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An Overview of the Historiography of African Traditional Religion

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Abstract

An African proverb has it that “He that does not know from where the rain started beating him would not know where it would end”. The relevance of historiography in the acquisition of genuine knowledge cannot be overemphasized. Regrettably, some contemporary scholars of African Traditional Religion pay little attention to the historical development of the said discipline, thereby leaving its sui generis to the whims and caprices of armchair and freelance writers. A situation which is retarding the embracement of the genuine spirit of African Traditional Religion by certain contemporary Africans. Scholars like Kanu (2015, p.23), Oguejiofor (2006, p.23), Mbiti (1969), and Idowu (1973), have written on the historiography of African Traditional Religion, and in all they agree that to think historical in the study of African Traditional Religion is to place oneself in a position of relevance, which, in turn, involves understanding and self-understanding. For the success of this academic work both the primary and the secondary sources of data collection have been adopted. The employment of the phenomenological, historical, and the sociological methods is for adequate analysis of the data collected. The use of the great man theory of history and the history from below is to encourage authenticity. The negligence of the writings of our predecessors poses a great threat to the complete development of the African Traditional Religion. Contemporary Scholars of African Traditional Religion must embrace the honest spirit of the discoveries of the past researchers, and writers on the said indigenous religion in Africa, for leverage in the ongoing campaign for the revival of the African traditional religious and cultural values which among other things promote truth, justice, peace, unity and respect for human life and dignity.

Keywords: Historiography, Africa, Tradition, Religion, Overview

Introduction

African traditional religion pervades every department of life of the indigenous African man, and underpins the core of his traditional values. Though the said religion has no sacred book, its tenets are enshrined in the hearts of the traditional African people, through the tendrils of the African cosmology

which sees the physical and the spiritual realms in a symbiotic relationship.

The early Western Christian missionaries and colonial agents who worked in Africa like Rev. Thomas Jefferson, Major Arthur G. Leonard, Percy A. Talbot, Captain R.S. Rattray, etc., are often credited with having made the first real attempt to study African traditional religion, in the bid to satisfy

personal interest, gain some knowledge about Africans, in order to work and communicate with them.

Permit me to observe here that during the pre-colonial time (1400-1870) the Western explorers, Christian missionaries and scholars had very poor knowledge about the African people, culture and its various dimensions, due to lack of proper contact with the Africans. Hence, out of ignorance and prejudice they believed that Africans had no religion.

The colonial period (1880-1950) was an era when the missionaries took an increasing part in extending Western or European interests. It was also a time when European explorers and merchants realized that for them to achieve their goal in Africa; profitable trade, colonial agents in this part of the world, must be in control of the hinterlands. Therefore, for administrative convenience, and proper knowledge about Africa colonial administrators in Africa demanded from their masters in Europe the services of trained ethnographers and anthropologists, who later argued, after careful researches, that every locality (Africa inclusive) has a definite knowledge of God.

Idowu (1973), refers to this period as the era of doubt and resisted illumination. This is

because several efforts were made by certain European scholars like John Oman and A.C. Bouquet to resist the said truth; it challenged the superiority claim of the West.

During this period, unlike the pre-colonial epoch, the Europeans came to believe that Africans have a religion, but the African indigenous religion was derogatively labelled as paganism, fetishism, idolatry, polytheism, etc. However, with the dawn of scholars like Tempels, a new age dawned for the investigation of African traditional religion.

The post-colonial period (1930-1960) witnessed a more systematic study of African traditional religion. During this epoch, scholars such as Placid Tempels, Alexis Kagame, Evans-Pritchard, Parrinder, etc., carefully examined the content of African traditional religion. They lived among the African people, understood them and started a sympathetic approach to the study of African traditional religion. With them change of attitude towards African traditional religion deepened.

The contemporary season in connection with the study of African traditional religion came into being about five decades ago via the combined efforts of researchers who were mainly Africans. This development has indeed led to an accelerated emergence of

African traditional religion as a full-fledged academic discipline. Today, African traditional religion is studied in many universities in and outside Africa.

Theoretical Framework

In the words of Obilor (2021, p.44), a theoretical framework is based on an existing theory or theories in a field of research that is related and/or reflects the hypothesis of a current study. It is a “blue print” or a guide for a research (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). Thus a theoretical framework guides the researcher so that he would not deviate from the confines of the accepted theories to make his final contribution scholarly and academic (Ibe, 2021, p.25). This academic work has adopted both the great man theory and the history from below theory.

The great man theory is an approach to the study of history popularized in the 19th century according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of great men and women. The theory is primarily attributed to the Scottish essayist, historian, and philosopher, Thomas Carlyle. In his view all the things that we see standing accomplished in the world are the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment of thoughts that dwelt in the great men and women sent into the world. As

regards the history from below theory, it attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people. There is an emphasis on the disenfranchised, the poor, etc. The proponents have a Marxist model in mind, as in the approach of the history workshop movement in Britain in the 1960s.

The best application of the said theories is in the area of the contributions of both the mighty and the lowly, in and outside Africa, in the systematic study of African traditional religion. The hospitality, sincerity, progressiveness, etc., of the indigenous African people, the elites inclusive, created an enabling environment for early investigations in African traditional religion by the early colonial agents, Christian missionaries, ethnographers and anthropologists in Africa. Though the objective study of African traditional religion started with the emergence of some African scholars and researchers like E.B. Idowu, J.S. Mbiti, F.A. Arinze, etc.

Permit me to observe at this point once again, that in this academic work, the above theories are applied to provide the framework of the relevance of historiography in the evolution, and systematic examination of African Traditional Religion. For African Traditional Religion to achieve the purposes for which it was created, which among other things

include, to help the African to reconstruct his past in order to understand the present and effectively plan for the future, contemporary scholars in this field must value the investigative strategies and the writings of the previous researchers in African Traditional Religion.

The Historical Development of African Traditional Religion

For the success of this section of our work, here, we shall carefully consider the following; the pre-colonial period, the colonial era, the post-colonial epoch and the contemporary season.

The Pre-Colonial Era (1400-1870)

Scholars like Quarcoopome (1987, p.13), and Kanu (2015, p.25), have written on the pre-colonial period in connection with the development and history of African Traditional Religion, and in all they agree that the first stage of the Europeans encounter with African culture which the African Traditional Religion is a significant part of, was characterized by ignorance and false certainty. This crop of Europeans; the earliest missionaries and explorers in Africa, due to bias, and ignorance of the nature, tenets, etc., of the African Traditional Religion and by extension culture, did not believe in the existence of the said indigenous religion. To

them Africa was a dark continent filled with savages. Quarcoopome (1987, p.13), writes that 19th century European missionaries looked upon Africa as the very stronghold of Satan. It is pertinent to observe here that the above perverse ignorance finds expression in the statement attributed to Emil Ludwig, in Smith (1961, p.1), “How can the untutored African conceive of God? Belief in Deity is a philosophical concept of which savages are incapable of framing”.

Be that as it may, the aforesaid show of ignorance and prejudice by the earliest Europeans regarding the African Traditional Religion, was necessitated by their lack of adequate knowledge of the African people, their culture, etc., and their analysis of the African Traditional Religion without real contact with the African indigenous men and women. Achebe (1958, p.124), expects the above view when he writes thus:

Does the white man understand our custom about land?.... How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?....But he says our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad.

Though the early European missionaries and explorers blatantly denied the existence of

African Traditional Religion, their actions and thoughts on Africa and its culture and religion drew the attention of a good number of scholars and researchers to the need for proper examination of the African culture and religion.

The Colonial Period (1880-1950)

This was a time when missionaries took an increasing part in extending European interests. The explorers and merchants from different European countries realized that profitable trade depended on maintenance of peace and that this peace could not be assured without administrative intervention and control in the hinterlands (Kanu, 2015, p.28). Africa was turned into a field for the conflicting ambitions of the major European colonial powers (Spain, France, Portugal, Britain, Germany and Belgium).

By the early 1880s, these conflicting ambitions were beginning to be expressed territorially. Parts of the African coasts were claimed by traders and administrators of one or other of the European powers. Missionary, trading, military and administrative activities started expanding. The stage was now set for the European Scramble for Africa, finally actualized in 1884-1885 Conference and Treaty of Berlin (Kanu, 2015, p.29).

According to the Treaty of Berlin, European colonial claim to territory could only be secured by “effective occupation”. The subsequent scramble for territory by European powers took place so rapidly that within a decade the outlines of most of the colonial territories, and significantly, of most of the present independent African states, were laid down (Hodder, 1978). It was so rapid that by 1913, European powers had divided the African continent into a Patchwork that showed little respect for ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Kanu, 2015, p.29).

With the inception of this phase, the challenges of governance prompted many local colonial administrators to seek the help of trained ethnographers and anthropologists. They were needed to provide vital information about the culture, customs, institutions, beliefs and values of the traditional Africans to aid colonial administrations in Africa, especially in the areas of proper policies formulation and implementation.

Kanu (2015, p.30), writes that a number of institutions were inaugurated, including the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IALC) in 1926 (later known as the International African Institute, I.A.I) inaugurated by representatives of scientific,

missionary and official colonial bodies. It had Lord Lugard as its first chairman. The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (R.L.I) with a similar aim was formed in Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1937.

Ejizu (2013), opines that trained ethnographers and anthropologists like S. F. Nadel, K. Little, Monica Wilson, Mary Douglas, Charles K. Meek and Godfrey Lienhardt got either recruited or financially sponsored by the colonial office to provide accurate information to bolster the effort of local colonial governments. As long as scholars like Kanu (2015, p.30), Idowu (1973, p.89), etc., are concerned, the said development greatly benefitted the study of African Traditional Religion.

Idowu (1973), refers to this era as the period of doubt and resisted illumination. He observes that scholars such as Andrew Lang argued that every locality has a definite knowledge of God. This new knowledge created crisis in the knowledge store of the West (Kanu, 2015, p.31). Several efforts were made to resist the truth, because this truth challenged the superiority claim of the West. Possoz, in Kanu (2015, p.31), expects the above view when he writes that up to the present, ethno-philosophers have denied all abstract thought to tribal peoples. The civilized Christian European was exalted, the

savage and pagan primitive man was denigrated. Out of this concept a theory of colonization was born which now threatens to fail everywhere.

According to Ejizu (2013), the findings of anthropologists at the time affected Christian missionaries, as it helped to improve their attitude towards African Traditional Religion and culture in general. This does not mean that African Traditional Religion got a total acceptance during this period. There were cases of a forced acculturation, a situation in which a highly developed society imposes certain elements of its culture on the other, thereby forcing it to derail from its unique tract of cultural civilization (Kanu, 2015, p.32).

During this era, unlike the precolonial period, the European came to believe that Africans have a religion, but their religion was designated with derogatory terms like totemism, magic, fetishism, primitive, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, polytheism, Animism, etc. Tempels (1952, p.15), maintains that none of these conceptions of primitive thought has been sufficiently exposed to its roots, studied and defined from the point of view of the primitive peoples concerned. Here lies the problem of the precolonial and colonial periods. With the dawn of scholars like Tempels, a new age

dawned for the study of African Traditional Religion (Kanu, 2015, pp.33-34).

The Post-Colonial Era (1930-1960)

The post-colonial period is characterized by a greater depth in the understanding of African Traditional Religion. During this period, scholars like Placid Tempels, Alexis Kagame, Evans-Pritchard, Parrinder, etc., explored the content of the religion and philosophy of the African people. These scholars lived among the African people, understood them and started a sympathetic approach to the study of African Traditional Religion. With them, a change of attitude towards African Traditional Religion deepened. This method of enquiry finally led to the discovery that primitive people originally had faith in and worshipped the Supreme Being (God) (Kanu, 2015, p.34).

In the course of his research in Bantu worldview and philosophy, Tempels arrived at the underlining factor in Bantu philosophy, which he called the vital force. This he believes is the essence of being. While for the Westerner it (Force) could be considered as an attribute of being, for the Bantu it is identical with being. God has a greater force, followed by the spirit of the Ancestors, then human beings. However, the created universe of the Bantu people is centred on the human

force, for everything in the universe is understood only in relation to the human person. From this perspective, it is obvious that in Bantu ontology, as in other African worldviews, the cosmos is anthropocentric.

Commenting on “the Primal Vision” published in 1963 and authored by J.V. Taylor, which attracted a lot of sympathy from the English world to African Traditional Religion, Mbiti (1969, p.12), holds:

In this attempt he is carried away by that primal world, becoming too sympathetic and insufficiently critical. He presents everything as if it were so sacred, pure and clean that it is being polluted by Christianity, Westernism, urbanization and the ways of technological life.

He presented Africa not as a continent that is savage and pagan, but one that the Western world has something to learn from (Kanu, 2015, pp.36-37).

E.G. Parrinder spent twenty years teaching in West Africa and Studying African religions, before becoming the founder and member of the Department of Religious Studies in the University College of Ibadan. Some of his remarkable works are “African Traditional Religion” published in 1954 and “Africa’s Three Religions” published in 1969. In the

former, he discussed the major items of African Traditional Religion; the Supreme Being, sacred specialists, magic, sorcery, ancestors, etc. In the latter, he examined the three religions in Africa; African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity.

E.E. Evans-pritchard wrote the work; “Nuer Religion”, in 1956. He gave a monograph on the religious beliefs and behaviour of the Nuer people of Southern Sudan. It was based on practices observed and conversations with members of Nuer society during his year-long stay among them. He discussed the ideas of spirit, taboo, sacrifice, justice, contagion, gods and totemic spirits, among the Nuer people.

G. Lienhardt, wrote on “Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka”. He brought out the significance of the personal encounter between the Dinka and God arguing that the Dinka experience the divine in virtually every aspect of their lives; thus, the world of the spirits and men converge in human experience. A careful look at the above view shows that the post-colonial period was characterized by a more systematic investigation of African Traditional Religion.

The Contemporary Epoch

According to Kanu (2015, p.38), the fourth stage in the study of African Traditional Religion came into being about five decades ago through the combined efforts of researchers, basically Africans. This development led to an accelerated emergence of African Traditional Religion as a full-fledged academic discipline. Ejizu (2013), Writes that African Traditional Religion has since become part of the curriculum of several academic institutions in Africa and other parts of the world. It is offered as a major course in departments of religious studies in universities, colleges of higher education and research institutes. Students are free to major in African Traditional Religion at diploma, bachelor, masters and doctorate degrees. It is now placed on a similar pedestal as Christianity and Islam. The systematic study of African Traditional Religion has achieved a measure of acceptability as an academic discipline.

The generation of African scholars that occupy the stage in the post-colonial era have played significant role in the explanation of the important elements of African Traditional Religion. They have contributed positively towards the evolution of the systematic study of African Traditional Religion. Some of these scholars are Rev. Canon John S. Mbiti,

Revd. E.B. Idowu, Rev. Fr. S. N. Ezeanya, Rev. Canon E. C. Ilogu, Rev. H. Sawyerr, Rev. Fr. Anthony Ekwunife and Rev. Fr. IkengaMetuh. Permit me to observe here once more, that African Traditional Religion as a course has gained international recognition. Thus, it is not only studied in African Universities, it is also studied in many universities in various parts of the globe.

Evaluation

Some of the reasons for the study of African Traditional Religion, today, are; to help the African people to reconstruct their past in order to understand the present and effectively plan for the future; to help the African man in his search for self-determination and self-assertion; to make known the world view of the African people so that non-Africans may understand the social and moral behaviour of the Africans; to make scientific comparison with other religions; and to correct misconceptions about the indigenous religion of Africa by European or Western investigators and certain educated contemporary Africans.

Though, the ideas and activities of some early missionaries, explorers, etc., in Africa tried to jettison the relevance and uniqueness of African Traditional Religion, it might be

wrong to think that they did not contribute directly or indirectly to the systematic study of African Traditional Religion. The approaches of the ethnographers, anthropologists, and the post-colonial, and contemporary scholars, etc., deserve some commendation; they worked as a catalyst, and laid the foundation for systematic study of African Traditional Religion. Current students and researchers of African Traditional Religion must ensure the careful usage of the genuine spirit of the findings of the above missionaries, scholars, etc., in the promotion of the course of African Traditional Religion, culture and values for sustainable development in contemporary Africa.

Recommendations

The systematic study of African Traditional Religion, and its emergence as a full-fledged academic discipline in Africa and in the West, are the resultant effects of the efforts of some early scholars and researchers of African Traditional Religion. Unfortunately certain students and scholars today pay little or no attention to the historiography of African Traditional Religion, a situation which is negatively affecting the African indigenous values of truth, diligence, etc. To ameliorate the said ugly situation we recommend the following:

- i. The Association of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars must ensure that the academic works of early scholars and researchers in African Traditional Religion are found in the libraries of all institutions of learning in Africa, and the West.
- ii. Lecturers in this field of study must make sure that their students are properly exposed to the historiography of African Traditional Religion.
- iii. Any form of association of African Traditional Religion with fetishism must be carefully avoided.

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion is one of the courses studied in institutions of higher learning, both in Africa and some parts of the West today; thanks to the efforts of scholars like Andrew Lang, Tempels, E. G. Parrinder, E. E. Evans – Pritchard, Idowu, Metuh, Mbiti, Ilogu, Achebe, etc. For African Traditional Religion to play a significant role in the sustainable development of Africa the zeal of contemporary scholars in this field of study must be characterized by truth, authenticity; scientificity, etc.

Our shelves must not be found lacking in monographs, tracts, theses, books, etc., authored by the said foundational researchers, scholars, etc., of African Traditional Religion.

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