

## Lesson 3 – ATR

### THEME: The Structure of ATR

To be able to know the nature of religion in Africa or ATR, we need to understand the African worldview.

#### What is African worldview?

Worldview is simply defined as the way people understand the world in which they live, the way they view reality around them. The way a people view reality arises from their experiences in the environment. Professor Nwala observes that African experiences determine the content of their basic beliefs and ideas (cf. Igbo Philosophy, 1985, 9. 177). This worldview can be defined from various perspectives including cosmology and ontology.

- Cosmology – views regarding the structure of the physical world eg. Sky, earth and the underworld
- Ontology – views regarding the nature of reality, eg. Spirituality and materiality
- Moral – views regarding the principles of human life and conduct in the world's society

Note that the African experience is not only from their encounter with the physical environment. Emotions and fantasies such as dreams and imaginations – which are not physical things – are part of the African experience in the world. Therefore, the African worldview refers to the manner in which Africans interpret the world in the various ways in which the world manifests itself to them. The world manifests itself to the African primarily as a physical entity but certain experiences in it make Africans to see another side of the world that is spiritual. Thus, the average African thinks of the world as simultaneously physical and spiritual or visible and invisible. As Iroegbu puts it, 'he encounters one world but in different aspects in its materiality and in its spirituality' (see Panteleon Iroegbu, Spirituality and Metaphysics..., 2003, p. 8).

Cosmologically speaking, African worldview reflects a three-tier cosmic space that dovetails into two distinct world-orders. The three cosmic spaces are the Sky, the Earth and the Underworld while the two distinct world-orders are the spirit-world

and the human-world. In African thought, the sky is the abode of the gods, the earth is for men, and the underworld is for dead men or ancestors.

The sky and the underworld typically represent the spirit-world, although spirits can also exist and operate across the three cosmic spaces since they are ubiquitous. For example, spirits or gods can come from sky to inhabit things in the earth like trees, land, and rivers. Again ancestral spirits can also come from Underworld to the earth space to interact with men. In fact, the idea of religion in Africa stems from the interaction of men on earth with those inhabitants of the spirit-world, namely, gods, ancestors, and other spirit-forces.

### **The Spirit-world**

The spirit world is captured in African worldview as a sphere of super-sensible existence. As we have seen, it is the abode of such beings as gods, ancestors, and other spirit-forces – all of which are not visible or perceptible to human sensation. Since man is a material creature, his mind can only grasp supernatural realities in natural or material modes. Therefore, the spirit-world is inevitably captured in materialistic terms.

Thus, the spirit world appears to the African as another world comparable to the physical world known to him. It is often thought to have roads and trees and streams and markets, just like the human world. In fact, it is sometimes viewed as lying side by side with the physical world and separated from it only with a tenuous divide. Some people even think that the spirit-world is meshed with the human world so that men and spirits are using the same roads and streams and markets. Sometimes too, it seems to be located within the space and time boundaries of the physical world; so in some villages, people point at some wild zones as the zone of spirits. African folk lore talks figuratively about travelling beyond seven hills and seven streams to reach the abode of the spirits.

### **Structure of ATR**

African traditional religion includes the African experience of the spirit-world and the expression of such religious experience in the context of African ecological realities, as well as the manner in which this experience manifests in and influences African life. Since the spirit-world is immaterial, religion in Africa is

typical materialistic in outlook. It involves the use of physical object and gestures in the human interaction with the spirits. Therefore, there are three levels or aspects making up the structure of ATR, namely,

- The supernatural level, which captures African systems of thought, philosophies, ideologies, myths, worldviews, and beliefs especially belief in God
- The physical or material level, which captures worship actions, rituals and sacred objects.
- The moral level, which captures precepts, observances and taboos

### **THE SUPERNATURAL LEVEL**

#### **African Belief In a Supreme Being**

The supreme being is experienced by man as an ultimate cause of existence, including the existence of the world and of man. But some people argue that Africans do not originally have an idea of God as a supreme being. For them the idea of supreme God came into Africa from the West through Christianity or from the East through Islam

One of the men who hold this position is Prof Donatus Nwoga who wrote a book titled 'The Supreme Being as a Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought'. He derived his argument from linguistic analysis of the word 'chukwu' and 'chineke'. Here are some of the major excerpts from the book:

- That chukwu is not supreme god but a local deity from Arochukwu
- That chukwu is a combination of Chi and ukwu just as chineke is chi and eke
- That eke is not about creating but about sharing
- That chi is a personal god in Igboland, and the Igbo do not have a universal chi
- That it is Christianity that brought in the idea of supreme god in Igbo thought and so compared chukwu with God who is father of Jesus Christ
- That there is little or no ritual evidence of a worship focused on chukwu in Igboland

Another man named Arazu added



- That the Igbo do not have the concept of creating out of nothing
- That if there is a supreme god in Igboland, it must be Ala, the most popular deity in Igboland

Arazu seems to derive their argument from the German Emil Ludwig who argued that Africans are untutored and cannot possibly conceive the very philosophical concept of God and of Creatio ex nihilo

### **Argument in Favour of God in Africa**

- A man called Olaudah Equiano who was one of the foremost Igbo slaves to have written a book pointed out in his Interesting Narrative of 1789, a century before Christian missionaries arrived in Africa, that Africans believe in one creator who lives in the sun
- Nri myth of origin upholds Chukwu as creator. The myth pre-dates both the Aro story and the missionary arguments. The myth states that Chukwu created man called Eri, and when the man got hungry, he gave him yam...
- Traditional prayer formulations enlist the supreme god as the first in its litany of divine invitees. Eg. The formular of breaking the kola nut in Igboland
- African personal names reflect the idea of God, eg. Chukwuma, Chukwudi, Okechukwu, etc

### **ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IN ATR (with particular reference to the Igbo)**

God's attributes in Africa are more easily seen in the people's names for God as well as in the personal names they give their children. For example, among the Igbo, God is called Chukwu, Chineke, and Osebuluwa; children are called Okechukwu, Chukwudi, etc

Local Name of God	English Meaning	Attributes of God
Chukwu	The greatest God	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Greatness,</li> <li>2. most powerful</li> <li>3. transcendent</li> <li>4. kingship</li> </ol>
Chineke	The creator-God	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. creator</li> <li>2. originator of all</li> <li>3. uncaused cause</li> </ol>



		4. sharer 5. judge, justice
Osebuluwa	Sustainer	1. provident, provider 2. merciful 3. omni-scient 4. loving, omni-benevolent