Religion and African Pluriversalism

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Abstract- **Africa is known with indigenous, strong and rich heritage ranging from culture, tradition, belief system, to languages and norms and morale. These had existed centuries before the incidence of colonialism in Africa. This paper seeks to look at the nature of imported religious identities and how they have over the years influenced the diverse African traditional knowledge and truth. The methodologies of this paper are combination of historical, descriptive and documentary research design based on qualitative research method. This paper among other things discovers that African traditional belief system has been endangered by the imported religions, for example, Islam and Christianity. There has never been a universality in African traditional belief system due its diversity, and no one single exclusivity in matters of knowledge and truth as one culture can no longer speak and others should just listen and not raise their voices. Imported religions have their own origin and this origin cannot be replaced for the belief inherent in the indigenous African traditional systems. In this case, the paper then recommends the need to free our mind from these imported religions in order to preserve our original traditional heritage as a continent, even in this neo-colonial imperialistic state.**

Keywords: **Religious Identity, African Pluriversalism, Traditional System, Cultural Orientation**

I. INTRODUCTION

Pluriversality is the philosophy that argues that there is no one single exclusivity in matters of knowledge and truth. Given the immense contact between cultures in recent times, the universal perspective holds that one culture can no longer speak and others should just listen and not raise their voices. Walter Mignolo, the *de facto* progenitor of the concept of Pluriversality, argues that pluriversality is not cultural relativism, but the entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential. That power differential is the logic of colonialist covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity. Modernity is a fiction that carries in it the seed of Western pretense to universality. It is clear that monotheistic religions went as far claiming that their positions are most appropriate and hence should be adopted by all and sundry in order to attain salvation (Mignolo, 2013).

The world today is characterized by a plurality of faiths and cultural identities (Pratt, 2013). Hence, this plurality of faiths comes with a contrasting of religiously influence (Oyibo, 2017).Huntington in his foremost book: The Clash of Civilizations (1993) makes sufficient allusion to this claim when it asserts that the western civilization that is influenced by Christianity, is, as it were, on a war path with Islamic civilization. However, his assumptions have been heavily disputed. Critics suggest, among other things, that he ascribes a degree of homogeneity within the Islamic world that simply does not exist. Religious extremism as we discussit in this paper is not the sole province of any of the monotheistic religions. All three monotheistic religions have ample manifestations of violence towards 'religious others' (Oyibo, 2017).

In Christianity, arguments in support of extreme fundamentalism and even the enacting of terrorizing violence have been at play ever since Augustine called upon the force of the state to compel a theological outcome - the elimination of a rival schismatic church (Pratt, 2014).In Islam according to Durie (2010), baseds on the contentious Islamists' interpretation of Islam and the desire to restore the political hegemony of Islam have significantly decimated Christianity and persecuted Christians. The religious content in these battles cannot be easily supplanted by the other factors in play such as political dominance or economic marginalization attributed to the West, as it were. The struggle among the monotheistic religions over whose version of revelation and truth is the ultimate one is obvious in these religiously motivated conflicts. Adherents of the Islamic faith consider the Sharia as divinely ordained laws of Allah (Oyibo, 2017).

While all religions are characterised by referring to a supra-empirical source of truth and purity, it is useful, at the outset, to distinguish between different religions by assessing the scope of their symbolical claims. Whereas *universalistic* religions, e.g. Christianity and Islam, claim to contain the whole spiritual truth, *particularistic* religions have more specific aims and only claim partial access to that truth. While the former confront the individual with a fundamental choice and demand total commitment from their members, the latter are less demanding and may even be combined in functional mixtures, which, for the universal religions, would be perceived as eclecticism, syncretism and heresy (Koenig, 1999).The provisions of the Sharia are adjudged to be divinely sanctioned and revealed moraltruths, whose authority is beyond the purview of any human creature. Hence, there is no other truth that can exist over and above the truths revealed in the Qur'an. In the same vein, adherents of Judaism, as well as the Christian faiths, view the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments as transcendent moral truths. Christians, drawing on the Jewish *Tanakh* hold tenaciously to the belief that the Ten Commandments were revealed by God himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. The book of Exodus contains the episode where Moses climbed up to the mountain on the instruction of Yahweh, who Himself dictated the Ten Commandments to Moses. Consequently, all three monotheistic religions subscribe to the view that the truths

revealed in their sacred scriptures are transcendent in nature. These truths are binding on all its adherents (Oyibo, 2017).

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBELM

There are five elements according to Mbiti (1975a, p. 10) that constitute all religion: "beliefs, practices (ceremonies and festivals), objects and places, values and morals, and religious officials."Prominent among these religions in Africa are African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islam. The only thing central to these religions is the existence of God, the Creator. However, there are divergent interpretations and understanding of the five elements common to them. None of the religions can claim to have an exclusive reserve to the knowledge and truth.

To this effect, Sam (200) argues that every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which it has no evidence. In fact, every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even conceivable. The central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Gale Thomas terms Christianity and Islam as world faiths and concludes that "African traditional religions have no predominant doctrinal teachings. Rather, they have certain vital elements that function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination." (Gale, 2016, p.3).

The paper intends to give answers to the following questions: What is the concept of religion in African traditional system? What is religion and African pluriversalism in the era of Religious Modernism? What are the divergent view on the origin and concept of God in African Traditional Religion?

III. CONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SYSTEM

The challenge to answer the question: What is religion has remained unresolved. Sundermeier (1999, P. 11) opines that the answer to this question "usually reveals more about the one giving the definition than about religion itself Our perspective determines our theory or definition of religion". Over the centuries there have been attempts to define the phenomenon of religion. These attempts have come from various perspectives, ranging from the psychological, sociological and anthropological to the philosophical and theological (Momen, 1999, pp. 52–73) and, most recently, they have come from a biological perspective (Hammer, 2005).

There are many definitions on the word 'religion'. Many scholars have defined it differently. However, adequate definitions are not so easy to find. Nevertheless, some defined religion as 'an ultimate context for meaning and value'. Others see religion as· a social entity, for example, the authoritative symbol set which creates a society out of a group of individuals. Still, others defined religion as, the way in which individuals organise to cope with social change and other threats in their environment (Kenan, 1997).

Still furthermore, others defined religion as 'the quest for, realisation or maintenance of a sense of belonging to the ultimately-rea'. 1 These brief definitions of religion and other definitions which are not mentioned in this paper, are all important and it can be applied to any religions in the world, among them the African Traditional Religion is one of them. In the light of this definition and the purpose of this paper, one can talk about what constitutes the worship of God in African Traditional Religion (Kenan, 1997). Religion is the human way of representing reality (Van den Heever, 2001, p. 4). It is therefore quite logical that there will be a multitude of interpretations of what reality looks like. Religion is not seen as something concerned with a specific phenomenon (Van den Heever, 2001, p. 3).

Not only can these attempts be arranged according to perspectives, but also according to theories (Crosby, 1981, p. 5), providing definitions for the groups of definitions. "Although varied, the theories and definitions became fixed in stereotypical forms. As a result of the confusion caused by the plethora of definitions there have even been suggestions to discard the mostly dominant Western term 'religion' altogether" (Asad, as cited in Figl, 2003, p. 71). A sociologist would look through a sociological lens at religion, whereas a psychologist would give a definition based on a different (psychological) perspective. This would also apply to culturally determined definitions: A Westerner would provide a definition influenced by European thought and an African would formulate the answer according to African philosophy.

The majority of definitions of, and theories on, religion have originated from a Western background. Even the whole existence of the term 'religion' is seen as a '*eurozentrischen*' (Eurocentric) term (Figl, 2003, p. 73). Sundermeier (1999, p. 11) points out that the mere "question about what religion is betrays a Western background. Thus, a whole world of Western-determined references is implied when talking about religion, but such a so-called Western understanding of religion is not necessary homogenous."

Amidst the different definitions of religion, this paper adopts the definition proposed by Monica Toft (2011):

Religion can be usefully seen as a system of practices and beliefs sharing most of the following elements: (1) a belief in a supernatural being or beings; (2) prayers or communication with those beings; (3) transcendent realities, including 'heaven,' 'paradise,' or 'enlightenment'; (4) a distinction between the sacred and the profane and between ritual acts and sacred objects; (5) a view that explains both the world as a whole and humanity's proper relation to it; (6) a code of conduct in line with that worldview; and (7) a temporal community bound by its adherence to these elements (p. 115).

Toft's definition of religion has a holistic dimension to it which accommodates African traditional religion. Religion becomes the convergence point for other multiple perspectives

which all seem to proceed from religion or seem to have their basis on religion (John, 2015).

IV. RELIGION AND AFRICAN PLURIVERSALISM IN THE ERA OF RELIGIOUS MODERNISM

In contemporary Africa the persistence of sacred practices is a source of conflict between devotees of African religions and outsiders. When outsiders evaluate indigenous cultures and religions, they often judge practices and beliefs as controversial. Western religious cultures regard many aspects of African religions—such as witchcraft, ritual killing of animals, female circumcision, polygamy, and approaches to gender relations—as peculiar compared with Western cultural practices. Among the adherents of an African religious tradition, however, these practices generally do not cause controversy.

Religious modernism in Africa through Christianity and Islam has succeeded in distancing African religion from the socio-economic and political spheres in the developed world (Clarke & Jennings, 2008). However, despite the influence of religious modernism in Africa, such separation has not left a lasting imprint on African societies, where African religion continues to play an important role in socio-economic and political life. Christianity and Islam are imported religions to Africa. In line with this Aderibigbe et al (2015) explains that, both Christianity and Islam are regarded as "foreign" to the African continent and it peoples. But rather observes that the studies of the Christian and Islamic traditions pose no difficulties with regard to sources of information. Both religions have sacred books. In addition, the founders, geographical origins, and organizational structures are well articulated and remain largely the same for the adherents, regardless of the different interpretations. However, both Christianity and Islam are regarded as "foreign" to the African continent and it peoples.

Africans are a deeply spiritual people. Their traditional religions, however, are perhaps the least understood facet of African life. Although historically non-Africans have emphasized the multiple deities and ancestral spirits in African traditional religions, there are other notable features. For example, African cosmogony posits the existence of a Supreme Being who created the universe and everything in it. African myths frequently describe numerous lesser deities who assist the Supreme Being while performing diverse functions in the created world. Spirits may be divided into human spirits and nature spirits. Each has a life force devoid of physical form. Individuals who have died, usually ancestors in particular lineages, are the human spirits. These spirits play a role in community affairs and ensure a link between each clan and the spirit world. Natural objects, such as rivers, mountains, trees, and the Sun (as well as forces such as wind and rain), represent the nature spirits. Africans integrate this religious worldview into every aspect of life (Encyclopedia.com, 2016).

John (2015, p. 4) laments that:

With the advent of imported religions, it can be argued that Africans have not been able to live their identities and theorize themselves in a world where Africa's own contributions to cultural and social organization have been denigrated or even ignored. The African traditional religions have been frequently devalued and only the authority of imported religions is seen to have significance. It is no exaggeration that African traditional religions have been seen as culturally irrelevant and imported religions are now so embedded in the psychology of Africans that most Africans have been lulled into.

Even when Africans resort to religion unconsciously, it shows how deeply a religious consciousness is ingrained in an African person, whether he or she is at home or in the diaspora (Chitando et al.,2013, pp. 5-7). It is, therefore, common for Africans to display their religious beliefs and rituals in moments of joy and despair. Africans come alive when they manifest their religiosity. African expressions, names, activities, symbols, celebrations, work, ideology and philosophies are loaded with religiosity (John, 2015). In the midst of the situation, Mbiti (1999, p. 1) asserts that "Africans are notoriously religious. According to him, "religion permeates all departments of life to such an extent that it is not easy or possible to isolate it." Although the African religious consciousness was initially derived from the practice of traditional religion, Christianity and Islam have given further impetus to this consciousness. Conversely, however, as the unfolding of a natural cultural process, both Christianity and Islam have in turn been influenced by traditional religion (Muzorewa, 1985).

Traditional religion in any culture affirms the identity of that culture, provides a source of knowledge, and defines a people's existence. Religion provides an education for individuals and is a rich source of cultural knowledge about many different subjects. A crisis of identity has been created in Africa as Africans' own indigenous sources of knowledge are steadily replaced by global values dictated by Western capitalism. Another issue is conversion to Christianity and Islam in Africa, which has not only created conflicts between indigenous religions and these two traditions but also set Christianity and Islam against each other (Khapoya, 1994).

V. THE DIVERGENT VIEWS ON THE ORIGIN AND CONCEPT OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The concept of God, divinities and spirits in African traditional religious ontology has been a controversial and misunderstood concept. Various factors led to this controversy and misunderstanding, such as prejudice by Western scholars who measured African traditional religious concept with Christianity. Other factors include lack of indebt study of African religion leading to hasty conclusion. Most of those who came to study the religions of Africa were armchair scholars who depended on data from missionaries who themselves concentrated in one community or tribe.

On the belief in God in African traditional religion, Idowu (1973, p. 40) writes:

> ... with regard to the concept of God, there is a common thread, however tenuous in places, running throughout the continent. Whatsoever outsiders may say, it is in fact this one factor of the concept, with particular reference to the character, of deity which makes it possible to speak of a religion of Africa.

Some of the names given to the supreme beings by African tribes are; *Leve or Ngwo-a* name given by the Mende people of Sierra Leone. This name is directly translated as Supreme God. The Mende people believe that all life and activity in both a material and non-material sense derive from him. Akan people of Ghana call God *Onyame,* (the Supreme Being,) God the creator of all things, the Deity. In Nigeria, the Binin people call God *Osanobua,* for literally, the creator of the world, the sky, the earth and oflife and death. The Igbo called God, *Chineke,* (the creator) God, *Chukwu,* (the creator spirit). The Yoruba called him, *Olodumare,* (the Almighty, the Supreme God) (Idowu, 1980). Other tribes are; Basuto who live in the Transvaal said that their high God is called *Hueane. Leza* is the name used for their High God by the Baila, Botango and several other tribes of Northern Zambia. The Wachaga tribe from Tanzania called God *lruwa,* and in Kenya God is called *Akuj,* for the Mangu, the name for God is *Ngai (*Kenan, 1997*).*

They used the scanty information derived from one or two localities in Africa to draw conclusion about the ontology of God, divinities and spirits in Africa. These armchair scholars went as far as believing that the sub-Saharan Africa is one country with one religious belief and practice. This misunderstanding continued until indigenous African scholars like John S. Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu, in 1970s and 1980s, set out to refute some of the erroneous claims about African religions. They echoed the fact that "Africans had known God before the missionaries came." This view gave Africans and their religion, which was battered and shattered by the missionaries who condemned and denigrated their religion, a new hope and integrity ((Mbiti, 1970, p. 3; Bolaji, 1980, p 85).

However, one of the ways African religion and its adherents have parted ways is in the knowledge and truth about the origin of God. There are divergent views of scholars and African Traditional religion as per the origin of religion. Some see religion as originating from fear. People saw the vastness of the universe and the rumblings of thunder and lightning and the vastness of the sea and so many other things that caused them fear and so developed faith in something that will shield them from what they feared. Others see religion as originating from magic while others see religion as the creation of the priestly class. As there are divergent views of scholars concerning the origin of religion, in the same way many scholars have various views as per the origin of belief in Godin Africa (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Through reflections on the universe, Africans came to believe in God. This view has its bases on the fact that Africans believe in God as the Creator of the universe. This belief may have led them to reflect on the vastness of the universe. Their imagination led them to this conclusion that there must be a Supreme Being whose power not only created this vast and complex universe but also sustains it. They therefore began to give this being worship and adoration. Mbiti, writing in his work Introduction to African Religion, explains that the process of arriving at this conclusion of belief must have taken a long time and there must have been many myths and ideas which tried to explain these mysteries of the world (Mbiti, 1975).

Through realization of their own limitations Africans came to believe in God. This second view or explanation of the origin of beliefin God in Africa has its root in man's limitations and the insatiable nature of man's needs. Africans saw that they were limited and weak in many respects, including knowledge and power, particularly in the face of death, calamity, thunderstorms, earthquakes, mighty rivers and great forests which are beyond man to control. These limitations and powerlessness rather led them to speculate that there must be a Supreme Being who is superior to these other powers that can be drawn to help them through appeasement and or sacrifice (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Mbiti (1991, p. 3), argues that "this idea made it logical and necessary for man to depend on the one who was more powerful than people." This made Africans to feel that they needed the help of this Supreme Being in their experiences of limitations and powerlessness. This is the Great God that the Africans worship. It should be observed that the process of this formulation took a long period before it was actually conceptualized (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010).

As Africans observed the forces of nature, they came to believe in God. This third view of the origin of belief in God in Africa is so important because it has to do with the various forces of nature. From time immemorial; man has been in the habit of looking at the forces of nature with awe and reverence. This made man to worship these forces as having one supernatural power or another. As Africans looked at the weather, storms, thunder and lightning, and other phenomena such as day and night, the firmament, the sun, moon and stars, seeing their enormous benefit to man yet unreachable, the Africans began to associate the sky with a great God who is very close to man, supplying man's needs such as rain for his land to produce abundant fruit. Mbiti (1991, p. 6) argues that this may be the reason "that God is so much associated with the skyand the heavens".

Other questions raised by people on the concept of God in African Traditional Religion come from within and without. People from outside asked questions such as: Is there any awareness of God in Africa? If so, what idea of him have they formed? To put the questions more accurately: Is there an African concept of God? If Africans know God, what God or which God do they know? Is it their own god or the real God? (Edwin, 1950) These were the age-old questions in the minds

of some people, and even today they continue in the minds of many people. It is believed in this paper these questions about the concept of God form part of pluriversalism in the African religion. We will present different views of those scholars who have especially, written about the concept of God in African traditional religion in order to understand their individual point of departure in the argument.

Before Edwin Smith's explanation on the African concept of God, he quoted Farnell as saying; the epithets whereby a Greek divinity was addressed in prayer and in official hymns give the best due to the idea of ancient worship (Uka, 1991). In order to make the quotation clear and to relate it to the African concept of God, he goes on to say; 'when Zeus is invoked as cloudwrapped, delighting in Thunder and Apollo as for-worker we know how the Greek thought of them. Similar epithets are bestowed by Africans upon the Supreme Being. As a rule, the epithets are unquestionably old and widely known among pagan Africans' (Uka, 1991).Smith stated, 'Africans have rich store of folk-proverbs. In them the African peoples express a pungent criticism of life and the gathered wisdom of the past'. He gave an example from Ghana to illustrate how frequently the name God occurs in these proverbs. For instance, 'if you would tell God tell the wind', says the *Hawk,* 'all God did is good (Edwin, 1959).In these proverbsone can see the concept of God among the African peoples, especially in their religion. Apart from the proverbs, ethnographic descriptions of African tribes usually includespecimens of their myths and legend, and many of these illuminate the African concept of God.

Furthermore, in his research among the Ashanti of Ghana, R.S.Rattray said about them concerning the concept of God:

I had some years ago taken a firm stand against a school of thought. ... which denied that the conception of a supreme being in the West African mind, and his place in their religion, were due to any cause deeper or more remote than the influence of Christian missionary teachings ... further research embodying a much fuller investigation into Ashanti religious beliefs than was before possible has only served to strengthen the opinion which I formerly expressed ... I am convinced that the conception in the Ashanti mind of the supreme being has nothing whatever to do with missionary influence ... contact with Christians or even, I believe with Mohammedants ... in a sense, therefore, it is true that this great supreme being, the conception of whom has been innate in the minds of the Ashanti, is the Jehovah of the Israelites (Rattray, 1927, p. 24)

The names given to God by African peoples are not just mere names, but are descriptive of His character and epithet of the fact that He is a reality. The names denote that, as Westerners observe, he is a reality to the Africans and convey 'the purest expression of their religious thinking and of their religious experience. The names given to God help to show his attributes. Some names refer to him as creator, maker of souls,

founder of the universe, controller of nature and giver of rain and so on (Uka, 1991).

VI. CONCLUSION

Religion is universal. Religion is expressed contextually according to local culture. The phenomenon of religion is understood differently according to different thought patterns. For a long time, religion has been understood solely according to Western thought patterns. Aderibigbe (2015) concludes that Africa is a massive continent with diverse religious traditions, to the extent that within the same tradition there have been variations. The three main religious traditions— African traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam—constitute the triple religious heritage of the African continent. This heritage, though contemporarily more dynamically evidenced, has a long history and influence. In the case of African traditional religion, it can be traced back to the very beginning of the emergence of African peoples.

There are four foundational religious beliefs in the traditional religions: (1) the belief in impersonal (mystical) power(s); (2) the belief in spirit beings; (3) the belief in divinities/gods and (4) the belief in the Supreme Being. These foundational religious beliefs are essential to our theological interpretation and analysis of the traditional religions especially within African setting (Turaki, 2000).The works of African scholars for the past three decades have established the fact that Africans have a concept of a universal God and the Creator (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1975). Most Africans are in agreement that the traditional Africans do not actively worship this Supreme Being.

The paper recommends the need to free our mind from these imported religions in order to preserve our original traditional heritage as a continent, even in our neo-colonialized state. This paper also pleads for a broader scope of understanding religion and God by including insights from an African point of view.

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