

DOING A PHENOMENOLOGY OF AFRICAN RELIGION

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Abstract

Man is the centre of attraction of the universe. Biblical narrative accords him the pride of place among other creatures. This exalted position necessarily puts him in a relationship with all there is. Religion captures his encounter with God, his peers and with the other created things. Knowledge of the history of any religion, what it entails and who involves in it are relevant issues for the phenomenology of any religion. This paper does a simple phenomenology of African Religion within the existential milieu of the Igbo people of Nigeria. It seeks to contribute to religious studies with a more inclusive openness that evades all forms of exclusivity that clamps down on the belief of others.

Keywords: African Religion, Anthropology, Experience, History, Igbo people, Phenomenology of Religion.

Introduction

African Traditional Religion (ATR subsequently) is a religion of the African people. While this is not an advocacy for uniformity, it affirms the variety of practices all through the continent. The substance of the belief, however, agrees at much deeper levels.¹ The traditional African in the words of Mbiti is “notoriously religious.”² In other words, the sense of the sacred permeates the worldview of the African such that nothing substantial is done without recourse to the supra-sensible realm. In this sense, one could speak of a religion that is as old as Africa itself. With no specific history built around specific individuals, it radiates the religious sense of a people. The ancient Egyptian world had its structure of religious beliefs and practices that date as far back as Biblical records offer us. The book of the Kings speaks of the queen of Sheba (in Ethiopia) who travelled to Israel to see the Wisdom of Solomon. Records have it that she went there with her ‘gods’ (1 Kings 10:1-11, 2 Chronicles 9:1-10). Though much is not heard about other parts of Africa, it is not a negation of the existence of religion

¹ J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, In *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10 (1976) 2, p. 2.

² J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, Nairobi, 1969, p. 1.

within the entire continent. Thus, this work sets to do a phenomenology of ATR from the Igbo perspective. It shall examine the relationship between culture and religion. This would show how the religion thrives without a specific founder, mode of transmission, the place of the Igbos, beliefs and practices; and how these have been misconstrued.

Phenomenological method

The term phenomenology is derived from two Greek words: *phainomena* (an appearance) and *logos* (word or reason): thus by etymology, it means reasoned inquiry. This means that phenomenology studies phenomena: appearances of things as experienced. It concerns itself with what makes the thing experienced what it is from available facts. This seems to give it a firsthand touch with reality as the philosophy that deals with the various ways humans experience phenomena.³ Merleau-Ponty views it as “the study of essences” by which “all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness.”⁴ In this sense, it is the philosophy that deals with the various ways humans experience themselves and things as they appear, devoid of intermediary means. For Strawson, it “is the study of a particular part of how things are or can be or must be.”⁵ It seeks the truth of things as they are in themselves. As a result, it is “a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity.”⁶ In this light, phenomenology “is the attempt to describe our experience directly, as it is, separately from its origin and development, independently of the causal explanations that historians, sociologists or psychologists might give.”⁷ While relying on the thoughts of Kupers, Chitando and his colleagues affirm:

It is a method of scientific philosophy in general which tries to discover essences of appearances which are anything which human beings can become conscious. It approaches phenomena without theories about their

³ E. CHITANDO – N. T. TARINGA – P. TAPIWA, *On top of which mountain does one stand to judge religion? Debates from a Zimbabwean context*, In *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 27 (2014) 2, p. 117.

⁴ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1962, p. vii.

⁵ G. STRAWSON, *Selves: An Essay in revisionary Metaphysics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 1.

⁶ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

⁷ *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy: The language and concepts of philosophy explained*, Penguin Books, England, 2005.

causal explanations and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions.⁸

Every experience, in the most ordinary sense usage, has at its core: consciousness and intentionality. These are not empty contents. They are always about someone or something. Bearing this in mind, Smith views phenomenology as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.” In this case, what is laid bare is not merely from the thoughts of a second party, but as it is experienced. As such, he contends: “The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.”⁹ Such experiences form the basis of the descriptions of the said phenomenon that would follow. It does not presuppose the knowledge of what it seeks before the proper experience. This is what gives this firsthand experience an edge over second or third-hand experiences.

From the foregone, a description of the phenomenology of religion is possible. It is a methodological approach to the study of religion that views religious experience from the firsthand perspective of the believer. This is done in a way devoid of preconceived notions about the religion in question: no biases. In this way, the “phenomenological mode of thinking seems to opens up a space of reflection in which religious themes and concerns obtain a new philosophical weight and urgency, to bridge or at least make problematic the strict separation between reason and faith.”¹⁰ In other words, it concerns itself with experiential aspects of religion from the standpoint of its adherents in a way systematic. It is not some form of comparative religious studies though it bears the stamp of distinctive religions. According to Kristensen, while phenomenology of religion notes the history of religion, it does so systematically. In his words,

Phenomenology of Religion is the systematic treatment of History of Religion. That is to say, its task is to classify and group the numerous and widely divergent data in such a way that an over-all view can be obtained of their religious content and the religious values they contain. This

⁸ E. CHITANDO – N. T. TARINGA – P. TAPIWA, *On top of which mountain does one stand to judge religion?*, p. 117.

⁹ D. W. SMITH, *Phenomenology*, In *The Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, USA, 2014, accessed 01/12/2016.

¹⁰ J. BORNEMARK – H. RUIN, Eds., *Phenomenology and Religion: New frontiers*, Södertörn University Library, Stockholm, 2010, p. 9.

general view is not a condensed History of Religion, but a systematic survey of the data. The different religions present a rich variety of facts. The ritual acts and doctrinal tenets within each separate religion do indeed exhibit a certain similarity; they bear the stamp of that particular religion, but the religions differ, in character from one another... It is this systematic view that Phenomenology of Religion attempts to provide.¹¹

Most writers pin the phenomenology of religion within the philosophical phenomenology in the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). This is also evident in the works of his immediate disciple, Edith Stein (1891-1942). This makes a 20th-century ideology that has been famous in the works of other philosophers like Heidegger (1889-1976), Sartre (1905-1980), Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and others. What they seek as a goal was the starting point of knowledge. In this light, the "goal of the phenomenology is to clarify and thereby to find the ultimate basis of all knowledge. To reach this goal, it considers nothing that is in anyway 'doubtful', nothing that can be eliminated."¹² With such considerations, it seeks the foundation of what can be known by bridging all forms of differentiation as a result of prejudices that could hamper this exercise. For Bornemark and Ruin, it "means making less certain the limits between rationality and irrationality, as well as the secular and the non-secular and the religious and the non-religious, in the ultimate concern for a non-constrained and free thinking and the creation of new conceptual configurations."¹³ Douglas Allen penned down five characteristics of philosophical phenomenology that have particular relevance for this context of the phenomenology of African Religion. These shall be summarized thus:

- a) **Descriptive nature:** this dwells on the phenomenological slogan *Zu den Sachen* (to the things themselves) to buttress the fact that phenomenology deals with the direct intuition and description of phenomena as they appear in the immediate experience.
- b) **Antireductionism:** Phenomenological antireductionism is concerned with freeing people from uncritical preconceptions that prevent them from becoming aware of the specificity and diversity of phenomena, thus allowing them to broaden and deepen the immediate experience and provide more accurate descriptions of this experience. In opposing the

¹¹ W. B. KRISTENSEN, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. J. B. Carman, Springer-Science + Media, Dordrecht, 1960, p. 1.

¹² W. STEIN, *On the Problem of Empathy: The Collective Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 3, ICS Publications, Washington, 1989, p. 3.

¹³ J. BORNEMARK – H. RUIN, Eds., *Phenomenology and Religion*, p. 10

oversimplifications of traditional empiricism and other forms of reductionism, phenomenologists aim to deal faithfully with phenomena as phenomena and to become aware of what phenomena reveal in their full intentionality.

- c) **Intentionality:** A subject always intends an object. Intentionality refers to the property of all consciousness as consciousness of something. All acts of consciousness are directed toward the experience of something, the intentional object. Phenomenologists must be attentive to the intentional structures of their data; to the intentional structures of consciousness with their intended referents and meanings.
- d) **Bracketing:** This emphasises the phenomenological Greek term *epoché* which literally means abstention or suspension of judgment often defined as a method of bracketing. It is only by bracketing the uncritically accepted –natural world, by suspending beliefs and judgments based on an unexamined –natural standpoint, that the phenomenologist can become aware of the phenomena of immediate experience and can gain insight into their essential structures.
- e) **Eidetic vision:** The intuition of essences, often described as eidetic vision or eidetic reduction, is related to the Greek term *eidos*, which Husserl adopted from its Platonic meaning to designate –universal essences. Such essences express the –whatness or essence of things, the necessary and invariant features of phenomena that allow us to recognize phenomena as phenomena of a certain kind.¹⁴

Nominal clarification: ATR

There is the problem of the naming of African Traditional Religion. This arises from the fact that while on the general scale it is seen as the religious expression of the African belief, the mode of expression is not unanimous. As cultural expressions vary, so do the religious practices. However, we can speak of “African Traditional Religions” which captures the different religious traditions in Africa. In this regard, we could refer to it as “African Indigenous Religions” which denotes the idea of the divergent nature of the religious practice of Africans. However, we restrict ourselves to African Traditional Religion which lays more emphasis on the unity of the continent. The term Africa describes the continent in all ramifications. However, when African is evoked, our minds go to

¹⁴ D. ALLEN, *Phenomenology of Religion*, p. 5-6, Accessed (02/01/2017): <https://www.interculturel.org.>documente>

the people who inhabit this continent so named with their culture and worldview. Traditional as a word denotes the practices that are peculiar to a particular people, be they written or unwritten that is passed on from one generation to another. With these in mind and the definition of religion laid above, a definition of African Traditional Religion is necessary.

Unlike Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and other world religions that have just a single word, ATR is composed of three words that together form a concept. This complexity alone poses a problem in defining what it portends. Moreover, when the fact of its being a real particular to a people is raised, a way forward is reached. Distinguishing it from other religions, Kanu avers, "it encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered religious but neither Christian nor Islamic."¹⁵ In other terms, Awolalu views it as "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, and which is being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians."¹⁶ He further lays down the three peculiarities of ATR:

- a) This is a religion that is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions.
- b) It has no founders or reformers like Gautama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ, or Muhammad. It is not the religion of one hero.
- c) It has no missionaries, or even the desire to propagate the religion or to proselytise. However, the adherents are loyal worshippers and, probably because of this, Africans who have their roots in the indigenous religion, find it difficult to sever connection with it.¹⁷

From the above, it is necessary to understand that ATR is an age-long religion of Africans. Though expressed differently, it has been passed on from generation to generation. It is the religious experience that captures the entirety of the African continent and its people. This makes it a religion of Africans and for Africans. While other world religions like Christianity and Islam have founders (like Jesus Christ, Mohammad, etc) and are 'missionary' by nature, this is not the case with ATR. There is neither a founder nor a missionary in ATR. This shows that it "is

¹⁵ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2015, p. 5.

¹⁶ J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, p. 2.

¹⁷ J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, p. 2.

not the religion of one hero"¹⁸ and has no interest in propagating its beliefs for the onward conversion of people. This is because there is no need for conversion within ATR. It is rather a lived religion with its followers "more preoccupied with its practice than with its theory."¹⁹ The thoughts of ATR as a revealed religion enjoy pride of place in the work of its scholars. No known founder can be named for this it. Proponents (Mbiti, Awolalu and many others) agree that the religion must have originated from the lived experiences of African forefathers. In this sense, living life was simply living the belief of the religion. Life and religion are intertwined to the extent it can be said: "African man is existentially involved in his religion."²⁰ Hence, in a loose sense of the word, one can say that Africans are the founders of ATR.

Unlike other world religions that have founders and written creeds, ATR cannot be traced to a particular founder; neither does it possess written codes. Its creeds are not written but orally transmitted from one generation to another. Here, language is a necessary tool for this transmission. By spoken words expressed in music, proverbs, folklore, etc., a chunk of history is handed on to younger generations. Oral tradition is a means of transmitting history, folktales, stories, and religious beliefs from one generation to another. The *Webster's Dictionary* describes "oral" as, that which is "spoken rather than written." It also defines "tradition" as the "transmittal of elements of a culture from one generation to another especially by oral communication." This mode of transmission is peculiar to virtually all African communities. It is a way of life since it is the most veritable means by which the riches of African treasures are passed on to successive generations. Deep sentiments, morals, values, mystical experiences, etc are transmitted to younger generations so that on the whole, nothing is lost in the culture.

Oral tradition is a means of communication by spoken word in an Igbo traditional setting. It does not use the written word. The written word we have today were absent in most African communities. Mbiti rightly affirms that "...Most African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing. Therefore they could not keep written records of their history. Instead they passed on information from one generation to another, by word of mouth."²¹ This means that ATR is a religion well known to the people. It is a

¹⁸ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 9.

¹⁹ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 9.

²⁰ M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitalogy: A Step forward in African thinking*, Pauline Publications Africa, Nairobi, 1999, p. 142.

²¹ J. S. MBITI, *Introduction to African Religions*, Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford, 1991, p. 4.

reality in familiar grounds for the Igbo culture. For Awolalu, "It is a religion that is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions."²² Having asserted the absence of a founding father of ATR, it is worthwhile to note that religion here is a lived event in the lives of the people. While there is no founding father, the activities of the people reveal a lot about the religion since both religion and culture are so intertwined. The history of the religion is linked with the development of each tribe or people and stretches to the early beginnings. This means that the evolution of ATR took a gradual process. The mystical phenomena surrounding conception, birth and death, happiness, pain and suffering, natural forces and questions on the meaning of life stung the people to consciousness.

To speak of the sources ATR is to highlight the raw materials that unravel the depths of the religion. The primary sources of ATR are hidden in its oral tradition which embodies stories, proverbs, myths, songs, prayers, ritual incantations, names of people and places, and the wisdom of personages believed to be highly gifted. The language which is a veritable tool as well as art; ceremonies and rituals; shrines and religious objects, altars, magical objects and practices as well as symbols reveal a great deal about ATR.²³ They are done in various rites which are communally based activities that mostly involve "a minimum of two or three persons in all cases [of] prayers, invocations, blessings or maledictions."²⁴ This communal aspect shows its roots in the way of life of the people. Which people give us the specific context?

The Igbo people of Nigeria: Traditional beliefs and practices

The term "Igbo" is both the name of a tribe and its language in Nigeria. A problem of identity is evoked once the question: "where do the Igbos come from?" is raised. This is because there is no unanimous concession on the origin of Igbo. Kanu contends that "there is an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'."²⁵ While there is a sincere quest to answer this question, much is still in view. Only within the last fifty years was special interest put into the search for the foundations of the Igbos. The

²² J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, p. 2.

²³ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 73-4.

²⁴ M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitalogy*, p. 153.

²⁵ A. I. KANU, *The Concept of Life and Person in African Anthropology*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, edited by Ezenweke E. O – Kanu A. I., Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2012, p. 62.

experiences of colonialism and the Biafran Civil War fostered this search for a historical identity.²⁶ There are diverse perceptions of how the present geographical location of the Igbos today came to be. Relying on the work of Onwuejeogwu, Kanu hints at two theories that give an idea of where the Igbos migrated from. The first being the Northern Centre Theory which argues thus:

the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the Centre Theory Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.²⁷

Notwithstanding the diverse notions of this history, these key facts cannot be neglected about the Igbos. They are one out of the three major tribes of Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria. They “are an ethnic group in Nigeria occupying the South Eastern part of the country.”²⁸ For Okoroike the “Documentation of Igbo life and culture is fragmented” yet he agrees that “they are geographically found in the South-eastern Nigeria and have dispersed to some area in the middle belt bordering Enugu.”²⁹ More so, Onwuejeogwu gives precise geographically views of the Igbo. He believes that the “Igbo culture area may be defined as an area enclosed by an imaginary line running outside of the settlements of Agbor, Kwalla (West Niger Igbo), Ahoada, Diobu, Umuabayi (Port Harcourt), Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu (Abakaliki Area, Enugwu-Ezike (Nsukka Area), Ebu (West Niger Igbo).³⁰

From the above, we can deduce that the Igbos are majorly found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Delta, Rivers and Imo States. Their language of communication is the Igbo language. Igbos, as it is the case with every other African culture, “use expressions and proverbs to give words appropriate and deeper meanings.”³¹ There is a structural division of the traditional Igbo society, with the family as its primary source. Kanu buttresses this fact:

The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of

²⁶ E. A. AFIGBO, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Culture History of the Igbo-speaking peoples of Nigeria*, In *Language and Culture*, edited by Ogbalu F. C. – Emenanjo E. N., Heinemann, Ibadan, 1975, p. 28.

²⁷ A. I. KANU, *The Concept of Life and Person in African Anthropology*, p. 63.

²⁸ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 158.

²⁹ C. O. OKOROIKE, *Ibos of Nigeria and their Cultural Ways: As Aspects of Behaviour, Attitudes, Customs, Language and Social Life*, iUniverse, Bloomington, 2009, p. 4.

³⁰ A. ONWUEJEOGWU, *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, Ethnographica, London, 1981, p. 8.

³¹ C. O. OKOROIKE, *Ibos of Nigeria and their Cultural Ways*, p. 5.

families or kindred. ... Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concepts of *umunna*³² and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system.³³

The traditional Igbo conceptual frame, like the African worldview in general, believes in the hierarchy of beings. This hierarchy spans between two worlds: the spiritual and the physical. Awolalu agrees with Idowu that true knowledge of the African lies in the capacity “to discover what Africans actually know, actually believe, and actually think about Deity and the supersensible world.”³⁴ These two worlds exist with the physical solely depending on the spiritual for its sustenance. Ekwunife affirms this division in other terms: it “is the world of the spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate beings. Though homo centric (man centered) in practice, yet finds its ultimate meaning in transcendence.”³⁵ It is the goal of everyone to find favour from the spiritual world during and after living within the physical world. This first world has to do with spiritual beings. It is the invisible world. The latter however, centres on the terrestrial life of humans, animals, plants and other tangible realities. This is the visible and palpable world of perceptible things. The rapport between these two worlds highlights the major beliefs and practices of Igbo ATR such as:

- a) **Belief in the Supreme Being:** There is the belief in the Supreme Being who is the source and ruler of the universe. This Being “is sometimes referred to as *Chukwu-Okike* or *Chineke* which accords him the powers of creation.”³⁶ He ranks higher than every other being. It is a very important belief in the Igbo cultural systems such that human beings do all things to please him. This belief in *Chukwu-Okeke* (as for the Igbo culture and other African cultures) gives ATR the sense of monotheism.³⁷ On this premise, Nkemnkia avers: “there is only one God, but many are the ways to encounter him.”³⁸ However, attention seems to be taken away to the intermediary beings who are messengers

³² *Umunna* is a word employed to explain the patrilineal nature of a traditional Igbo society. It is derived from two words: *Umu* meaning children and *Nna* (father).

³³ A. I. KANU, *The Concept of Life and Person in African Anthropology*, p. 64.

³⁴ J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, p. 1.

³⁵ A. N. O. EKWUNIFE, *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, Snaap Press Ltd, Enugu, 1990, p. 18.

³⁶ J. C. OKEKE, *God and Man in Igbo Traditional Religion*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, edited by Ezenweke E. O – Kanu A. I., Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2012, p. 41.

³⁷ J. O. AWOLALU, *What is African Traditional Religion*, p. 10.

³⁸ M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitality*, p. 151.

of God because of their seeming closeness to humans. These intermediaries are known as divinities.

- b) Belief in divinities:** These are secondary beings that run errands for the Supreme Being. They are sometimes referred to as gods. Nkemnkia believes they are not “but a stage or phase in the union with God.”³⁹ The divinities have various functions which reveal their names depending on the nature of their relationship with humans such as *Anyanwu* (sun), *Ala* (Earth goddess), *Mmuo Mmiri* or *Nne Mmiri* (sea goddess), *Amadioha* or *Igwe* (sky, thunder), *Ahiajoku* (god of agriculture), *Chi-Omumu* (the goddess of children), *Ekwensu* (god of warriors), *Agwu* (god of divination and healing) and so on.⁴⁰ It is the misunderstanding of the roles of the divinities that are responsible for the label of ATR as a polytheistic religion. The aids of these divinities are sought since the supreme is outside the realm of human understanding.
- c) Belief in spirits:** Next in the hierarchy of beings in the spiritual world are the spirits. These are beings lower than the divinities and take directives from them to and from humans. They possess powers and interfere in human affairs. In moments of difficulties, they are often consulted for guidance.
- d) Ancestors:** It is believed that anyone who dies virtuous lives on in the land of the dead. This means that people who die in good old age and had good moral standing during their lives in the physical world are received in the ranks of the spirit world. They are also referred to as the “living dead”. This is because they create the most viable connection between their families and the spirit world.⁴¹ As such, they play an intermediary and intercessory roles for and on behalf of their immediate and extended families.
- e) Reincarnation:** Death is not the end of life for the Igbo culture. There is a continuation of human existence. Ezenweke identified the concept of “*Uwa m, uwa asaa*” (the seventh world). This is “the belief that everyone has seven chances to be reborn into the world to accomplish desired goal.”⁴² It is the belief that the dead return to life in the latter generations of their family lineage. In this sense, a man who dies is reborn in another generation and this goes on and on until he can

³⁹ M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitalogy*, p. 146.

⁴⁰ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 109-113.

⁴¹ E. O. EZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in African Ontological Scene*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, edited by Ezenweke E. O – Kanu A. I., Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2012, p. 174.

⁴² E. O. EZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in African Ontological Scene*, p. 174.

accomplish his goal in life.⁴³ This seems to give an unending view of the nature of life as continuous existence without a definite end.

- f) Worship and sacrifices:** The act of reverence to spiritual beings is intrinsic in African thought. The offering of sacrifices and libations are at the core of the religious practices of Igbo ATR. Sacrifices are seen as the sole means to appease the spiritual realm and so seek favours. The sacrifices offered vary depending on the need and the problem in view. Some sacrifices could require the use of humans in cases where there exists a very grievous offence that is not redeemable by the use of animals or plants. Sacrifices generally are offered by the priest (*Ezemmuo*) who is the principal-agent and interpreter of the thoughts of the gods.

Phenomenology of ATR

ATR is a lived experience of the African people and should be studied independently of bilks. This is what the phenomenology of Religion would champion as a course. It is even truer for the adherents of ATR within the Igbo people of Nigeria. Traditional religion cannot be fully understood without a good grasp of traditional history.⁴⁴ Studies reveal that history and religion are inseparable as much as culture and ATR cannot be separated. Religion forms part of the history of a people. Kristensen insists on the place of the history of religion in the phenomenology of religion.⁴⁵ It holds a central place if we must understand what its memory holds. This is why contemporary studies of religion highlight the place of history and phenomenology of religion.⁴⁶ Every history talks about people and places. If it is about the latter, it is because there are people there. This brings in the anthropological dimension of the phenomenology of religion. It is the experience of man. In this context, a religious experience of the Igbo people. To speak of a people is to talk about their worldviews. Philosophies grow from this. The same could be said of the philosophy of religion which has a link to history. Davies notes that “philosophical thinking about religious matters (as good a definition as any of

⁴³ Cfr. E. O. EZENWEKE, *Issues and Properties of Reincarnation*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, edited by Ezenweke E. O – Kanu A. I., Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2012, p. 193-206.

⁴⁴ E. CHITANDO, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, In *Religious Studies: A Global View*, edited by G. D. Alles, Routledge, London, 2008, p. 111.

⁴⁵ W. B. KRISTENSEN, *The Meaning of Religion*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ E. CHITANDO, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 111.

'philosophy of religion') is something that goes back to centuries."⁴⁷ These three pillars are necessary for the phenomenology of religion and shall be the basis within which this work underscores the Igbo traditional religion.

This paper had noted that ATR is a religion of the African people. Though it has no uniformity, it is of a people (African, in this case). Being so, it is as old as the continent itself. It has also shown that culture, which is a totality of a peoples' way of life has no clear cut demarcation with the religion of the people. Religion, like culture, is at the heart of the African. A deep understanding of the rich historical heritage of the Igbo people paves way for a true phenomenology of Igbo Traditional religion. "To, therefore, think historically in the study of African Traditional Religion is to place oneself in a position of relevance, which, in turn, involves understanding and self-understanding."⁴⁸ The Igbo proverb that holds that "if a man does not know where he is coming from, he would not know where he is going to" summarizes this idea of history in the phenomenology of religion. One cannot effectively do a description of religious experience with its historical context. The elaborate nature of the Igbo funeral rites, for example, would not make without an understanding the basis for it as a rite of passage from one mode of existence to another.

Life for the Igbo people, remember, is continuous; without an end. Death is merely a transition to the world of the spirits. There is the tendency to quickly note similarities with other religions. Such comparative religious studies are good. However, they are not the goal of the phenomenology of religion which seeks an independent description of religious phenomena on individual merits. Even when it does a group study of divergent religions, it pays extra attention to their historical lining, which in turn covers aspects of who the adherents are, what and how they do what they are seen doing. This would touch on aspects of the kind of philosophy their religion depicts. On this, Kristensen contends:

PHENOMENOLOGY DOES NOT TRY TO COMPARE THE RELIGIONS WITH ONE ANOTHER AS LARGE UNITS, BUT IT TAKES OUT OF THEIR HISTORICAL SETTING THE SIMILAR FACTS AND PHENOMENA WHICH IT ENCOUNTERS IN DIFFERENT RELIGIONS, BRINGS THEM TOGETHER, AND STUDIES THEM IN GROUPS. THE PURPOSE OF SUCH STUDY IS TO BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH THE RELIGIOUS

⁴⁷ B. DAVIES, *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, edited by B. Davies, Georgetown University Press, Washington, 1998, p. 1.

⁴⁸ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 23-24.

THOUGHT, IDEA OR NEED WHICH UNDERLIES THE GROUP OF CORRESPONDING DATA.⁴⁹

The philosophy of the African has no room for isolation. It is rather communal. The adage “no man is an island” is truer within the African view. Describing this African world view, in the words of Iroegbu, Kanu describes it “as being characterized by a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny.”⁵⁰ This is what Mbiti meant by “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am.”⁵¹ Good knowledge of this African world-view sets one at the heart of the Igbo philosophical world of religion. The religious experiences are mostly communal in nature. This flows from the general ideals of comportment desired of everyone within the community. Though an individual be culpable, the community shares in the woes his failings bring. As such, Nkemnkia highlights:

In order to find the meaning of life, one must look towards God through the marvels of his creation in the midst of the people. The God of the African is a God of the community or tribe and never a God exclusively addressed to a single person. God does not discriminate between one and the other. His gifts are for the good of the whole community. If one individual offends the community, he is actually offending God.⁵²

This communal dimension affirms the place of the individual. A collection of individuals make the community. Man is viewed from the sense of his relationship with his peers. The age grading system, for instance, plays a very important role in maintaining this relationship. A life without the other is but a misfortune. Life is the highest good and is preserved at all costs. From birth, through puberty, marriage and death, there are rites of passage that further incorporate one into the community. Even in death, there is a rite of passage. The names of people and places speak volumes about their relationship with the spiritual and physical world. One, who dies virtues, joins the cadre of ‘the living dead’ who have transcended the physical human existence. He (or she) who is received in the cadre of ‘the living dead’ can reincarnate, given the Igbo religious conceptual scheme. Gender roles are spelt out such that a man who does that which is peculiar to women is quickly stunk to consciousness. All these better

⁴⁹ W. B. KRISTENSEN, *The Meaning of Religion*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 68.

⁵¹ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 108.

⁵² M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitalogy*, p. 143.

describe the anthropological dimension every phenomenology of Igbo traditional religion pays attention to.

Hitches to the study of ATR

Through the years, studies in ATR had been done with the lens of other religions. African scholars give interpretative views that maintain a proselyte approach. The aim had been to make ATR a tool to foster the propagation of the Christian Religion or the Islamic Religion, as the case may be. While observing this, Okon (in the thoughts of Onunwa) states the “zeal to make traditional religion a vehicle through which Christianity could be propagated had for long dominated the thought of the African indigenous Christian theologians who could aptly be described as confessional scholars.”⁵³ True phenomenology of religion does not take such confessional approaches in its description of religious experiences. Any such study demeans ATR and blurs a true understanding of what is manifested. No true perception of religion can be acquired through this. The phenomenology of religion seeks a breakage through this tight approach to the religious phenomena as they manifest themselves. With such foreclosed goals, it would be difficult to grasp what Igbo traditional has to offer.

In the camp of interreligious dialogue, such moves create pretences that do not give the right dispositions for genuine encounters. While this is not obtainable within the camp of the phenomenology of religion, the prejudices that bring about this are lessened. One clear example that buttresses this could be found in the understanding of what spirit entails for ATR. This could also be extended to the sacred. Goetz explains this better: the idea of “the Sacred, in the spirit of the religions, is not a notion, and neither a quality, but it is a presence.”⁵⁴ It is not a concept one can easily explain away. The Igbo person is content and convinced of the presence of God. This does not invoke an immediate urgency to explain this presence. All that matters is that it is there and forms part of the essential life of the community. This shows that it is unnecessary forcing the religious worldview of missionary religions on the adherents of traditional religions. It is a serious mistake evident in the early missionaries. The best this does is promote uncritical syncretism.

⁵³ E. E. OKON, *Distortion of facts in Western Ethnographic study of African Religion, Culture and Society*, In *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 3 (2013) 1, p. 95-6.

⁵⁴ J. GOETZ, *L'Esperienza di Dio nei Primitivi*, Morcelliana, Rome, 1983, p. 24.

Reductionism is great problem in the quest to study ATR. It comes with some sense superiority from foreigners who presume a higher status for their religion in contrast to ATR. This comes with an over-simplification and prejudiced understanding of what a religion presents as its beliefs and practices.⁵⁵ Many judgments have been passed on ATR which have led to so many misinterpretations and the reduction of the religion to so many derogatory names such as primitive, paganism, heathenism, fetishism, idolatry, animism, and so on.⁵⁶ Based on this, Okon argues: “some anthropologists have no interest in the beliefs and practices of the religious believers and the meaning these beliefs and practices have for them.”⁵⁷ These are the very things the phenomenology of religion pays great attention to and seeks to approach the religious experience with more open-mindedness that puts out all forms of bias. On this, Chitando argues that though “the phenomenological approach has been popular, especially in the study of ATRs, African scholars have utilized various approaches.” For him, the “study of religions has embraced historical, sociological, psychological, and other approaches.”⁵⁸ All these approaches if properly employed would shed a better light on the rich heritage the religion holds.

Conclusion

The study of ATR is broad, demanding and ongoing. While it is true that various approaches have been adopted for this study, it must be noted that a true study of ATR must be from within, and not just from without. This inward-outward approach is what a true phenomenology of religion proposes. It entails a firsthand contact with the religion; by extension too, African culture. The reason for this necessary extension is because both are intertwined and undistinguished within the African context. African cultures are religious by nature. As a result, language which is the vital tool of culture must be an indispensable phenomenon in this quest. The fact that culture and religion are inseparable in Africa means that any genuine studies of ATR must bear in mind the fact that “communality and complementarity is at the root of African thought and an ontological quality

⁵⁵ E. E. OKON, *Distortion of facts in Western Ethnographic study of African Religion, Culture and Society*, p. 96.

⁵⁶ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 10-16.

⁵⁷ E. E. OKON, *Distortion of facts in Western Ethnographic study of African Religion, Culture and Society*,

⁵⁸ E. CHITANDO, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 111.

of the African.”⁵⁹ A genuine study abreast with this gives a true picture of ATR. What a great phenomenological study that would be!

⁵⁹ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutical Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, p. 70.