



Dynamism in the Features and Practices of African Religion in Yoruba Land

OLUWATOSIN ADEOTI AKINTAN

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract. Africa, with a very rich cultural heritage of what past generation of African people thought, did experienced and passed on to their children comprises several clans which are bound together by languages, traditions, religious observances, beliefs and practices. Undergirded with this cultural richness is religion which is the richness part of her cultural heritage. Significantly, there are many people both in the academia and the larger society who still treat African Religion derogatorily because they lack information or sound knowledge of the distinctive features and practices of the Religion. The influence of Christianity and Islam has also affected the religion negatively, to a large extent, as the adherents of these faiths even in this century still refer to the adherents of African Religion as ‘unbelievers’, ‘idol worshippers’ or ‘pagans’. It becomes pertinent therefore to write about the diversity, features and practices of African Religion in order to educate, inform and, to some extent, influence the orientation of the people of other faiths towards the religion positively. The paper therefore examined the features, nature and some of the African practices which constitute the religious beliefs of the Africans, as well as the effects of these religious beliefs and practices on the African ways of life despite the dominance of Christianity, Islam, Science and Technology. The research adopted a descriptive method and content analysis of literature on African Religion to advance the cause of the religion. The Paper concluded that despite the fact that African religion has many forces militating against it and undermining its importance in this modern age, it has evolved with time, and its many changes have positively impacted the religious, spiritual, social, moral, political and educational life of the African people.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, African Religion, Religious Observances, Modern Age.

1. Introduction

Africa comprises several clans which are bound together by languages, traditions and religious observances, beliefs and practices. The rich cultural heritage of Africans reveals their practices and beliefs which have been passed from generation to generation. This according to Mbiti (1978: 2) ‘this is what forms a long line which links their forefathers/foremothers with the descendants who now feel proud of it.’ The African heritage is rich, but is not uniform, it is similar but yet different from time to time, from place to place and from people to people. Among these African heritage is religion which is the richest part of the cultural heritage. As further observed by him religion is found in all areas of human life:

It has dominated the thinking of African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations, and economic activities... religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, while at the same time, this way of life has shaped religion as well (1978: 2).

In view of this, it is the aim of this paper to examine the diversity, features, nature and some of the African practices which constitute the religious beliefs of the Africans. The significant impact of these religious belief and practices on the African ways of life despite the dominance of Christianity, Islam and modern civilization will also be examined.

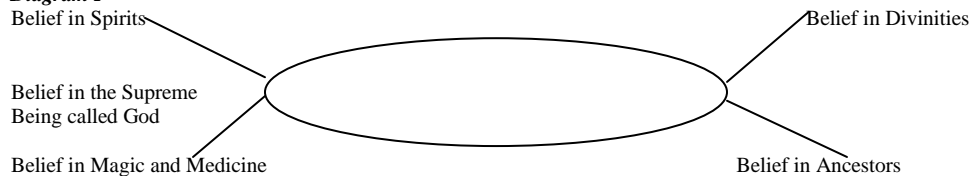
1.1 The Nature of African Religion

African religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the product of the religious thinking and experience of the forefathers/foremothers that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. The religion has inspired many artistic carvings, songs, dance which have made it resilient and attractive to the international world.

African religion is perceived more on a communal basis rather than on individual basis. The beliefs are held together by the community, the ceremonies are performed in group by the family and relatives, the whole community or by a group having the same occupation. The religion is an essential part of the way of life of people. The religion accompanies the individual long before his birth, through pregnancy, childhood and long after his/her physical demise. Ferguson (1998: 242) observes: Religion is seen as an aspect or dimension of the whole of life. There is no distinction between the secular and the sacred. All that we, do we do under divine powers.

According to Idowu (1996: 5) the real key note of life to an African man/woman is neither in his/her noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of his/her heroes. ‘The keynote of life is their religion and in all things, they are religious.’ African religion has no scripture or holy books. It is written in the history, the hearts and experience of the people. Though it has no sacred book, it has been able to move with times and it produces no religious controversies. It is pragmatic and realistic; it applied to the situation as the need arises. It moved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situation of their lives and reflected upon their experiences. There were no founders, no reformers, preachers or missionaries to change it, improve on it or take it to other continents (Mbiti, 1978: 15). However, in recent years, scholars and immigrants have taken African religion to other continents such as Cuba, Brazil, United States of America, and Carribeans. A common feature in Afro-Brazillan religions is the worship of the African deities (usually called Orixas but also Voduns or Nkisis), which are associated with elements in nature

Diagram 1



Depicting the features of African Religion

(e.g wind, water, thunder): It is obvious that the religions of African influence have been most strongly associated with Brazil’s popular culture and religious traditions. Diakite (2015: 334) opines that:

Orisha traditions have even furnished the wider society with defining cultural scripts, templates for African consciousness, and a meta-language for African spirituality...Orisha devotees world-wide have embraced a global awareness of Yoruba civilization and its theological import...

In the words of Ogungbile (2015: 409):

...there is also a huge production of books by devotees among the African religious practitioners to preserve the memory of African in places like Trinidad and Cuba...African indigenous religion has assumed a global status.

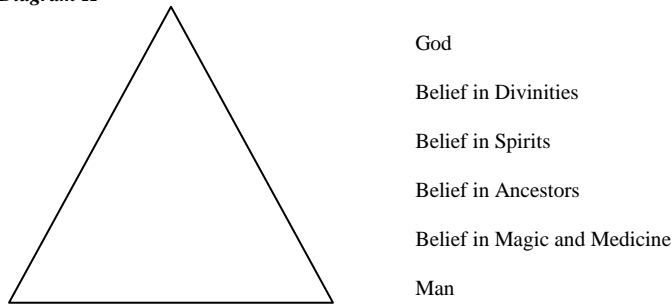
The religion of the Africans permeates their lives and expresses itself in many ways. As further explained by Idowu (1996: 5) it forms the themes of their songs, makes topic for minstrelsy, finds vehicles in myths, folktales, and proverbial sayings and is the basis of their philosophy. In spite of the fact that African religion has no written records, the religious beliefs and practices of the African people are known and revealed through oral traditions.

These oral mechanisms which include myths, proverbs, theophoric names, everyday speech, liturgy, pithy sayings and songs are our primary means of knowing something about the Africans’ interpretation of the universe and the hereafter. Non oral mechanisms consist of symbols, emblems, crafts and artistic expressions.

2. The Features of African Religion

There are five component elements which constitute the structure of African religion. The various structures in African religion are interrelated and God is the Supreme among all of them. The structure links man with God. This can be seen in the two diagrammes below.

Diagram II



Depicting the hierarchy in the structure of African Religion

2.1 Belief in God

This is the core and cohesive factor of the African religion. God is the origin and sustenance of all things. He is outside and beyond His creation, on one hand and also personally involved in His creation, so that it is not outside of Him or His reach (Mbiti, 1982: 29). In all the societies of African countries, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being. God is not a stranger to the African people and in the traditional societies, there are no atheists. Their knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies.

There are many eternal and intrinsic attributes of God among Africans. These attributes are words or phrases ascribing traits, properties, qualities or characteristics to the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is considered to be Omniscient, that is, He knows all things, Omnipresent, meaning He is simultaneously everywhere, and Omnipotent, meaning He is Almighty. He is immanent-men do establish contact with Him and at the same time, He is transcendental. God is unique. He cannot be compared with any being and there is none like Him. The uniqueness of God is one of the reasons why there are no images of Him, graven in drawing or in painting among African. Africans only have symbols of His attributes but not His images because the Supreme Being is a spirit. This also accounts for why there is no shrine for Him in many part of Africa. The Supreme Being cannot be confined in time and space. According to Mbiti (1982: 34): It is commonly believed that God is spirit, even if in thinking or talking about Him African peoples may often use anthropomorphic images. As far as it is known, there are no images or physical representations of God by African peoples. This being one clear indication that they consider Him to be a Spiritual Being. The fact that He is invisible also leads many to visualize Him as spiritual rather than

physical. To grasp this aspect of God, some societies... compare Him with the wind or air.

He is The Impartial Judge who sees and knows everything. ‘All over Africa, the idea of God as one who rewards the righteous with good fortune and punishes the wicked looms largely’ (Tasie, 2001: 54). In his capacity as the potentate of the universe, God is thought of as judge. There is no human action or thought that is hidden from Him, and His judgment is sure and inescapable. God is Immortal. He lives forever, He is always there, constant and He is a universal God.

Apart from the above attributes, in every African society, the people have a local name or names which clearly show the character and nature of God. They also show emphatically the fact that God is not an abstract concept or an illusion but that He is real. Consequently, Nabofa (2002: 9) is of the view that: These names also convey the purest expression of the African religious experience and thought. The various names of God result from the total experience of the people about Deity.

The following names show that, to an African man/woman, God is real and it also expresses the people’s belief in Him as the Controller of all things in the universe. For instance, the Yoruba refer to God as *Olodumare*, *Olorun*, *Eleda*, meaning the Almighty, Supreme Owner or Lord of Heaven, and the Creator while the Edo/Benin, call him *Osanobua*, *Osaro*, *Osayi*, meaning: The source being who carries, maintains and sustains the universe. Indeed God exists and He is the creator. Also, the Igbo call him *Chineke*, *Chukwuonyeokike*, *Chukwudi* (Chidi) *Chinedum*, meaning: The One who is the only God. It is God that controls and directs me. In Sierra Leone, the Mende know him as *Ngewo*, *Leve*, *Yaada*, meaning: The Great Spirit, the Supreme Creator, The One who is High up and Grandfather. Among the Akan of Ghana, He is known as *Onyame*,

Tweduampon, Totrobonsu, meaning: The Supreme Being, God and the Creator of all things, The Dependent One who causes rain to fall. In Cameroon, the Bulu refer to him as Mebee, Ebasi, meaning: The One who bears, carries and sustains the world, The Omnipotent father (Nabofa, 2002: 9).

Among the Africans, God is The King with absolute supremacy or authority which emphasises His uniqueness. 'The divinities, in their numbers, owe their existence to Him and they have no absolute power of their own' (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005: 47). God is The Living One, who is ever-present, ever active and ever-acting reality in the African world. He is pictured as an active and creative spirit.

2.2 Belief in Divinities and Spirit

The Africans believe that as the Supreme Being, he created the heaven, the earth and all the inhabitants, He also brings into being, the divinities and spirits to serve His theocratic world (Awolalu, 1981: 20). These divinities are divine beings and they are derived from the Supreme God. They serve God's purpose in the theocratic control and maintenance of the universe. They also serve as intermediaries or functionaries between God and man. In many African societies, there are pantheon of divinities through whom God, the Supreme Being manifests Himself. They are many and the people hold various forms of worship for them. The pantheons vary in sizes as a result of the sociological set-up or other reasons which may influence the concept of the divine ordering of the government of the universe among the various groups in Africa. The divinities are associated with natural phenomena, objects, human activities and experiences. Hence, Mbiti (1982: 75-76) believes that;

Divinities are, on the whole, thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits. They are associated with Him and often stand for His activities or manifestations either as personification or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature.

Moreover, Kalu (2015: 43) explained that a major characteristic of the African worldview is the predominance of the spirits, good ones and bad ones.

With a cyclical perception of time goes a three-dimensional conception of space. The sky is the abode of the creator spirit and the agents who are regarded as major divinities. Some of these are nature spirits such as the sun, moon etc. the human world is not only inhabited by living human souls but by a number of spirit beings: some major divinities such as the earth goddess, nature deities such as earth,

trees, rivers, rocks, human spirits, guardian spirits which look after various professions... evil spirits especially the wandering spirits of those who did not receive proper burials also inhabit the Spirit world beneath.

Tasie (2001: 52) argued that the belief that spirits are wise and endowed with the power to detect sins either committed in public or shrouded in secrecy exert a powerful restraining influence on anti-social behaviours in Africa.

Moreover, spirits can reside in natural phenomena but they are not bound to these material objects. They are separate and separable entities, and their being does not depend on the material objects which may be destroyed or replaced. The various material use as objects include, rocks, hills, mountains, rivers, caves, trees, pots or thick forests. All these are only channels or avenues through which the spirits are approached. It is in furtherance of this that Awolalu and Dopamu (2005: 34) reported that:

African worship of these natural forces or objects dedicated to so many divinities and spirits have earned African traditional religion such derogatory terms as "animism", "fetishism" and "polytheism". But Africans have contended that they are not really worshipping these physical objects but the spirits behind them, which are believed to serve as intermediary between man and God.

Based on this, Idowu (1996: 169) contested that Africans' indigenous religion is not animism, fetishism or polytheism, as argued by foreign writers, but "Diffused monotheism", a monotheism in which the good Deity (Supreme Being) delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divinities.

From the point of view of the theology of African religion, Idowu (1996) surmises that, it will not be correct to say that the divinities were created. It will be correct to say that they were brought into being or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe. They are derivatives from the Supreme Being and each divinity has his/her own local name in the local language, which is descriptive either of his allotted function or the natural phenomenon which is believed to be a manifestation or emblem of his being. In all, Idowu (1996: 171) asserts that:

The correct interpretation of the position of the divinities is that they constitute only a halfway house which is not meant to be the permanent resting place for man's soul. While man may find the divinities 'sufficiency' for certain needs, something continues to warn him that 'sufficiency' is only in God.

Technically, the divinities are only means to an end and not end in themselves.

The divinities are next in rank to the Supreme Being. In traditional societies the people believed that because of the superlative attributes and awesomeness, of the Supreme Being, He could not be directly approached. Among the Africans and particularly, the Yoruba group, divinities and spirits are used interchangeably. It is in this regard that Awolalu (1981: 22) remarks that:

...the divinities and spirits are best considered together because the Yoruba do not make too clear distinction between them. They are both divine and are both in the spirit world.

This shows that both divinities and spirits are classified together by virtue of their being in the spirit world. Essentially, the whole essence of the African being in communion with the divinities and spirit is to obtain their favour and this is well articulated by Awolalu (1981: 74) who asserts that:

...the whole essence of beliefs in the existence of spirits is to keep in favour with these invisible spirits and thus to avoid misfortunes and disasters.

Therefore in order to make life meaningful and worth living, the African people accord great respect to these divine beings who are regarded as the protectors and guardians of the community. The divinities, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (2005: 74) are ‘objective phenomena of the African Religion. They are semi-autonomous agents, each being the executive head of his department in the Deity’s monarchical government, the convenient and

appropriate channels through which the African people can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty.’ By virtue of the African Cosmological worldview which sees God as incomprehensibly unapproachable, the people could only gain access to Him through His intermediaries. It is in this perspective that the divinities and spirits occupy a strategic place among the people. This is why Adotey-Addo (2017: 1-2) submits that:

Traditional Africans believe that since God’s holiness blinds, He therefore cannot be approached by mere mortals. He is a spirit and these must be approached by spirits invisible to mere humans... The Great one brought the divinities into being. He therefore, is the maker and everything in heaven and on earth owes their origin to Him alone.

Hence the need for the worship of these various divinities and spirits as intermediaries. The divinities are of three categories. These are:

The Primordial Divinities: These are believed to be the divinities of heaven who had been with the Supreme Being, long before the creation of the universe. They partook in the creative work and their origin is not known.

Deified Ancestors: They were human beings who had lived extraordinary and mysterious lives on earth. When they died, they were ‘Canonised’ or deified as gods/goddesses. After their deification they were no longer ancestors but divinities.

Personified Natural Objects: These divinities are those that are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, canvass, brooks and thick forests and so on Africa (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005: 74).

Below are some of the examples of the divinities in.

Categories of Divinities	Names of Tribes and Divinities
Arch divinity	<i>Orisa-Nla Or Obatala (Yoruba) Ala (Igbo) Olokun (Edo)</i>
Oracle Divinity	<i>Orunmila (Yoruba) Fa (Fon)</i>
Divinities of Iron or god of backsmiths	<i>Ogun (Yoruba) Gu(Ewe) Gua (Akan)</i>
Thunder Divinity	<i>Herioso or Xevioso (Fon) Sango, Jakuta or Oranfe (Yoruba) Ogukwu (Igbo)</i>
Divine messengers Inspector General of rituals	<i>Esu (Yoruba) Ekurensu (Igbo) Legba (Ewe & Fon)</i>

2.3 Belief in the Cult of Ancestors

Ancestors are departed relations who are no longer visible on earth because they have become spirits (Shishima, 2014: 37). The ancestors as “living dead” still protect their human families and are assiduously acknowledged in life events (Kalu 2015: 43). Their families sometimes build shrines for them and offer sacrifices when necessary. They are consulted through diviners and called upon when calamity befalls the society (Shishima, 2014: 37).

The ancestors are called by different names throughout the continent. The Yoruba refer to them as *Baba nla* - great father or *Iya nla* - great mother. The Yoruba man, for instance, offers food or kills a cock for them. They are talked to in a familiar way and the people will not speak of consulting the dead or speaking to their spirits but say I am going to speak to my father/mother. Africans go to the tombs of their departed ones which are usually in the house, inside the room, in the compound or inside the shrine

of the divinities to have communion and communication with their beloved departed ones, to ask for aid, to appease for a wrong done so as to avoid punishment and to thank them for past gifts. The departed father/mother too returns to their human families from time to time and share meals with them symbolically. The food and libation given to the living dead are paradoxically acts of hospitality and welcome, yet informing the living dead to move away. This, they do because they believe that though the departed are no longer visible in the physical sense, death has given them more potentialities and has greatly enhanced their dignity, power and prestige (Mbiti, 1978: 84-86).

The ancestors of the Africans are seen as the guardians of family affairs, tradition, ethics and activities. Africans are therefore careful to follow the proper stages of practices and customs regarding the burial or other means of disposal of dead bodies, and make libation and food offerings as the case might be. This is because according to Idowu (1996: 207-208):

Those who die do not remain in the grave. Their bodies will rot away indeed, but they remain their essential selves apart from the 'bodies' of 'earth'. In fact, they believe the deceased stand aside and watch all the performances of the burial and funeral rites. They do not leave the house or its premises until a few days after the burial and after the completion of certain essential rites. It is in consequence of the belief that the deceased are really never in the grave/tomb... and the people have no doctrine of the resurrection of the body: that is, not in the dramatic, eschatological sense of the graves giving up their dead at the consummation.

Nowadays, looking at the burial ceremonies and commenting on the importance of the ancestors among the African Christians, Fatokun (2005) argues that rituals and ceremonies are often observed in remembrance of them to ensure their continuous watch over the living members of their family. But with civilisation however;

... the African heritage of preserving the memory of departed good parents have been Christianised in the form of "outing and memorial services" practices which are not in the New-Testament (or the Bible generally) but a development from African cultural orientation (Fatokun, 2005: 135).

2.4 Africans' Idea of Partial Re-Incarnation

Among African societies, it is believed that some ancestors or living dead are 'reborn'. This is partial

re-incarnation because it is not the entire person that is reborn. Only certain aspects of his characteristics or physical distinctions are seen. Thus Mbiti (1982: 119) says:

... it is possible for something of the features, characteristics and personality of such a spirit (the living dead) to be noticed in a newly born child. Then people would say that 'so and so' has come back, has returned, or has been reborn. The child may then be given the name of that deceased person, or people may make sacrifices and offerings to express joy and gratitude. Thus idea of partial rebirth is spoken of as reincarnation. But not everyone is reborn in that manner, nor is the entire deceased person as such. Only some aspects of the living dead are reborn, and this is perfectly possible biologically. Furthermore, those aspects can be inherited by either boys or girls regardless of the sex of the living dead in question. They can also be reproduced simultaneously in several children within the family.

Speaking further on this, the Africans are certain that there is no belief in reincarnation in the classical sense. According to Idowu (1996: 209) this is the sense that:

... reincarnation is the passage of the soul from one body to another... the lot of the souls is each being determined by its behavior in a former life.

The Yoruba speaks of 'A-tun-wa' meaning *another coming*. But in the real sense of the word, there is nothing like belief in reincarnation in the technical sense. This is a result of the fact that those who depart from this world, after entering the afterlife (the cult of the ancestors) remain there and their children keep unbroken intercourse with them up to the fourth generation. In summary, what the idea of reincarnation tries to show among Africans is further stated by Idowu (1996: 209):

It appears to establish the belief in the concrete fact that there are certain dominant lineage characteristics which keep recurring through births and thus ensuring the continuity of the vital existence of the family or clan.

2.5 Belief in the Practice of Magic and Medicine

The belief in the practice of magic and medicine is found in all African societies. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (2005: 35) they are used by man to conquer his environment. They are elements used to procure what cannot be obtained in the ordinary way and they can be used for good as well as bad ends. These two elements are based on the facts that, there are vital forces or supernatural powers in the universe that can be tapped, controlled and used by man. In

order to enjoy total wellbeing, man therefore resort to the practice of magic and medicine.

Magic according to Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu, has been defined as an attempt by man to tap and control those supernatural powers or resources of the universe for his own benefit. Its motto is 'my will be done'. There are two types of magic and these are: Contagious magic and homoeopathic magic. These two types of magic can be used in both good and evil ways. When used maliciously, it is condemned and then called a black magic or sorcery (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005: 263).

Medicine on the other hands, is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent diseases, to restore and preserve health. There are two types of medicine, these are preventive (prophylactic) and curative (therapeutic). Magical objects such as charms, talismans and amulets are used as protection against evil forces like witchcraft and sorcery in most African societies. Magic and medicine have the same name among some ethnic groups in Africa. The Yoruba call both 'Oogun', 'egbogi' and 'isegun', the Nupe call them 'cigbe', the Igbo call them 'ogwu', while the Akan call them, 'suman'.

Both magic and medicine are controlled by the same divinity. This divinity among the Igbo is called 'Agwu' and among the Yoruba it is 'Osanyin'. They are tutelary divinities of magic and medicine. Ritual is a common element of magic and medicine and both are depended upon spiritual belief. They are inevitably connected with the supernatural. Divinities and spirits may be called upon to concretise a magical preparation or a medicament.

In summary, it is necessary to note that the last four element that is, belief in divinities, spirits, ancestor magic and medicine do not have absolute power on their own. They are contingent on the first element which is the belief in God. It is only the first which possesses an element of ultimacy 'clearly' and this is expressed in the whole continent in the notion of the 'Supreme Being' (Andah: 1988: 91). This first element which is the belief in God, only has absolute existence of its own right. He does not rely on any of the elements. He has neither cult, symbols nor statues. He rarely receives sacrifice but is regarded as the ultimate recipient of the sacrifice offered to the spirits (Arinze, 1970: 10).

2.6 African Religious Practices on Rites of Passage

In the lives of individuals and families, there are important events which have religious implications

and which involve transition or crossing from one stage of life to another. These events are what the Dutch scholar, Van Gennep called the 'rites of passages'. According to Van Gennep (1960: 3):

The universe itself is governed by a periodicity, which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements, forward, and periods of relative inactivity. We should therefore include among ceremonies of human passage those rites occasional by celestial changes, such as the change over from month to month from season to season and from year to year.

These are the cycle or stages of life; it commences from the conception of a child, his birth, the passage through puberty, the new state of marriage, ordination, initiation and the ceremonies of burial. All the rites altogether constitute the sacraments of personal and family life. They are performed to mark transitions into different phases of human life, and are important turning points ceremonies in the life of a man/woman.

These events are religiously and socially celebrated by Africans through rituals. This is because to them, religion permeates the whole of life and Africans are notoriously religious. They are able to express themselves in their various acts of worship which begins, controls, and ends all the affairs of their lives. In Africa, these various rites of passage are a way of communing with the divine elements for the purpose of changing human situation, when the need arises. Through rituals and the various rites, these divine elements are able to walk with man, from birth to death. Man is deeply religious, living in an intensely religious universe.

3. Pregnancy, Birth and Childhood

In African societies, childlessness is regarded as a great problem because it prevents the continuity of the human society. Much rites/rituals are connected with pregnancy and childbirth in the traditional societies to ensure safe delivery, good health and fulfilment of life. This is because in many African societies, marriage is not fully recognised or consummated until the wife has given birth. Pregnancy therefore, is seen as the final seal of marriage and the sign of full integration of the woman into her husband's family. Children are seen as the buds of society and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives. Pregnancy is the first indication that a new member of society is on the way. As a result of this, the expectant mother becomes a special person and receives special treatment from her neighbours and

relatives. This special treatment starts before, and continues after child-birth.

The pregnant woman must observe certain taboos and regulations. Various rituals would be performed in order to protect her and the child. The mother-to-be is forbidden to eat certain foods, do certain work or walk during a particular time of the day; like in hot afternoon or in the night so as to prevent the spirit of born-to-die-children - 'abiku' from entering her womb. Where she has to walk, the expectant mother carries protective charms on her body. Between the eighth and ninth months of pregnancy, the actual birth takes place and elderly women act as midwives. Relevant rituals are performed to aid the expectant mother during the process of labour and delivery of the child. Here we need to note that these religious rites vary from one ethnic group to another.

Nearly in all African societies, the placenta and umbilical cords are the symbols of the child's attachment to the mother, to womanhood and to the state of inactivity. They are treated as special objects among Africans. Since it symbolises the separation of the child from the mother, they are ritualistically disposed. They are either buried in the ground or thrown into the river or used as charms for the child to wear. The disposal of the umbilical cord and the placenta in whichever way, shows that the new born child has died to the state of pregnancy and the state of being alone in the mother's womb. Now he/she has risen in the new life of existence, being part of the human society growing into the status of being 'I am' because 'we are', and since 'we are', therefore 'I am'. With the birth of a child, Africans are able to see that another religious being has been born into a profoundly religious community and world (Mbiti, 1982: 112-115).

The naming of children is an important occasion which is marked with ceremonies in many societies. But it takes various forms according to the customs of each family, clan or ethnic group. The name given to the child at birth may mark the occasion of the child's birth. Some names may describe the personality of the individual or his character or some key events in his life while other names given to the children at birth may come from the living-dead (ancestor) who might be thought to have been partially 're-incarnated' in the child. This may be because the family observes certain common traits between the child and a particular living-dead or they have consulted the Ifa-Oracle on the third day, like we have among the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

4. Puberty and Initiation Rites

Many African people do not have rites and ceremonies to mark the child's passage from

childhood into adulthood. Only few do observe initiation and puberty rites. These are physically, socially and religiously celebrated. These initiation rites accompanied by certain physical dramatic activities have some symbolic meanings. According to Mbiti (1982: 121-125) during these rites, the young are ritually introduced to the art of communal living.

5. Marriage

After the various initiation and puberty rites comes marriage. Among the African people, marriage is one of the focus of existence. It is a complex affair with economic, social and religious aspects. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet-the departed, the living and those yet to be born:

Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator... marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he/she who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, a rebel and a law-breaker, he/she is not only abnormal but under human (Mbiti, 1982: 133).

Therefore, anyone that fails to get married under normal circumstances would be rejected by the society. Marriage and procreation in African communities are seen as a united force and marriage without procreation is incomplete. This also is what John Mbiti means when he says:

It is a religious obligation by means of which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards man's struggle against the loss of original immortality. Biological, both husband and wife are reproduced in their children, thus perpetrating the chain of humanity (1982: 133).

Marriage is a long process and it is full of various rituals performed at the necessary stage. There are different customs and traditions observed in the matter of finding suitors or partners for marriage. This depends on the various ethnic groups. But no matter the manner in which the young people concerned know each other or make choice as to whom to marry, it is the parents and relatives that begin the betrothal and marriage negotiations. Mbiti (1982: 136) perfectly mirrors this, when he asserts that:

Since the individual exists only because the corporate group exists, it is vital that in this most important contract of life, other members of that corporate community must get involved in the marriage of the individual.

According to Fatokun (2005: 140):

Even with the introduction of Christianity and Islam, African converts with these foreign religions still adhere to the demands of traditional marriage rites called "engagement" which is usually done before (or after) church wedding or Muslim nikah (depending on the agreement of the families).

In traditional societies, marriage is not allowed between close relatives. There are as many customs of the wedding activities as there are many African peoples. The custom of presenting a gift to the bride's people is practised all over Africa, though in varying degrees. This practice is given various names such as, 'bride wealth, bride gift, bride price or dowry'. This marriage gift is an important institution in African societies. It is a token of gratitude on the part of the bridegroom's family to those of the bride, for their care over her and allowing her to become their wife. The bride is seen as a valuable person by all and sundry. She is not stolen but given away under mutual agreement between the two families. This practice is the most concrete symbol of the marriage covenant and security. In the African societies, there is no room for divorce which is now the order of the day (Mbiti, 1982: 140).

The state of marriage among Africans is polygyny, that is, a system where there is one husband and two or more wives. Men getting married to two or more wives is a custom found all over African societies but the situation in which a woman has two or more husbands (polyandry) is not allowed in Africa. Mbiti enumerates reason for the practice of polygyny among Africans. These are stated below:

The custom fits well-into the social structure of traditional life, and into the thinking of the people, serving many useful purposes. If the philosophical or theological attitude towards marriage and procreation is that these are an aid towards the partial receptive or attainment of the lost immortality, the more wives a man has the more children he is likely to have, and the more children, the stronger the power of immortality in the family. He who has many descendants has the strongest possible manifestation of 'immortality'. He is 'reborn' in the multitude of his descendants and there are many who 'remember' him after he has died physically. A man has the attitude that the more we are, the bigger I am. Children are the glory of marriage and the more there are of them, the greater the glory (1982: 142).

Today, because of modernity, high cost of living, getting children educated in modern schools or even clothing them properly or feeding them adequately,

and the danger involved in having multiple partners like contracting diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, many are no more in favour of polygyny.

6. Death and the Hereafter

Death is everybody's concern in the traditional societies. It is an inevitable and disrupting phenomenon among Africans. In African belief, death is not the end of life. It does not write 'finis' to man's earthly journey. It is only a means whereby the present earthly existence is changed for another. According to Bolaji Idowu, after death, man passes into the life beyond which, according to the Yoruba people, is called 'Ehin-Iwa' - After life. In this After-life, those who have finished here go on living (Idowu, 1996: 204). This, as opined by Awolalu (1981: 92) is the belief in the hereafter, in the power and love of the ancestors. Rituals connected with death are usually elaborate and it varies from one society to another. People are so concerned about the various rituals because they know that sooner or later, everyone would personally experience it. More so, it brings loss and sorrows to families, clans and the entire community.

Death is seen by an African man as part of the natural rhythm of life and paradoxically, every human death is thought to have external causes, making it both natural and unnatural. This life is like a pilgrimage; the real home is in the hereafter and one does not depart from there. 'Death, is conceived as a departure, a separation and not a complete annihilation of a person. Though the dead person is cut off from the human society, the corporate group clings to him through the ancestral cult' (Mbiti, 1982: 157). Death, to an African man, is seen as the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirit-hood. At death, the soul of the person goes to the sky or near to God, the Supreme Being. Yet the dead person is not cut off from his own human families, relatives or communities. They continue to hold him and see him as a living dead who is near to them in spirit and can be approached through libation, invocation, prayer and offerings. The dead now act as intermediaries between their families (living ones) and God or even between the world of men and that of the divinities and spirits or between men.

The majority of Africans have strong belief that judgment takes place at the end of each person's life that is in the after-life, while others believe that judgment - reward and punishment takes place while still in the world. The Yoruba for instance believe

that after death, the person stands before God (*Olodumare*) and gives an account of his earthly life. This also applies to the *Lodagaa* of Northern Ghana who believe that suffering awaits 'bad' people at the crossing of the river of death, 'on getting to the next world while the *Sonjo* people wear a tribal mark on their shoulder to guarantee them recognition on getting to the next world and live happily there' (Mbiti, 1982: 161).

Therefore, when an African person dies, he is believed to continue to live. He is seen as a living dead. The dead man's surviving relatives do not wish to see him slip out of their physical world; they want to hold on to him, remember him and retain him in a state of personal immortality. Though the body and spirit have been separated, the dead man's family members "keep him going" despite the fact that death has put an end to his/her real self and complete person.

7. African Religion and Modern Challenges

Despite the fact that the African religion has many forces militating against it and underscoring its importance in this modern age, it is striving at all cost to find a renewed life. It has within it, an inexplicable seed of immortality which has been planted on a fertile soil which continues to give nourishment to the tree resulting from the seed and under which men and women come to seek refuge from time to time as explained by Awolalu and Dopamu (2005).

Since humanity as a whole is dynamic, societies and its various religions cannot be static. African religion is not different. Many changes have taken place in Africa and these have affected the people religiously, spiritually, socially, morally, politically and educationally. Yet, with the in-road of Christianity, Islam, Western education, urbanisation and industrialisation, African religion still continues to retain the faith of many African men and women wherever they find themselves. Even many so-called Christians and Muslims continue to patronise their indigenous religion for protection and security as the need arises. Many still observe the indigenous religious festivals which are still of national importance.

One remarkable recent development in the history of African religion is the rapid growth of Ijo Orunmila/Ijo Adulawo where the practices of African Religion have been modernized and made attractive to both educated elites and the influential in the society. African religion is no longer seen as the

religion of African Religion of the uneducated, rural dwellers. Adherents of African Religion with confidence, without any inferiority complex attend services and programmes organized by this group on a regular basis.

Among the Yoruba for instance, the vast majority today identify themselves either as Muslims or Christians. These vast majority also practise some aspects of their indigenous religion. Though with modern changes here and there, the indigenous religion has been affected; it is no longer exactly as it used to be but it is by no means extinct. In times of life crises, the people revert to them in secret or even in the open. Observing old customs, to an African man or woman is a die-hard practice. According to Awolalu (1981: 194) 'Islam and Christianity along with western education are super-imposed on the indigenous religion, and many adherents find it difficult, if not impossible, to dissociate from the indigenous practices which they were born into.' Hence, they turn to it from time to time and they sing with pride such songs like:

Awa o soro ile wa o
Awa o soro ile wa o
Igbagbo/Imale kope e o
Igbagbo/Imale kope
Kawa ma soro
Awa o soro ile wa o

We shall fulfil our traditional rites
 We shall fulfil our traditional rites
 Christianity/Islam cannot prevent us
 Christianity/Islam cannot prevent us
 From fulfilling our traditional rites
 We shall fulfil our traditional rites

8. Conclusion

From the above discussions, it is obvious that the whole of African religious belief is based on the existence of God, who is the creator, controller and determiner of human life and destiny. African's also believe in ritual acts of worship which affect all aspects of life. Just like other religious systems (Christianity and Islam), the indigenous religion of the Africans is also based on the eternal questions of what it is to be human, what is the meaning of life and the correct relationship among humans and spiritual powers. Africans try to explain the occurrence of evil and suffering and they seek to portray the world as operating with some degree of order and predictability. They uphold certain types of ethical behaviour and all these are expressed in sacred oral traditions handed down from generation to generation.

The words of Idowu (1996: 231) in respect of African religion is important here as a warning. He asserts that:

African religion should not be denied a place among the living religions of the world. To be denied would only be a case of wearing blinkers. The indigenous religion has no creeds to be recited, but instead the creeds are written boldly in the heart and consciousness of the individual and an individual is a living creed of his own religion.

Idowu's assertion is more significant in view of the impacts of African religion on other world religions such as the Afro-Brazilian religion, Afro-Cuban religions, African-derived religious traditions in Jamaica, and Asia religions. African religion is rich in values and has contributed immensely to humanity.

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