



## NATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND SPIRIT : A NOTE ON THE CULTURE OF AFRICAN FOLK RELIGION

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### ABSTRACT

*The practices in any folk religion, and similarly those in African folk religion show certain deviations from the main stream and classical forms of religious practices. African milieu has allowed a multitude of influences onto it over the centuries in its history. The aim of folk religion is mostly to address the immediate need, and to suggest ways to equip the practitioners to avoid or combat the imminent misfortunes on the practicing society or to combat any evil spirit. These are sometimes the bye products of the main religion, and sometimes these are the associations with nature showing the colorful association of man nature and universe. The practitioners of the folk religion, many times, seldom understand that their practices are different and distinct from their root religion. In the vast enchanting continent of Africa, Nri-Igbo, Ife, Oyo, Dahomey, Benin City, Ouidah, Nsukka, Kanem-Bornu, and Igbo-Ukwu are the main areas where the artifacts of African folk religions are found. We find that the African folk religions are close to earth and nature. They provide a pattern of solidarity among human being, and establish a close association of humanity and environment.*

**Key Words:** Folk Religion, Environment, Earth, Spirit, Life, Africa, Meta religion.

### INTRODUCTION

Folk religion, also known as Popular Religion or Vernacular Religion refers to certain unofficial religious practices. The practices in any folk religion, and similarly those in

**DR. R. P. SINGH**

1Page



African folk religion show certain deviations from the main stream and classical forms of religious practices. African milieu has allowed a multitude of influences onto it over the centuries in its history. To conform with Maluleke, we can say that 'If Africa is anything, it is various and there are millions ways of being an African (Maluleke 2001:37). Religiously, as well as a culturally, there is huge diversity on the vast continent of Africa; Africa consists of 'multiple identities' (Maluleke 2001:37). It is generally accepted that there are many religious systems in Africa (Magesa 2002:16; Mbiti 1990:1). Religion is found in almost every sphere of Africans' lives and societies. According to Mbiti (1991) it can be found in rituals, ceremonies and festivals; shrines, sacred places and religious objects; art and symbols; music and dance; proverbs, riddles and wise sayings; names of people and places; myths and legends; beliefs and customs. But the shades of the religion are not that stern and static.

We know that the folk religions are the parallel practices along with the Meta religion of the specific religio- cultural practices. The aim of folk religion is mostly to address the immediate need, and to suggest ways to equip the practitioners to avoid or combat the imminent misfortunes on the practicing society or to combat any evil spirit. These are sometimes the by products of the main religion, and sometimes these are the associations with nature showing the colorful association of man nature and universe. The practitioners of the folk religion, many times, seldom understand that their practices are different and distinct from their root religion. In the vast enchanting continent of Africa, Nri-Igbo, Ife, Oyo, Dahomey, Benin City, Ouidah, Nsukka, Kanem-Bornu, and Igbo-Ukwu are the main areas where the artifacts of African folk religions are found.

As far as the folk religious practices are concerned, the practices of traditional Berber religion are found in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso etc., and that of Hausa animism are found in Sudan. The canons of Bantu mythology in the Central, Southeast and Southern Africa, that of Bushongo, Lugbara, Baluba and Mbuti mythologies in Congo, Dinka religion and that of Lotuko mythology in South Sudan make the trajectories of folk religious practices therein. In the Eastern African region, Bantu, Akamba, Maasai mythologies and the Kallenjin religious practices present the evidences of folk practices therein. Similarly the Southern African region observes the traces of Bantu, Lozi, Tumbuka and Zulu mythologies, and San religion towards making the popular religious practices. Folk religions like Akan, Edo, Serer, Yoruba and Dahomean, and the pervading mythologies like Efik prepare the grounds for folk religious practices there.

Analyzing the traditional practices under the folk religions of Africa, one can find four cardinal religious beliefs, common amongst them. These are; the belief in the spirits and their being, the belief in the mystical and supernatural power, belief in gods and goddesses,



and the belief in the Supreme being. Beside these cardinal principles, the Folk religions in Africa are characterized by having the artifacts of magic, superstition, animistic or fetishistic rituals and local ceremonies etc. Opoku statement is appropriate here when he says that “African traditional religion ... is part of the religious heritage of Human kind. Born out of the experience and deep reflection of our African forebears, it provides answers to the stirring of the human spirit and elaborates on the profundity of the experience of the divine-human encounter based on the resources of Africa’s own cultural heritage and insight” (Opoku 1993:67). The parallel practices in the African folk religion concentrate on the belief in the Evil Eye ,the practices to get rid of the evil, curses, demons, ghosts and witchcraft , staunch belief in seeking the blessings of select animals, veneration of the dead, offering of crops, beer, wine and cheese to the dead ancestors, gods and goddesses , performing different fertility rites , maintain belief in traditional magic systems for cure , snake handling and thanksgiving ceremonial prayers . They also believe in giving offerings before meals, domestic rituals, worshipping the ancestors and the dead family members, beliefs in phantoms and supernatural existences like that of hoodoo, voodoo, pow-wow and Santería ,belief in folk medicines etc. Magesa (1997:35) points out that the structure of African Traditional Religion is based on morality. Morality originates with God and flows into the ancestors. God is the ‘Giver of Life, the Power’ behind everything (Magesa 1997:35). The way of human life (tradition) originates from God (Magesa 1997:35). Tradition contains the moral code and prescriptions for an ethical life. Different other artifacts of the folk religious practices in Africa include religious jewelry and signs, use of different magic charms (hex) signs, religious art, folk architecture and interior decoration at homes, having distinct statements of apocalypse in religious prophecy and many more.

The ceremonies of folk religious practices are performed mostly in the related community which may start in a low profile, at any place, in the believer’s community. The community members collectively participate in collective drumming and chanting of specific mantras. The Okuyi ceremony practiced by Bantu groups in Gabon and Cameroon is an appropriate example of it. Under Okuyi ceremony, the participants embody a divine spirit (the god or goddess concerned) or ancestor by drumming, and chanting of specific mantras. Sometimes these rituals are performed to realize divine energy reaching in that state of consciousness. In the trans like situation, the practitioner(s) utter specific words, statements that observe the same merit as that in proclamation, conjecture and oracle.

Valid concern for Environment is also visible in the folk religious practices in Africa. Human being stands between the spiritual forces and the existence of man. African Traditional Religion, according to Magesa, is based on maintaining the balance between the two spheres of the universe (the visible and invisible world). The maintenance of this balance and harmony is humanity’s greatest ethical obligation and determines the quality of life (Magesa



1997:73). Nature in its various forms finds its importance in the folk religions of Africa. It reflects in the forces like that of moon, sun, star, ebb, flow, thunder, lightning, comets and meteors, change of weather, rainbows and great fig trees (mugumò) etc have their own appeal, connotation and importance in the religious practices. Veneration of different spirits, as well that of the ancestors of the community, is a popular paradigm in the folk religion. These spirits play the role of an agent to seek blessings from the Supreme Creator God. Krüger et al. (2009:36) identify three categories in the spirit world of African Traditional Religion, namely the spirits of ancestors, nature spirits and deities. Although the border between spirits and gods is perforated (Sundermeier 1990:175), there are differences between the two categories. Spirits roam on earth (Sundermeier 1990:175). Gods, on the other hand, are closer to God and have a wider sphere of influence and activity. For Africans, The Supreme God is worshipped under the direction of the demi-gods (the lesser deities) and the spirits of the dead ancestors. Mbiti argues, this plays out as follows. "For most part of their life, African people place God in the transcendental plane, making him seem remote from their daily affairs. But they know that he is imminent ... Thus for them, God is in theory transcendent, but in practice immanent." (Mbiti 1970:18)

Different kinds of offering like that of flowers, fruits, animal sacrifice, cooked and raw food, semi precious stones is also a practice in the preparation for worship. Liquor is poured in the honour of the deities. Observing respectable social behavior, giving respect to parents and elders, taking care of children in maximum possible decent way, extending hospitality to guests, observing different forms of honesty, trustworthiness, courage and bravery are the common virtues. African religion, among other religions, has been accused of being animistic (Momen 2009:357). The conviction that reality as perceived by humanity is merely a part of reality, and the fact that an invisible spiritual world co-exists with the visible world characterizes African Traditional Religion as animistic

In the folk religious practices different practices of traditional healing are also found. These healings are performed under a religious system of reading the bones and using sacred divination plates. The use of herbal medicine is also found. The whole purpose of life in African Traditional Religion is to preserve and enhance this life force that everyone has received (Magesa 1997:51). There is a strict code of conduct of morality and ethics in folk religions. To quote Magesa we can say that "moral behaviour maintains and enhances life force, but disobedience and disloyal behaviour toward the tradition passed on by the ancestors will weaken life force. A close relationship with God, the ancestors and other humans will ensure life force." (Magesa 1997:52).

The founding canons of the folk religions are found in traditional beliefs, and ages old practices. There are seldom any written scriptures. As per an estimate the believers in the



traditional African religions are found in 43 countries, with a population of over 100 million. The African worldview is described as a religious worldview (Bediako 1995:29; Mbiti 1990:15). The world is perceived through a religious lens. Every activity and entity has religious significance. The elemental, spiritual and communal forces (the cultural heritage of Africa) have become not merely the locus of spiritual meaning, the pursuit of mystical powers and the pursuit of kinship community (1999:122). These moral principles fit into the framework of an African understanding of religion.

We find that the African folk religions are close to earth and nature. They provide a pattern of solidarity among human being, and establish a close association of humanity and environment. These folk practices offer a close relationship among nature, nature, environment and spirit. They find human being an integral part of the universal scheme. Many times the patterns of recycling and giving back what we do is also visualized here.

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