

## Chapter 2

# Concepts of God, Divinities, Ancestors, and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Thought: Conceptual Analysis

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The concept of god, divinities, ancestors, and spirits in African traditional religious ontology has been misunderstood by many scholars to the point of seeing Africans as people who did not know the supreme being nor worship him. Africans were seen as worshipping strange god(s). Against this backdrop, the researcher undertook this study to show that the concept of god is not strange to Africans and that in traditional Africa there is no atheist. Africans rather see the divinities as special beings, offspring, and/or apparitional beings who receive their authority from the supreme being to serve in the unitary theocratic system of the supreme being's government. This study adopts the descriptive and analytical research methods to investigate African traditional religious lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. This chapter concludes by suggesting that there is the need for proper religious education, a theology of enculturation, and understanding of African worldviews in order to sustain Africans' beliefs and practices.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

God is the Supreme entity to the adherents of the traditional religions of African and considered to be the origin of everything in the universe. In Africa, God is viewed in both immanent and transcendent dimensions. This very idea of oneness of the Supreme Beings is core to the followers and this belief creates no place for the atheists in their traditional concept of God. There is no written form, but this belief has been imbibed in them through their life experiences and mainly taken from proverbs, short statements, stories, religious rituals, prayers, songs, myths etc. The knowledge of God is a gift given at the time of birth to a new born baby. According to Ashanti proverbs, 'No one shows a child the Supreme Being.' Knowing about God is believed to be an instinctive knowledge to the religious adherents. Africans are of the opinion that God reveals Himself to them. Going forward, the concept of God, divinities, Ancestors and spirits in African traditional religious ontology has been a controversial and misunderstood concept.

Various factors led to this controversy and misunderstanding, such as prejudiced by Western Scholars who measured African traditional religious concept with Christianity. Other factors include lack of indebt study of African religion leading to hasty conclusions. Most of those who came to study the religions of Africa were armchair scholars who depended on data from missionaries who themselves concentrated in one community or tribe.

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

In this paper, our attention is drawn to the fact that there are realities in African religion which has not been properly echoed by Africans themselves especially those Eurocentric ones whose religious inclination has blinded them to the fact that Africans are not strangers to the worship of One True God (Supreme Being), who is called by different names in Africa. This paper further shows the position of the divinities, Ancestors and spirits in African religious ontology stressing that their belief in this other Beings does not in any way contradict their belief in the Supreme Being as some opine. In most of the religions of the world, the concept of the Supreme Being is clearly spelt out just as it is in African religion with the divinities and spirits clearly set forth as messengers of the Supreme Being.

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