

Chapter 3

The African Traditional Religious Ontology of God, Divinities, and Spirits

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ABSTRACT

Earlier scholars of religion argued that Africans were animists and polytheists who didn't have the concept of a supreme being because they did not see clearly the distinction between the supreme being and divinities. It's recent that indigenous scholars disputed this and redefined the relationship as 'diffused monotheism'. God seemed to be remote to the Africans' daily affairs of life, and African culture of respect and honor had a role in this. The authors attempt to present a reality of an accurate outlook of the obscure yet clear religious ontology of God, divinities, and spirits in the African indigenous religion. Durkheim asserted religion divided society into two categories, the profane and the sacred; nevertheless, in the African religious ontology, the two are intermixed in everyday experiences. On the flip-side, to overlook the concept of spirit being in the African worldview is to proscribe an African religious belief system.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion in Africa is not something separate and apart; it is endemic and experienced within the rhythm of everyday life. The idea is premised on the verity that the concept of the Supreme Being, divinities, ancestors and spirits is not in any way extraordinary to the Africans although in the long-established African climes, there is no one who can be appropriately described as atheist. The African in their thoughtfulness sees the divinities as the offspring of the Supreme Being or apparitional beings who receive their authority from the Supreme Being to serve in the unitary theocratic system of government of the Supreme Being. In the same light, they see the ancestors as the intermediaries between the Supreme Being, divinities, spirits and the living. Studies of 'African Traditional Religious Ontology of God, Divinities and Spirits' adequately reveal that there can be no universe without spirit beings. In Africa, the existence of this idea consists in being perceived. This is in line with George Berkeley's 'Principles of Human Knowledge' that "all things are only materials because people are there to perceive them" (Berkeley, 1982). Therefore, to downplay the concept of spirit being in African traditional culture is to proscribe African religious belief system. Traditional African devotees believe that spirits are superior to man and do not suffer hunger, fatigue etc. They can transform as immaterial and corporeal beings with the possibility to assume various dimensions. Spirits are inseparable component of existence. The objectives of this chapter are: Firstly, to understanding the core concepts in African religious worldview; secondly, to establish the philosophical basis of Africans belief in the supreme being; thirdly, to evaluate the role of man towards god in African traditional religion; fourthly, to examine the role of divinities in African traditional religion, and Finally, to explain the role of spirits beings in African traditional religion.

THE ROOT OF MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF SUPREME BEING

African indigenous (native) religions for several reasons are difficult to be understood by non-natives.

1. There has been a lot of misinformation from former religious studies scholars concerning ontology of God, divinities and spirits in sub-Saharan Africa until indigenous African scholars like John S. Mbiti in 1970s and E. Bolaji Idowu in 1980s, whose works set the records straight about African religions. Some earlier scholars argued that Africans were polytheists because they did not see clearly the distinction between the Supreme Being and divinities. It was later

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