

must certainly have come from somewhere, outside Africa. Thus Islam and Christianity were invoked to account for the genesis of African religious ideas. Leo Frobenius for instance found an Islamic connection even before he set foot in Africa. "Before the introduction of genuine faith . . . by the Arabs, the natives had no, strictly speaking, Religion".⁶ Ellis also added his voice when he said, "The Supreme Being is really borrowed from Europeans and only thinly disguised".⁷ The doubt and resisted illumination also took the form of challenging the credentials of those honest researchers rather than those who made the false claims in the first instance.

The era of intellectual dilemma was a direct result of doubt and resisted illumination. Cultural pride and academic arrogance would not want to do away with preconceived ideas and pet theories for concrete evidence. Various evasive means were adopted to escape from this intellectual dilemma. Spurious and derogatory terminologies were invented to designate the Traditional Religion in an obvious attempt to fit theory to facts. Such terminologies include primitive, animism, paganism, idolatory and so forth.

Thus it is to inform, to educate and to disabuse the minds of Africans and especially Westerners that the study of West African Traditional Religion has become a matter of urgent necessity in the contemporary world.

Derogatory Terminologies

Let us here examine critically the obnoxious terminologies and see why they are inappropriate and hopelessly inadequate to describe the Traditional Religion. In this regard mention must be made of the noble efforts of Bolaji Idowu who has examined these terminologies very closely⁸ and to whom I am indebted for much of the material here.

Primitive: The word primitive is derived from the Latin word *primus*, and it means first or *ancient*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines primitive as early, *ancient*, old-fashioned, crude and/or primary. From this dictionary definition it is unlikely that

6 Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, Vol. 1., p. 1ff.

7 A. B. Ellis, *Yoruba Speaking People*, p. 12.

8 Bolaji Idowu, *Ibid*, pp. 108-136.

mankind from bondage to sin.⁹ This seems to give the impression that Christianity is based on the ancient practice of human sacrifice, which was considered to be the most potent form of sacrifice to ward off any danger that might threaten the whole society. In Islam the Black Stone at Mecca may not be unconnected with idolatry. Since religion like culture is dynamic and therefore beliefs and practices undergo changes, religion in its original form cannot be said to be in existence.

It is both unreasonable and unfair to speak of the religion of a particular people as primitive on the basis of racial or ethnic prejudice as Western investigators usually do. Since in the majority of Western Literature primitive is used in a derogatory sense, it is not only inappropriate but offensive to designate West African Traditional Religion as primitive.

Paganism: This term is derived from the Latin word *paganus*, meaning originally a village dweller (a villager) or a countryman, a person who lives far away from the civilized community. It is a mark of sociological distinction between the polished, civilized, enlightened and the sophisticated, as opposed to the crude, rustic, unpolished, uncivilized, unenlightened and unsophisticated. Basically, paganism is purely a sociological term.

From its sociological roots, paganism is used by Western investigators to refer to the religion of so-called primitive or uncivilized peoples of the world. The Pocket Oxford Dictionary defines paganism as “Acknowledging neither Jehovah, Christ nor Allah; non-Christian”.

Evidently, paganism was never according to its sociological roots meant to be a word with religious connotation. The only condition under which we can accept its religious usage is if it is made to include the totality of the culture of country dwellers, which would then embrace their religion. In this case one should consider the religion of country dwellers in Europe and America as paganism, since it forms part of their culture. But this, no found its way into the religious context by way of derogatory comparison through those Europeans who believed their religion to

be far more superior to or more meaningful than the religion which they call paganism. The feeling of the crude and unpolished is still there. To say that anyone who does not acknowledge Jehovah or Christ or Allah is a pagan and then go further to identify paganism with a non-Christian is nothing short of bias, a one sided value judgment. Indeed, according to the second definition even a Muslim is a pagan.

Some Western investigators insist on using the term paganism because they claim that there is no better term to use. Franz Cumont for instance believes that the only suitable name for a religion that appeared to be made up of a variety of cults or is hydra-headed, and in which religious chaos persist is paganism.¹⁰ Even though he realises that there is a common religious denominator (i.e. common belief in God) underlying the various cults he would not part with paganism. This is a clear case of academic obduracy and resisted illumination.

Boas identified paganism with magic or something very close to magic: "this is the sin of all religions".¹¹ If this is the case then paganism is a world-wide phenomenon which is not the sole property of any particular religion of the world.

All things considered, paganism is a term which had been derogatorily imposed on Africans from outside and as such is obnoxious. With particular reference to West African Traditional Religion, any time the word pagan is used it has the undertone of racial or social discrimination. Even though the discrimination is loaded with religious overtones the basic implication is sociological.

Admittedly there are varieties of cults in Africa — cult of God, cult of the divinities, cult of the ancestors etc — but even here one cannot speak of the kind of chaos Franz Cumont is referring to. This is because there is a homogenous transcendental reality in the belief in one God, without which the whole structure of African Traditional Religion falls to pieces. Even if there is something of these elements of variety and magic in West African Traditional Religion there is no honest way of using paganism as the name for the religion.

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Heathenism: The origin of the word *heathen* is German. The suffix (*en*) has the same meaning as the *en* in *woollen* or *gladden*. The *heath* originally referred to the wasteland removed from the outskirts of the town, where undesirable elements like outlaws, vagabonds and rouges had their abode. Heathen therefore means a dweller on the heath. Naturally therefore, the heathen is primarily one who belongs to, or has the habit of, or has the forbidden quality or characteristic or the disposition of heath-dwellers.

Like paganism, heathenism is primarily a mark of sociological distinction between the sophisticated, enlightened and peaceful law abiding people of the urban areas and towns, and the unsophisticated, rough and law breaking elements of the heath.

However, the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines heathen as one who is neither Jewish, Christian or Muslim; unenlightened person. In the same manner the Pocket Oxford Dictionary makes pagan and heathen synonymous. This agreement about their being synonymous is true to their basic meaning and connotations. But then we have to question how a purely sociological term of sociological distinction became transferred entirely to a religious context.

The Authorised Version of the Bible translates the Hebrew *goiim* with the word heathen. The Revised Standard Version on the other hand translates *goiim* as nations. Both of these retain the word Gentile following the original Greek or Latin which simply means ‘race’ or ‘descent’ as a translation of the Greek *ethne* which means the same as *goiim*. The New English Bible translates *ethne* in Matthew 6:32 as a heathen.

‘Heathen’ like the Hebrew *goiim* or the Greek *ethne* or Latin *barbarous*, is a word coined especially for those who look down from a height of superiority upon other races. With the Hebrews, it was from a height of spiritual pride (the chosen race) and with the Greek and Romans from the height of cultural arrogance.

In respect of West African Traditional Religion the name heathen is most unsuitable, and in fact a very obnoxious misnomer. It has nothing to do with religion basically. It is the worst of all the labels and its usage is most objectionable.

Fetishism: The word *fetish* is of Portuguese origin. It refers to

charms and amulets used by the Portugues themselves. The general term for these magical objects is Fetico. This is translated into the English and the French from the Latin Factitus as Fetish or Fetich, in the sense of the magically artful.

The Portugues, observing similar objects among the people of West Africa identified their religion with fetishism. From that time onwards fetish was taken as a general descriptive term for the West African worship of terrestrial and material objects. Later it came to denote a general theory of primitive religion, in which external objects are regarded as animated by life similar to that of man. Thus Africa was thought to be the land governed by insensitive fetish. Bossman for instance writes, "They cry out, 'Let us make Fetish'; by which they express as much as let us perform our religious worship". James Frazer speaks of the "Fetish Kings of West Africa" when he means a religious head as distinct from a civil ruler. Mary Kingsley also wrote, "When I say Fetish or *Juju*, I mean the religion of the natives of West Africa".¹²

The identification of Fetish with the whole of African Traditional Religion is the product of inadequate data, ignorance or prejudice. Inability to grasp the fundamentals of African worship naturally leads one into the error of taking appearance for reality. This is because properly considered fetishism mostly describes that aspect of religion which is based upon magic and charms and not the whole of religion.

Rattray who investigated the religion of the Ashanti of Ghana objected to the use of the word fetish to embrace all that is religion in Africa. He believes that most of what is usually listed under fetish and fetishism belongs to magic: "If any of these definitions were to be accepted for the Ashanti then we should be compelled to accept the unsatisfactory appellation 'fetishism' to describe also the higher Ashanti religious beliefs . . . the cult of the Supreme Being when his great Spirit manifests itself through some supernatural object would become fetish; the lesser gods (abosom) would be forced into the distinct category of *suman* (magic); the hallowed

¹² Bossman, James Frazer and Mary Kingsley, quoted from E. G. Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion*, p. 15ff.

bones of the dead kings and all fine traits in the worship of the ancestors would become fetishes and fetish worship".¹³ In other words, the cult of God, the cult of the divinities and the cult of the ancestors would be reduced to magic if these wrong definitions are accepted.

Rattray confines fetish to part of an emblem of a god and says that fetish and god are in themselves different and distinct: "The main power or the most important Spirit in a god comes directly or indirectly from *Nyame* the Supreme Being; whereas the power or spirit in a fetish comes from plants or trees, sometimes directly or indirectly from fairies, forest monsters, witches or from some sort of unholy contact with the dead. A god is the god of the many, the family, the clan or nation. A fetish is generally personal to the owner".¹⁴

Fetish are 'man made' things unlike the Divine Being in whom Africans believe and put their trust. Africans distinguish between the thing that is made and the spiritual reality who is the determiner of destiny. In other words Africans see magic and religion as two different things. Thus fetish as a general description for religion in Africa results from misuse or abuse of the word and it is most inappropriate. Some elements of magic there are, but West African Traditional Religion is not just magic or fetish.

Idolatry: Idol is from the Greek word *Eidolon* and means images or shape. It came to mean an image copied from the real thing. That is to say a representation of other things. From this it developed into a portrait, especially of a god and later still "false god" (following the conjecture that *Eidola* may connote a world of false judgment). In logic it connotes first the form of an idea and later false idea or false mental conception.

Eidolon does not mean originally what is false, although it has acquired this meaning in the course of time. As a result of the derogatory use of the word, idol should not be used for any emblem of religion or any cult object which is only a representation or symbol of the being to which worship is offered. Such object is strictly speaking not an end in itself, but a means to an end. As an

¹³ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, p. 24ff

¹⁴ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, p. 24ff

emblem of a religion it is only a symbol and therefore it has a meaning and a reality beyond itself. The main purpose of such a symbol is to aid man's perception, concentration and to be a constant and perpetual reminder of the divine presence. All religions have sacred symbols — in Judaism we hear of the Ark and the Cherubim; in Christianity there is the Cross and the images of the Catholic saints and in Islam the Kaba is well known etc. Thus a religion is not necessarily idolatry because it uses a material representation of the cult objects. If it were so, then Christianity (which no religion can rival in the multiplicity of images) would have been nothing more than idolatry.

With special reference to West African Traditional Religion, the word idolatry does not apply technically. Similarly the word idol in its popular meaning does not apply at all to cultic objects. Idols do not take the place of the divinities. They are receptacles or temporary dwelling places into which a divinity may display his presence, come at will or when invited. One can destroy the material object or idol or carry it away or replace it and that will not in any way affect the divine being. Thus to label West African Traditional Religion as idolatry is to "do a great injustice to it and to do violence to its essence".

Animism: Animism is derived from the Latin word *Anima* meaning soul. It is the belief and ability of spiritual beings to occupy animate and inanimate objects. It has to do with individual creatures capable of continual existence after death. It also has to do with other spirits upward to the rank of powerful deities.

Tylor who propounded the theory of animism postulated that the belief in souls gave rise to the belief that spirits may from time to time possess or inhabit living and *non-living* things.¹⁵ He observed the fact of dreams and visions and claimed that it was as a result of these means by which primitive man thought that while he was lying down asleep, his physical being was engaged elsewhere in normal and abnormal activities. From this he first conceived the idea of a separate spirit, or soul or double. Through the same process he came to the belief that other spirits visited his own and became convinced in the belief that other human beings have souls which are separate and can exist outside the body.

¹⁵ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Vol. I, p. 424 ff.

Taylor also observed the experience of death and affirmed that there was something which makes a man a living being. When that something is no more present in man, the physical frame remains intact but that something which is missing makes all the difference between the living and the dead. That something he compared to breath and so when a person ceases to breathe he is declared dead. That something, Taylor suggests, is the soul.

Thus according to Taylor, the idea of the soul is derived from dreams and visions in which dead people appear and so gave rise to the idea that the soul might be alive. It is also derived from breath. From this, primitive man supposed that animals and even inanimate objects (e.g. trees, mountains etc. which are also seen in dreams and visions) have souls or spirits. Taylor then concluded that it is the doctrine of the soul that gave birth to the wider doctrine of spirits, divinities and God himself. This happened when man regarded these spirits as being responsible for events and incidents in the world, which can and does affect man for good or for evil.

Animism to a limited extent is applicable to West African Traditional Religion. That is, if we limit animism to the doctrine of spirit and spirits. That is to say the belief in the existence of spirit and spirits. Africans like some other races have passed through or are passing through the stage of animatism, the process by which inanimate objects are believed to possess the active attributes of life. Spirits are thought to inhabit trees, rocks, hills, etc. The silk cotton tree for example is thought to have an indwelling spirit. There is also the belief in various categories of spirits — ghost spirits, born-to-die spirits, witch spirits etc. But belief in spirit beings is just one of the components in the whole structure of the Traditional Religion. Thus it is incorrect to describe the whole of West African Traditional Religion as animism.

With regard to the divinities they are not to be confused with the natural objects which they may from time to time inhabit. Objects like rocks, lakes, streams, mountains and groves are only receptacles for the divinities. These may be destroyed but not the divinities. In this case therefore, animism in the sense of spirits dwelling permanently in natural objects does not apply.

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Polytheism: A prominent feature of West African Traditional Religion is the pantheon of divinities; divinities with sizeable

population. In consequence of this there is a tendency to regard the Traditional Religion as polytheism. But it is not polytheism.

Polytheism, when viewed correctly is a qualitative and not a quantitative term. It is not necessarily the belief in several gods, but the absence of a cohesive or unifying and supernatural ultimate that determines its character. A very good example can be found in Greek mythology where the gods like Zeus, Jupiter, Mars and Venus are of the same rank and file in kind and passion. Zeus may be considered as their father, but he is the first among equals, and he is never spoken of as the creator of the world.

In the Traditional Religion on the other hand, God is not of the rank and file of the divinities. He is the supernatural ultimate. He is wholly other and therefore not of the same status with the divinities. He is above the pantheon and not part of it. The divinities were brought into being by him. They derive their power and authority from him. Some of them are agents of creation. As ministers and intermediaries of God, the divinities are only means to an end and not end in themselves. Thus it is not appropriate to designate West African Traditional Religion as polytheism.

The appropriate description of the Traditional Religion should be monotheism, because there is a cohesive religious factor, which is the belief in a living God. But this must be qualified as "modified monotheism" or "diffused monotheism" because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of the religion. A situation therefore exists where the divinities, although deriving their power and authority from God, can be treated for practical purposes as end in themselves. Another reason also is that the divinities are accorded regular worship, whereas God is rarely worshipped directly.

WATR: How Precise is the Term?

Objection is raised to the term African Religion, in the singular, on the grounds that there are various beliefs and practices among the people. There are different names for God, so that there is no known common name by which God can be called by all as in Christianity or Islam. In some areas the divinities are prominent while in some others they are secondary in prominence to the

ancestors. How then can one refer to the African Religion in the singular?

The fact is that at the base of all these varieties is a common belief in God. All the elements in the structure of the religion link man with God, and it is in this respect that one can refer to the African Religion in singular.

The use of the term 'traditional' has also been a source of contention, since it suggests something so ancient that it is no longer being practiced today. There is something to be said for this. However, the term 'traditional' is to be understood in the sense of what has been handed down by our ancestors and that which is practiced today. It combines the idea of the past, present and the future.

Sources of Information about WATR

The absence of sacred literature like the Bible or the Koran and also the absence of imposing sacred buildings like Temples, Churches, Cathedrals, Mosques and Pagodas have contributed to the mistaken idea that Africans have no religion or if at all, it cannot be known. But the history of religion testifies to the fact that the societies from which religions like Christianity and Islam emanated were once backward and pre-literate and the revelation given to their founders existed in oral form before being committed to writing at a much, much later date. In the same way African religious ideas exist, largely in oral form. Thus in spite of the fact that Africans have no written records their religious beliefs and practices can be known and revealed.

What then are the sources of information on West African Traditional Religion? The sources are both oral and non-oral. The oral sources include: myths, proverbs, meaning of God's name, personal theophoric names, ordinary day speech, pithy sayings, liturgy and songs. The non-oral source consists of artistic expressions.

The Oral Sources

Myths: A myth can be defined as a channel for conveying a certain