

Chapter Nine

African Religion

“African Traditional Religion, Nature, and Belief Systems”

Objectives:

1. Define religion according to African beliefs
2. Identify characteristic features of African religion
3. Understand the significance of the wooden mask in African religion
4. Identify three other sources, besides oral tradition, of African religion



AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, NATURE, AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is found in all established human societies in the world. It is one of the most important institutional structures that make up the total social system. There is hardly a known race in the world, regardless of how primitive it might be, without a form of religion to which the people try to communicate the divine. This religion becomes inseparable with the total life experience of the people. It thereby permeates into every sphere of the people's lives, encompassing their culture, the social, the political, and the ethical, as well as the individual and societal expectations in their ups and downs. As is the case of nearly every other people in the world, religion is one of the keystones of African culture and is completely entwined in the people's lifestyle. A basic understanding of African religion will provide an awareness of African customs and belief systems.

Perhaps no religion has been so confused in the minds of Western audiences as the African Traditional Religion. The images of this religion have been presented as hopelessly savage and full of ugly superstition. This is solely because the earliest investigators and writers about the religion were mostly European and American anthropologists, some missionaries, and colonial administrators who had no knowledge of the true African spiritual situation. Their works portrayed a distorted image of a religion drawn from half-truths and fertile imaginations. However, an increasing number of African theologians are conducting valuable studies in the African Religion. They have been able to unveil the position that the tenets, spiritual values, and satisfaction which are found in the other world religions—namely, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, to mention a few—could also be found in African Traditional Religion. Furthermore, it is imperative to say that these researches have left a positive impact, in the sense that they have helped highlight the general truths, concepts, and trends about the religion, thereby dispelling most of the popular misconceptions about the religion.

The emphasis of this chapter will be on the basic concepts of African Traditional Religion. These are its nature, characteristic features, and its conceptual framework.

THE NATURE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The African Religion is the religion of the Africans and strictly for the Africans. It is not a religion preached to them, but rather a part of their heritage that evolved with them over the years. They were born and not converted into it. It has no founder, but rather a product of the thinking and experiences of their forefathers who formed religious ideas and beliefs. Therefore, its existence cannot be attributed to any individual as in other world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on.

Through the ages, the Africans have worshipped without being preoccupied with finding names for their religions. It was the investigators of religion who first supplied labels such as paganism, idolatry, and fetishism, to mention a few. In order to correct the misconception of such derogatory terms, it became important to designate the religion with a name that describes its true and real nature.

The name African Traditional Religion has been used by scholars to describe the religion. The name was not coined in order to brandish the religion as primitive, local, or unprogressive—rather, it is employed to reflect its location in geographical space and to underscore its evolution from the African personal experience (Aderibigbe, 1995). Furthermore, it is used to distinguish the religion from any other type of religion, since there are other religions in Africa that did not grow out of the African soil but were brought from outside. This shows that the religion is particular to the people, and it would be meaningless and useless to try and transplant this religion to an entirely different society outside of Africa (Mbiti, 1975).

To the African, religion is a hidden treasure secretly given by the Supreme Being solely to the African as a vehicle of communicating and for expressing himself before the sacred entity. In order for a non-African to see and appreciate the wealth of spiritual resources embedded within the religion, he needs to actively participate in order to unveil the nature of the religion, which cannot be understood by mere casual observation. This is why the true nature of the African Religion has been wrongly described and expressed by many, particularly foreign writers and scholars who were outsiders and had no deep knowledge of the experience of the true African spiritual dynamics. These unfortunate misconceptions have been variously demonstrated in derogatory terms for the religion, the denial of African concepts of God (Aderibigbe, 1995), and as ugly superstition that is demon-oriented. It therefore lacks the spiritual fulfillment necessary for the salvation of the soul. Consequently, their works are full of fabrications, exaggerations, half-truths, and biases against the religion and its adherents.

Nevertheless, their works have left a significant impression on most Westerners. Most people remember the African Religion with the image of a missionary in a cannibal's pot about to be cooked and eaten or an evil witch doctor trying to cast a voodoo spell upon a victim. However, with the increase of scholars in the field of African theology such as E. B. Idowu (1962) and Mbiti (1975), there have been some successful attempts to correct some erroneous ideas about African Religion and its belief systems, thought patterns, rituals, and culture generally. The true nature of African Religion cannot be based on erroneous claims of the Europeans concerning the Religion, but rather on what the Africans think and feel about their religion. The true nature of African religion is hinged on the embodiment of the religion in a belief system and functionalism that are actualized in the everyday life of the indigenous African.

A basic understanding of the religion will provide an awareness of African customs, belief systems, concept of God, relationship with the divinities, spirits, ancestors, and the view of death and life beyond death.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

The fact that African Traditional Religion has no sacred scriptures like other world religions does not necessarily mean that it is devoid of organized religious beliefs and practices. The religion is characterized by a belief system which consists of the totality of the African beliefs, thought patterns, and ritual practices. The religious beliefs of African Religion are in two inclusive categories: the major beliefs and the minor beliefs. The major beliefs are in a fivefold classification. The major beliefs in their hierarchical order have significant relevance on the totality of African religious belief systems.

The above diagram represents an overview of the belief system in a hierarchical order.

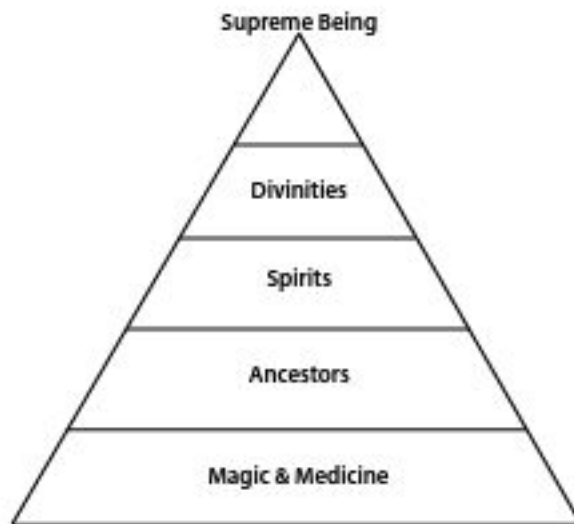
Belief in the Supreme Being

In the religious belief system, the belief in the Supreme Being is fundamental to all other beliefs and is firmly entrenched in African belief and thought. This is contrary to the Western view that the primitive African is not capable of having any conception of a single Supreme Deity. As Idowu points out:

Those who take one look at other people's religion and assert glibly that such people have no clear concept of God or no concept of God at all should first look within themselves and face honestly the question, "How clear is the concept of God to me ..." (Idowu, 1973).

The Africans believe in the Supreme Being and recognize Him as the ultimate object of worship. He is not an abstract power or entity, neither is He an idle Negro king in a sleep of idleness occupying Himself only with His own happiness (Baudin, 1885). Rather He is actively involved in the day-to-day affairs of the people. The people strongly attest to the fact that He is the creator and author of all things in heaven

and on earth. The names and attributes of God clearly connote the people's belief in Him. He is regarded as omnipotent, holy, the creator and source of all other beings that originate from Him and are in turn responsible to Him. The exalted place of the Supreme Being as above other creatures gives rise to His worship in various African societies, either fully as is the case of the Ashanti of Ghana and the Kikuyu tribe of Kenya, or with partial worship as the Ewe and Abomey peoples of Togo do. Among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria, the lack of an organized cult such as temples, shrines, altars, or priests for Him does not in any way diminish His presence and significance. He is believed to be present everywhere. At the same time, this is why He is not limited to a local shrine or



represented in images or symbols. God is real to the Africans—His name is constantly on their lips. Each people have a local name which uniquely belongs to Him. The names by which the Deity is called in Africa are descriptive of His character and emphatic of the fact that He is a reality and that He is not an abstract concept (Idowu, 1973). As Westermann (1937) observes:

The figure of God assumes features of a truly personal and purely divine Supreme Being ... it cannot be overlooked that he is a reality to the African who will admit that what he knows about God is the purest expression of his religious experience.

The Yoruba people refer to Him as Olodumare—Almighty God; Olorun—owner or Lord of Heaven; Aterere Kari aye—Omnipresent God. The Igbo refer to Him as Chukwu—the Great Source Being or Spirit; Chineke—the Source Being who created all things. The Akan of Ghana refer to Him as Onyame—the Supreme Being, the Deity. The Membe of Sierra Leone refer to Him as Ngewo—the Eternal One who rules from above. These various names and their meanings give us a vivid understanding of the African concept of the Supreme Being. To Africans, God is real, the Giver of Life and the All-Sufficient One.

Belief in Divinities

The belief in divinities form an integral part of the African belief system. The divinities were created for specific functions and do not exist of their volition. The relationship of the divinities to the Supreme Being is born of African sociological patterns. Most African countries have a king or chief as the head of the society, and he is always approached by other chiefs who are lesser in rank to the king. This is due to the belief that the king is sacred and must not be approached directly. The role of the divinities like the lesser chiefs as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and man is that of serving as a conventional channel of communication, through which man believes he should normally approach the Supreme Being. This distinctive role of the divinities led to the erroneous conclusion of the Europeans that the Supreme Being is never approached directly by Africans.

To the African, divinities are real, each with its own definite function in the theocratic government of the universe. The divinities are halfway as a means to an end and can never be ends in themselves. The real and final authority comes from the Supreme Being. This is why after each prayer and supplication before the divinities the Yoruba end the devotions with *-ase*, meaning "may it be sanctioned by the Supreme Being." The divinities have different names in different African societies. The Yoruba call them Orisa. To the Igbos, they are known as *Alusindimino*. The Akan address them as *Abosom*. There are numerous divinities in Africa, and their number varies from one community to another or from one locality to another. Their number ranges between 201 and 1,700 in various Yoruba localities. The names of divinities depict their nature or natural phenomenon through which they are manifested. For example, the divinity first associated with the wrath of God among the Yoruba was *Jakuta*, meaning "he who fights with stones." The same god among the Igbos is known as *Amadioha*. Among the Nupe the same divinity is called *Sokogba*—Soxo's ax.

The divinities in African concept can be classified into three categories. First are the primordial divinities. These are believed to have been in existence with the Supreme Being before and during the creation of the world. They are believed to have partaken in the creative works of God. Their origins are not known and are

beyond man's probing. One of such divinities is Obatala, a Yoruba divinity believed to have been entrusted with the creation work of the physical part of men. Consequently, he is popularly referred to as Alamorere (the fine molder). He is also called Orisa-nla and designated as an arch-divinity; he is believed to be the deputy of Olodumare, deriving his attributes from those of the Supreme Being.

The second are the deified ancestors—those who were heroes during their lifetime by living extraordinary and mysterious lives are deified after their death. They are no longer mere ancestors, but absorb the characteristics of an earlier divinity. A vivid example is Sango, the deified Alaafin of Oyo, who assumed the attributes of Jakuta, the erstwhile thunder divinity in Yoruba land.

There are also divinities that found expression in natural phenomena. Such divinities are spirits associated with natural forces such as rivers, lakes, trees, mountains, forests, etc. Their habitations are considered sacred, and there are usually priests who are custodians of such places and through whom the spirit may be consulted. An example of this is the Olokun (water divinity), which is common among the Yoruba and Edo people.

Finally, divinities are believed to be ambidextrous. With this nature, they are capable of being good and bad simultaneously. Positively, they help in solving people's various problems by helping in procreation, fertility, increasing man's prosperity, and so on. On the other hand, when denied veneration, they could inflict misfortunes on a community.

Belief in Spirit

Africans believe in and recognize the existence of spirits referred to as apparitional beings who inhabit material objects as temporary residence. According to African belief, spirits are ubiquitous and can inhabit any area of the earth because they are immaterial and incorporeal beings. Though divinities and ancestors are sometimes classified as spirits, they are, however, different from the kinds of spirits being discussed here, in the sense that they are more positively associated with the people. They are, in fact, described as "domesticated" spirits. While men venerate, respect, and communicate positively with the divinities, he associates with the spirit out of fear and awe. Spirits are normally synonymous with inimical activities detrimental to man's prosperity, so the people try to placate them so that their progress may not be hindered. Spirits inhabit such places as rivers, hills, water, bushes, and trees. Such places are naturally sacred. For instance, among the Yoruba, the Akoko (known by the Igbo as Ogilisi) is reputed to be an abode for spirits.

Spirits have been classified into groups. Among the Yoruba, there are spirits known as Abiku or Ogbange. The Igbo refer to them as born-to-die children. These are considered sadistic spirits that specialize in entering into the womb of women in order to die at a specific period, thereby causing their victims pain and anguish. Such spirits could plague a particular woman several times if treatment is not applied. This is why in Yoruba land pregnant women are not allowed to walk about at noontime, because it is believed that this is the time the spirits roam about and they are capable of ejecting the original fetus of the pregnant woman and implant themselves as substitutes for the ejected fetus.

The second category of spirits is believed to be spirits of the dead whose souls have not been reposed. These are spirits the dead whose bodies have not been buried with due and correct rites. It is believed that their spirits will not be admitted to the abode of the departed. Thus, until they are properly buried, they will continue to wander about. Such spirits could also belong to those who engaged in wicked works while

alive and also died wicked. Such spirits could haunt the community, wreaking havoc if not continually appeased.

The spirit of witchcraft belongs to the third category of spirits. It is a human spirit, and it is believed it can be sent out of the body on errands of havoc to other persons or the community in body, mind, or estate. Such spirits may cause diseases, miscarriages in women, insanity, or deformity in human beings.

Finally, Africans recognize spirits in anthropomorphic terms since they are believed to possess the same human characteristics such as tastes, emotions, and passions.

Belief in Ancestors

This belief is based on the concept that the world is dual: it is comprised of the physical world and the spiritual world. The spiritual world is recognized as an extension of the physical, thereby controlling it. Africans have a strong belief in the continued existence of their dead. The communal and family bonds are held to continue even in the next world. They are usually referred to as ancestors or the living dead. They are closely related to this world, but are no longer ordinary mortals. The Africans believe they can come to abide with their folks on earth invisibly to aid or hinder them to promote prosperity or cause adversity. This is why belief in them is not only taken seriously, but is also one of the most important features of the African Religion. The ancestors are factors of cohesion in the African society. This is because of the respect and honor given to them as predecessors who have experienced the life the living are now treading.

However not all the dead are ancestors. There are conditions laid down that must be fulfilled before assuming the exalted status of an ancestor. The first condition is that the dead person must have lived a good and full life. Second, he must have died a good death and not an abominable death caused by accident, suicide, or a violent or unusual death such as from chronic diseases. Finally he must have died in old age and be survived by children and grandchildren. When these conditions are fulfilled, he automatically becomes an ancestor and receives veneration so intense as to be erroneously regarded as worship. Idowu has this to say of the African belief in ancestors:

To some extent, they are believed to be intermediaries between the Deity or the divinities and their own children; this is a continuation of their earthly function of ensuring domestic peace and the well-being of their community, to distribute favors, to exercise discipline or enforce penalties, to be guardians of community ethics and prevent anything that might cause disruption (Idowu, 1973).

Based on this belief, the Africans bury their dead in the family compound in the hope that they will continue to influence their lives. In the African societies, there are various ways of venerating the ancestors. It may be by pouring a libation of food and drinks and/or by prayers. It may be carried out by individuals or on a communal basis. Furthermore, there are also religious festivals which are usually carried out in the ancestral cult. In Yoruba land, the Oro and Egungun festivals are the symbolical representations of the ancestral cult.

Almost all the tribes in Africa have one form of ancestral cult with festivals associated with it for the veneration of the ancestors. An example is the Ashanti of Ghana, where we have the sacred Golden Stool,

which is the ancestral symbol of the Ashanti. Other tribes in Africa with ancestral cults are the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Lugbara of Central Africa, and the Ovambo of Southern Africa.

Belief in Magic and Medicine

Magic and medicine form a significant part of the traditional beliefs of Africans. By definition, magic is an attempt on the part of man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit (Idowu, 1973). Through the use of supernatural powers, he tried to achieve his own desires through self-effort. Man's use of this power could either be positive or negative, depending on his conception of the power. Medicine, however, is the science or art of the prevention, treatment, and cure of disease. The art of medicine is important because man recognizes that health can be lost and medicine helps the body return to its normal state.

Basically, the difference between magic and medicine is that in the use of magic, man tries to enforce his will by using supernatural powers at his disposal; while through the use of medicine, man tries to utilize the powers at his disposal to prevent or cure any form of misfortune which might befall his body or estate. This is clearly seen in the words of R. S. Rattray, concerning the Akan belief about medicine:

If God gave you sickness, he also gave you medicine (Rattray, 1923).

This is why medicine men, known as traditional doctors, abound in Africa. They regard their powers as a gift from God through the divinities. They claim they are given the art of medicine by divinities through dreams or through spirit possession. Among the Yoruba, the tutelary divinity of medicine is Osanyin. The divinity is believed to be the custodian of the art of medicine. Though magic is negatively viewed, when it is associated with medicine, the two become so interlinked that it becomes difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. This is because both employ supernatural powers and can be employed for both evil and good, depending upon the individual involved.

Another common trait about magic and medicine highlighted by Awolalu and Dopamu in writing about the religion of West Africa is that some tribes in Africa have a common name for magic and medicine. For example, the Yoruba call *oogun*, *egbogi*, and *isegun*. The Igbo call them *ogwu*, while the Akans of Ghana call them *suman*.

Finally, it is essential to point out that both magic and medicine constitute a part of the mysteriousness of the African Religion. This is because they derive their supernaturalness, efficacy, taboos, and custodians from the religion. This is why incantations and rituals are common features of magic and medicine in the African Religion.

Other Beliefs in African Religion

There are some other beliefs within the African Religion that are basically derived from the five major beliefs discussed above. They complement the major beliefs, and together they form the totality of the African Religious Belief. They are referred to as minor beliefs.

Belief in the Hereafter

Like all other world religions, the concept of a life after death is firmly entrenched in the people's belief. African Religion also holds the view that life exists beyond this physical world, which is considered the temporary abode of men while heaven is the spiritual and real home of man. Africans believe that man is made up of both body and soul. The soul does not die like the physical body, but rather it returns to the Supreme Being, who is believed to reside in heaven. The Supreme Being is the final destination of man to whom he belongs and must return. This belief is clearly illustrated in the Yoruba adage *Aye loja orun nile*—that is, the world is a marketplace and heaven is home. No one sleeps in the marketplace. After each day's transactions he or she returns home to rest.

However, not everyone is qualified to enter into heaven. Only those who have engaged in good works while on earth would be granted eternal rest with the Supreme Being, the Supreme Judge of all men. Among the Yoruba there is a saying which encourages man to do good while on earth in order to earn eternal life: *Sere to ri ojo ati sun*—do good so you can earn eternal life. It is believed that those who live an ungodly life on earth will be banished and separated from the Supreme Being.

Belief in Morality

Morality in African Religion is religiously based, since every sphere of the African life is closely associated with being religious. This is why Adewale (1988) asserts that the ethics (morality) of Africans from one to another is religious. Africans have a deep sense of right and wrong, and this moral sense has produced customs, rules, laws, traditions, and taboos which can be observed in each society (Mbiti, 1975).

Morality deals with human conduct, and this conduct has two dimensions, the personal and the social. It guides people in doing what is right and good for both their sake and that of their society. It evolved in order to keep society in harmony, which is achieved through the system of reward and punishment. African morality is centered around some basic beliefs. It is believed that morals are God given and were instituted simultaneously with creation. Therefore, its authority flows from God and must not be challenged. For his part, man is compelled to respond appropriately to these moral demands; failure to comply could incur the wrath of God. This is why certain calamities which may befall a community or person are often interpreted as a punishment from God.

Furthermore, Africans believe that some supernatural beings like the ancestors and the divinities keep watch over people to make sure they observe moral laws. They could punish or reward moral behavior. This further strengthens the authority of the morals. Human beings also play an active role in controlling the morality of the people. The individuals keep a close watch on those with bad moral attitude and often uproot them before they turn the society into an immoral one. This is based on the belief that the welfare and solidarity of the people are closely related to the moral action of individuals. Good deeds are normally encouraged, for these bring harmony, peace, and prosperity. On the other hand, misdeeds could bring calamities of all kinds.

Finally, the importance of morality to Africans cannot be overemphasized. It is evident in their myths, legends, and proverbs, which stress the need to keep the moral demands of human conduct.

Belief in Worship

The act of worship is an integral part of any religion and African Religion is not excluded. It is believed that through worship, one turns to his object of worship in adoration and supplication. Worship in African Religion is directed to the Supreme Being and veneration to the divinities. It is believed that if there is effective worship of both, there will be peace and harmony between the supernatural beings and man.

There are various forms of worship in African Religion. There is the formal and also the informal, the direct and the indirect. In parts of Africa with a direct form of worship, it is characterized by altars, priests, and sacrifices. This is especially so with the worship of the Supreme Being. In the case of indirect worship, there are no temples or priests specially designed for the Supreme Being.

The veneration of divinities could be done regularly on a communal level or individually. This is because they are frequently called upon for one favor or another. On the individual level, the informal type of veneration is carried out privately at the personal shrine normally located in the compound. At the communal level, the formal kind of veneration is carried out at the public shrine, where everyone within the community participates, including family heads, clan heads, priests, priestesses, and traditional rulers.

The main components of worship and veneration are prayers, songs, libations, invocations, and offerings. On the whole, worship or veneration in African Religion is employed to show adoration of and communication with the supernatural beings. It is believed that when these beings are adequately worshipped or venerated, they will bestow upon man the necessary blessings required for successful living on earth.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Africans have a rich cultural heritage, which has been handed down from one generation to another. The richness of their heritage reflects in all spheres of their lives, especially in the area of the Traditional Religion. Though the religion does not have a sacred scripture like other world religions, it has means by which its religious beliefs and practices can be known and appreciated. These devices are categorized into oral and non-oral. The oral devices are proverbs, myths, pithy sayings, legends, liturgy, everyday speech, songs, and Theocratic names. The non-oral devices consist of artistic expression.

Oral Traditions

This is regarded as the scriptures of African Traditional Religion. The lack of knowledge in the art of reading and writing caused the African society to employ a means of preserving and transmitting their religious beliefs and practices through oral traditions. They are testimonies of the past, which are transmitted from person to person over the ages. Some of them are records of actual historical events memorized by the people. Others are created by the people's imagination. Consequently, some are regarded to be more reliable than others. For example, proverbs, pithy sayings, and names are believed to be more reliable than legends, myths, daily speeches, and folktales, which are often distorted and cannot be regarded as authentic for grasping the people's beliefs and practices. Here are some forms of oral traditions and their functions:

Myths

In the African traditional society, storytelling at night is the most common recreation in many homes enjoyed by the children and young people. Myths attempt to explain certain things, especially the origin of man and the world. They are vehicles for conveying certain beliefs about man's experience in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man's experiences in the supersensible world. Through myths, man tries to find explanations for certain things. For example, how death came into world; why only women conceive; why they must labor before giving birth to children; why different languages in Africa came into being. Answers to such questions are conveyed in stories which help to preserve them in the memory, making it easier for retention. Myths give us an insight into some of the religious concepts of the Africans who evolve them. Myths are variable sources of information in African Religion because they serve as practical ways of preserving the nonliterate beliefs for possible transmitting without losing their theological themes, since most of these myths are popular stories that draw from beliefs and ideas familiar to the people. Some myths, especially those used during rituals, may enjoy a high degree of authenticity. Such myths could provide the basis for the scriptures of African Religion.

Proverbs

Proverbs are a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of her heritage. They are a rich deposit of the wisdom of many generations and are held in high esteem. There are hundreds of such proverbs in different African societies which carried with them theological instructions, moral teachings, and metaphysical significance (Jacob, 1977). These proverbs reveal a lot about African religious beliefs, since they are mostly formulated from human experiences and reflections that fit into particular situations of life throughout the ages. It is no gainsaying that among Africans, proverbs are cultivated as an art form and cherished as an index of good oratory. For example, among the Yoruba, proverbs are regarded as "horses for retrieving missing words" that are used for conveying deeper meaning. From some of these proverbs one can learn the various attributes of God as creator, omnipresent, holy, merciful and upright, etc. Thus, we find many proverbs referring to God as an object of religious beliefs, such as the Akan proverb "If you want to tell God anything, tell it to the wind"; "God drives away flies for the cow with no tail" (Yoruba); "God has both the yam and the knife, only those whom he cuts a piece can eat" (Igbo). The importance of proverbs to Africans cannot be overemphasized, and this is clearly expressed in the Igbo adage, "A child who knows how to use proverbs has justified the dowry paid on his mother's head."

Names of People

Names are given immediately upon birth and considered to be very much a part of the personality of the person. In most African countries, the name of the Supreme Being is often made part of the child's name (Mbiti, 1969). This shows that they recognize the Supreme Being. Such names are used as practical demonstration of people's religious feelings, an expression of worship, and the events prevailing at the time of birth. This practically demonstrates how much the people associate the Supreme Being with the continuation of life and the birth of children. There are many names which signify a particular attribute of the Supreme Being.

This would mostly depend on the circumstances surrounding the child's birth. Among the Yoruba, we have such names as Oluwatobi (God is great), Oluwaseun (God is victorious). The Burundi name their children Bizimana, meaning "God knows everything." A careful study of various names by researchers of African Traditional Religion could give a deeper insight into the people's religious beliefs, especially their belief in the Supreme Being.

Prayers

Prayers are an essential part of religion. They constitute the act of communicating with the Supreme Being, which is the essence of religion. Like other world religions, prayers are an integral part of African Traditional Religion. Africans pray to the Supreme Being for guidance, blessings in matters of daily life, good health, protection from danger, etc. These prayers are directed to Him, the deities, and the ancestors requesting for one favor or another. The prayers may be made privately by an individual or communally at public meetings and for public needs. When Africans pray, their prayers are always short and straight to the point. They do not "beat about the bush." There are different modes by which the people pray to the supernatural beings. There is the direct form of prayer, where people communicate with the Supreme Being without the help of intermediaries. However, the indirect form of prayer is when people pray on behalf of others. These include priests (both men and women), rainmakers, chiefs, kings, and sometimes medicine men (Mbiti, 1975). Africans pray because they believe the Supreme Being listens to them and accepts and answers their prayers. He is believed to be everywhere simultaneously. Here are a few examples of prayers in African Traditional Religion as illustrations.

For example, in the morning, the Yoruba have prayers like, "God, let us be successful today." Before worshipping, the Yoruba also pray, "Father, accept our offering and supplication to you."

When there is drought, Africans pray, "God, give us rain"; "Help us, O God"; "God, pity us." In times of sickness, African prayers implore the Supreme Being: "God, heal our sickness, let the sick be well again"; "Take this sickness away from our house, our town, our tribe." When a journey or other forms of a project are to be embarked on, Africans pray for God's protection and successful completion of the project. Prayers such as, "May God go with you"; "May God help you," etc., are offered. There are also general prayers of blessings, such as "God preserve you and keep you." Prayers are also offered for long life, such as "May God spare you to see your children's children."

It must be stressed that in all situations, the Africans pray to show their belief in and dependence on the Supreme Being. The prayers also provide information on the African concepts about the Supreme Being. These concepts form the center of the African Traditional Religion.

Non-Oral Sources

Apart from the oral sources, through which valuable information on African traditional religion is secured, there are some non-oral devices which provide valuable information on the beliefs and practices of Africans where their religion is concerned. These non-oral sources are identifiable in three forms: (i) artifacts; (ii) wooden masks; and (iii) the sacred institutions (Abioye, 2001). These three non-oral traditions are essentially

artistic expressions that in concrete terms "showcase" the African traditional religion in all its ramifications. Here is a brief discussion of each of them.

Artifacts

All African societies are very rich in artifacts. These artifacts have become concrete reflections of African belief and devotion to the Supreme Being, the divinities, and the ancestors. The artifacts associated with the African Religion are in two categories. There are objects that are products of archeological findings. Artifacts in the second category are made up of the works of contemporary artists. Archeological excavations have, in some cases, led to more information and better understanding of certain African beliefs and practices. An example of this is the discovery of the temples and altars of Onyame, the Ashanti Supreme Deity, by R. S. Rattray. This singular discovery has gone a long way to show the inadequacy of the foreigners' usual claim that Africans had no organized worship of the Supreme Being because they did not have the idea of God. Indeed, the discovery has led to the search and successful discovery of many other different forms of organized worship among various African tribes. In addition, contemporary artifacts comprising of dance staffs, apparatuses for divination, musical instruments, votive figures, and many other forms of ritual objects provide information on African religious beliefs and practices. Many of these objects are found in shrines, while others are part of the general stocks of artistic works of many African artists attempting to recapture the rich African cultures in different forms.

Wooden Masks

These are concrete forms of covering the face in the attempt to hide the identity of the persons putting on the masks. The practice of putting on masks covers the whole of Africa and is regarded as a part of basic rituals, particularly having to do with the ancestral worship and the cult's expressions of the African people. In the first form, people who are regarded as incarnations of the spirits of the ancestors put on masks to conceal the earthly personality behind the mask and give cogency to the belief that the person wearing the mask is an ancestral spirit. In the second form, members of secret societies in Africa put on masks. Examples of mask usage are found among the Ogboni in Yoruba land and the Poro among the Mende of Sierra Leone.

In addition to the masks, there have been stools found in shrines. They are regarded as having religious implications in their artistic expression. The stools become objects of religious expression by the fact that they are not only found in shrines, but also in some other places. For example, among the Akan of Ghana, the stools have become altars upon which the head of the Akan lineage offers food and drink to their ancestors on appropriate occasions, thereby praying for the protection of the lineage. He also prays for good health and long life with an abundance of harvests.

Sacred Institutions

Beliefs of Africans in the Supreme Being and all other aspects of their religion are reflected in the several traditional institutions all over Africa. Traditionally, these institutions are regarded as sacred. An example of

such institution is the traditional ruling institution. Among Africans, the traditional rulers are not mere political heads. They indeed represent the Supreme Being. Thus, the authority they have is in trust for the Supreme Being. This is why traditional rulers are not seen as ordinary persons. They are sacred. For example, the Yoruba call an oba *Igbakeji Orisa* (deputy of the Supreme Being). Among the Ashanti, the golden ornaments the king wears symbolize the belief that the Supreme Being is personified by the sun. Thus, when the Ashanti king wears the golden ornaments, he signifies the eternal fire of the sun (Abioye, 2001). In addition, among the Yoruba and the Akan, the cult of thunder has become a kind of sacred institution. In both African societies, the ax has assumed the symbol of the Supreme Being's judgment. The Supreme Being is regarded as the ultimate judge, and he can express his wrath against evildoers. The ax is the tool for this wrath. For the Yoruba, the divinity executing Olodumare's wrath is Sango. Consequently, axes are found in his shrines. Indeed, the original thunder divinity among the Yoruba was Jakuta, which literally means "one who throws stones." The stones are also found in the shrines of Sango, the new divinity of thunder. The Akan of Ghana refer to the ax as *nyame akuma* (God's ax), and the ax is found in the shrines of Onyame as a symbol of his wrath.