

African Traditional Religion: An Examination of Terminologies Used for Describing the Indigenous Faith of African People, Using an Afrocentric Paradigm

by

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“The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside”- Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972).

Abstract

This paper critically examines such terminologies like juju, paganism, savage, ancestral worship and heathenism in relationship to the African experience, considering that such misleading terminologies are not appropriate in describing the religion and spirituality of African people. Thus, it was suggested that researchers should adopt in an Afrocentric approach to studying African traditional religion, and that a researcher should “bracket” their faith and prejudice they might have about Africa and its people. Finally, it is suggested that Afrocentric terminologies should be introduced by African people to guide foreign researchers and others from continually using misleading and racially motivated terms in reference to the religion and spirituality of African people.

Introduction

Religion, like any other philosophical concept does not have a single universally accepted definition. This is because religion deals with immaterial objects that cannot be empirically verified. It has been defined differently by people of diverse interests, academic and cultural background.

However, in this paper, we shall discuss some of the definitions of religion. According to James (1902), religion is the “feeling, act, and experiences of individual men and women in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”. Omoregbe (1999) in his *Comparative Religion* defines religion as interpersonal relationship between a person and a transcendent personal being believed to exist. To Ekwunife (1990), religion is an awareness and recognition of a dependent relationship on a transcendent Being, the Wholly Other, nameable or un-nameable, personalized or impersonalized expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour. Just like any other definition of religion, the word ‘belief’ remains an important core element in the concept of religion.

Generally, African people are very religious and for that matter, religion permeates in all aspects of life, i.e. drumming, dancing, singing, ceremonies, festivals, marriages among others. African traditional religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the African people. To Mbiti (1969), African Religions and Philosophy is a systematic study of the attitudes of mind and belief that have evolved in the many societies of Africa and affects the way of life of most African people. Awolalu (1976:1) says that “when we speak of African traditional religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans” Over the years, some foreign scholars, investigators, missionaries and media outlets have been belittling the African traditional religion by describing it with some racially motivated terminologies such as savagism, juju, fetishism, animism, magic, paganism, heathenism and ancestral worship.

In response, this paper begins by defining the meaning of religion and African traditional religion. Second, it explains the peculiarities of ATR. It then studies some racial terminologies used in the description of ATR mainly by Euro-Americans and some African people. It further provide needed solutions to help African and non-African researchers in the study of African traditional religion.

An Afrocentric Paradigm in the Study of ATR

Afrocentricity [Afrocentric paradigm] is a philosophical and theoretical paradigm whose origins are attributed to Molefi Kete Asante, a Pan-Africanist scholar. His works in this area include *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987), *Afrocentricity* (1988) and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (1990). Asante defined “Afrocentricity [Afrocentric paradigm] as the placing of African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour” (Asante, 1987: 6). Again, according to Asante (2014), Afrocentricity [Afrocentric paradigm] is an intellectual paradigm that privileges the centrality of African people within the context of their own historical experiences. Zulu (1999) also sees Afrocentricity as an ‘intellectual orientation’ and African-centred paradigm [Afrocentric paradigm] as a ‘process of implementation’, thus the paradigm is a ‘tool’ or ‘vehicle’ through which Afrocentricity is carried out. He further defined Afrocentric paradigm as a “critical multidisciplinary humanistic, intellectual and cultural dynamic involving: cosmology, epistemology, axiology, aesthetics, critique, human dignity, a comment to knowledge development, a questioning all ideas related to the African development and the placement of African ideals and values” (Zulu, 1999:14). To Zulu (1999:15), the quest of Afrocentricity is to free the study of Africa, and people of African descent from European domination and the racist claws of European scholarship. In regard to Professor Zulu’s [a pioneer in Afrocentricity] definitions, the Afrocentric paradigm would be the ideal paradigm that can be used to critique misleading and racially motivated terminologies used in reference to African traditional religion.

Afrocentric paradigm is useful in studying African experiences from an African perspective or point of view, thus looking at African history, philosophy, religion, among others, through an ‘African spectacle’. This paradigm has become necessary since the bulk of African experiences have been written from Eurocentric perspectives. Hence, the invaders [Europeans] have dictated the religio-politico-socio-economic trend in the whole world, and various terminologies such as savagism, juju, fetishism, animism, magic, paganism, heathenism and ancestral worship have emerged to belittle African spirituality. In a definitional context, Eurocentrism is a set of beliefs which places Europe at the centre and relegating all other ways of thinking to the periphery position by setting standards in which reality can be tested (Shohat & Stam 1994). Eurocentric scholars are thus viewed as agents of a fundamental conspiracy to deny the contributions of African people to civilization (Rodney, 1972). In contrast, an aim of Afrocentricity is to correct those misconceptions and misrepresentations of the facts presented by Eurocentric scholars.

The Afrocentric paradigm should be seen as a decolonisation process of African people from cultural, religious, political and psychological chains of Eurocentric tradition. This decolonisation process should be viewed as a special form of decolonisation which is different from practical or ordinary decolonization (Mhlongo, 2013). Afrocentric scholars suggest that African centred knowledge should not be developed for the sake of it, but for the sake of emancipating and bringing African consciousness back (Kershaw 1998: 40; Asante 2003: 102-103; Mazama, 2003:26).

Afrocentricity should not repeat the problem of Eurocentricity by being biased and non-neutral. Afrocentricity should thus be viewed as neutral, non-bias paradigm or perspective which relies on consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis and actionable perspectives where African people are seen in the agency position and negotiating phenomenon within the context of African history (Asante 2006:648; Mazama 2003:24). It should be noted that Afrocentricity is neither a religion nor any system of belief, but a way to view data, create, and analyse information.

Afrocentricity [Afrocentric paradigm] is widely used in subject areas such as communication, history, sociology, social work, psychology, and education. But in this paper, Afrocentric paradigm would be used as a theoretical base for examining some misleading and racially motivated terminologies used in reference to African traditional religion, since the paradigm is best used for studying Africa and its people from an African perspective. Facts and information would be collected and analysed from an Afrocentric perspective and this would enable us to study African faith and spirituality from an African point of view, free from Eurocentric biases and prejudices. This paradigm has been predominantly used in writing African history, philosophy and sociology. However, in this paper we shall apply it in the study of African tradition religion.

African Religion or African Traditional Religion?

African religion and African traditional religion are all common names used to discuss the faith found within Africa. Each name is debated among scholars and some challenge the word “traditional” since the word makes the religion seem outmoded. For example, Asukwo, Adaka and Dingba (2013:240) see “the clumsy religious practices called the African traditional religion as nothing but a deliberate attempt to ridicule the people of Africa as if they were not created by God like any other race”. They further state that the continuous derogatory reference of African religion as a “traditional” should henceforth be seen as ‘racism’. Frankly speaking, the word traditional needs to be examined. According to the Oxford dictionary (2000:1271), the word “traditional” can mean “a belief, customs, or way of doing what has existed for a long time among a particular group of people and not necessarily inborn or aboriginal; a set of these beliefs or customs”. In regard to this definition, Christianity and Islam could be described as traditional religions of Africa, since they have been practised in Africa for over centuries ago.

On the other hand, scholars who advocate for the use the word “traditional” argues that the word doesn’t mean the religion is outmoded or ancient, neither does it have derogatory connotations.

On this note Awolalu writes:

We need to explain the word “traditional”. This word means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a “fossil” religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women (1976:1).

For the purpose of this paper, “African traditional religion” would be used instead of African religion. This is because the word “traditional” helps us distinguish the religion from other religions that has existed in Africa for centuries, i.e. Islam and Christianity.

Distinctive Features of the Religion

- ❖ African traditional religion relies on the oral transmission. Thus, doctrine tends to be more flexible than it is in text-based religions like Christianity and Islam, and it changes according to the immediate needs of its followers. Awolalu also states that African traditional religion “is not written on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions” (1976: 2).

- ❖ Founder(s) of the religion is/are not known unlike that of Christianity, Zoroastrianism or Islam. Some scholars believe that the religion has no founder(s). For example, Awolalu writes that: “It has no founders like Gautama the Buddha, Christ, or Muhammad; it is not the religion of one hero” (1976: 2). *Worldmark Encyclopaedia of Religious Practices* also states that practitioners of African traditional religion understand the founders of their religion to be God or the gods themselves, the same beings who created the universe and everything in it. Thus, religious founders are described in creation stories. Whereas some scholars believe that the religion is a revealed religion, and others believe that the religion emerged from African past experiences (Hackman-Aidoo, 2014). In any case, there might be a person or group of people whom the religion was revealed to or an “experiencer” (or experiencers) who through his/her (their) experiences the religion emerged. Thus the founder(s) of the religion is/are our members of the past generations (Hackman-Aidoo, 2014). Also, ATR has no missionaries and is less into to proselytising compared to Islam and Christianity. However, the believers of the religion are loyal worshippers.

The Problem

Western scholars were the first to write about ATR, thus they dominated the study of African traditional religion. Their writings were borne out of prejudice or probably out of the impatience of the researchers to look at the universal meaning of the terms they used to describe the religious life of African people (Asukwo, Adaka & Dimgba, 2013). It should be noted that at a point in time, the Europeans labelled the African continent as a “Dark Continent” devoid of any civilization. Eurocentric writers did all they could to belittle African achievements including its religion. Great African civilizations such as Pharaonic Egypt, etc. that emerged from Africa were attributed to the effort of people from outside Africa, specifically the people with Arab or European ancestry (James, 2009; Rodney, 1973)

African traditional religion as an aspect of African civilisation also suffered from such inhuman racial treatment meted out to Africans people. The religion itself was described with many racial and misleading terms by missionaries, anthropologists, historians, sociologists and archaeologists in an attempt to belittle ATR. Such terms include animism, savagery, paganism, magic, fetishism, idolatry, juju, primitive, heathenism and ancestral worship. It should be noted that these terms are still widely used by both African and non-African writers and researchers. Some African writers have been westernised by Europeans hence they also use these racial and misleading terms whether knowingly and unknowingly in describing African traditional religion.

Western media like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) often use these terms in their media. For example, a BBC (Jan. 2004) news article entitled *Sudan foes sign wealth deal* goes on to state that “...it sets out how they will share the revenues, mostly from oil, after 20-year civil war between Muslim north and Christian and *animist* south...” Also in Kumawood movies (Kumawood is the name of the movie industry in Kumasi, Ghana), African traditional priests are portrayed in such movies as juju men and fetish priests who people only visit when they want to kill or illegally obtain a property from someone. We shall examine the above racial and misleading names/terms and point out why they cannot be used in describing African traditional religion in the 21st century.

Racially Motivated Terminologies Used in Belittling ATR

Animism: Animism was coined by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), the term *animism* refers not to a type of religion, but to a theory of religion. After Tylor, many writers have described African traditional religion as animistic. Tylor defined animism which is from the Latin word *anima* meaning life, breadth and soul as the theory of the universal animation of nature (Harper, 2009). Animism is a term coined to serve in an argument about the origins of religion in general, but it has survived the widespread rejection of that theory, and now used as a label for African traditional religion.

Tylor (1871) posits that animism is an attendant factor in any religion and in every culture at any level of development. This means that there are traces of animism in every race and religion in the world, and not just with African people and traditional religion alone. It is true that within ATR there are elements of animism. For example, the Iroko tree is not an ordinary tree; it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit; the Oshun River [in Nigeria], and is believed to be more than an ordinary lake or river because the spirits dwell in them; lightning and thunder are manifestations of the thunder god (Awolalu, 1976).

I should add that it would be a gross error to label African traditional religion as *animism* since every religion has some form of belief in the existence of spirit(s). For example, Christians believe in the existence of Holy Spirit; Shintoists believe in the existence of Kami {spirits}; Jews believed that Yahweh inhabited mount Horeb; Muslims venerate the Sacred Stone, the *Ka'ba* in Mecca when they go for pilgrimage and among the Hindus and Jains, it is believed that spirits inhabit natural objects (Omoregbe, 1993). In short, to say that African tradition religion is animistic, and would be misleading and racial.

Ancestral Worship: There are still other investigators and writers who have defined African traditional religion as *ancestral worship*. This is another term used in describing ATR. An ancestor is believed to enjoy a divine super human status with special religious powers that can be beneficial or harmful to the earthly kin, hence most foreign investigators mistakenly think African people worship them. The term “ancestral worship” was invented by anthropologist Herbert Spencer as he first used it in his work *Principles of Sociology* in 1885. According to Spencer’s concept, savage people associate the spirit of the dead with certain objects and keep the spirits in their favour, and they offered sacrifices to them. Mbiti (1969) says though it is true that the dead occupy a very significant place in the life of the African people, and thus, everything they do cannot be reduced to ancestral worship.

Furthermore according to foreign investigators, researchers and writers, all that African people regard as spiritual beings were no more than deified ancestors (Lateju et al, 2008). This assertion is untrue because practitioners of ATR can draw distinctions between the Supreme Being, god and an ancestor. For instance, Adetoyese (n, d: 5) states that: “ancestors are regarded as spirits in the sense that they are no longer visible. But they are not spirits in the sense that they are like Divinities or God. Thus African people distinguish between ancestors, divinities and God”. Just as Catholics venerate Saints {which has not been called ancestral worship}, Shintoists venerate Kami {spirits}, African people also venerate their ancestors. Kwame Nkrumah, J. B Danquah and Okomfo Anokye are all regarded as Ghanaian ancestors not because Ghanaians worship them but because Ghanaians venerate them, due to the significant role(s) they played while they were alive. From the forgoing, one could see that its usage is only limited to, i.e. African people. Thus this term is also misleading and racially motivated

Fetishism: Linguists claim that the word is of Portuguese origin. The early Portuguese who came to Africa in the fifteenth century onwards saw that African people used to wear charms and amulets and this made them to give the name *Feitico* to such things. This English word also has a cognate in the French word *Fetich* and the Latin word *Factitious* or *Facticius* (Ntrel, 2008). *Fetish* is any object, animate or inanimate, natural or artificial viewed or approached with a feeling of awe, as having mysterious power residing in it or as being the representative or habitation of a deity” (Ntrel, 2008 ; Awolalu, 1976). It was earlier on believed by some Western scholars that every ethnic group in African owned a fetish.

From the forgoing, it would be quite wrong to describe the religion of African people or a practice in the religion as *fetishism*, although there may be some element of this in the day-to-day life of African people. Many Western writers, scholars, media and some section of African people use this word indiscriminately and racially. On this note, Awolalu writes:

Prayers said during worship by Africans have been described as fetish prayers; the functionaries of a cult have been described as fetish priests; herbs prepared by African priests have been labelled fetish herbs, and not medical preparations, however efficacious such herbs may be; and taking an oath has been described as undergoing fetish (1976:7).

Fetishism is not peculiar to African people alone, but to other world religions, so why is it ascribed to the African people and ATR alone? Prayer beads which are used by Catholic Christians (which is called Rosary), Muslims (which is called Tasbeeh), Hindus (which is called Japa Mala), Buddhists (which is called Japa Mala) and Sikhs (which is called Mala) can all be equated to *fetishism*. The crucifix is also *fetish* used for protection by some section of Christians. Parrinder (1954) has remarked that the word *fetish* is a most ambiguous word, and the time has come that we can no longer accept this term as a name or description for African traditional religion.

Heathenism: Heathenism is closely related to *paganism*. The word *heathen* is derived from the word heath. Heath is a vast track of land; a shrubby bushes and a *heathen* is one who inhabits a heath or possesses the characteristics of a heath dweller (Ntrel, 2008). Thus a *heathen* was originally used for a person who dwelled in such bushy places. Dwellers of heath were mostly criminals, vagabonds, and reject of the society (Ntrel, 2008). Are there not bushes and bush dwellers in Europe and America?

How come this term is only associated with African traditional religion? The *Microsoft Encarta Premium* (2007) also defines heathen as "an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody who does not acknowledge the God of the Bible, Torah, or Koran" or "an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody's way of life, degree of knowledge, or non-belief in religion". This definition suggests that world religions other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam become heathen. This term is more sociological and racial than religious, and therefore misleading and derogatory.

Idolatry: Idolatry is derived from the Greek word *eidolatria* or *eidolon* which means the worship of image, figure or shape, usually copied from the real thing (Harper, 2009; Kano, 2014). Thus with regard to African traditional religion; it was used by mainly European Christians who speak of ATR as the worship of false gods. Jebadu (2006) also notes that, idolatry is the worship of the creature instead of the Creator, and creature worship is made by people who are a creature. This is where foreign scholars get it wrong. Omoregbe (1993) explained that when an African prays before a statue, image or sculpture, he or she is not talking to or worshipping the statue or the image in question, but the divinity (the Supernatural Being) symbolically represented by that statue. This corroborates with the view of Awolalu that the statue or emblem of worship by African people are not means to an end in itself, it is only a means to an end.

The "idols" that are seen in the religion are symbols that are representative of the deity and absolutely meaningless apart from its spiritual connotations. For example, if a statue or sculpture representing Antoa Nyamaa (Asante deity) is destroyed possibly by natural disaster, the worshippers of Antoa will not feel that their goddess has been destroyed, because the piece of statue is only a symbol, serving as a visible embodiment of what is symbolised. Symbolic representation is not peculiar to African traditional religion, but to other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Shintoism among others, and so why is Idolatry only attributed to the religion of African people? It would be grossly unfair, misleading and racial to describe the religion as idolatry while the images of Mary and Jesus in the Catholic Church have not turned Christianity into an idolatrous religion.

Juju: The word *juju* has its root in the French word *joujou* meaning a little 'doll or toy or playful thing' (Ntneh, 2008; Kano, 2014). Awolalo (1976) states that its application to African deities has been perpetuated by English writer P. A. Talbot in his *Life in Southern Nigeria* written in 1926 wherein he devoted three chapters to *Juju* among the Ibibio people and discussed the various divinities among them. I wonder why critical scholars or writers could not say the same of Christianity and Islam [both religions originated from outside Africa] since they both make use of "toys". How can a god of a race be described as a toy or doll? *Juju* is misleading and racially motivated term used by Euro-American investigators, media, and some African people out of sheer prejudice or ignorance.

Paganism: The word *pagan* is believed to have originated from the Latin word *paganus* meaning peasant, village or country district; it also means one who worships false god; a heathen (Awolalu, 1976; Omoregbe, 1993; Ntrel, 2008). Again, Webster's universal unabridged dictionary defines *pagan* as heathen; an idolater; one who worship false gods; applied to one who is not a Christian, Jew or Muslim. This definition suggests that these three Abrahamic religions are the only true religions. The truth is most modern Europeans trace their ancestry to Israel and claims that Israelis are Caucasian like them, hence religions that originated from Caucasians are "true" and "non-pagan" religion, while that what originated from Africa is pagan. Omoregbe (1993) also stressed that the word pagan is synonymous with the word "infidel" or "unbeliever". From the foregoing, one could see that the word is only used to belittle African religion and henceforth, misleading, racial and derogatory.

Primitive: *The New Webster Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (as cited in Awolalu, 1976) defines *primitive* as "pertaining to the beginning or origin; original; first; old fashioned; characterized by the simplicity of old times". Thus *primitive* means crude, backward, uncouth, ancient, old-fashioned, outdated, etc. In the field of anthropology, Levy-Bruhl was the one who wrote about some societies and designated them as primitive in the 1920s and 1930s. This pejorative attitude is based on two assumptions, both of which have been found to be untrue. He thought people and their culture has gone through evolutionary process from the most *primitive state* of existence to most *civilised state*. In this process, he thought Euro-American societies were most civilized and societies in places of Africa as most primitive. This corroborates assertions of Awolalu that:

The Western scholars and media often use this term to distinguish between their society (which is regarded as civilized) and the African society which they consider as uncivilized and old-fashioned-just because African society does not have or adopt the same norm as that of theirs. Anthropologists and Sociologists like to justify their use of the word on the ground that the culture is adjudged to be that which is original in the history of the human race (1976:6).

It should be obvious from the dictionary meaning that this word cannot be appropriately used in describing African traditional religion or practitioners of the religion since it is racially motivated. Most African religious scholars now believe that the use of the concept in relation to Africa by anthropologists and sociologists has its roots in racial pride and cultural arrogance (Kano, 2014). African traditional religion just like any world religion has been evolving from simpler to complex and therefore cannot be said to be primitive.

To distinctively refer to ATR as primitive makes less meaning as all religions have some elements of primitivity thus, strictly speaking, religion in its original or simpler form is no longer in existence (Awolalu, 1976; Kano, 2014). Whatever happens, the use of the word *primitive* by Western scholars, media, and African people is racial and misleading.

Savage: Savage means “pertaining to the forest or wilderness; wild; uncultured; untamed violent; brutal; uncivilized; untaught; rude; barbarous; inhuman” (Awolalu, 1976). *Savagery* is the opposite of *civilization*. It should also be noted that there is an element of *savagery* in every one of us, and in every culture, hence *savagery* should not be made the exclusive trait of African people.

One should not forget that Africa is the cradle of civilization .Civilization started from this part of the world, i.e. Egypt (see Diop, 1974; James, 2009). If a fight takes place and an African man brings out his cutlass or stick and strikes or hit his opponent to death, is he any different from an American police who brought out his gun and shot an innocent African-American kid to death? From all indications, the word savage is misleading and racially motivated by sociologists and anthropologists.

Suggested Solutions

First, in order to overcome bias and misrepresentation of facts in the study of African traditional religion, scholars should adopt an Afrocentric paradigm when they study of African religion and spirituality. Researchers ought to rely on primary sources, preferably, oral sources and first hand observation of African religious practitioners. Second, it is advisable that researchers “bracket” their faith and prejudice they might have about Africa, African people and African religion. In so doing, the researcher(s) would be able to produce compelling facts and conclusions which are not biased or distorted. And third, if African people want the rest of the world to stop describing their religion and indigenous institutions with misleading and derogatory terminologies, then it is only natural that they come up with their own Afrocentric terminologies [failure to do so will prolong the use of inappropriate terminologies in describing African religion]. With regard to this, many Encyclopaedias like the *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (2008) and various religious dictionaries could be produced to guide researchers about the appropriate terminologies to use regarding various aspects of African religious practices.

Conclusion

African traditional religious practices have suffered from various racial and misleading terminologies. These terminologies which include, but not limited to paganism, heathenism, fetishism, savage, ancestral worship, juju and animism have been used widely by Euro-American missionaries and researchers in an attempt to belittle African people and religion. Some African researchers like Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, etc. have examined these terminologies as African scholars [being an African scholar does not necessarily make one Afrocentrist]. This paper looked at these terminologies from an Afrocentric perspective, and it also concluded that these terminologies are racially motivated and have racial connotations and can be equated to racial terms like “Nigger”, “kaffir”, “Bantu” or “Banjo lips”. African people should define their own religion, and create their own Afrocentric terminologies that will serve as a guide to foreign and mentally colonized investigators and researchers, around the world.

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