

2 • What is African Religion?

• The Nature of African Religion

What is African Religion? That is a big question, and this book is written to answer it. In order to profit from reading it, we should first look at the nature of religion in general, and then see how African Religion affects the African way of life. Religion can be seen in five parts. No part by itself constitutes the entire meaning of religion. All these parts must be seen as working together to give us a complete picture. Briefly they are as follows.

Beliefs

These are an essential part of any religion. They show the way people think about the universe and their attitude towards life itself. African religious beliefs are concerned with topics such as God, spirits, human life, magic, the hereafter, and so on.

Practices, ceremonies and festivals

This group of activities is also essential to any religion. Religious practices show how people express their beliefs in practical terms. They include praying, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs, and so on. Festivals are normally joyful occasions when people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event. For example, there are festivals to mark harvest time, the start of the rainy season, the birth of a child, and victory over enemies. We find many religious practices and festivals in African Religion. We will consider many of them in this book.

Religious objects and places

This part of religion covers the things and places which people have set apart as being holy or sacred. They are not commonly used except for a particular religious purpose. There are many such religious objects and places. Some are made by man, but others are taken in their natural form and set apart for religious purposes. Some belong to private individuals and families, while

others belong to the whole community in a given region. They include places like shrines, groves, sacred hills or mountains and objects like rivers, amulets, charms, masks, and many others. We shall say more about them later in this book.

Values and morals

This is the part of religion which deals with the ideas that safeguard or uphold the life of the people in their relationship with one another and the world around them. Values and morals cover topics like truth, justice, love, right and wrong, good and evil, beauty, decency, respect for people and property, the keeping of promises and agreements, praise and blame, crime and punishment, the rights and responsibilities of both the individual and his community, character, integrity, and so on. They help people to live with one another, to settle their differences, to maintain peace and harmony, to make use of their belongings, to have a relationship with their total environment. There are differences in the values and morals followed by different peoples of Africa, but many of them are similar. It should also be remembered that they change as the living conditions of people change, but they always remain a necessity in human life. We will say more about African values and morals as we study their traditional religion.

Religious officials or leaders

These are the people who conduct religious matters such as ceremonies, sacrifices, formal prayers and divination. In many cases they are trained men and women. They know more about religious affairs than other people, and are respected by their community. They hold offices as priests, rain-makers, ritual elders, diviners, medicine men, and even as kings and rulers. These officials may or may not be paid for their duties, but in most cases people give them presents and gifts to show their gratitude. Without them, religious activities would neither survive nor function properly, and much of the religious wisdom of the people would be forgotten. They are specialists and experts in religious matters; they are the human keepers of the religious heritage. They are an essential part of African Religion since without them it would grind to a halt and people would not benefit from it in practical terms. We have included a study of them in this book, to see how they are trained and do their work.

These then are the five essential parts which together go to make up a religion. We cannot define a religion by only one or two of its parts. They have to be considered together, because religion is complex. Religion is not made up only of beliefs and practices; it has also objects, values and officials. In this book we shall study all these five aspects of African Religion, in order to give us a full picture of the religious insights which African peoples have acquired and experienced in their own setting and life.

Having considered the parts which help to make up a religion, let us now see how African Religion is related to African peoples, how it developed, and what wrong ideas have been held about it.

• African Religion is Part of the African Heritage

In the first chapter we learnt that the African heritage is very rich. It is historical, cultural and religious. Therefore we can say that religion is part and parcel of the African heritage which goes back many hundreds and thousands of years. African Religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers, that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs,



King Tutankhamun of Egypt, like many other pharaohs (Kings, rulers) of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and other Dynasties, was said to have been of African descent.

they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.

We cannot understand the African heritage without understanding its religious part. Religion is found in all African peoples. Their different cultures have been influenced very strongly by religion as it is found in each people. The earliest records of African history show that the Africans of ancient Egypt were very religious people. Up to this day, Africans who live according to their traditional ways are also said to be very religious.

Through the ages, therefore, religion has been for Africans the normal way of looking at the world and experiencing life itself. For that reason it is found wherever people are. It is integrated so much into different areas of life that in fact most of the African languages do not have a word for religion as such. They only have words for religious ideas, practices and objects or places. We shall look at these later on in the book, to know exactly what they are.

• African Religion Belongs to the People

Because African Religion developed together with all the other aspects of the heritage, it belongs to each people within which it has evolved. It is not preached from one people to another. Therefore a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow African Religion in that group. It would be meaningless and useless to try and transplant it to an entirely different society outside of Africa, unless African peoples themselves go there with it. Even within Africa itself, religion takes on different forms according to different tribal settings. For that reason, a person from one setting cannot automatically and immediately adjust himself to or adopt the religious life of other African peoples in a different setting. The peoples of Europe, America or Asia cannot be converted to African Religion as it is so much removed from their geographical and cultural setting.

Since African Religion belongs to the people, when Africans migrate in large numbers from one part of the continent to another, or from Africa to other continents, they take religion with them. They can only know how to live within their religious context. Even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and

sometimes centuries. A good example of this is the case of Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in the Americas and the West Indies. In spite of being suppressed, brainwashed and bombarded with another (and foreign) culture since the days of slavery which lasted up to the nineteenth century, they have retained many elements of their African religiosity to this day.

It is African Religion which gives its followers a sense of security in life. Within that religious way of life, they know who they are, how to act in different situations, and how to solve their problems. This does not mean that African Religion has no weaknesses and no false ideas. But as far as it goes, it has supplied the answers to many of the problems of this life even if these may not have been the right answers in every case. Because it provides for them answers and direction in life, people are not willing to abandon it quickly, otherwise they would feel insecure afterwards unless something else gave them an additional or greater sense of security. When Africans are converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way they think and feel that they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining something from both religious systems.

African Religion functions more on a communal than an individual basis. For example, its beliefs are held by the community; therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all these beliefs. The ceremonies are performed mainly in or by a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area or by those engaged in a common occupation.

African Religion is an essential part of the way of life of each people. Its influence covers all of life, from before the birth of a person to long after he has died. People find it useful and meaningful in their lives, and therefore they let it spread freely. They teach it informally to their children through conversation, proverbs and myths, as well as through practice. Young people also learn about it through participating in religious activities such as ceremonies, festivals, rituals and so on.

Since African Religion belongs to the people, no individual member of the society concerned can stand apart and reject the whole of his people's religion. To do so would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people. Even if the individual is converted to another religion, this should not mean abandoning his African culture altogether. Where there is no real conflict between African Religion and other religions, the convert retains

much of his cultural and religious background as long as he remains within the traditional set-up of life.

• **How African Religion was Founded**

Some of the world religions like Christianity and Islam have founders who started them. This is not the case with African Religion. It evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their life and reflected upon their experiences. Many factors must have played a part in its development. These include the geographical environment – mountains, rivers, deserts and forests – the change of the seasons, the powers of nature (such as earthquakes, thunderstorms and volcanoes), calamities, epidemics, diseases, birth and death, and major historical events like wars, locust invasions, famines, migrations and so on. To these must be added man's reflection on the universe, the questions about its origin, the earth and the sky, the problem of evil and suffering, the phenomena of nature, and many other problems.

Religious ideas and practices arose and took shape in the process of man's search for answers to these questions, and as ways of making human life safer and better. They were influenced by human experience and reflection. No doubt many of the ideas and practices were later abandoned when they were found to be inadequate. But, as time went on, these ideas and practices increased in number and spread as the people increased and dispersed. Many religious ideas and practices sprang up simultaneously in different parts of the continent, while others spread through contact among the different societies. For this reason, we find both similarities and differences in African Religion all over the continent. Where religious ideas and practices were borrowed or interchanged, each people adapted them to suit its own requirements. Where people spoke related languages, it was easier for some of the religious ideas and concepts to spread among them than where neighbouring people spoke entirely different languages.

Just as there were no founders of African Religion, there have been no reformers, preachers or missionaries to change it, improve it, or take it overseas to other continents. Changes affecting African Religion have sprung up out of the historical changes in the lives of the people concerned. For example, where one society fought and conquered another and ruled it, no doubt the religious life of the conquerors often left its mark on the life of the conquered people. Where a strong king or chief wished to see new ceremonies

or sacrifices made, he no doubt made it obligatory for them to be introduced. In time of danger (such as drought, war or calamity), religious activities revived in order to meet the needs of the time. In such ways, change did come upon African Religion from place to place, and from time to time, through leading personalities of the nation, the intermingling of peoples, and natural necessities. Traditional Religion is open to new ideas, and it must have assimilated ideas in the course of its long history.

• Does African Religion have Sacred Scriptures?

The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, and the Qur'an is the book of Islam. African Religion has no scriptures or holy books. It is written in the history, the hearts and experiences of the people. Having no sacred scriptures, it has been able to move with the times, and it has produced no religious controversies. People are free to hold different views and beliefs without the danger of being accused of heresy or falsehood. On the other hand, since there are no sacred books, we cannot tell precisely what African Religion may have been five hundred years ago and how far it may differ today from what it was many centuries ago. Therefore we cannot speak of the purity of African Religion, since there is no authority about what it was originally or at any given point in its history.

African Religion is very pragmatic and realistic. It is applied to a situation as the need arises. The followers of African Religion are not bound by any authority which goes back in history. They just follow it as it has been handed down to them by former generations, changing whatever is necessary in order to suit their circumstances of life. In that way some ideas and practices are forgotten for ever, unless they may be retained in some religious objects and myths. Whatever is forgotten is forgotten because the people concerned found it useless for their needs and situations of life. Changes are often brought about by new necessities. On the other hand, since rural life does not often change radically, the main ideas and practices of African Religion must have remained unchanged in general, even if the details may not have remained the same because of the lack of sacred writings.

• Some Wrong Ideas about African Religion

Many books and articles about African Religion have been written by outsiders. In these writings a number of wrong and derogatory

things have been said. Even many Africans have been led to use the same wrong terms and hold the same ideas. Let us put right some of these wrong things.

African Religion is wrongly called ancestor worship

This is wrong because Africans do not worship their departed relatives. It is true that departed relatives are believed to continue to live and to show interest in their surviving families. These families may show their belief by building shrines for the departed and placing bits of food or drink there or on the graves, and sometimes mentioning them in their prayers. But these acts of respect for the departed do not amount to worshipping them; they show people's belief that the departed of up to four or five generations should not be forgotten. We showed at the beginning of this chapter that acts of worship (such as sacrifices and prayers) are only a part of African Religion. What is a small part cannot constitute the entire religious system. It is completely wrong to speak of African Religion as 'ancestor worship'.

African Religion is wrongly called superstition

A superstition is a readiness to believe and fear something without proper grounds. We have shown that in African Religion much more than beliefs is involved. Furthermore, these beliefs are based on deep reflections and long experience. They cannot, therefore, be called 'superstitions'. Followers of every religion in the world hold a number of superstitions. But this does not mean that their religion as such is the same as superstition. This also applies in the case of African Religion.

African Religion is wrongly called animism or paganism

Animism means the system of belief and practices based on the idea that objects and natural phenomena are inhabited by spirits or souls. It is true that African peoples in their traditional setting acknowledge the existence of spirits, and that some of the spirits are thought to inhabit objects like trees, ponds, and rocks. There are many stories told about such spirits. This is, however, only a small portion of the many beliefs held in African Religion. Furthermore, it has to be seen in the context of the African view of the world in which God is considered to be supreme, and He has

under him spirits and men. To say that there are spirits in the world does not mean that people's religion is only about these spirits. Christianity and Islam also acknowledge the existence of spirits, but neither of them is animism. We have pointed out that belief in the spirits is only part of the system of beliefs found in African Religion, and that as a religion it contains much more than this belief.

Paganism or pagan is sometimes used as a derogatory word to describe Africans who are not followers of either Christianity or Islam. Yet there are many people in Europe and America who do not follow either of these world religions, and are often wholly irreligious, but they are never called pagans. Africans who follow African Religion are deeply religious people and it is wrong and foolish, therefore, to speak of them as pagans, or to regard their religion as paganism.

African Religion is wrongly called magic or fetishism

Outsiders have mistakenly regarded Africans as simply believers in magic. It is true that magic, witchcraft and sorcery feature much in the traditional life of African peoples. But their religion is not constructed around magic. It is much more than that. Africans believe that there is a force or power or energy in the universe which can be tapped by those who know how to do so, and then used for good or evil towards other people. But this is only a part of their belief. It is wrong, therefore, to equate African Religion with magic. Later on in this book we will say more about magic and witchcraft.

Fetishism is a word which came originally from a Portuguese word used by early Portuguese traders and travellers to describe the charms worn by Africans on the west coast of Africa. Since then it has been widely used to cover many other things connected with African religious life. It now connotes something bad and primitive. It is a completely inadequate term to describe African Religion. A charm cannot be a religion, neither can a religion be a charm.

There are other wrong names for African Religion but the ones we have considered are the commonest. We can only say that African Religion is a major religious system in its own right. Like every other religion of the world, it has its own weaknesses as well as strengths. Our concern with it in this book is neither to praise it nor to condemn it, but simply to understand it in the context of African life.

3 • Where African Religion is Found

We have said that there are no sacred writings in African Religion. This raises the question of where one finds it if not in a book. In this chapter we can only give a summary of where to look for and find African Religion if one wishes to observe or study it in practical life.

- **African Religion is Found in the Rituals, Ceremonies and Festivals of the People**

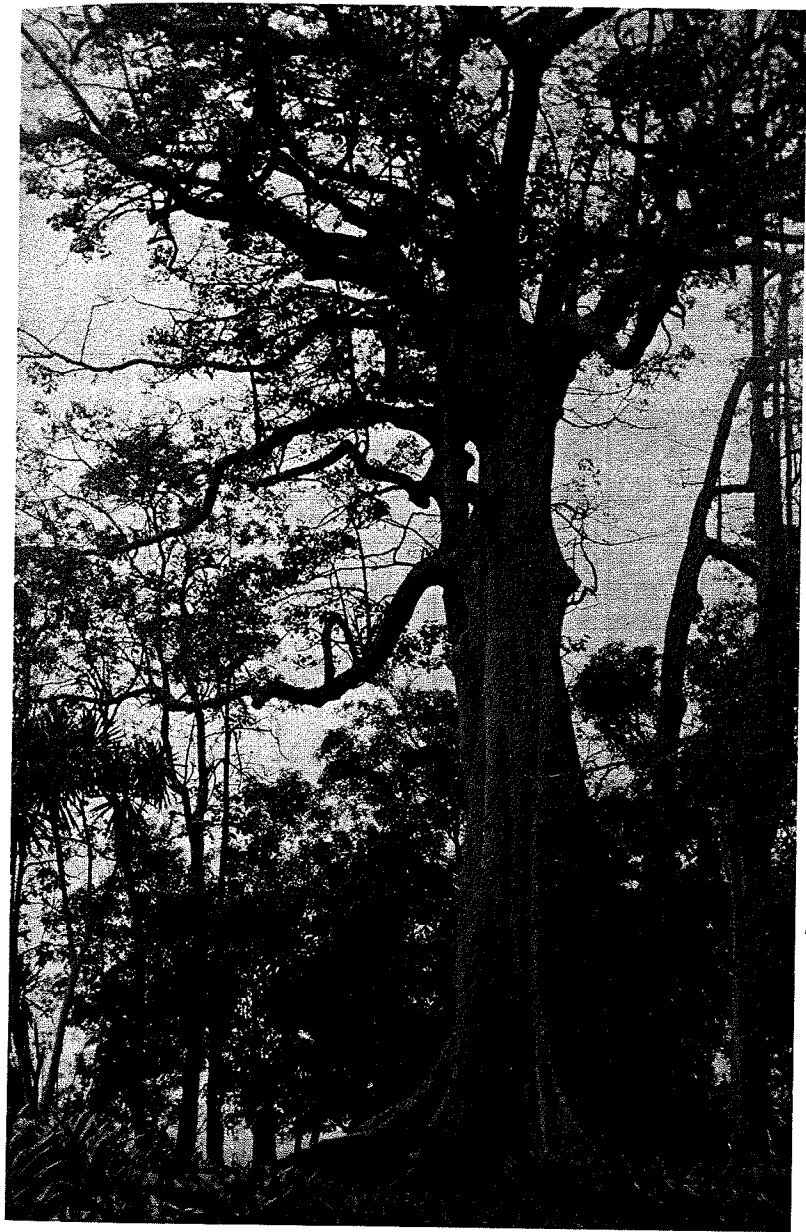
Africans like to celebrate life. They celebrate events in the life of the individual and the community. These include occasions like the birth of a child, the giving of names, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain, and many others. Some of these rituals and ceremonies are done on a family basis, but others are observed by the whole community. They have a lot of religious meaning, and through their observation religious ideas are perpetuated and passed on to the next generations.

- **African Religion is Found in Shrines, Sacred Places and Religious Objects**

There are many of these. Some shrines belong to a family, such as those connected with departed members of the family or their graves. Others belong to the community and these are often in groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, under certain trees and similar places. People respect such places, and in some societies no bird, animal or human being may be killed if it or he or she is hiding in such places.

At the shrines and sacred places, people make or bring sacrifices and offerings, such as animals, fowls, food, utensils, tools, and coins. They also make prayers there. They regard such places as holy and sacred places where people meet with God.

Some of these religious places are man-made, and may be large enough to look like a big house (which is called a temple). Others are simply natural places which are secluded or situated away from people's homes and fields. Often there are people (priests)



Known as 'the witch tree', there is a legend that a famous medicine woman (Nakayima) used to sit under it and attend to the sick and the barren, curing many of them. It is held to be a sacred tree (Uganda).

The Ethiopian and Armharic Alphabet.

(Translated from the German source, Zeich. (for Zeichen) means symbol or sign; Wert means value or equivalent).

ÄTHIOPISCH UND AMHARISCH.

Name	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert
Hoi	ሀ	ha	ሀ	hū	ሂ	hi	ሃ	hā	ሄ	hē	ህ	he	ሐ	ho
Lewi	ለ	la	ለ	lū	ሊ	li	ላ	lā	ሌ	lē	ል	le	ሎ	lo
H'aut	ሐ	h'a	ሐ	h'ū	ሐ	h'i	ሐ	h'ā	ሐ	h'e	ሐ	h'e	ሐ	h'o
Mai	መ	ma	መ	mū	ሙ	mi	ሙ	mā	ሙ	mē	ሙ	me	ሙ	mo
Saut	ሠ	ša	ሠ	sū	ሠ	si	ሠ	sā	ሠ	sē	ሠ	se	ሠ	so
Res	ረ	ra	ረ	rū	ረ	ri	ረ	rā	ረ	rē	ረ	re	ረ	ro
S'at	ሰ	sa	ሰ	sū	ሰ	si	ሰ	sā	ሰ	sē	ሰ	se	ሰ	so
S'at	ሰ	ša	ሰ	sū	ሰ	si	ሰ	sā	ሰ	sē	ሰ	se	ሰ	so
Quf	ቀ	qa	ቀ	qū	ቀ	qi	ቀ	qā	ቀ	qē	ቀ	qe	ቀ	qo
Bel	በ	ba	በ	bū	በ	bi	በ	bā	በ	bē	በ	be	በ	bo
Tau	ተ	ta	ተ	tū	ተ	ti	ተ	tā	ተ	tē	ተ	te	ተ	to
Tsau	ቸ	tša	ቸ	tšū	ቸ	tši	ቸ	tšā	ቸ	tšē	ቸ	tše	ቸ	tšo
Kharm	ኀ	xa	ኀ	xū	ኀ	xi	ኀ	xā	ኀ	xē	ኀ	xe	ኀ	xo
Nazus	ነ	na	ነ	nū	ነ	ni	ነ	nā	ነ	nē	ነ	ne	ነ	no
Nazus	ኀ	na	ኀ	nū	ኀ	ni	ኀ	nā	ኀ	nē	ኀ	ne	ኀ	no
'Alef	አ	'a	አ	'ū	አ	'i	አ	'ā	አ	'ē	አ	'e	አ	'o
Kaf	ኀ	ka	ኀ	kū	ኀ	ki	ኀ	kā	ኀ	kē	ኀ	ke	ኀ	ko
Kh'aph	ኀ	χ'a	ኀ	χ'ū	ኀ	χ'i	ኀ	χ'ā	ኀ	χ'ē	ኀ	χ'e	ኀ	χ'o
Wau	ወ	wa	ወ	wū	ወ	wi	ወ	wā	ወ	wē	ወ	we	ወ	wo
'Ain	ዐ	'a	ዐ	'ū	ዐ	'i	ዐ	'ā	ዐ	'ē	ዐ	'e	ዐ	'o
Zai	ሀ	za	ሀ	zū	ሀ	zi	ሀ	zā	ሀ	zē	ሀ	ze	ሀ	zo
Zai	ሀ	za	ሀ	zū	ሀ	zi	ሀ	zā	ሀ	zē	ሀ	ze	ሀ	zo
Yaman	የ	ya	የ	yū	የ	yi	የ	yā	የ	yē	የ	ye	የ	yo
Dent	ደ	da	ደ	dū	ደ	di	ደ	dā	ደ	dē	ደ	de	ደ	do
Dzent	ደ	dza	ደ	dzū	ደ	dzi	ደ	dzā	ደ	dzē	ደ	dze	ደ	dzo
Gamel	ገ	ga	ገ	gū	ገ	gi	ገ	gā	ገ	gē	ገ	ge	ገ	go
T'ait	ጠ	ta	ጠ	tū	ጠ	ti	ጠ	tā	ጠ	tē	ጠ	te	ጠ	to
T'sait	ጠ	tša	ጠ	tšū	ጠ	tši	ጠ	tšā	ጠ	tšē	ጠ	tše	ጠ	tšo
Ppait	ለ	ppa	ለ	ppū	ለ	ppi	ለ	ppā	ለ	ppē	ለ	ppe	ለ	ppo
Tsadai	ለ	tša	ለ	tšū	ለ	tši	ለ	tšā	ለ	tšē	ለ	tše	ለ	tšo
Dzappa	ዐ	dza	ዐ	dzū	ዐ	dzi	ዐ	dzā	ዐ	dzē	ዐ	dze	ዐ	dzo
Ef	ፈ	fa	ፈ	fū	ፈ	fi	ፈ	fā	ፈ	fē	ፈ	fe	ፈ	fo
Eps	ተ	pa	ተ	pū	ተ	pi	ተ	pā	ተ	pē	ተ	pe	ተ	po

Diphthonge.

Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert	Zeich.	Wert
ኀ	kwa	ኀ	kwi	ኀ	kwā	ኀ	kwē	ኀ	kwē	ኀ	tswa
ኀ	gwa	ኀ	gwi	ኀ	gwā	ኀ	gwē	ኀ	gwē	ኀ	fwā
ኀ	qwa	ኀ	qwi	ኀ	qwā	ኀ	qwē	ኀ	qwē	ኀ	two
ኀ	χwa	ኀ	χwi	ኀ	χwā	ኀ	χwē	ኀ	χwē	ኀ	hālē
ኀ	lwā	ኀ	šwā	ኀ	tšwa	ኀ	uwa	ኀ	dwa	ኀ	hālēlū
ኀ	mwa	ኀ	swa	ኀ	bwa	ኀ	zwa	ኀ	ttwa	ኀ	
ኀ	mwā	ኀ	rwā	ኀ	twa	ኀ	ywa	ኀ	tš'wa	ኀ	

The Vei Script (Alphabet) below and over the page, is from Liberia. It was invented by Doalu Dukere in the first half of the nineteenth century.

(Translated from the German source, Zeichen means symbol or sign; Wert means value or equivalent

VEI-SCHRIFT.

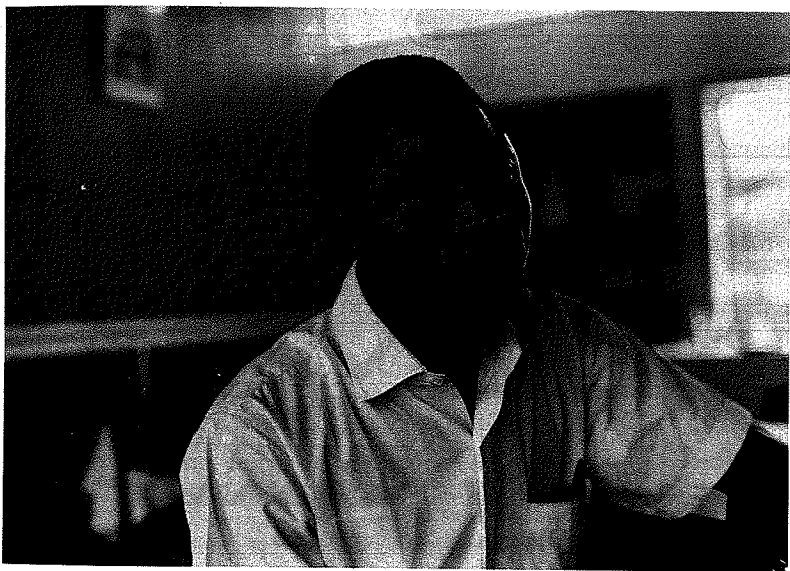
Zeichen	Wert	Zeichen	Wert	Zeichen	Wert	Zeichen	Wert
Ⲁ	a	Ⲁⲁ	dže	ⲀⲂ	gbǝ	Ⲁⲃ	n
ⲀⲄ	ha	Ⲁⲅ	dži	ⲀⲆ	gbu	Ⲁⲇ	na
ⲀⲈ	hā	Ⲁⲉ	džo	ⲀⲊ	ha	Ⲁⲋ	ne
ⲀⲌ	hai	Ⲁⲍ	džǝ	ⲀⲎ	hā	Ⲁⲏ	ni
ⲀⲐ	hañ	Ⲁⲑ	džon	ⲀⲒ	hā	Ⲁⲓ	nr
ⲀⲔ	be	Ⲁⲕ	džu	ⲀⲌ	he	Ⲁⲍ	no
Ⲁⲏ	be	Ⲁⲍ	e	ⲀⲆ	he	Ⲁⲇ	no
ⲀⲐ	bē	Ⲁⲑ	ē	ⲀⲊ	hi	Ⲁⲋ	nu
ⲀⲌ	bi	Ⲁⲍ	fa	ⲀⲎ	ho	Ⲁⲏ	nū
ⲀⲐ	bī	Ⲁⲑ	fe	ⲀⲒ	hu	Ⲁⲓ	na
ⲀⲔ	bǝ	Ⲁⲕ	fē	ⲀⲌ	i	Ⲁⲍ	ne
Ⲁⲏ	bǝ	Ⲁⲑ	feñ	ⲀⲆ	ka	Ⲁⲇ	ni
ⲀⲐ	bō	Ⲁⲍ	fi	ⲀⲊ	kā	Ⲁⲋ	no
ⲀⲔ	bu	Ⲁⲕ	fo	ⲀⲌ	kai	Ⲁⲍ	n
Ⲁⲏ	bu	Ⲁⲑ	fu	ⲀⲆ	kǝ	Ⲁⲇ	na
ⲀⲐ	bili	Ⲁⲍ	ga	ⲀⲊ	ke	Ⲁⲋ	ne
ⲀⲔ	da	Ⲁⲕ	ge	ⲀⲌ	keñ	Ⲁⲍ	no
Ⲁⲏ	dañ	Ⲁⲑ	ge	ⲀⲆ	ki	Ⲁⲇ	nga
ⲀⲐ	deñ	Ⲁⲍ	gǝ	ⲀⲊ	ko	Ⲁⲋ	nge
ⲀⲔ	di	Ⲁⲕ	gǝ	ⲀⲌ	kǝ	Ⲁⲍ	ngo
Ⲁⲏ	do	Ⲁⲑ	gu	ⲀⲆ	kǝñ	Ⲁⲇ	nde
ⲀⲐ	dō	Ⲁⲍ	gba	ⲀⲊ	kǝ	Ⲁⲋ	ndo
ⲀⲔ	dǝ	Ⲁⲕ	ghā	ⲀⲌ	kuñ	Ⲁⲍ	o
Ⲁⲏ	dǝ	Ⲁⲑ	gbe	ⲀⲆ	m	Ⲁⲇ	pa
ⲀⲐ	don	Ⲁⲍ	gbǝ	ⲀⲊ	ma	Ⲁⲋ	pē
ⲀⲔ	dǝñ	Ⲁⲕ	gbi	ⲀⲌ	mǝ	Ⲁⲍ	pe
Ⲁⲏ	du	Ⲁⲑ	gho	ⲀⲆ	mi	Ⲁⲇ	pi
ⲀⲐ	duñ	Ⲁⲍ	gboñ	ⲀⲊ	mo	Ⲁⲋ	po
ⲀⲔ	dža	Ⲁⲕ	gbǝ	ⲀⲌ	mu	Ⲁⲍ	ra la

art is found, since they are a part of art. Some are represented by insects, birds, animals, certain trees, figures, shapes and colours of all kinds, masks and carvings. For example, among some people the colour of white is the symbol of death, and when a person has died, relatives smear themselves with white chalk or other substance; and in some areas the chameleon is a symbol of protection and security. In many parts of Africa, the sound of the owl is a symbol of bad omen or death.

Each people has its own symbols, whose meanings are generally known to almost everyone. But there are other symbols which can only be interpreted by a few individuals, as, for example, the symbols used in initiation, divination and secret societies. Religious ideas have created many of the symbols; and in turn the symbols themselves help to communicate and strengthen the religious ideas.

• African Religion is Found in Music and Dance

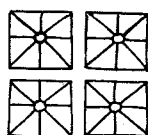
A lot of African music and songs deal with religious ideas and



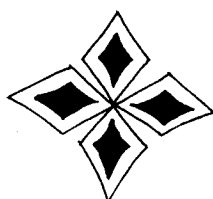
Tribal and location marks are common. Some of the marks are on the face, as in this photograph (Nigeria), but others are on the chest, back, stomach, ears or elsewhere on the body. They have religious meaning.



Ibo



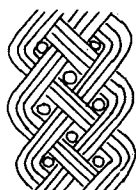
Fulani



Thembu



Swahili



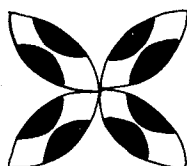
Yoruba



Hausa



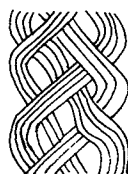
Suku



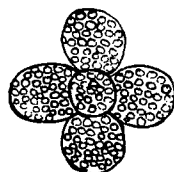
Sutu



Tallensi



Venda



Ibo



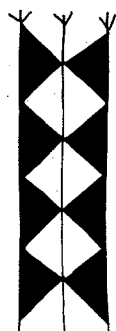
Asante



Mangbettu



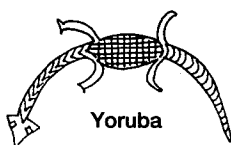
Kalanga



Dogon



Nabdam



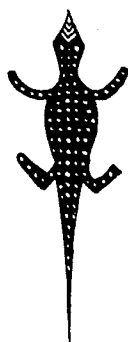
Yoruba



Nyakyusa



Grebo



Mangbettu

These symbols are some of the more common decorative motifs to be found in traditional African architecture.

practices. The religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals are always accompanied by music, singing and sometimes dancing. Music gives outlet to the emotional expression of the religious life, and it is a powerful means of communication in African traditional life. It helps to unite the singing or dancing group and to express its fellowship and participation in life. Many musical instruments are used by African peoples, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, such as the drum, flute, rattle, whistle and others.

Where African peoples have migrated from one part of the continent to another or to overseas countries, they have often taken their music and dance with them. Through these many religious ideas are also retained and celebrated. This is the case among peoples of African descent now living in North America, South America and the West Indies. Some of them still observe religious festivals with dance and songs whose African words they do not understand, since they were taken there by their slave forefathers from west Africa two or three hundred years ago. That shows how powerful music and dance are, in retaining and spreading religious ideas over wide areas and for a long period.

• **African Religion is Found in Proverbs, Riddles and Wise Sayings (See Appendix C)**

We have said that proverbs provide us with a rich source of African wisdom. Some of these proverbs are religious. They contain religious beliefs, ideas, morals and warnings. They speak about God, the world, man, human relationships, the nature of things and so on. They are set within the cultural and social environment of the people who have produced them and use them. Because proverbs are short, it is easy to remember them. Many people know a lot of proverbs and are skilful in using them at the right moment for the right purpose. Since proverbs are easily passed on from one person to another, we find that many of them go back several generations.

Riddles are used mainly for entertainment and stimulating people's thinking. Some of them also contain religious ideas. Wise sayings are often about the world in general, viewed from religious and moral perspectives.

• **African Religion is Found in Names of People and Places**

Many African names of people and places have meanings. These meanings are often religious. They are given to mark religious ideas and experiences. For example, in Nigeria the name of Babatunde means 'father returns'. It is given to a male child born immediately after the death of his grandfather. For a girl it is Yetunde, 'mother returns'. The meaning of these names shows the belief that death is not the end of life, and that the departed return to be 'born' in their family (although in fact only some of their features are reborn, and not the entire departed person as such). In Uganda the name Byamuhangi means 'they are of (or for) the Creator'. It is given to a male child by the parents as an indication of their belief that the child belongs to God the Creator. Also in Uganda the name Muwanga means 'the one who puts things in order'. It comes from the legend that one day the sun and moon were fighting and when darkness came over the land the people cried to God for help. Then God sent the divinity Muwanga (son of Wanga) to separate the fighting 'brothers', and put each in its place. This is a religious legend, and there is now a divinity known as Muwanga who symbolizes the idea of order and harmony.

There are many names all over Africa which have religious meanings. Therefore we can say that African Religion is found in people's and places' names. This shows the influence of religion in the life of the people. It also shows that people with such names are in effect religious carriers.

• **African Religion is Found in Myths and Legends**

Stories, myths, legends and biographies of people are another area where we find African Religion. We said in the first chapter that since there was no writing among African peoples, traditional wisdom and experiences and history were passed down by word of mouth. Therefore, stories, legends and myths became a very important source of information and means of communication. Many religious ideas are found in these oral ways of communication, and every African people has plenty of such stories and myths. For that reason, when people listen to them, or read about them, they are listening to the African religious ideas which may be found in them, and many religious ideas are readily taught and spread through the form of stories, legends and myths.

• African Religion is Found in Beliefs and Customs

Every African people has a set of beliefs and customs. Beliefs are an essential part of religion. Customs are not always religious, but many contain religious ideas. Religion helps to strengthen and perpetuate some of the customs; and in turn the customs do the same to religion.

Beliefs and customs often go together. They cover all areas of life. Beliefs generally deal with religious ideas; customs deal with what people normally approve of and do.

This book will talk about many religious beliefs of African peoples. They cover topics like God, spirits, birth, death, the hereafter, magic, witchcraft, and so on. When we come across African beliefs, we are in fact dealing with African Religion, although religion is much more than its beliefs. The beliefs are handed down from generation to generation, sometimes with modifications. Without them no religion can inspire its followers. Even when people are converted from African Religion to another religion, they retain many of their former beliefs since it is hard to destroy beliefs. Some of the beliefs in African Religion are like beliefs in other religions, but some are completely different.

Beliefs have a lot of influence on people. But some beliefs can be and often are false; yet people stick to them firmly and act accordingly. Therefore, it is good to understand people's beliefs well, because it is these beliefs which influence their behaviour. In addition to religious beliefs there are beliefs in other areas of life like politics, economics, science, and so on. Everyone holds certain beliefs, because we all need one or other kind of belief in our daily life. For example, if a woman did not believe that fire (or heat) would cook her food, she might not be able to provide food for the family every day. If you did not believe that your letter would reach your friend or parents, you would not write it.

Thus, beliefs are very important and essential for every day. African Religion has many beliefs, and by studying them we are able to understand not only the religion but the people who follow it.

• African Religion is Found in all Aspects of Life

We have shown the many areas of African life where we find traditional religion. They lead us to conclude that it is seen in all aspects of life. Therefore, it influences all areas of life. African

Religion has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of African peoples throughout the centuries. Even if it has no sacred books, it is written everywhere in the life of the people. To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious. Many scholars agree with what was said in the very first sentence of my book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, that 'Africans are notoriously religious'. In each African society, religion is embedded in the local language, so that to understand the religious life of the people properly, one needs to know their language. In each society there are also individual men and women who have a good knowledge of the religion of their people, and others who are responsible for the performance of religious ceremonies and rituals. These pass on their knowledge to people in general and through training others to carry out the religious life of their community. We shall study something about them later.

We have surveyed the areas in the life of African peoples where their religion is found. Let us now consider the geographical distribution of African Religion over the continent.

• The Geographical Distribution of African Religion

Where do we find African Religion on the continent of Africa? It is to be found almost everywhere. The map shows this. One-third of the continent is predominantly Muslim. This covers northern Africa, the Sahara region and the 'Horn of Africa.' But even within this region, there are many traces of African Religion showing that it has not been completely suppressed by Islam. When Islam first came to our continent in the seventh century A.D. it found African Religion there. The Arabs who colonized parts of the African continent have maintained their own religion, Islam, with its Arabian social and cultural forms. But Africans who were converted to Islam, or forced by occupying Arab conquerors to adopt Islam, did not immediately abandon their traditional religion. In some places it has taken several centuries for African Muslims to leave many, but not all, of their African religious ideas and practices. Often they have only mixed Islam with their own traditional religion.

In the remaining two-thirds of Africa and Madagascar we find strong African Religion everywhere, though less so in Ethiopia, where Christianity has been a powerful religion since about the fourth century. Our study of African Religion in this book will

Coptic Christianity
in Egypt

Equator

KEY



Predominantly MUSLIM, with some
traits of AFRICAN RELIGION



Predominantly overt AFRICAN RELIGION
and rapidly expanding CHRISTIANITY

concern this region which covers two-thirds of the continent. In the same area also live the majority of indigenous African peoples. It is a vast area, with over 1500 numerically major African peoples (tribes as they used to be called). It has many geographical contrasts including huge equatorial forests and deserts, great lakes and rivers, sparsely and densely populated areas, about a thousand distinct languages and many more dialects. This region has seen many past civilizations and achievements of African peoples. It includes coastal settlements which for many centuries were in commercial contact with peoples of other lands, as well as interior peoples who hardly had contact with anybody else, apart from their next neighbours.

This is the area from which slaves were so mercilessly and harshly taken by the Arabs on the eastern and northern section, and by the Europeans on the western section, and 'exported' to Asia, Europe and the Americas. It is a region of great mineral wealth and agricultural potential, of floods and locust invasions, of a variety of animals and insects. All these and many more are the factors which prevailed when African Religion took shape.

In this area where African Religion emerged, it remained without major influence from other religions of the world for most of its long history. A few attempts were made three to five hundred years ago to bring Christianity to some of the coastal peoples. Although this was successful in some areas, this success did not last long, nor did it penetrate much into the interior except in one or two places. But from the nineteenth century onwards, Christianity spread in every direction, so that by now every African people has heard the Christian message, and many millions of Africans have accepted the Christian faith. We often find both Christianity and African Religion side by side. In many ways African Religion prepared the way for the conversion of African peoples to Christianity. But their conversion does not mean that they have abandoned all their former religious ideas and traditions. Often their religious life shows a combination of African Religion and Christianity, but there are some who endeavour hard to forsake everything from African Religion, believing that in doing so they are more faithful to their newly found Christian faith.

In the year 1900, African Religion was the largest religion in Africa, with 63 million followers (or 58% of the entire population). Islam came second, with 34.5 millions (or 32%); Christianity was third, with 10 millions (or 9.2%); and followers of other religions

including Judaism, Hinduism, Bah'aism, Sikhism, etc., counted about 1 million (1%). Most followers of African Religion started to hear about Christianity in the twentieth century and to convert in larger numbers than those converting to Islam. In 1972 the number of Muslims and of Christians became equal, and thereafter the Christians exceeded the Muslims. In 1984 there were 234 million Christians (that is 45%), 211 million Muslims (or 41%), 63 million (pure) followers of African Religion (or 12%), and 7 million followers of other religions (or 2%). It is estimated that, in the year 2000, Christians will number 394 millions (that is, 48.4%), Muslims 339 millions (41.4%), pure followers of African Religion 72.4% millions (8.9%), and followers of other religions 8.5 millions (1%). It should be remembered that the majority of those who were counted as Christians, and many of the Muslims, still stuck to some of their African religious ideas and practices. Therefore, in effect many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register or be counted in the census as adherents of only one religion.

Thus, we now have three major religions and many smaller ones in Africa. These are African Religion, Christianity and Islam. Africa is a deeply religious continent, and there is hardly an inch of our continent which does not know this vast religious heritage of not only traditional religion but also world religions. One religion rubs shoulders with another religion in almost every community of Africa today. From the top leaders of our nations to the beggars in our streets, religion plays a role in their lives. Among indigenous Africans, this is often African Religion plus Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam. Among the African peoples of ancient Egypt (the Copts) and Ethiopia, it is chiefly Christianity. And for the migrants from Europe it is Christianity; among the migrants from Arabia and the Middle East, it is Islam and Judaism; among the migrants from India it is mainly Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.

That then is the general picture concerning African Religion. Let us take a closer look to see what beliefs it holds, what values it maintains, what views of the universe it cherishes, how it helps people to find a meaning in life and to enjoy that life, what ceremonies it observes and how they link man with God and the unseen world.

4 • African Views of the Universe

• Accumulation of Ideas about the Universe

As they went through life, African peoples observed the world around them and reflected upon it. They looked at the sky above with its stars, moon, sun and meteorites; with its clouds, rain, rainbows and the movement of the winds. Below they saw the earth with its myriad of life-forms, animals, insects, and plants, and its rivers and lakes, rocks and mountains. They saw the limits of man's powers and knowledge, and the shortness of human life. They experienced and witnessed the processes of birth, growth, procreation and death; they felt the agonies of the body and mind, hunger and thirst, the emotions of joy, fear, and love. All their five major senses (of hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling) were open gates through which all kinds of experiences came upon them. These experiences stimulated them to reflect upon their life and the universe in which they lived. The result was a gradual building up of African views or ideas about the world and the universe at large.

No thinking person can live without forming some views about life and the world. Some of the ideas developed by individual reflection eventually spread among other people, through discussion, conversation, artistic expression and so on. The other people were stimulated to reflect further, extending old ideas, abandoning some of them, acquiring new ones and translating others into practical realities. And so the process gained momentum, people's ideas about the universe accumulated and definite views and systems of thought began to emerge. There can be no end to the development of people's views about the universe, as this process is a continuing one.

Obviously many ideas about the world have emerged among African peoples. It would be impossible to cover them in detail, but in this chapter we can give a broad summary of them in order to make us familiar with their general content. Their views are expressed in myths, legends, proverbs, rituals, symbols, beliefs and wise sayings. There is no formal or systematized view of the universe, but when these various ideas are put together, a picture emerges. There are many mysteries in the universe and whenever possible people try to find an explanation for them, whether or not the explanation is final.

• A Created Universe

It is generally believed all over Africa that the universe was created. The Creator of the universe is God. There is no agreement, however, on how the creation of the universe took place. But it seems impossible that the universe could simply have come into existence on its own. God is, therefore, the explanation for the origin of the universe, which consists of both visible and invisible realities. People often say that 'God created all things'. In many African languages, the name for God means 'Creator'; even where there is another name. He is often called 'the Creator' as well.

As we will see in the next chapter, the belief in God is found everywhere in Africa. When people explain the universe as having been created by God, they are automatically looking at the universe in a religious way. We can say, therefore, that the African view of the universe is profoundly religious. Africans see it as a religious universe, and treat it as such.

While there are many different accounts of the creation of the universe, it is commonly agreed that man has been put at its centre. We shall see on pages 43-4, that of all created things man is the most important and the most privileged. In some accounts of creation it is told that God made the heavenly part of the universe first, and then, standing on it, he created the earth. In other myths the order is reversed. Some accounts say that the entire universe was created in one act. It is also a widespread view among African peoples that God continues to create. Thus, the creation of the universe did not stop in the distant past: it is an ongoing process which will never end.

• The Nature of the Universe

In many African societies it is believed that the universe is divisible into two. These are the visible and the invisible parts, or the heavens (or sky) and the earth. Some peoples, however, hold that the universe is in the form of a three-tier creation, namely: the heavens, the earth and the underworld, which lies below it. African peoples do not think of these divisions as separate but see them as linked together.

The heavenly part of the universe is the home of the stars, sun, moon, meteorites, sky, the wind and the rain, with all the phenomena connected with them such as thunder and lightning, storms, eclipses of the sun and the moon, 'falling stars', and so on. It is also thought to be the home of God, although people

cannot quite locate where he dwells, other than saying that he lives in 'the sky', in 'heaven', or 'beyond the clouds', or they simply say that 'God does not live on the earth like man'. God is often believed to have other beings living with him or close to him. Some of these are in charge of different departments of the universe, others are his messengers and servants or ministers, and some are like his children. But there are other Africans who say that God dwells completely alone and does everything himself, since he is all-powerful.

It is generally held that the heavenly universe is not empty but that it has its own population. It is teeming with its own kinds of life in addition to the visible objects mentioned above. This means that it is more or less the counterpart of the earth, even though what goes on there is invisible to us.

The earth, too, is full of created things. Some African peoples regard it as a living being, and call it 'Mother earth', 'the goddess earth', or 'the divinity of the earth'. Symbolically it is looked on as the mother of the universe, while the heavenly part is the father. In some societies rituals are performed to show respect to the earth. For example, in Zambia, when the rains start, people have to refrain from working on the ground in the fields for a few days. In some parts of Africa when a major calamity like an earthquake or a murder befalls people, sacrifices may be made to the divinity of the earth. On the earth itself many things are held in great esteem for religious reasons, such as mountains, waterfalls, rocks, some forests and trees, birds, animals and insects.

The link between earth and heaven

Man, who lives on the earth, is the centre of the universe. He is also like the priest of the universe, linking the universe with God its Creator. Man awakens the universe, he speaks to it, he listens to it, he tries to create a harmony with the universe. It is man who turns parts of the universe into sacred objects, and who uses other things for sacrifices and offerings. These are constant reminders to people that they regard it as a religious universe.

In many African myths it is told that at one time in the distant past, the heavens (or sky) and the earth were united as one. This union is pictured as being like the place where the earth and sky seem to touch each other at the end of the horizon. Other myths say that the union was formed by a ladder or rope between the two. These accounts go on to say how the separation took place.

According to some, animals bit the leather rope into two, so that one part went up to the sky and the other fell to the ground, thus severing the heavens from the earth. Some myths say that it was through man's fault or error that the two parts of the universe were divided up. These are simply attempts to explain the fact that the universe is divided into two parts, as it appears to be to the ordinary person; and also to explain the fact that God and man are separated.

The universe is seen as eternal

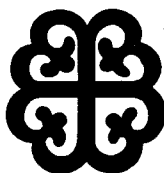
The universe is considered to be unending in terms of both space and time. Nobody can reach the edge of the universe, since it has no known edge or rim. Just as there is no edge of the earth, so there is no edge to the universe. In terms of time, it makes sense for people to believe that there was a beginning for the universe, even though they do not know when it was. But nobody thinks that there will ever be an end to it. They say, 'The world will never end'. African ideas of time concern mainly the present and the past, and have little to say about the future, which in any case is expected to go on without end. Events come and go in the form of minor and major rhythms. The minor rhythms are found in the lives of the living things of this earth (such as men, animals and plants), in their birth, growth, procreation and death. These rhythms are thought to occur in the lives of everybody and everything that has physical life. The major rhythms of time are events like day and night, the months (reckoned on the basis of the phases of the moon), the seasons of rain and of dry weather, and the events of nature which come and go at greater intervals (such as the flowering of certain plants, the migration of certain birds and insects, famines, and the movement of certain heavenly bodies). All these rhythms of time suggest that the universe will never come to a halt, whatever changes there may be.

In many places, circles are used as symbols of the continuity of the universe. They are the symbols of eternity, of unendingness, of continuity. The circles may be used in rituals, in art, in rock paintings, as decorations on stools and domestic utensils and so on. In other places this unendingness is symbolised by drawings of a snake curled round sometimes with its tail in its mouth. The same idea is celebrated in rituals which re-enact birth, death and re-birth, showing that life is stronger than death. This can also be interpreted to mean that continuity on a large scale is more

Some examples of Adinkra patterns and explanations of their significance.



1 Gye Nyame



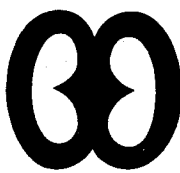
2 Nyame Dua



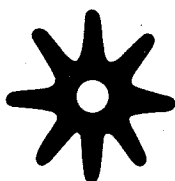
3 Mmusuyidee



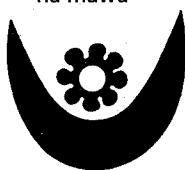
4 Nyame nnwu
na mawu



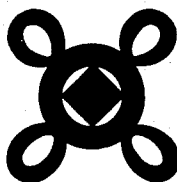
5 Nyame, biribi wɔ soro



6 Nsoromma



7 Ɔsrane ne Nsoromma



8 Sunsum



9 Akoma

1 Gye Nyame (Only God). Symbolises: God almighty, all present and all knowing.

2 Nyame Dua (God's tree, a three-forked post planted in home compounds, an altar for God). Symbolises: God's presence everywhere and everytime, hence his protection.

3 Mmusuyidee ('thing' for sacrifice). Symbolises: Good omen and uprightness of Spirit, 'wards off negative powers or thoughts'.

4 Nyame nnwu na mawu (God does not die and so I cannot die). Symbolises: the unending existence of the spirit, as part of God's being or spirit. Hence the continuation of life after death.

5 Nyame, biribi wɔ soro (God, there is something in heaven!). Symbolises: God's goodness, reliance on Him to answer prayers. (Ancient Asante kings hung this emblem on palace doors and touched it every morning.)

6 Nsoromma (star). Symbolises: We are children of God.

7 Ɔsrane ne Nsoromma (the moon and stars). Symbolises: faithfulness, fondness and benevolence; 'dependence of women on men in marriage. Co-operation between the two is essential for success'.

8 Sunsum (soul). Symbolises: Purity and spiritual nature of the human being.

9 Akoma (heart). Symbolises: fondness, consistency, goodwill and faithfulness.

10 Ɔkɔde mmɔwere (the talons of the eagle). Symbolises: unity and strength.



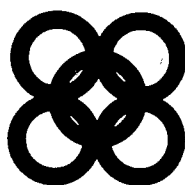
10 Jkɔdee
mmɔwere



11 Eban



12 Nkyinkyimiie



13 Kuntinkantan or
Kuntunkantan



14 Akoko nan tia ne
ba a enkum no



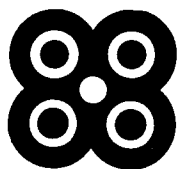
15 Hye-wo-ho-nhye



16 Bi-nka-bi



17 Sankɔfa



18 Ntesie or
Mate masie



19 Afuntummireku-
Denkyemmireku



20 Adinkrahene

11 Eban (fence). Symbolises: safety, security and love.

12 Nkyinkyimiie (twistings). Symbolises: toughness and selfless devotion to service; an ability to withstand difficulties.

13 Kuntunkantan (Greatness, Pride of State). Symbolises: feelings of Greatness but also warning against inflated ideas about one's self.

14 Akoko nan tia ne ba a enkum no (if a hen steps on its chick, the chick does not die). Symbolises: mercy, protectiveness and correction with patience and fondness.

15 Hye-wo-ho-nhye (unburnable). Symbolises: imperishability of self or chief or state.

16 Bi-nka-bi (no one should bite or provoke another). Symbolises: justice, freedom and unity (avoiding strife).

17 Sankɔfa (return and pick it up). Symbolises: a constant reminder that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past.

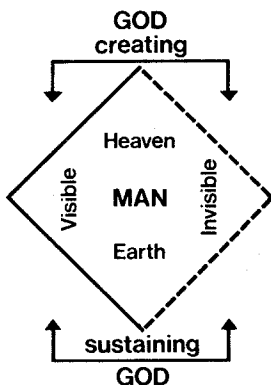
18 Ntesie or Mate masie (What I hear, I keep). Symbolises: wisdom, knowledge and prudence.

19 Afuntummireku-Denkyemmireku (the plural headed crocodile with a single stomach). Symbolises: unity in diversity. Democracy, oneness of humanity in spite of cultural diversities.

20 Adinkrahene (king of the adinkra designs). Symbolises: greatness, prudence, firmness and magnanimity.

important than change in small details. People are aware that the laws of nature do not normally change, and so there is no ground for imagining that this entire universe might suddenly come to an end. Thus, the universe is considered to be permanent, eternal and unending.

In the African view, the universe is both visible and invisible, unending and without limits. Since it was created by God it is subsequently dependent on him for its continuity. God is the sustainer, the keeper and upholder of the universe. Man, on the other hand, is at the very centre of the universe, as he has traditionally imagined it to be. Modern science is radically changing that picture. We may summarize these ideas in the form of a drawing:



• Order and Power in the Universe

It is considered that the universe is orderly. As long as this order is not upset there is harmony. Order in the universe is seen as operating at several levels.

Order in the laws of nature

First, there is order in the laws of nature. These function everywhere, and give a sense of security and certainty to the universe. If they were completely unpredictable and changed at random, there would be chaos in the world which would endanger the existence of both life and the universe itself.

Moral order among people

Secondly, there is moral order at work among people. It is believed by African peoples that God gave moral order to people so that

they might live happily and in harmony with one another. Through this moral order, customs and institutions have arisen in all societies, to safeguard the life of the individual and the community of which he is part. Moral order helps men to work out and know among themselves what is good and evil, right and wrong, truthful and false, and beautiful and ugly, and what people's rights and duties are. Each society is able to formulate its values because there is moral order in the universe. These values deal with relationships among people, and between people and God and other spiritual beings; and man's relationship with the world of nature.

Religious order in the universe

Thirdly, there is religious order in the universe. We saw earlier on in the chapter that Africans look at the universe in a religious way. Because of their basic belief that the universe is created and sustained by God, they interpret their life's experiences from that starting-point. The laws of nature are regarded as being controlled by God directly or through his servants. The morals and institutions of society are thought to have been given by God, or to be sanctioned ultimately by him. Therefore any breach of such morals is an offence against the departed members of the family, and against God or the spirits, even if it is the people themselves who may suffer from such a breach and who may take action to punish the offender.

There are, therefore, taboos which strengthen the keeping of the moral and religious order. There may be taboos over any aspect of life: words, foods, dress, relations among people, marriage, burial, work, and so on. Breaking a taboo entails punishment in the form of social ostracism, misfortune and even death. If people do not punish the offender, then the invisible world will punish him. This view arises from the belief in the religious order of the universe, in which God and other invisible beings are thought to be actively engaged in the world of men.

Mystical order in the universe

Fourthly, there is a mystical order governing the universe. The belief in this order is shown clearly in the practice of traditional medicine, magic, witchcraft and sorcery. It is held in all African societies that there is power in the universe, and that it comes

The top of the king's authority rod (staff), showing a man and the protective animal (chameleon) (Zaire).



from God. It is a mystical power, in the sense that it is hidden and mysterious. This power is available to spirits and to certain human beings. People who have access to it are sometimes able to see the departed, hear certain voices, see certain sights (such as fire and light), have visions, communicate at a distance without using physical means, receive premonitions of coming events, foretell certain things before they happen, communicate with the invisible world, and perform 'wonders' and 'miracles' which other people may not ordinarily be able to do.

It is the knowledge of this mystical power which is used to help other people (especially in healing, rain-making, finding the cause of misfortunes and troubles, detecting thieves, and so on), or to harm them. When it is used harmfully, it is regarded as evil magic,

witchcraft or sorcery; and it may also be used in curses. The ordinary people do not know much about this mystical power. It may take a long time for someone to be trained in the knowledge and use of mystical power; and such knowledge is often safeguarded and kept secret. In some cases the ability to use this mystical power is simply inherited or passed on without the conscious intention of those concerned. Once a person has discovered that he has some of this power, he may then proceed to undertake further training in using it, or he may just neglect it.

• **Man at the Centre of the Universe**

As the Creator of the universe, God is outside and beyond it. At the same time, since he is also its sustainer and upholder, he is very close to the universe. But in African myths of creation, man puts himself at the centre of the universe. We have already seen the diagram on page 40, showing the central position of man in the universe, according to his pre-scientific image of it.

Because man thinks of himself as being at the centre, he consequently sees the universe from that perspective. It is as if the whole world exists for man's sake. Therefore African peoples look for the usefulness (or otherwise) of the universe to man. This means both what the world can do for man, and how man can use the world for his own good. This attitude towards the universe is deeply engrained in African peoples. For that reason many people have, for example, divided animals into those which man can eat and those which he cannot eat. Others look at plants in terms of what can be eaten by people, what can be used for curative or medical purposes, what can be used for building, fire, and so on. Certain things have physical uses; some have religious uses (for ceremonies, rituals, and symbols); and other things are used for medicinal and magical purposes.

African peoples regard natural objects and phenomena as being inhabited by living beings, or having a mystical life. In religious language we speak of these beings as divinities and spirits. The idea behind this belief is to give man the ability to use or control some of these things and phenomena. For example, if people believe that there is a spirit or divinity of their local lake they will, through sacrifices, offerings or prayers, ask for the help of the divinity when fishing in the lake or crossing it in a canoe. This gives them a feeling of confidence and security, a feeling that they are in harmony with the lake (and with the life-agent personified

by the lake or occupying that lake). In some societies it is believed that lightning and thunder are caused by a spirit; therefore people endeavour to be in harmony with that spirit, for fear that it might strike them dead or set their houses on fire.

We may say, therefore, that African people consider man to be at the centre of the universe. Being in that position he tries to use the universe or derive some use from it in physical, mystical and supernatural ways. He sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavours to live in harmony with it. Even where there is no biological life in an object, African peoples attribute (mystical) life to it, in order to establish a more direct relationship with the world around them. In this way the visible and invisible parts of the universe are at man's disposal through physical, mystical and religious means. Man is not the master in the universe; he is only the centre, the friend, the beneficiary, the user. For that reason he has to live in harmony with the universe, obeying the laws of natural, moral and mystical order. If these are unduly disturbed, it is man who suffers most. African peoples have come to these conclusions through long experience, observation and reflection.

African Religion sees nature as a friend of man and vice-versa. He is an integral part of nature and the priest of nature. The destruction or pollution of nature (including air, water, forests, land, animals, trees, plants and useful insects) brings harm to all life in general and injures human welfare in particular. Therefore, man has to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for his own and its survival.