle that things that have once been associated must remain ever afterwards in contact even after they have been separated. For example, it is believed in most African communities that fingernails, hair, spittle, urine and placenta among other things can be used to harm anybody hence all these things are guarded jealously. For example, till date among the Yoruba it is the child's father that the placenta of a child would be handed over to and he in turn will ensure that it is safely buried and keep the knowledge of the site to himself.

This type of magic is also used to the benefit of the society in that it is used for protection. For example, the teeth of a snake or lion or any other wild animal can be wrapped in leather as talisman. They then worn on the neck or the waist and these prevent such animals from attacking the wearer. Gun powder too is worn mostly by hunters as a protection against gunshot accidents.

As you read through all the different types of magic you will discover that they are almost the same thing. This is because the theoretical foundation for most magical practices is a belief in correspondences, or hidden relationships among entities within the universe, especially between human beings and the eternal world. According to this view, the application of the right colors, objects, sounds, or gestures in a given context can bring about the desired result. The theory of correspondences affirms the power of thought to confer reality on

products of the imagination, particularly when these thoughts are expressed through significant symbols.

### **3.3 Magic and Religion Compared**

#### **Similarities**

- Both magic and religion deal with a power wholly other than humanity itself. The two recognizes the transcendental, the supernatural and the power beyond humanity.
- Both magic and religion have a common root. They both arise as a consequence of humanity's sense of need. They are the result of humanity's attempt to deal with the mystery that surrounds their immediate physical environment.
- Both religion and magic are symbolic. There are objects representing the supernatural entities in both religion and magic. Such objects in turn are endowed with magical or religious significance.
- Taboos are common to both religion and magic. There are some things that must be done and some things that must be avoided for efficacy of both.
- Magic and religion arise from the desire of humanity to dominate and have powers over others. When they possess such powers, fear, awe and respected are created out of the situation for them.
- In summary, magic and religion both have supernatural frame of reference and appeal to man's inadequacy and are able to give power to those who are in search of them for the purpose of dominating others.

#### **Differences**

- Magic deals with non-human and molt- arbitrary order of reality while religion seeks foster idea of fellowship between human beings and God.
- Magic seems to make some things work together for humanity's good through the use of force. Apart from its public concern as in the case of rainmaking, magic at the personal level is used by the hunter, trader, students or politicians for selfish ends. Religion on the other hand is more concerned with the good of the whole community by giving sanction to common laws and norms. So

religion gives inner sense of sanity, peace and self-being but magic does not provide these.

- Magic tends to show human beings how to obtain certain good things through their effort. Through magic, power is tapped and made use of to satisfy individual's needs. Religion on the other hand puts power in the hands of the Divine and human beings can have communion and communication with the Divine. This is to say that religion implies trust, dependence and submission. In conclusion magic commands and religion implores.
- Religion requires high moral standards on the part of its adherents. Religion holds that humanity must maintain high moral life in order to maintain communion with the Divine. Magic on the other hand would operate in spite of the moral status or ethical standard of the ones involved.

### **3.4 Medicine**

By medicine, we mean substances that are used in treating or preventing disease or illness. From this perspective, African sees medicine as both medicament and preventive. Medicine then is the art of using the available forces or materials of nature to prevent diseases and to restore and preserve health.

In traditional understanding, medicine is closely associated with religion. This is because medicine comes directly from God and it operates through divinities and spirits.

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit you have studied about magic which is seen in the ability to make impossible things possible or to give someone control over the forces of nature. You have also learnt about the three forms of magic, namely: homeopathic, sympathetic and contagious magic. You were also exposed to the comparison of magic and religion and the forms of medicine in Africa.

### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Magic is that which makes the impossible things happen or that which gives somebody control over the forces of nature
- There are three forms of magic: homeopathic, sympathetic and contagious magic.



- Medicine in Africa is closely associated with religion
- Medicine in Africa can be preventive and preservative. It is also curative.

## 6.0 TUTORMARKED ASSIGNMENT

Compare and contrast magic with religion.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 4 WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Witchcraft
  - 3.2 Sorcery
- 4.0 Conclusion
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Another realm of African religion is that of belief in magic and medicine. In fact, it is very important to state that the 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific approach to the world has not been able to rub off the belief in the existence of witches totally in Africa. Even the mode of prayer in most Neo-Pentecostal churches testifies to the African belief in the existence of witches. Western education has also not been able to eradicate this belief as those who are learned still have a tingling sensation when they are confronted with the inexplicable. In this unit, you are going to learn about the African belief as far as witchcraft and sorcery is concerned.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- discuss what the Africans believe about witchcraft
- identify what sorcery is
- discuss the modus operandi of witches and sorcerers.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Witchcraft

Africans believe that witches are people with an inherent power by means of which they can do anything, especially negative things in the world. It is however believed that some of the witches may have acquired the powers for the purpose of helping their children, but it is held by and large that their powers are used for evil and anti-social purposes and that their main task is that of pestering people's life.

Africans believe that witches are mostly women though some men are found in their rank and file who hold some important office. It is further held that some people are born with the powers of witchcraft while others acquired it. Also, it can be passed on to people by means of sharing food that is given by a member who wants to initiate the person. It is usually thought that a person may possess the power without realizing it. However, whether they are aware of it or not, they can use the powers and this is why in Africa the concept of witchcraft is mystifying, appalling and sinister.

Witches operate mainly at night. They meet in the guilds and they meet spiritually. This is to say that the meetings are mainly the activities of the souls. This is why it is believed in Africa that witches leave their physical bodies at home asleep in their houses while their souls have went off to their meeting. To be able to do this, it is believed that they can take the form of a cat (especially black), an owl or bat. It is also believed that if this animal or bird whose form is taken is killed during the process, the witch using the body automatically dies.

It is also believed that at meetings members must supply a human victim, presumably somebody close to them and in whose well being they have deep interest. It is also believed that witches have powers to spoil medicines and render magic useless because they know the plants, roots, herbs and barks the magician and the medicine-men use. As a result of this, some medicine-men collaborate with witches so that they can work successfully. They are thought to be so potent that they can be the cause of misfortune and illness. People hold them responsible for accidents, sudden deaths, poverty, barrenness and a host of human miseries.

### 3.2 Sorcery

Sorcery is the application of bad magic on people or object. It is generally held in Africa that sorcery can be used to harm people, destroy life or property, disrupt the well-being of an individual and to change a happy destiny to an unhappy one. Generally speaking, sorcery stands for anti-social employment of physical powers. Thus, a person who uses bad magic is called a sorcerer and they are usually feared by all because of their mischievousness.

It is believed that sorcerers are capable of employing all sorts of ways to attack other people and their belongings. They can send flies, snakes, lions or any other animal to attack their target. They can even spit on the ground and command their spittle to go and harm another person or even go to the extent of invoking evil spirits to attack or possess their victims.

They have been said to have called upon lightning to attack their victims; they have also been said to cause elephantiasis of the legs and others have used direct poisoning on their victims. It is also possible for them to attack their enemies through invocation and incantation. In doing this, they usually employ sympathetic or contagious magic. For example, they can prepare an effigy and invoke the spirit of their target into the effigy. After this, they can harm the person through whatever is done to the image into which the person's spirit has been invoked.

For the purpose of preventing themselves from being harmed by sorcerers, the use of charms, amulets and various type of medicines, either taken directly (orally) or through incisions is prevalent.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

The two negative areas that have to be studied is the African belief in witchcraft and sorcery. There is prevalent belief in witchcraft in Africa that has not been eroded despite the many years of contact with European or Western civilization. Even educated Africans have not been able to totally rid themselves of this belief. Belief in sorcery too is prevalent. This can be seen in the forms of prayers being offered in many churches in Africa today.

#### 5.0 SUMMARY

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Belief in witchcraft and sorcery is prevalent in Africa.
- They are believed to be able to cause misfortune to human beings
- They both use their mystical powers negatively.

#### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the African belief in witches and sorcerers.

#### 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 5 DEATH AND HEREAFTER

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

If you will remember that when we are talking and reading about rites of passage, we intentionally left out funeral rites because of the special attention we intend to attach to it. In this last unit, you will now study every issue related to death in African traditions and its implication to its religion.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the African concept of death
- discuss the rites associated with funerals in African life
- discuss the implications of the funeral rites
- discuss the African concept of life after death
- discuss the importance of ancestral cults among Africans.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Death

Death is seen in Africa as the inevitable end of all human beings. It is also considered as the most disrupting phenomenon of all. Death to the Africans stands between the world of the living (human beings) and the world of the spirits or between the visible and the invisible world. The African concept of this world is that this world is like a voyage and that everyone will go home one day. Therefore death is that event that returns everyone back home. Hence, the idea is that no matter how long

one may stay put on earth, one will eventually return to where he comes from through the agency of death.

However, though death is seen as the end of all human beings, Africans do not see death as the end of life. Death is seen as a transition from the present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits. Death is described as a journey which humanity must take in order to reach the land beyond where they would be elevated to the position of an ancestor.

It is also believed that death does not sever human beings relationship with their family but on the contrary it extends the family relationship into infinity. This is the basis for the continual fellowship and communion between the living and the dead in African. They believe that both the living and the ancestors (the dead) have a role to play in fulfilling family obligations and ensuring the continual existence of the family.

It has to be noted that though death is not seen as the end of all things, it is still an unwelcome development among Africans. It is often seen as a wicked destroyer and a curse that frustrates human effort. It brings about physical separation of loved ones and also constitutes a great loss to the immediate family where death has occurred and also to the community at large.

There are several myths in Africa that seem to explain the origin of death. The most acceptable is the one that sees death as the messenger of God himself. It then confers on death the status of debt that all the living must pay one day no matter how long they live on earth.

Death can be classified into two categories among Africans. These are the good, also called natural death and the bad death. The death of young people, either as children or as youths or young adults is regarded as bad death. This is the basis for such not enjoying the privilege of full funeral rites. For example, when a child dies, the parents and the relatives would lament and dispose the corpse as quickly as possible. In fact, the parents in most cultures would not even want to know where such a child is buried. Also falling in the category of bad death are deaths that can be attributed to divinities of judgement and justice. For example, those who are killed by thunder and small-pox are regarded as having been given capital punishment from the divine. Hence, they are not mourned. They are buried with purificatory and expiatory rites to appease the divinities concerned. Other types of bad death include those who died of leprosy, accidents such as falling down from the palm tree, suicide, murder, drowning, burns and those who died with pregnancy or in labour. All those in this category are not given formal burials but are handed over to the priests for burial without delay.

Good death is the death that comes to human beings at a ripe old age. Consequently, the death of an old person in the African community is an occasion for much rejoicing and ritual ceremonies. Most good death actually falls into the category of natural death. This is death that comes as a result of old age. At times stories are told of old people who are ready to die but sent for all their children and give them final instructions before passing on finally.

It is important to say at this point that in most African communities, it is believed that when a person stopped breathing, the person is declared dead. The general belief is that the spirit or the soul of the person returns to God but the physical body is buried and it rots there. The soul on arrival before God will give an account of how the person has lived in this world and this would determine the person's final home.

### **3.2 Funeral Rites**

The African belief that death is a transition from one plane of existence to the other is seen in the funeral arrangements and burial. Funerals are generally taken to be a great occasion among Africans. It involves the whole community who gather to perform appropriate rites which to them strengthen the bond of unity between the living and the dead. It is believed that unless these rites are appropriately performed, the spirit of the dead would never be at rest nor join the ancestral spirits but would be hovering around the homestead and may actually begin to harm people. This belief encourages all those who are alive to see to the success of the funeral rites.

It has to be stated here too that funeral rites vary from one society to the other and also dependent on the circumstances surrounding the death of the person to be buried. Considerations are given to age, social position and status of the dead. In this section, we will focus on what seems to be the general and the burial of an old person.

In most cultures, the death of an old person is heralded with gun shots. As soon as such gun shots are heard people will trace the compound where the shots are heard and identify the person who has died. If the corpse is to be moved to another place for burial, then a man holding a live fowl goes in front and he will be plucking the feathers of the fowl until they reach their destination. The undertakers will eat the fowl on reaching their destination.

The hair of the deceased is clean shaven if the deceased is a male and beautifully plaited if the deceased is female. The corpse is then thoroughly washed with warm clean water and new sponge and soap. The belief is that before one joins the ancestors the person has to be



clean. After the bath, the corpse is dressed in dignifying clothes brought by the relatives. It is then laid on a well decorated bed. After this, music, dancing and feasting begins. Women dance round the corpse singing funeral songs while the other people spend money on them as gifts.

The interment takes place either in the morning or in the evening and the grave is dug in one of the rooms in the house. This is done because it is believed that the deceased still forms part of the household and should not be separated from the people. Messages are sent to the ancestors through the deceased. People ask for personal benefits, like gifts for children, good husband or wife, good work and the victory over enemies. After the burial ceremony is concluded, a gun is fired to indicate that the corpse has been buried.

It is believed that the deceased would be around the household for a number of days after the burial. This is because they believe that until certain other rites are performed the deceased has no place in the abode of the ancestors. The ceremonies will take place on the third, the seventh, the thirteenth, the seventeenth and the fortieth day. It is after the performance of these rites that the deceased takes its place among the ancestors.

### **3.3 The Hereafter**

It is generally believed that the hereafter is another world or a distant place where life may resemble this life. For this reason, articles such as clothing, sponge, towel, food and in the case of the wealthy or the royal household gold trinkets and precious ornaments are buried alongside to help the dead on the way to the next world. It is the same belief that makes the Africans bury slaves and wives along with deceased rulers so that they will continue to assist them on the way to the eternal home.

### **3.4 Ancestral Cults**

Belief in the continued existence and influence of the departed members of the family and the tribe at large is very strong in the African continent. It has to be noted that the ancestors are not seen just as past heroes but that they are still very present watching over the household and directly concerned in all the affairs of the family.

As it had been stated earlier, not every dead person qualifies to become an ancestor. This is because there is a standard set aside to determine who will qualify as an ancestor. One such criterion is adulthood which again is determined by marital status. Apart from being an adult, such an adult must have died a natural death. All forms of unnatural death, be it accident or disease may at times be attributed to the person's hidden

Ane. The only exemption to this law is the death of someone on the Jattle field in defense of the whole community. This in fact enhances one's reputation.

It is believed in Africa that since the ancestors are no longer visible in the physical sense, some elements of enhanced power are attributed to them. Death has given them more potentialities. The ancestors are the link between the people and the spiritual world. In other words, as the living-dead, they seem to be the best group of intermediaries between the divinities and God on the one hand and humanity on the other hand since they have full access to the channels of communicating with the Divine Being directly. Also, as intermediaries from above, they have delegated authority from God. They have the mandate to reward right conduct and punish the individual for crimes against the society.

With their delegated power and authority the ancestors naturally command fear and respect from the people. Because of this fact, great care is taken to ensure that the ancestors get befitting burial. All rites and ceremonies must be meticulously performed to avoid displeasing them. One notable aspect of the cult which has attracted much comment is the attention paid to them as well as attitude towards them. Some people regard the offerings made to the ancestors as worship.

To some extent this claim is justified because there are elements in the relationship and attitude of the living towards the ancestors that look like actual worship. For example, at the individual level there are prayers that accompany libation and the offerings made to the ancestors. In such prayers, people ask for fertility, food, life in abundance, victory in time of war and peace. It is this that the critics of African Traditional Religion have taken to be worship.

It has to be noted however that the Africans do not place the ancestors on the same footing with the divine. They do not worship them but venerate them. Though, there is the danger of veneration degenerating into worship without the worshippers knowing. This however is also true of all other world religions.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt in this unit that Africans do not see death as the end of all things even though death is seen as the inevitable end of all human beings. It is the belief that the dead are not permanently severed from relating with the living that has led to the institution of the ancestral cult. Those that are inducted into the cult of the ancestors are those who have lived up to old age and have died peacefully or naturally. Those who

died as a result of sickness or at a young age are seen as cursed and so are not fit to be ancestors.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Death in Africa is seen as the inevitable end of all humanity
- Death however, is not seen as then of existence but leads to existence in the spiritual world.
- This belief led to the establishment of the cult of the ancestors.
- Full funeral rites including induction to the cult of the ancestors are accorded those who lived to old age and died peacefully or naturally
- Those who died as a result of sickness or at a young age are seen as cursed and so are not fit to be ancestors.

## 6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the concept of life after death among Africans and its effect on the funeral rites.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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