

**THE PROBLEM(S) OF NAMING THE ULTIMATE IN AFRICAN  
TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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**Abstract**

*Africa as a continent has suffered greatly from all angles or sectors of their lives, this is noticed with the coming or introduction of new cultures from other continents which parade themselves as superior continents with superior cultures. This is seen in the changes and abandonment by Africans in their moral, social, economic, cultural and even spiritual or religious life, all in attempt to catch up with the superior continents or adapt to their way of lives. This created big problems and confusions among the African people in being original or themselves while living out their daily normal lives. With the above problem or confusion especially from the religious point of view, Africans found it very hard to ascertain if the name of the Ultimate Reality found in their culture or religion is originally from them or an influence of cultural or religious contact from their colonizers. This is the thrust of this paper, to investigate whether the name of the Ultimate Reality is original to Africans in their different religious worships or a borrowed name from other religious contacts. This write-up employed the investigative research into the opinions of past and present authors concerning the above issue which has been a burning and dividing issue within the African Traditional Religion.*

**Introduction**

A closer look at the religious change that took place in Africa clearly indicates that a lot of changes took place without the Africans knowing about it, just like the dividing of African continents into nations by their colonizers. As of today, the religious changes that took place in Africa, none of the values or customs are practiced fully except in the combination of the new religious values and African religious values. Muslim religion was known for its possible combination of values but Christianity initially rejected everything about African culture or values in their religious practice. Fisher (1973) in his historical analysis of African conversion reiterated the above issue that African religious change tends towards discontinuity and at the same time has element of continuity. It is only Fisher among all the religious theorists that captured the current situation of Africans towards conversion to Christianity and Muslim religions. In the

adhesion stage of conversion process Fisher explained that Africans stood with one foot in African Traditional religion and another foot in Muslim or Christian religion, adopting their new worship process as useful supplements to the old religion. Again, the stages of religious conversion explain the situation found in Africa in general as regards to practice of inculturation which is an attempt by many African scholars to interpret the Christian gospel from African point of view.

According to Metuh (1985) Trimingham ascribed the large scale of religious changes in Africa during the colonial and post colonial periods to the collapse of structures of traditional societies and traditional religious system to which they were closely knitted. The collapse of traditional African society started crumbling in the face of the experience or contact with the macrocosm society which is not for clan or tribal society. Hence for microcosm of village to survive in the realm of bigger structural society, there must be some adaptation in itself for its continuous existence in the society. These necessitated changes in the African traditional societies in the way things are being done and carried out for its survival. The way of worship, the habit of eating, agricultural production, economical change, informal education to formal education, manner of addressing and mode of dressing, speaking, and means of transportation and so on, all changed due to religious contacts.

Another factor that led to the forced religious change in Africa is that the two famous religions (Christianity and Islam) according to Ekwunife (2012) displayed exclusive, uncompromising, intolerant and aggressive attitudes towards African Traditional Religion. Both religions proclaimed a monopoly on absolute truth, each regarded all other religious values and spiritual qualities to be false and invalid. According to him:

Both felt a pressing need to convert the whole world to the truth each upheld. To that end, both used military force unhesitatingly. The record on both sides is stained with acts of violence, barbarism, and atrociousness....the emergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the middle East laid and sowed the seed of controversies over true religion, true faith, true religious practice and invariably, true God. (pp. 3-4).

All this tends to explain or show that a kind of forced religious change took place in Africa which was never planned, hence originality was lost and confusion setting in. This was largely seen in Africa on the name the Ultimate Being is

called. Some of the African scholars believed that it is borrowed from new religions that invaded African continents, indicating that Africans have no name for the Ultimate Reality or Being. Another group of scholars insisted or argued that the Africans have names for the Ultimate Reality irrespective of new religious contacts. They believed that the names were original to African people because they have been calling on the Ultimate Being before the advent of new religions. However, it is obvious that there are a lot of influences with regard to the names of the Ultimate Reality in African Traditional Religion, certainly Africans have names original to them for the Ultimate Being or Reality which must have undergone some processes due to influence of globalization and technological advancement going on daily.

Beyond the arguments being generated or posited on the issue of names of God in African traditional religion, it seems that the above arguments further created or manifested itself on the type of religion being practiced today in the African countries. First of all, the missionaries who brought the gospel to African soil came with different types of gospel messages, each with different names of the Ultimate Reality, each again tried to outwit the other in getting more converts to their fold and hence the missionaries created unhealthy rivalries among them and among the converts themselves. This accounts also for the proliferation of churches in African soil today which spring up on daily basis. According to Smith (cited by Agazue, 2015):

The number of prosperity churches is huge, with entrepreneurial pastors starting new churches seemingly every day. Pentecostalism has become the fastest growing industry in Nigeria, and the second most popular export (after crude oil). Churches in Nigeria... now out-number schools, clinics and banks all put together. (pp. 1-2).

The effects of the problem of naming the Ultimate Reality today in Africa have brought multiple and spiral problems towards the development of Africa in all sectors of life. For religion according to Ekwunife (2012) acts as a binding force both in moral definitions, ethical prescriptions, technological advancement, in other words it is religion that co-ordinates and elevates these inherent qualities in a society and man to a transcendental plane thereby imbuing them with deeper meanings in man's everyday life.

### **The Controversies Surrounding the Naming of the Supreme Being**

There many issues or factors that brought about the problems of naming the Ultimate in African Traditional Religion, which led to the discordant tunes by some group of scholars claiming that the name of the Ultimate Being in Africa is imported through the missionaries or through the global contact. Another group of scholars believed that the name of Ultimate Being is indigenous to Africans themselves because they have been worshipping and calling on their Supreme Being before the coming of the missionaries from different parts of the world. Though there may be influences which may have taken place with time due to contact with other parts of the world. For strong culture is not one that does not change but adapts to the reality of the time in which it found itself. For no culture or paradigm can exist and operate in its pristine form and still be relevant to the people it is serving, hence Oguejiofor (2010) talked of the resilient nature of African cultures.

The above change in pristine form of culture or resilient nature of African culture was well depicted by Onunwa (2005) thus:

Some votaries of the traditional religion conveniently use such terms and ideas as if they were originally part of the traditional religious system. Often in the village, one is surprised to hear some elders of the traditional religion conclude prayers and petitions when pouring libation with the phrase, *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. This is also true of the prayers when breaking kola nuts. After the prayers some of the elders freely end with 'in the name of Jesus Amen' as if it was the pattern of ending it in the traditional way. We see here that it is no longer Christianity trying to use or accept African symbols to make its gospel meaningful for Africans but rather African Traditional Religion trying to imbibe Christian ideas and languages to preserve itself and make itself relevant to modern man. (pp. 207-208).

One of the enduring values of African Traditional religion is its versatility and its historical development. For example the way Igbo Traditional Religion has enlarged its practices, vocabularies, liturgies, and rituals pertaining or tending towards solving the poverty of its people with the elements it borrowed from Christianity, is responsible for its survival and relevance among the Igbo people despite attack it receives from change agents and those seeing it as evil practices. This nullifies the earlier notion that the gods of the Africans are on retreat and yet to come back to its people.

According to Ekwunife (2012) with the invasion of African land by European, American and Moslem missionaries in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the problem of new perception, interpretation of values in African world set in. This affected the whole entire of African social and religious institutions. This also involves the naming of the Ultimate Being in Africa, because the missionaries in trying to understand the culture of the Africans introduced their values as a better one than the African values. Furthermore having come as supreme culture or value to African culture they destroyed many cultural values of the people to build or propagate their own cultural values. Hence this brought about the clash of values or complications of naming the Supreme Being. The consequence of this single effect of clash of values caused ripples in the life of the Africans even till today. Africans are yet to find any model solutions to help to arrest the negative effects being generated in the modern African life.

Sequel to the above problem, the missionaries who were unable to comprehend the values of the Africans with their own cultural background and biases went ahead to call or name the Ultimate Being in Africa with all sorts of derogatory names. According to Boas (1961), Kofi (1978) and Quarcoopome (1987) the derogatory terms were imposed on Africans and they all have racial undertone. These derogatory terms according to Kanu (2015) include pagan, heathen, primitive, ancestor worship, magic, fetish, juju, animism and so on. This means that Africans were seen as a people who needed to be liberated from their worship of false gods hence everything concerning them has to be changed because superior culture has been imposed on them. The missionaries pursued this mandate vigorously; so many cultural values were crushed on the process. It is at this point that Onwubiko (1991) remarked that one of the reasons that led to the "Deus Otiosus" theory of the early missionary writers on African religions was their inability to discover sacrifices to the Supreme Being which were less frequent compared to those given to the minor deities.

Another predominant factor that caused controversy over the naming of the Ultimate Being in African Traditional religion is the difficulties involved in studying African Traditional Religion. The Africa continent is a vast continent with different countries, languages, ethnic and complex dialects. This already is a barrier to any meaningful research to be done or carried out on Africa though most of the missionaries were not concerned about founding the truth concerning African people and their culture. The Supreme Being is called different names in many languages and dialects of Africans. Kanu (2015) observed that it might be difficult for a scholar to fully understand the concept of

Supreme Being among the different African groups. The result will be rash generalizations and wrong conclusions as seen today by the early missionaries on African Traditional Religion. Coupled with the above problem, is the problem of the unwritten records from earliest times unlike other world religions. This single factor tends to relegate the African Traditional Religion to background and local religion; hence various interpretations seem to be the order of the day.

African Traditional religion has been described or seen to be polytheistic in nature. The term polytheism according to Kofi ((1978) means “the belief in, and worship of, more than one god....” (p.5). Of all the factors, this polytheism used to describe the nature of African Traditional Religion did a lot of harm to it more than any other factor. Quarcoopome (1987) argued that what determines polytheism in any religion is the absence of a cohesive or unifying and Supernatural Ultimate. It implies that the presence of Ultimate Being determines monotheism which is the worship of one God. But Parriender (1961) argued that African Traditional Religion is polytheistic in nature in the sense that:

...his choice of the term on the grounds that polytheistic religions are tolerant of other religious views and can easily accept new gods or cults. There are no jealous gods that forbid the addition of new beliefs as long as the traditional deities are not attacked. (p. 11).

Many scholars have argued that African Traditional religion cannot be regarded as polytheistic religion for a religion cannot be said to be polytheistic merely because there exist many divinities in that religion. Kofi (1978) remarked that in classical polytheism, the gods in the pantheon were all independent of one another. One of the gods might be regarded as the chief or head, but that god can never be regarded as the creator of the other gods. From the above discussions it is clear that those who used the term polytheism on African Traditional Religion understood little or nothing about the religion itself. Hence these misconceptions continued to generate confusion in the understanding of the name of Ultimate Being in the African world.

### **The Ultimate Being: Imported or Original to African Traditional Religion?**

It has been argued from different quarters whether the idea of Ultimate Being came from missionaries of two most populous religions that invaded Africa or is it original to African Traditional Religion. Bearing in mind that African Traditional Religion is criticized heavily by many to be polytheistic in nature and

lacks written records. Uchendu (1965) categorically stated that “it is a polytheistic religion; their numerous deities, which are strikingly democratic, continue to increase with the rate of culture contact” (p.94). Though, no religion in its purest form can be said to be monotheistic analytically, unless one goes by faith. For monotheism according to Dhavamony (1973) can either be explicit or implicit where one God is believed in and worshipped as a Supreme Being, Dhavamony calls this monotheism in African Traditional Religion to be implicit monotheism which is a complex form of monotheism that allows for the compatibility of other divinities alongside the belief in one Supreme Being.

Consequently there are two groups of scholars who are projecting the issue of Ultimate Being in African Traditional Religion namely; the protagonists and the antagonists group. According to Ekwunife (2012):

The protagonists in their various academic writings demonstrate that the idea of, and worship of the Supreme Being-God are part and parcel of African traditional life, thought and worship. They insist that internal evidences from a meticulous examination of oral sources of A.T.R, sacred institutions of traditional culture, Art works and symbols prove their contentions beyond reasonable doubts. Moreover, the fact that traditional Africans are part and parcel of created humanity with rational capacity excludes doubts as regards the existence of the Supreme Being (God) in thoughts and worship....The antagonists scholars objected to the above claims of the protagonists. They rather insisted on the Christian/Islamic origin of the Supreme Being or at best foreign origin of this concept. (pp. 8-9).

The protagonist like Onwubiko (1991) explained that in African religions there is belief in the Supreme Being called by various indigenous names among the many African communities. According to him:

The names given to this Being manifest African ideas and concepts of Him. He is given both proper and descriptive names: NGEWO in Sierra-Leone; CHUKWU in Igboland; OLUDUMARE in Yorubaland; NYAME in Ashanti; etc. Some of the African names for God are anthropomorphic and are expressions of African concepts of God. There are acts of worship of Him, but these are very rare. It must be remarked that one of the impressions that led to the “Deus Otiosus” theory of the early writers on African religions was their inability to discover sacrifices to the Supreme

Being which were less frequent compared to those given to the minor deities. (pp. 60-61).

Uchendu (1965) already has made the above stand of Onwubiko (1991) vividly clear using Igbo indigenous religion by saying that the idea of a creator of all things is focal to Igbo theology. According to Uchedu (1965):

They believe in a supreme god, a high god, who is all good. The logical implication of the concept of a god who is all good is the existence of a devil (*agbara*) to whom all evil must be attributed. This is not peculiar to Igbo thought. It is a characteristic of all known religions which accept the doctrine of a high god who does no evil. The Igbo high god is a withdrawn god. He is a god who has finished all active works of creation and keeps watch over his creatures from a distance. The Igbo high god is not worshiped directly. There is neither shrine nor priest dedicated to his service. He gets no direct sacrifice from the living but is concerned as the ultimate receiver of all sacrifice made to the minor deities...He is a satisfied god who is not jealous of the prosperity of man on earth. (pp. 94-95).

The above idea explained the stand point of African God conceived to be a high god and how the Africans perceive their Supreme Being contrary to the notion that the idea of Ultimate God comes to Africa from missionary contacts. Basden (1966) also confirmed the distinct recognition of a Supreme Being (beneficent in Character) who is above every other spirits good or evil. He is believed to control all things in heaven and earth. Other spirits are at his service whose sole aim is to fulfill His commands. Idowu (1975) is one of the strong contenders of African Traditional Religion being essentially monotheistic by nature. He came to this conclusion when he finished analyzing what he called errors of terminology. These terminologies which are derogatory in nature like primitive, paganism, animism, fetishism and so on, were errors used mainly by westerners to designate African Traditional Religion. The meaning of these terms according to Idowu, are deformed and are applied in this false notion of African Traditional Religion (ATR). These terms are not compatible in describing ATR rather in all African communities God is referred to as the Ultimate Being. In his words "I do not know of any place in Africa where the Ultimate is not accorded to God...I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheistic" (p.135). Though, he described this monotheism as diffused monotheism which is the same with implicit monotheism as described earlier.



There are other protagonists of Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion who has given deep insights on the originality of Ultimate Being belonging to Africans. Some protagonists like Arinze (1970), Metuh (1985), Ede (1987), Adibe (2008) and host of others have shown in one way or the other that the Ultimate Being is original to African people and not the case of imported or foreign culture. Even some of the early foreign writers or visitors to African soil also affirmed the view that the Africans had a belief in a Supreme Being with most attributes that God has acquired anywhere in the world.

However, there are the other voices from the antagonists' view which according to Ekwunife (2012) seems to rest on three connected premises: Firstly that African traditional religious culture is at the lowest rung of evolutionary development. The primitive traditionalists cannot conceptualize such a lofty philosophical concept as the Supreme Being. Oguejiofor (1996) commented that:

Such racist ideas, coupled with the fact that the missionaries rarely made efforts to understand the original beliefs of the people, make it today difficult to find out what the people originally believed. Igbo traditional beliefs and morals were globally termed *superstitious* and *devilish*. Again, the introduction of modernity and missionary success effectively instilled into the traditional religionists that their religion was retrograde. (p. 53).

Secondary, that the Christian/Islamic Supreme God cannot enjoy the same status as God with the primitive god of the Africans. Thirdly that the concept of the Supreme Being is a missionary invention into African soil, this means that the missionaries introduced it and imposed it on African Traditional Religion who appropriated it and made it their own in this modern times. Nwoga (1984) completely concludes that Africans (Igbo) do not originally have the idea of a Supreme God until the coming of the Christianity. This means that the idea of Supreme Being is a complete stranger in African traditional religious thought. He reached this view after examining the thoughts of some antagonists. Nwoga (1984) conclusively asserts that:

The Igbo person's experience and consciousness of transcendent power operation in his personal affairs gave rise to and is subsumed in the concept of Chi. Around this concept of Chi he consolidated his expectation of life and fortune. It is this Chi that is the god of the Igbo person. Each person has his god though it requires a certain level of maturity before a person can set up a shrine to the god. (p. 33).

The position of Nwoga above raises a lot of questions today concerning the belief in Supreme Being, does it mean that Africans have no common Supreme Being they worship as community or as a town except their personal Chi? What of the annual festivals taking place in different communities yearly, to which god do they offer those sacrifices? During consultation concerning some abnormal events happening in the community, which god do they consult? Though Nwoga claimed that it is the god of Aro oracle that the Igbo people meant when they refer to Chukwu as Ultimate God and their other needs are cared by divinities among their localities. There are others who are in the same line of thought like Nwoga, Ezekwugo (1987) asserts strongly that both Chukwu and Chineke were never applied or used by the traditional Igbo or Africans to mean Supreme Being. For him the Igbo had taken the name of the Aro oracle to stand for some sort of Ultimate Being.

Having seen the positions of protagonists and antagonists, it is obvious that all the arguments show different understanding of African Traditional Religion from different perspectives. None holds the absolute truth which can be verified in its favour. But their positions gave a way for further investigations in finding authentic possible answers to the controversy at hand. The analysis given by both sides, when properly viewed will definitely put or raise African Traditional Religion to a higher level with the other world religions.

### **The Implications of These Controversies in the Practice of African Traditional Religion**

Today Africans have varieties of names for the Ultimate Being which accrue from many dialects and tribes that are in Africa countries, this is not problem in itself but problem lies in different churches and practices emanating from these different names and practices, each naming and calling Ultimate Being with different names which they formulated in response to their different practices. This is not what used to be the case in African societies, rather each societies or community has names of deity which they were known for or which they consult from time to time. Again, this has led to many young Africans initiating their own shrines mostly in their homes for sacrifice of different kinds especially for money rituals purposes. This is quite different from what it used to be in the pristine time of African societies.

The consequences of smuggling of the word "Supreme" by the Christian/Moslem faiths according to Ekwunife (2012) accounts for the superiority in religion or culture which the Western world used in dominating

African Traditional Religion. This led to derogatory names with which they regard African culture and religion, since then Africa has been caught up in the web of inferiority complex. This inferiority complex is virtually seen in everything Africans are doing. When what one is doing, is not in imitation of the western world, it will not be recognized as authentic or original. With this situation, Africans abandoned their education, natural food, culture, language, religion, annual festivals sports, and so on in search of new way of life. Hence the saying the gods are on retreat and the center cannot hold again. This accounts for gradual loss of languages, cultures, and so on among the Africans.

This again created different kinds of rivalries among the votaries of African Traditional Religion, just like in the early days of the missionaries in Africa. The missionaries in trying to gain grounds or have more converts in a particular place engaged in all sorts of practices and introduction of ideas so that they can have many converts hence rivalries of different sorts were seen among them. Today some African traditionalists engage in different forms of practices to attract people to their religious shrines. This led to the combination of African traditional religious practices with Christian or Islamic Religion which is called inculturation by the leaders of these churches in the name of preserving the religious practices of the Africans. With this all kinds of practices and means are employed in making people to believe on the efficacy of their religious practices. These practices include all kinds of sacrifices among the young people to be rich in the society without hard work. The sacrifice most often entails shedding of blood of animals, sleeping near the graves for a number of days, going naked in the market place, eating of their own or other people's defecations. Recently it involves sacrifice with human parts in order to achieve their aims and having many converts to their shrines.

However the new idea of God introduced by the western culture according to Kofi (1978) helped to solidify and enriched the names already in place in African Traditional Religion. This is not only seen in the new ideas about God but in other cultural practices like in marriage institution. With the introduction of Christianity and the establishment of colonial governments, new forms of marriage were introduced. African Christians can now marry in the church and have Christian weddings or they can marry according to their cultural ordinance.

## **Conclusion**

This write-up among other things seeks to know or trace the problems causing the controversies in Supreme Being ideology in African Traditional Religion.

These factors seen above have led to the confusion among the African scholars inquiring to know the real name or names of Ultimate Being and whether it is of foreign origin or from Africans themselves. The African traditionalists or votaries have been influenced to have their own shrines and tries to combine it with new Christian and Islamic religions that exist side by side with African Traditional Religion.

Again the introduction of the word "Supreme" from colonialists and missionaries with regard to their God and culture, thereby indicating their religion to be supreme religion or Supreme God and supreme power/culture dealt serious blow to African values. This makes Africans to aspire for Whiteman's culture and religion which is seen to be Supreme in all aspects. The end results of these are relegating of anything African to background. Hence as of today, one hears of revitalization of African culture from all angles. The first step towards solving the problem of Ultimate Being controversy is the removal of the word "Supreme" from all cultures and world powers, for it carries with it racial and ethnocentric biases (Ekwinife, 2012).

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