

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THE PROBLEM OF FOUNDERS

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the major religions in the world, reveals that these religions have founders and religious books; these two elements: founders and religious books provide for a reference point and uniformity in the practice of these religions. For instance, Christianity has a founder, Jesus Christ, with a religious book, the Bible; Islam has a founder, Muhammad, with a religious book, the Quran; Bahi'a has a founder, Baha'u'llah, with a religious book, Kitab-I-Aqdas; Mormonism has a founder, Joseph Smith, with religious books, Kings James Bible, Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price. Beyond the founder, these religions also have missionaries and the desire to propagate or to proselytize their religions. in relation to this trend in major religions, this work has studied African Traditional Religion as a world religion and discovered that unlike other major world religions, it neither has a founder as in the case of an individual founder as seen in other religions, nor missionaries who propagate this religion. Compared to other religions, it further observed that its propagation is carried out by living it out other than by preaching it. Its followers are more preoccupied with its practice than with its theory. While this may constitute a fundamental problem in the study of ATR, this work observes that it defines the uniqueness of ATR and the African Worldview. For the purpose of this work, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry would be employed.

Keywords: Missionaries, Founders, African, Traditional, Religion, Proselytes, Religious Texts.

Introduction

The area of comparative study of religions has awakened a new consciousness in the study of African Traditional Religion. Scholars of religion have observed that major religions in the world have founders and religious books; these two elements: founders and religious books provide for a reference point and uniformity in the practice of these religions. For instance, Christianity has a founder, Jesus Christ, with a religious book, the Bible; Islam has a founder, Muhammad, with a religious book, the Quran; Bahi'a has a founder, Baha'u'llah, with a religious book, Kitab-I-Aqdas; Mormonism has a founder, Joseph Smith, with religious books, Kings James Bible, Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price. Beyond the founder, these religions also have missionaries and the desire to propagate or to proselytize their religions. We have heard the stories of western missionaries who did transverse seas and oceans to come to Africa from Europe for the proclamation of the gospel. The chronicle of Arabian missionaries who came into Africa through North Africa for the spread of Islam is with us. If one were to begin to compare African traditional religion to other religions in terms of the proselytism of these major religions, one would notice very evident differences.

The present work on schedule focuses on African Traditional Religion as a world religion with the attempt at discovering why

unlike other world religions, it neither has a founder as in the case of an individual founder as seen in other religions, nor missionaries who propagate this religion. This work tries to take into consideration the peculiarity of the African religious worldview for a better understanding of why the idea of founders are not emphasized in African traditional religious thought. And for a better approach it begins by first attempting to restructure or reposition the minds of scholars who argue that African traditional religion has no founders. This is done through opening the minds of scholars to other possibilities of meanings and intentions.

Restructuring the Mind on the Meaning of Founder(s)

The word *founder* is a noun which means the beginner or originator of something. You might talk about the *founder* of a nation, the *founder* of club, or the *founder* of a website. You can also be the founder of a religion like Jesus Christ is the founder of Christianity and Mohammed is the founder of Islam. A cursory glance at the history of religions reveals that there is only one founder for most religions.

RELIGION	RELIGIOUS BOOK	FOUNDER
Bahí'a	Kitab-I-Aqdas	Baha'u'llah
Christianity	Bible	Jesus Christ
Buddhist	Tipitaka	Gautam Buddha
Islam	Quran	Muhammad
Jainism	Jain Agamas	Rishabh
Judaism	Torah	Moses
Mormonism	Kings James Bible, Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price	Joseph Smith
Rastafari	Bible, Kebra Nagast, Holy Piby, the Promised Key	Haile Selassie
Sikhism	Guru Granth Sahib	Guru Nanak
Taoism	Tao-te-Ching, Zhuangzi, Daozang	Laozi
Zoroastrianism	Zend Avesta	Zoroaster
<u>Atenism</u>	-----	<u>Akhenaten</u>
<u>Charvaka</u>	-----	<u>Ajita Kesakambali</u>
<u>Mohism</u>	-----	<u>Mozi</u>
<u>Ājīvika</u>	-----	<u>Makkhali Gosala</u>
<u>Armazi</u>	-----	<u>Pharnavaz I of Iberia</u>
<u>Pashupata Shaivism</u>	-----	<u>Lakulisha</u>

List of World Religions and their Founders

Most scholars who are schooled in the west have reduced the idea of founder to an individual person, and as such any idea of founder that contradicts what they already have read of or know about other religions does not exist for them. This has been a major problem in the study of African philosophy, as major African scholars who were schooled in the west and trained by western scholars returned home

and denied the existence of African philosophy simply because it did not conform to what they were taught in the west as philosophy. This has also crept into the study of African traditional religion. Many scholars have argued that African Traditional Religion has no founder. While it is true that African traditional religion has no founder, it is the position of this work that African Traditional Religion has founders. Hackman-Aidoo (2014) writes:

The difficulty, in my opinion, many African traditional religion scholars face is that they have not been able to identify and even if they have, they assume the idea of a founder must be limited to an individual. Part of this problem is mainly because many of those scholars having received a western type of education still look at their indigenous faith with a western theoretical framework. What they profess to know about their religion is what outsiders (non-Africans) have said about them. In fact, the picture Africans paint of themselves as Africans is a carbon copy of a western African picture which has been internalized (p. 36).

The first step, therefore, in the study of whether African traditional religion has founders or not is to restructure the mind. The mind has to be first saved from the western stereotype that thinks of founders as individual persons, and secondly that the founder must be historically known to exist, for instance, like knowing his name and place of origin. The fact that it is not known does not mean that it does not exist, for the simple reason that 'to be' is not 'to be known'.

Revelation and the Indispensability of Founders

The word 'Traditional' is very fundamental in the conceptualization of African Indigenous Religion. However, it has been contended by scholars that 'traditional' is suggestive of that which is ancient, and therefore, no longer practiced. This is, however, not part of the meanings that the word contributes to our understanding of African traditional religion. It is rather used to denote indigenous practices and beliefs, facts, customs, often handed down from generation to generation, unwritten or written. As such, it combines the idea of the past, the present and the future. As a traditional religion, scholars have relegated it to the background arguing that the only religion worthy of its name is the religion based on God's climactic revelation, which is Christianity. Reacting to this perspective, Idowu (1973) writes:

If revelation indeed means God's self-disclosure, if he has left his mark upon the created order and his witnessing within man—every man—then it follows that revelation cannot be limited in scope and that it is meant for all mankind, all rational beings, irrespective of race or colour. In every part of the world, therefore, what in general terms is known as worship is a result of one central impulse—that of 'one divine personal will seeking all the time to make itself known (p.56).

This would imply that God's revelation goes beyond the walls of

Christianity, to include other religions like African Traditional Religion. Idowu (1973) believes that God reveals himself to all peoples everywhere, including Africa.

The one personal God...making himself known, keeping a grip on men...this implicit sense of the one Living God...when it became explicit, did so in a form conditioned by the general mental level...of ideas...In this also, we can see the self-disclosure of God in a form appropriate to man's stage of development and historical situation. Belief in the High God was the primitive man's way of apprehending and responding to, and expressing, the self-revealing pressure upon him the one God (p.56).

Thus, it is unarguably certain that our ancestor's faith which was handed down to us is the resultant effect of the impulse of the divine personal will to make itself known to humanity. African traditional religion was revealed to African ancestors in their own time and realized through reflection on their world.

Contrary to the popular opinion that exalts the Christians faith above and against other religions and cultures, Justin (cited by Shorter, 1988) made a notable attempt at arguing that the Christian faith is not only compatible with whatever is good and noble in other cultures, he holds that the different cultures were inspired by God and should be appropriate for his service. He saw other cultures, like the Hellenistic culture, as a prefiguration of Christ “a Logos spermatikos” (seed bearing word). He taught that the *Spermatik*

Logos has been implanted in the heart of every human culture since all things were created through Christ, with him and for him.

Clement (cited in Kanu and Obiefuna 2012a) established a fundamental theory- a harmony of faith and Greek culture, which places Greek philosophy at the service of faith. For him the ideas of Greek Philosophy were a gift to mankind and find their unity in Christianity. He states that:

Philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness until the coming of the Lord, and even now it is useful for the development of true religion, as a kind of preparatory discipline for those who arrive at faith by way of demonstration. For, “your way will not stumble” the Scripture says, if you attribute to Providence all good things, whether belonging to the Greeks or to us. For God is the source of all good either directly or indirectly as in the case of philosophy. But it may even be that philosophy was given to the Greeks directly; for it was a “schoolmaster”, to bring Hellenism to Christ, as the law was for the Jew. (p. 136).

Kanu and Ezenweke (2012b) observe that Augustine of Hippo learnt much from Greek Philosophy, which was then considered a pagan culture. Of particular interest is the work of Plotinus which Augustine used greatly in his writings. It is his opinion that faith runs on earth and takes its citizens from all nations and languages. Thus, Eliade (1957) writes that: “...the sacred is equivalent to a power, and in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated

with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy” (p.12).

Idowu 1973 and Chidili (2018) will, therefore, maintain that in every part of the world, what in general terms is known as worship is a result of one central impulse- God revealing Himself to people. Arguing for revelation in favour of founders in African traditional religion, this work posits that revelation was not made in a vacuum. It was made to the ancestors of African traditional societies.

African Ancestors as Founders of African Traditional Religion

The founders of African traditional religion are the African ancestors. These are the men and women who have lived and died, handing over the religion to their descendants. Generally, to qualify to be an ancestor in African worldview, the person must have lived a good moral life, and thus must have respected the taboos of the community; the person must leave behind a male offspring or offsprings; those who have no male children are referred to as *ofeke nmmuo* (spirits without portfolio); the person must have died a good or natural death (Kanu 2015a&b, 2017). These qualifications notwithstanding, Madu (1997) opines that “Although different people have different standards for measuring who qualifies to become an ancestor, it seems that the dominant factor rests on full burial rites” (p. 65).

Nyamiti (1984) distinguishes two elements that characterize the

African concept of ancestorship: *natural relationship*, which usually exists between the ancestor and his relatives, either as parent or brother. It can also be founded on common membership of a clan, tribe, religious sect or society. It can, therefore either be consanguinous or non-consanguinous. There is also the *sacred or supernatural* status of an ancestor, which is the consequence of his/her death. Following the African traditional moral standard, a good life is very significant here, since the ancestor is like a standard for the living. Metuh (1991) argues that they are under the presidency of the *Ala* deity. Uchendu (1965) avers that ancestors are the invisible segment of the Igbo lineage. Their world and the human world are very similar, just like in the human world, they have their farms, their roads, their markets, the only difference is that while our world is visible, theirs is invisible.

These forebears of ours called 'ancestors' are the founders of African traditional religion. The founders of ATR don't have to be like the founders of other religions. The logic of the African universe is communal than individual. This is partly because the beliefs of African traditional societies are beliefs held by the community and as such, it doesn't so much matter who the particular founder is. Mbiti 1970 writes that:

There are no religious founders, as far as I know. Since religion merges into the whole of life, to peak of religious

founders is almost meaningless. There are national founders, however, who have a cult and religious mythology build around them, so that they are an essential part of the religious and philosophical life and attitude of their respective peoples. (p. 191).

African Traditional Religion is co-terminus with the African people. It has its roots in the first Africans who existed and have only developed according to places and circumstances through time. If as Africans we already know that we have no record of the first African who existed, it would be more difficult to speak of an African who is the founder of African Traditional Religion. This explains why we talk about founders rather than founder in African traditional religion.

Conclusion

The entire idea of trying to trace the founders of African traditional religion in the history of the development of African traditional religion is purely of western origin. African scholars through the comparative study of religion have encountered founders and missionaries in other religions and are now beginning to raise questions as regards the place of founders in African traditional religion. If this question is raised, as important as it is without considering it within the context of the peculiarity of the African worldview, very little meaning would be gained. The peculiarity of

the African universe lies in the fact that the African knowledge system which is largely of oral tradition, is not so much concerned about the origin of the universe and the investigation of a life lived in the past as it is concerned with the nature of the universe and the need to give value to a life that is in existence. This explains why several attempts at proposing founders for African traditional religion have created more questions than were initially posed.

Bengtson (1975) made an attempt at describing some religious founders of African traditional religion, beginning with the Tsoede, the first king of Nupe around whom a cult was established; he discussed about Nyikang who was at the centre of the Shiluk experience. He was the founder of the Shiluk nation and the one around whom the formal cult of the Shiluk was established (Hofmayr 1911 and Pumphery 1941). The third founder he discussed was Heitsi Eibib of the Nama Hottentots, who was alleged originally to come from the east and to have led his people to their homeland of Namaqualand in South West Africa. A cursory glance at these figures referred to as founders reveals that they are merely national founders rather than religious founders. These have been confused with each other, and the fact that a cult and religious mythology have been built around them so that they become an essential part of the religious and philosophical lives of the people, deepens the confusion the more. These heroes mentioned above: Tsoede, Shiluk and Heitsi Eibib were national heroes rather than religious founders. Before the people had anything to do with these

people, does it mean that they had no religion? They already had a religion. Thus, these men did not found a new religion; they rather structured the already existing religion to serve the political structure that they were building at the time. Thus, the submission of this work is that African traditional religion has founders rather than a particular founder. This has been determined by a couple of factors which include oral tradition and the communal character of the African universe.

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